



A STAND FOR MEDIUM AND MATERIALITY

THE WORK OF TWO X TWO 2016 ARTIST HONOREE, LAURA OWENS, IS CHARACTERIZED BY INVENTIVENESS AND PLAYFULNESS.

Above: Laura Owens, Photo credit by Noah Webb. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York/Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne. Opposite, from left: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2006, acrylic and oil on linen, 48 x 43 x 2.125 in., Karpidas Collection. Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2004, oil and acrylic on linen; overall: 132 x 108 in., The Rachofsky Collection and the Dallas Museum of Art through the TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art Fund.



My first hands-on experience with Laura's (Owens) paintings was some ten years ago at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, in 2006. In keeping with the curatorial style of the gallery, it was a sparsely hung show with no more than half a dozen canvases together with a handful of drawings. I remember one work being particularly arresting—(*Untitled*, 2006), a deceptively charming work that portrayed a fantastical romantic scene—a purple-haired male and an amply breasted pink-skinned woman in an embrace. It is a terrific painting with an Indian folk feel. At the time it recalled for me the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé's landmark poem, "The Afternoon of a Faun," in which he describes the sensual experiences of a faun who has just woken up from his afternoon slumber and discusses his encounters with several nymphs in a dreamlike monologue. Like Mallarmé's poetry, I found fantasy, symbolism, and pleasure useful words to keep in mind when trying to conceptually grasp this otherworldly work.

Before moving on to complete her M.F.A. at California Institute of the Arts, Owens had completed a formative period at RISD in Rhode Island. RISD (Rhode Island School of Design) is well-known for having a very traditional formal academic training environment. This developmental time for Owens seems to have activated a tremendous suspicion of master narratives in visual art, especially in painting, of the last hundred years. It would seem her training at RISD brought about a project that challenged the metanarratives of history, culture, and identity. She quickly developed a critical and

highly personal language characterized by a seemingly nonchalant inventiveness, a playfulness between image and meaning. Recently I came across a self-written article on her work for *artforum* where she began with the line, "I like to think of each painting in an exhibition as posing its own question; and of course any one question may actually negate another." This reminded me of my earliest experience with her work in 2006. It was an accurate description of my encounter. Each painting was a distinct world of its own.

And so began my love affair with the work of Laura Owens. I traveled to Zurich, London, and Cologne to see her latest exhibitions. Each time I was astonished by an endlessly expanding and interconnecting range of countersubjects and origins incorporating the likes of American quilts, tapestry, embroidery, Lubok prints, Rajput painting, astrology, children's coloring books, and the history of art, to name only a few. In the production of her work, she moved effortlessly between a variety of tools from paintbrush or spatula to the technologies of screen printing or flatbed digital printing, testing these tools by eschewing their conventional use with unorthodox materials and processes, with fantastic results. What was even more thrilling was that in these handmade, mechanical, and digital experiments, Owens would subvert the characteristic methods of painting to allude to the ongoing transformation of the discipline itself. The results were not ironic, like so many of the neo-expressionist painters who emerged in the late 1970s, but seemed to assert and celebrate paintings' capacity to evolve and expand as a medium.



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 –Gavin Delahunty

As I continued to inquire and become little by little more knowledgeable, I learned that Owens's social and cultural pluralism extended into her studio practice where she has set up spaces for painting, printmaking, and bookmaking. Her multiplicity reached a highpoint around 2012 when she began co-running a new studio, exhibition, and event space at 356 S. Mission Rd. in Los Angeles. In an in-conversation with Fabian Stech shortly before the opening, she stated that "to have a space that is both studio and an exhibition space is to make a new type of space"...and that the project was "inspired by the history of artists working in Los Angeles and making site-specific projects." It was a bold move and a turning point of sorts for the artist. Having lived and worked in Los Angeles since the early 1990s, it signaled her investment in the city and a kind of thank-you for the inspiration it had provided. Moreover, this context gave birth to the acclaimed exhibition, *12 paintings by Laura Owens and Ooga Booga #2*, 2013, and individually intoxicating works such as *Untitled*, 2013, which from the outside looking in announced a newly revitalized Owens—painting on an expansive scale and inviting us to pay closer attention to the surfaces, images, signifiers, and their relationality in her paintings.

represented is subordinated by a peculiar opacity in the upper part of the painting. The work is from a series of seven paintings that started with scans from an old coloring book Owens was using as source material, scaled up to correspond with the size of the canvas, 108" x 84", and transferred into a charcoal line. The visual source material is transformed by Owens to become an equivalent form alongside the oversized impasto gestural marks. Her collapsing of what is real and what is simulated produces something that in its totality is visually more powerful. As I rummage through my daily experience of information overload in our infinitely expandable, centerless, interconnected world, I take comfort in knowing that out there are artists like Laura Owens who are making a stand for medium and materiality, and in doing so subverting and assigning some logic to our hyper-reality.

I'd like to end with a sort description of a remarkably cryptic work from around this time. *Untitled*, 2013 seems to be a chromatic evolution from the 356 S. Mission Rd. project. It is of an interior of a room, a tiled wall, and a gridded tabletop on which sits two oversized eggs and what seems to be a measuring spoon. What's

Laura Owens was born in Euclid, Ohio, in 1970. In 2003 she became the youngest artist ever to be honored with a retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Recent exhibitions include *Ten Paintings*, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco; *Secession*, Vienna, 2015; *FIAC*, Paris, 2013; and *Pavement Karaoke/Alphabet*, Sadie Coles, London, UK. She teaches at the Art Center College of Design, Pasadena. Since 2012 she has operated the exhibition space at 356 S. Mission in Los Angeles in collaboration with Gavin Brown and Wendy Yao. Owens is represented by Gavin Brown's Enterprise, Sadie Coles Headquarters, and Galerie Gisela Capitain. P



This page, above: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2012, oil, acrylic, Flashe, resin, collage, and pumice on canvas, 108 x 84 x 2.5 in., Karpidas Collection. Left: *12 paintings by Laura Owens and Ooga Booga #2*, 2013. Opposite, left: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013, oil, Flashe, and charcoal on linen, 108 x 84 in., Collection Marguerite Steed Hoffman; right: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013, Flashe, acrylic, and oil on linen, 137.5 x 120 in., Amy and Vernon Faulconer and The Rachofsky Collection.

