

LAURA LOWENS

IN CONVERSATION WITH GAVIN DELAHUNTY



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This year, TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art, an annual event in Dallas benefiting the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR) and the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA), will recognize artist Laura Owens as its esteemed Honored Artist. She joins a distinguished list of past honorees including Ellsworth Kelly, Wade Guyton, Luc Tuymans, Elizabeth Peyton, Cecily Brown, Robert Rauschenberg, and more, all honored by TWO x TWO over the past 18 years—helping to raise over \$60 million thus far.

Coinciding with the 2016 gala on October 22 at the Rachofsky House in Dallas, Owens will also be honored with the amfAR Award of Excellence for Artistic Contributions to the Fight Against AIDS in recognition of her generous support of amfAR's programs. "On behalf of amfAR and the Dallas Museum of Art, we extend our heartfelt thanks to Laura, and to our friends at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, Sadie Coles HQ, and Galerie Gisela Capitain, for their extraordinary support of Laura and of TWO x TWO," said TWO x TWO's director, Melissa Meeks Ireland. TWO x TWO hosts Cindy and Howard Rachofsky mirrored that sentiment, saying, "We share our heartfelt gratitude with Laura for her tremendous support of TWO x TWO and for allowing us to honor her generous spirit and her achievements in artmaking."

The artist spoke with Hoffman Family Senior Curator of Contemporary Art at the DMA Gavin Delahunty about finding inspiration in an old coloring book, the connection between collage and sailing, and using language as a means to propel her work.

GAVIN DELAHUNTY: *I wanted to start by asking you about a work from 2000. It's a watercolor and collage on paper that looks like a brig? That is to say, a sailboat that is understood to be fast and maneuverable. Can you tell us a little about that work, and secondly, like the nimble brig, how important is it for you to remain agile as a painter? What mechanism or activities do you put in play to stay alert in terms of your paintings' development?*

LAURA OWENS: The image comes from a book of American quilts I had around my studio for a long time. I liked the idea of the flatness of collage as a way to represent the overlapping sails. I had been planning to remake it at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, but the first tapestry I made there took so long that I never made the large-scale fabric version of this piece. I am rather slow to do anything, so it's hard to get my head around the qualities that keep me agile. I try to rethink what I am doing as I work, to abandon things and to approach making art in ways that are maybe uncomfortable for me in the moment.

GD: *Your ship has nine different patterned sailcloths that emphasize its collaged quality. I couldn't help but think of de Kooning's Sail Cloth from 1949. One of the first paintings to propel him into the uncharted waters of "pure" painting. . . it's marvelous, dense and animated with sinuous lines. Obviously, de Kooning appreciated collage—layering drawings one on top of the other to create relationships that were intended to obscure meaning. Can you talk about how you make use of collage in your work?*

LO: I think collage is the dominant mode of artmaking for all artists now, much more so than the historic idea of a medium-specific artwork that attempts to present itself as uniform. For me, collage means putting heterogeneous materials together to make a whole. Or "a combination and collection of various things." Installation art, sound art, painting . . . to me this work is

Previous page:
Portrait by Noah Webb,
courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome;
Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.

Opposite page:
Laura Owens
Untitled, 2004
Acrylic and oil on linen
132 x 111.25 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York /Rome;
Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

all now done by most artists through the logic of collage. I think this dominance across art forms is so ubiquitous that it is hard to notice. So I can't say how I use collage because it is just part of the fabric of how I am seeing everything.

GD: *The directness and peculiarity of your work from 2000 also reminded me of the Cornish painter and fisherman Alfred Wallis. His principal subjects were ships—cutters, not brigs. At any rate, his lack of formal training led him to compose his paintings in terms of relative importance—if the subject was a ship, then, in light of that, the ship would be the largest object depicted, and so on. Do you have a particular system or a self-imposed hierarchy when you compose a painting?*

LO: I am usually just trying to confront the logic I have used in the past and looking for a way to question it. I have a very formal painting background, which I am very aware of and often at odds with because it feels so stuck in ideas of balance, quality, finish, and ultimately taste. So it's important to look at different ways of organizing, like random accumulation, graphic design, advertising, illustration, and to sometimes just break my own habit of composing.

GD: *I was reunited with sailboats in your work when I moved to Dallas. The DMA is lucky enough to have a magnificent large linen painting of yours famously exhibited at the Whitney in their 2004 biennial. It also features two boats. One of my favorite things to do while looking at the work is to list the animals depicted: owl, bat, dog, cat, doe, duck, dove, fish. It's like a poem. What role does language play in your work?*

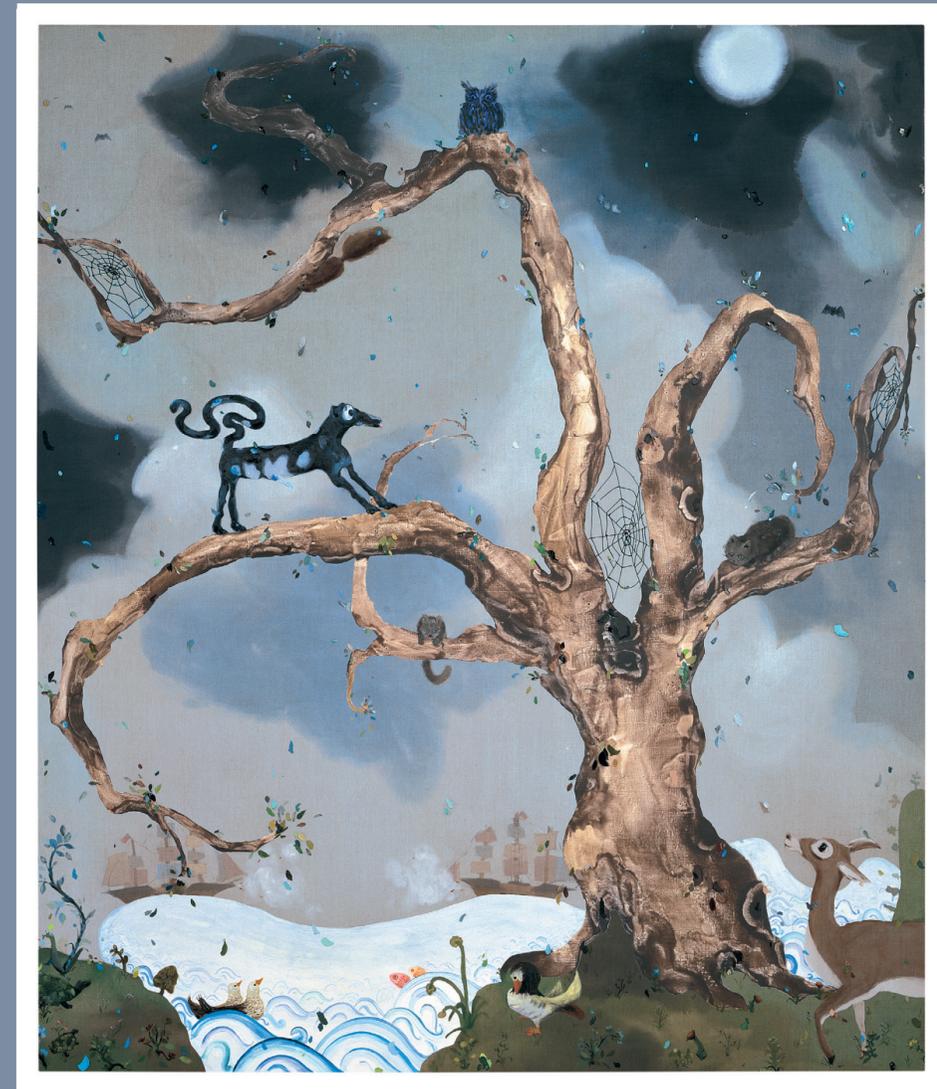
LO: I often use language to propel an artwork to start. Calling a painting a clock in order to see what that does to the idea of painting, for example, or using an idea like "sunset painting" to see where that would lead. Words and puns are good motivators for me, but also I see them as part of the painting. The words we use to describe the painting—the title, the anecdotes—are just as much a part of our understanding/misunderstanding as the material object. They're similar to our visual representations of the object and the contexts where the works can and can't exist.

In the painting you describe, the two boats are firing at each other and both have American flags on them. I think the animals in the foreground are both a way of identifying with our own complacency with the political sphere, but also an identification with a larger idea of relationships that exist at a time of war.

GD: *I also have a deep fondness for one of the works associated with the DMA's painting shown at the Kunsthalle Zürich in 2006. It is a sketch for the larger painting and has ten color tests across its top part. A wonderful affirmation as to how the final painting will be made. Do you often plan out paintings in this form before tackling them on a larger scale? Do you think of the finished paintings in totality before you lay a single mark on the surface?*

LO: I make studies and drawings for most paintings, and many of these were shown at the Kunsthalle Zürich in 2006 as part of a survey show that traveled in Europe. Russell Ferguson wrote an article for Parkett that included a detailed account of the role the studies play in the process of making one of my paintings. Drawings go back and forth from small-scale to large-scale (the same dimensions as the painting that will be made) as they are edited, and to the computer, looping many times through these drawing devices in order to work the composition while I simultaneously figure out the color palette and mediums on small test canvases with the actual paint or material that will be used in the final painting.

Of course, sometimes I just start painting on the canvas and that is it—no studies, no drawing.



Laura Owens
Untitled, 2012
 Flashe and yarn on hand-dyed linen
 35.5 x 33.25 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise,
 New York / Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie
 Gisela Capitain, Cologne



Laura Owens
Untitled, 2013
 Oil, Flashe, and charcoal on linen
 108 x 84 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise,
 New York / Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie
 Gisela Capitain, Cologne



GD: It's not the first time I've turned to poetry to think about your work. My first hands-on experience with your paintings was at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, in 2006 and a deceptively charming work that portrays a fantastical romantic scene: a purple-haired male and an amply breasted pink-skinned woman in an embrace. It is a terrific work with a Russian folk feel. It recalled for me Mallarmé's "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. As in Mallarmé's poetry I found "fantasy," "other-worldliness," "symbolism," and "pleasure" useful words to keep in mind when trying to conceptually grasp your work from this period. Can you elaborate on what were the sources for this direction at that time?

LO: I was going to the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena and looking at the Indian sculpture they have on the lower level, probably Radha and Krishna or similar sculptures. I made drawings and was interested in finding a way to bring the figure back into my work. I also wanted to show movement and play so that it was an active painting.

GD: I had the good fortune to visit your studio in 2014 and was simply amazed by the variety of equipment in your studio. Moreover, in the end pages of your 2015 Skira Rizzoli publication, there are graphic illustrations of a number of tools including a straight knife, spatula, large brayer, glue, ink, and linseed oil. Do you consider your studio to be a place for invention with new tools and techniques? Correspondingly, invention always takes place after the removal of certain parameters. What parameters are you removing from painting?

LO: I try to build in a lot of space for experimenting. I often reuse tools in different ways, or use old techniques with unorthodox materials. Sometimes this just leads to a new idea and the experiment is only a step in this direction. I really find it hard to say what parameters I am removing. I think of painting as a tool for making art—it's the ultimate readymade art. Nothing can be done to a painting to make it not art, and therefore there is an inherent challenge built into its structure.

GD: For a month in spring 2000 you were artist in residence at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, amid its gardens and greenhouses and textiles. You are currently painting in Greenport, Long Island, for a forthcoming show. What impact, if any, does a specific location have on your art?

LO: Probably a lot, but it's never easy to say until you I'm long past it. The Isabella Stewart Gardner residency is really just an apartment and exposure to the collection, not a studio, so I made art in a drawing classroom at the Museum School while I was in Boston. I felt so strange living inside the museum that I went to esoteric bookstores and read everything I could about astrology. I think delving into astrology on my own after years of critical theory at CalArts was really important, but I can't say how for sure.

GD: I once went on a pilgrimage to Collioure, France, in an effort to understand the influence this little Mediterranean fishing village had on

Matisse and to see where he had painted *Open Window, Collioure* [1905] and later *Porte-Fenêtre à Collioure* [1914]. There is something about *Open Window*—its surprising palette, saturated, unmixed colors, and broad brushstrokes—that reminds me of a dynamic painting of yours I first saw in your 2012 "Pavement Karaoke / Alphabet" exhibition at Sadie Coles gallery and now in a private collection in Dallas. There is an optical and conceptual complexity to this work, the exaggerated thickness of the paint, the inclusion of the classified ads, and the variety of lines that look as if they were made using a trackball from an early Macintosh or Atari computer mouse. Can you talk about that show, its installation, which had an enormous impact on me?

LO: It was a show I had to make while taking a break from making the 356 show, so in a way, it felt like an aside at the time. Maybe that took the pressure off because I knew I had this much bigger project under way. The painting you mention by Matisse is actually represented by the M in the alphabet series in this show.

I had made several prior installations that consisted of multiple paintings but ultimately were one work. I wanted to make installations that were individual paintings but revealed a dependence or interconnectivity between the multiple panels. So the *Pavement Karaoke* used language to tie the paintings together. The alphabet paintings can be reconfigured in any way, to make words, one alphabet, one letter. It is one work but can be installed in any way imaginable.

GD: And finally I wondered if you could address a remarkably cryptic work from 2013 which seems to be a chromatic evolution from the works exhibited in "Pavement Karaoke / Alphabet." It is of an interior of a room, a tiled wall, a gridded tabletop on which sits two oversized eggs and what seems to be a measuring spoon. What's represented is subordinated by a peculiar opacity in the upper part of the painting. Can you describe what is going on?

LO: This is from a series of seven paintings that are started with scans from an old coloring book I found as source material. In the coloring book, I liked how the titles were included in the drawings at the bottom of each page. For some paintings I took out the drawing and only left the title, for others, like the one you're asking about, I digitally manipulated the drawing. In both cases, the edited images were enlarged to the scale of the canvas and transferred into a charcoal line (looks like a black line). I think you are seeing a lot of paint marks at the top. When you see this painting in real life, the white dominates more than the marks at the top and the charcoal.

Bottom:
 Installation view of Laura Owens' "Pavement Karaoke / Alphabet," at Sadie Coles HQ, October 9–November 17, 2012.
 Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.

