

**Programming Attitude: An
Interview with Laura Owens**

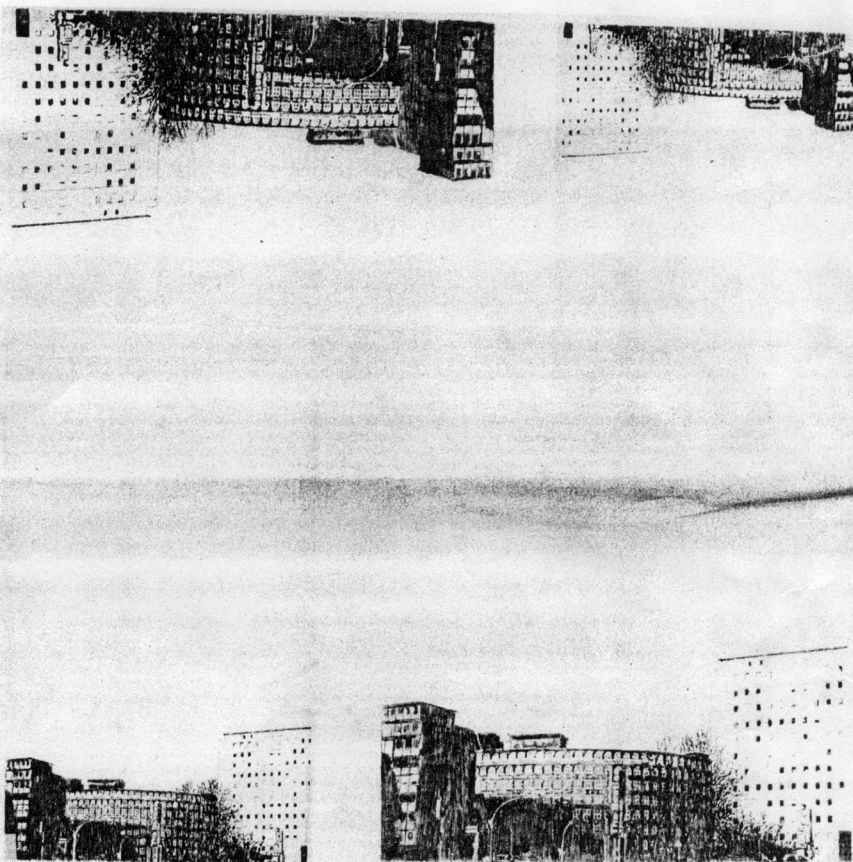
by Rebecca Morris

RM: There is a lot of talk about L.A. being a great place for young artists. Is this true?

LO: L.A. is a great place to live, for young people in general and especially for young artists. It doesn't take too much to have a nice life here. It is affordable and beautiful. I think most people who do not live here are intimidated by the expansive decentralized urban sprawl. I love to drive so that is not a problem for me. There are a lot of young artists living in different pockets around the city. I think because there are so many young art school graduates from Pasadena Art Center, Cal Arts, U.C.L.A., Otis, etc., many are deciding to stay in L.A. and make it work for them. There isn't a gold mine of opportunity out here; it is more a quality of life.

RM: Who are your friends in L.A.? Are they primarily artists, and do you talk about your work with them? Do these relationships involve studio visits, insights and exchange of ideas—do they affect your studio work?

LO: I have some close friends who are artists, writers, and musicians. We don't talk about my work. We just hang out more or less. None of my friends, except one, are primarily making paintings. We have similar tastes in many ways, which have nothing to do with the mediums in which we work. At the same time, we are all making very different-looking objects, so it is interesting to look for the connections. I am planning on doing a show sometime in the future with Frances Stark and Sharon



Frances Stark
Hamburg, 1995
carbon on paper

RM: What is it about working in L.A. that seems right to you, that makes you committed to staying there?

LO: The friends I have made out here make me feel committed to staying. Also the ability to be isolated within a huge urban environment is somehow stabilizing and allows me the freedom to work. I can walk out my door, go to the store, go to the mall and not run into anyone I know, unlike New York where it is inevitable you will see people you know at every bar, coffee shop, or street corner. Also there are many public parks, tennis courts, hiking trails, beaches, and other places where I try to maintain a year-round outdoor healthy experience. These things make me feel like a normal person, not like an artist in a claustrophobic, forced community. The art world is here, you just have to drive to it, instead of being constantly immersed in it.

Lockhart. I know there are certain connections, but because they are not readily obvious, it is difficult to identify them.

RM: How do you feel about people thinking that you have an L.A. aesthetic?

LO: No one in L.A. has ever said that. I think it's just people trying to get a handle on something they know nothing about. Stereotyping makes you feel good about yourself, like you know what's up. It's a way to stop thinking. Human beings are inherently lazy. People will use any and every opportunity to avoid thinking. They categorize, box things up and put them on a shelf.

RM: How do you generate ideas for your work?

LO: I think about two dimensional flat surfaces—how I receive them in the world, what their currency is, and the many ways of interpreting an illusion. I go to the library, the movies and museums. I watch a lot of television every day and use a computer almost every day. All of this enriches and tests my literacy in two dimensional visual culture. I don't take ideas directly from any particular place. I want to make paintings that are simply about looking at a painting, so fundamentally, that is where I start, though other stuff floats in and out.

RM: Currently, what are your major influences and why?

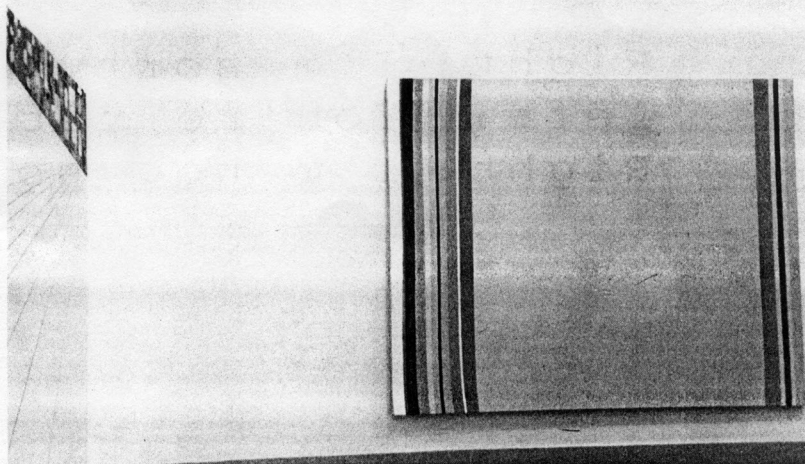
LO: That's hard to answer. I feel open and connected to most 20th century art; I like to look at everything and read everything. I listen to the Beach Boys, Snoop Doggy Dog and Gary Numan—they influence me in some way. I'm a sucker for anyone with a 'vision' and a sense of humor, of lightness: Preston Sturges films, Ad Reinhardt writing, Barnett Newman painting. The Mondrian retrospective blew me away. I love the film maker, Chris Smith, who made "American Job". I just saw the Magritte show in L.A. and thought I would hate it because the images are so trite, but I loved it. I am addicted to Seinfeld. I am becoming interested in the Enlightenment, primarily the writing and the gardens. I could keep going. I don't know how all of this influences me, but it does inspire me.

RM: You've mentioned that you want to present an "attitude" in your work. What does that mean?

LO: Perhaps that isn't the best word. I believe it is more important to decide how to approach making art than to decide what to make. Developing an unique attitude is a program from which you make work. It is rewritten everyday and is not fully definable. It is the infrastructure. When I lecture to art students, I tell them this rather than why I made this painting or that painting. A long time ago "attitude" might have been known as "ethics," or "morals." That wouldn't make any sense now.

RM: You use formulas and techniques for making realistic work, i.e. the rules of classical art training, but you play with these rules. Why?

LO: I'm interested in visual perception, though I'm not sure why—perhaps it is because it is taken for granted, or maybe it is because I dislike literal



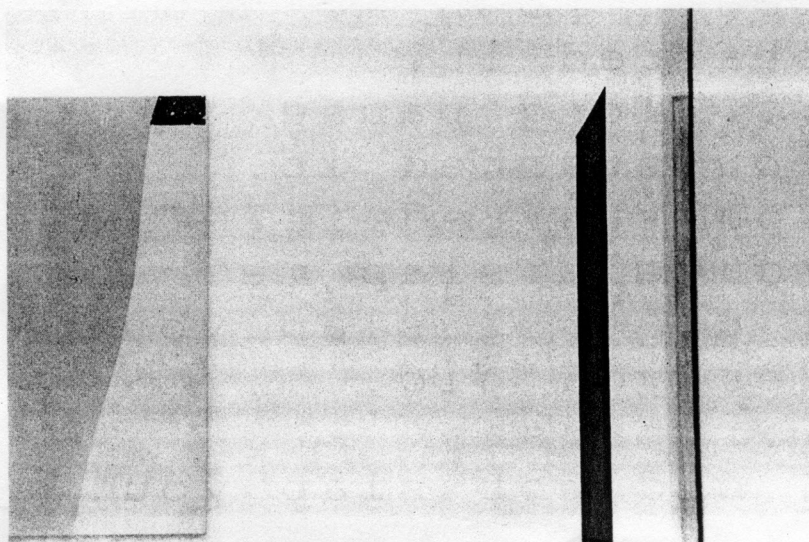
Laura Owens
Untitled, 1995
Installation view

metaphor and the symbolic in art. I have a distaste for work that tries to describe "something else"; the passive. I don't want to be shuttled to the past or transported to the future. When I think about perception, I am thinking about the person looking at the artwork. I never think about "breaking the rules," for that involves posturing and an antagonistic approach.

RM: Why do you dislike the literal metaphor, the symbolic in art?

LO: It is boring and uninteresting, which usually means the expectations surrounding the piece were very low. When visual art depends heavily on a literal metaphor, or on symbolism, the work is often not as interesting as the intended reference. This creates a pathetic and dependent relationship. It's like a cover song, not only is it rarely as good as the original, it's completely parasitic. Art that goes outside of itself and bounces back, generates meaning and is much more interesting. Passive objects are the complete absence of anything problematic, which is just lame. A painting like Manet's "Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe," was completely unsettling, if not shocking. It was very problematic and it was, and is, very interesting. However, to be shocking for that sake alone is infantile and boring. I also think that art has to question itself, you can't just fill in the blanks according to the guidelines and get an "A" because you tried hard and did what you were told.

Rebecca Morris is a painter living in Chicago.



Laura Owens
Untitled, 1995
Installation view