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**frieze**<sup>d/e</sup>

Laura Owens

COLOGNE, GERMANY

Galerie Gisela Capitain



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, Detail, 2010-11

Above all, two qualities have made Laura Owens an outstanding painter since the mid-1990s: her masterful application of every conceivable painting technique and of art historical references (from 11th-century Chinese painting via 18th-century embroidery to Henri Matisse, among others); and her capacity to take the exhibition space into account, already at the level of painterly production, while factoring in conceptually certain choreographic effects of the display.

But can this enthusiasm for experimentation be sustained over decades? Apparently it can. The central element of the Cologne exhibition was a group of 42 small square pictures (all works *Untitled*, 2010-11). In the past Owens has exhibited canvasses of a similar size as preliminary studies for large-format works, but here they border the walls in double file like a frieze, as a self-contained group. The most conspicuous elements are the clock hands incorporated into several paintings. Amongst briskly placed black and luminous blue strokes on a bright ground, for example, one blue stroke turns at the tempo of a second hand. In another picture the untreated canvas is filled out with white impasto like a generously slapdash Robert Rauschenberg, only not

entirely, while a hand of coloured stripes rotates across the surface, all the more accurate by contrast. A third features a rapidly sketched, Saul-Steinberg-like face, its sullen expression peaking in two crossed hands that form a pinched mouth. In other pictures, what look like hands turn out to be strokes of paint.

The symbolism of the clock temporality, industrial compulsion plays a subordinate role here, and indeed one of the pictures pokes fun at it when the numbers appear as facial features. The clock here is the kinetic instrument of a physical comedy.

Abstract Expressionism was aiming for the eternal even in the spontaneity of its painting process (once exhibited, a painting should remain forever unchanged). And likewise, Steinbergs style of caricature and illustration from the 1950s was also concerned with registering permanent typologies (a character, a societal constellation) in rapid strokes. But where a second hand creeps slowly across an abstract painting, it is as though the hand were laughing in the face of anyone who ever thought that an artistic composition could aim for a perfectly balanced end result that might be immune to time. This effect was further heightened by the frieze-like hanging, as though it were a series of decorative wall panels whose order could be playfully altered at any time (privileging the merely decorative is a constant in Owens work). The venerability and patina of art history suddenly seemed pleasantly quirky.



Laura Owens, 2011, Installation view

In the adjacent room, book objects arranged on three wooden tables enhanced the wealth of forms at least if considered from the perspective of reductionist visual design to the point of excess. Owens calls them a repository of my excess ideas, each of them a hand-made, individual object for flicking through. Some of them do in fact seem to be reservoirs of future pictorial compositions; or the poetry albums of peculiar children; or again the rigorously linear, precious realizations of an idea (the duel, for instance, between the great Russian chess champion, Garry Kasparov, and the brilliant Hungarian player, Judit Polgár, move for move, page for page).

One of the books turned out to be the basis for a diptych communicating across a corner in the third room: two untreated canvases with loosely composed lines, part embroidered, part painted, each of the paintings dominated by a single-stroke loop, as if particles from the endless pool of possible colours and forms had been caught in a landing net. In principle, this effect could also be achieved by playing with virtual imagery, but the situational intelligence of these works finds full expression only in the physical and spatial materialization of the exhibition display.

*Translated by Jonathan Blower*

*—by Jörg Heiser*

Jörg Heiser is co-editor of frieze and co-publisher of frieze d/e. He lives in Berlin.

**About this review**



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*by Jörg Heiser*

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Frieze d/e, Zehdenickerstr. 28, 10119 Berlin, Deutschland, +49 (0) 30 23626506

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