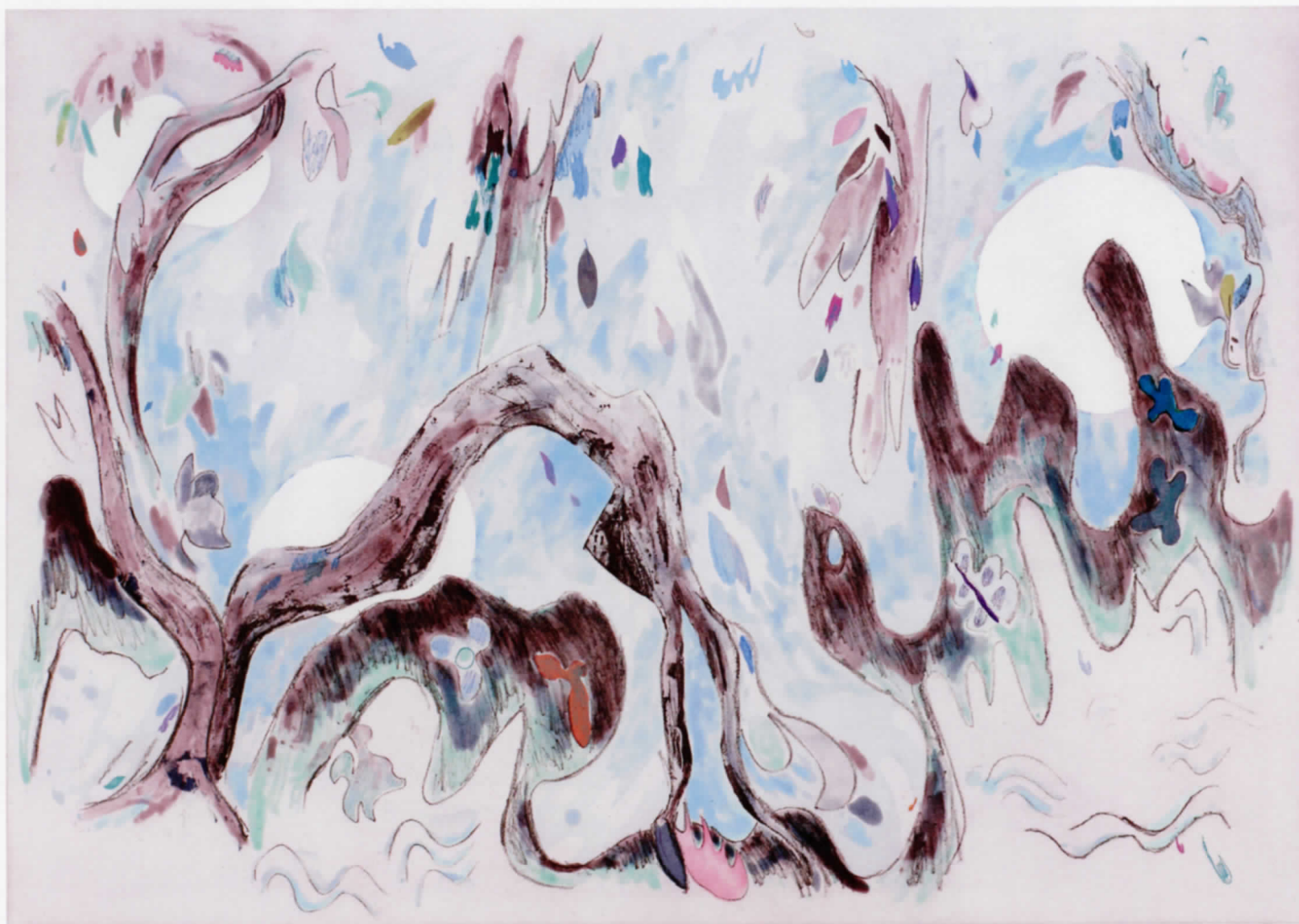


Overview



Laura Owens, *Untitled (LO 425)*, 2010. Color soft ground etching with spit bite and sugar lift aquatints. 28¾-x-41¼-inch image on 37¼-x-49¼-inch sheet. Edition 10. Owens' new etchings are printed by Asa Muir-Harmony, assisted by Emily York and Ianne Kjorlie.

LAURA OWENS

Try this: stand this page up. Lean it against something or hold it out at arm's length so you can see the image vertically rather than lying flat. Now (humor me) take a little walk in there.

I went in at the left side, between the mountain-obstacle and the tree trunk and landed in a flutter of blue, pale green, purple. Something like flowers. Something like an animal. The moon above splits as I slide away and pass it. Now it is at my feet; I bounce onto another mountainside, then into showers of petals in pink air. I had thought there were three moons, but I see there is only one, moving with me as I travel inside the frame.

"When I am trying to look at a painting and decide

whether it's finished or not," Laura Owens said recently, "I am physically or bodily engaged with it and that is how I decide." The space in her work gets deeper the longer you look. How does she do it? "I was thinking a lot about the viewer's body walking through space," she says.

Owens has changed her emphasis since her last project at Crown Point six years ago. Then, she drew a chicken clinging to a branch against a voluminous sky, a blue horse prancing on a curving road, a peacock sitting in a tree planted in a hilly foreground against a backward-falling sky. There are no animal subjects in the new prints; we ourselves are the subjects. In the earlier works the subjects are anchored in foregrounds



Laura Owens, *Untitled (LO 426)*, 2010. Set of three color sugar lift, spit bite and soap ground aquatints. Each image measures 31-x-23¼ inches on a 36½-x-28¼-inch sheet. Edition 25.

that suggest remnants of perspective and chiaroscuro, time-honored space-creation tools, but now those tools are not in play. Nevertheless, the deep space is there.

In both bodies of work bright shards of color give lightness and pleasure but other elements hint of doom. The animals are lively and unfazed. They are OK, and as we take their places in the new prints it turns out that we are OK too. I think this is what Owens has called “an aura of acceptance of whatever has happened.”

After Owens completed the large three-panel aquatint seascape shown here, I looked on the Internet at images of the paintings in her most recent (2010) show at Gavin Brown in New York. There was “our” seascape, or something like it: a long narrow painting of elegant crested waves, dark clouds gathering above. The same dashes of color in the waves; the same tiny pink stars in the sky. Our print is sequential: a small dark cloud appears in the first panel, and in the second

it gathers force. The third panel is mainly blue sky with rosy streaks; the dark is on its way out. But the painting has no such sequence; it holds a single moment in itself. As Nancy Princenthal described it in a review in *Art In America* it is “the biggest work shown, a 7½-by-14-foot nocturnal seascape sparkling with neon pink stars, its seemingly black-lit central surge rimmed with pink and purple.”

The painting is almost as long as a wall of my office; our large etching, including the three panels with their borders and frames, is half its length. One of the Internet photos shows a person silhouetted in front of the painting, dwarfed by it. Here in my office the print is strong but I hold my own.

Sometimes people call prints “poor man’s paintings,” and I am happy if they fill that role. But to me it is more interesting that they are nearly always human in scale. At home with us, they are good companions that provide energy and delight, often supplying new insights as we change in going about our lives.



Are prints reproductive? Someone asked that question of Owens in a panel discussion at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art recently. "The print process starts with the artist," she answered. "And nine times out of ten the first thing we'll say is, 'What can I do that's new?' We don't want to make reproductions. Printmaking is another medium to be used, and by working in a print studio like Crown Point you can use a medium you couldn't use otherwise."

Asked about the relationship of a print to a painting of the same subject, Owens replied this way: "Anything I start with is just a framework to get going, because once you pull the first proof off the plate you have to take the plate into account. You can still try to guide the print by using your working drawing, but etching is so specific. It's more important to be doing etching than to be following a particular work."

An audience member wondered what "doing etching" means.

"You come with a lot of intentions," Owens answered. "And then you get working and you start to see what can be done. The more I think I understand etching, the more I see there is a real connection to my painting, mainly because of the layering. But it's really crazy. It's really hard. I want things to be very immediate on the plate. So I have to concentrate. What you are drawing on the left is going to be on the right in the picture. You have to take your brain and make it do that with your hand. And then there's, like, five or six plates!" She laughs, and the audience laughs with her.

The moment is comfortable; the audience recognizes that this work has just come into existence, and that making it has been difficult but exhilarating. "Artists are supposed to stretch peoples' consciousness," Owens remarked in another context. I hope you find these etchings, brand new in 2011, are stretching yours.

—Kathan Brown

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Laura Owens in the Crown Point studio, 2010.

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