



Artist Laura Owens at her studio in Los Angeles. Far left: *Untitled*, 2000 (watercolor and pencil on paper; 12"x9"). Above: *Untitled*, 2000 (charcoal, pencil, watercolor, acrylic, and tissue paper on paper; 40"x28"). See Resources.

# Laura Owens

Who's afraid of "pretty" and "happy"?  
One young painter swims against the contemporary tide

By Neville Wakefield

Breakthroughs that launch artistic careers are cast, all too often, from the weary mold of existential torment. For Los Angeles-based artist Laura Owens, the ground literally moved beneath her feet. A master's student at Cal Arts, she'd been keeping her options open, painting, drawing, and making installations in mixed-media, with mixed results. Then, in 1994, the Northridge earthquake rocked her world. "It was a wake-up call," she says. "I realized it really doesn't matter what you do—you can do anything you want. After all, it's just painting." The results of this epiphany were heroically scaled canvases that, when they started appearing in group shows at L.A., New York,

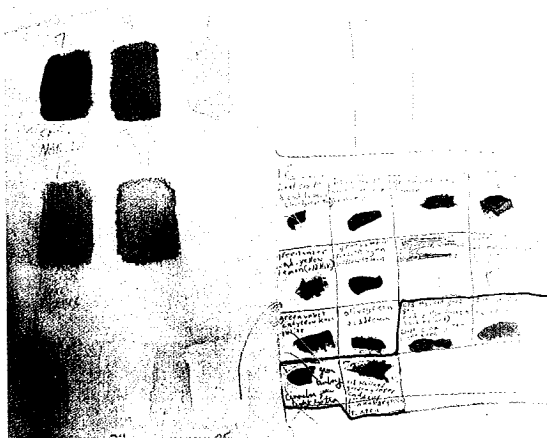
and Paris galleries, set off aftershocks of their own.

Owens' subject is hard to define. It seems to float on an ice-cream sea, pulled by the ebb and flow of landscape and abstraction. Adept at tweaking Modernist doctrine on the sanctity of the canvas edge, she's equally at home cultivating wild blooms in the color fields of '60s abstraction. She has Helen Frankenthaler's ability to open the painting's surface to the fall of light and David Hockney's laid-back disregard for the poetics of luminosity. And those aren't the only Owens paradoxes. Her paintings exude wit, but the humor is simultaneously comic and deadly serious. With each new, always untitled work, she ▷



“It was **overwhelming,**”  
Owens says of her Gardner residency.  
“Somewhere between  
**Disneyland** and the Met”

Clockwise from above:  
*Untitled*, 1999 (acrylic  
on canvas; 65" x 50").  
*Untitled*, 2000 (acrylic  
and oil on canvas;  
150" x 96"). The artist's  
color-coding system.

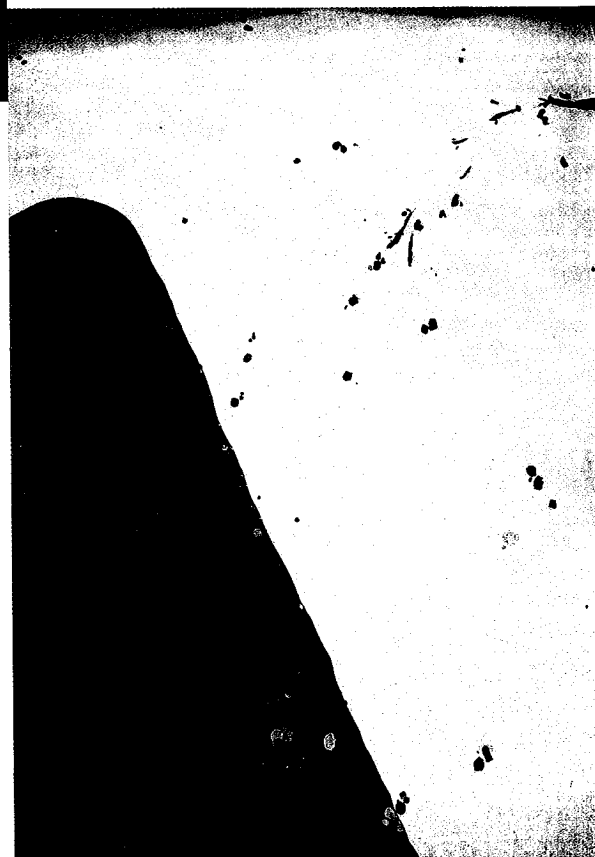


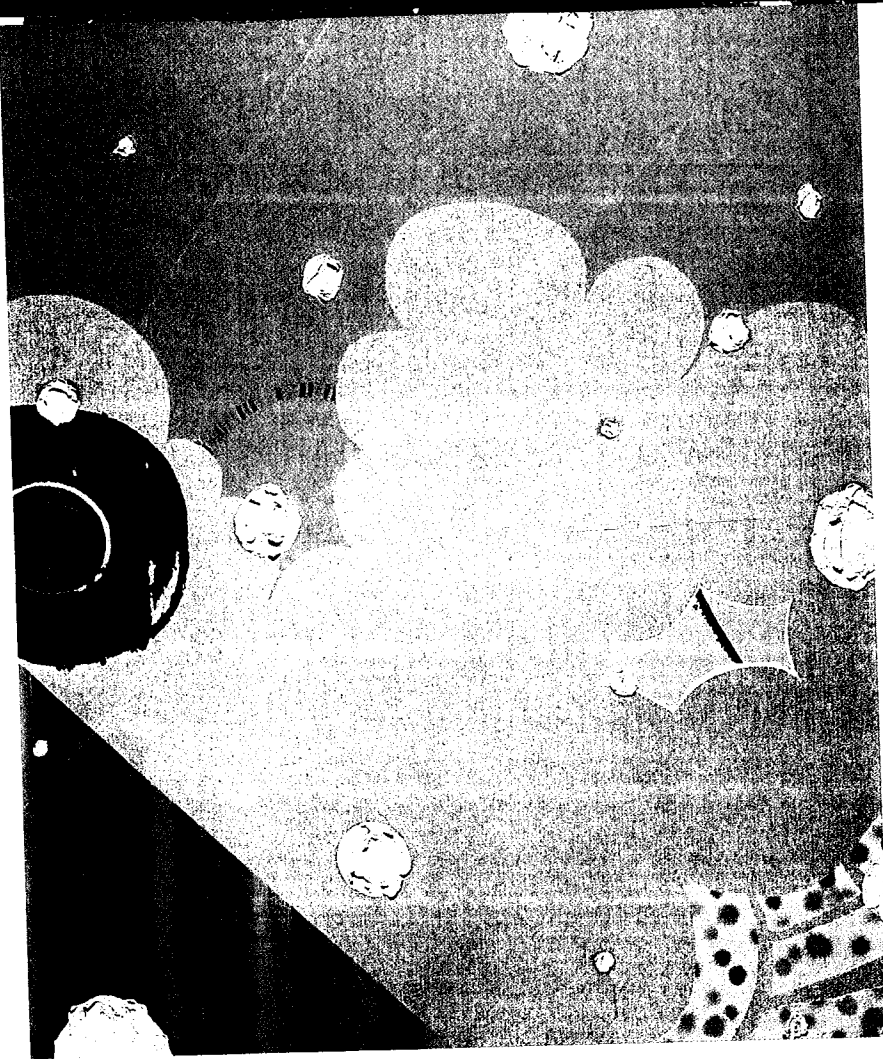
seems to reinvent the history of painting the same way that Neil Armstrong might have reinvented the history of space travel had he emerged from the Apollo 11 module wearing a beanie.

A stylized seascape, goofy verging on provocative, was the hit of Owens' solo show at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York in 1997. Blue horizontal lines represent the ocean, above which wheel a pair of seagulls, their impasto V's complete with shadows winking at the vernacular of illusion. The genre is a staple of art contests in provincial resorts; at more than 10 by 8 feet, however, the canvas refuses to settle comfortably into an established category.

In the subsequent four years, Owens' reputation has continued to grow, and she's hailed as a key player in the resurgence of contemporary painting. Blooming and buzzing with flora and fauna, her work is in the permanent collections of the Whitney and the Guggenheim in New York, as well as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A. anointed her one of today's 25 most important young artists by including her in its recent "Public Offerings" show (alongside Damien Hirst, Rachel Whiteread, and Jorge Pardo), and she's just won an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Owens' first U.S. solo museum exhibition, at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston through Sept. 16, grew out of a month-long residency there last year. "It was an overwhelming experience, somewhere between Disneyland and the Met," she says. On a conceptual level, it's >





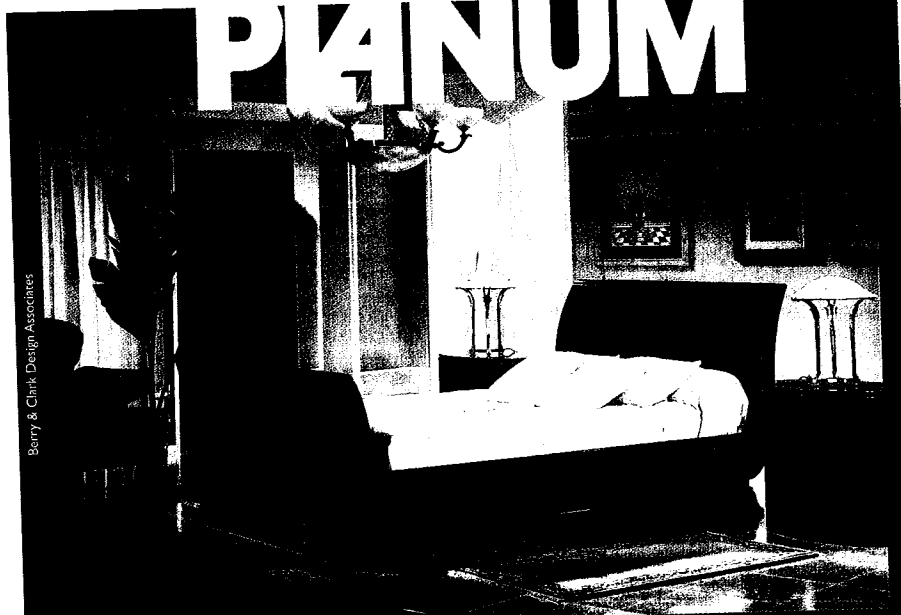
easy to imagine how Isabella Stewart Gardner's own fearless eclecticism and interest in integrating art with its surroundings would appeal to Owens. In fact, the installation of the museum's collection resembles her practice of "lateral collage," whereby the painting is "simply about adjacency, things sitting next to one another."

Two of the Gardner show's most notable works, both watercolors, were inspired by Owens' residency. In one, a floral garland encloses a vacant Symbolist center. In the other, the flowing outlines of a kissing couple intertwine in an Edenic garden of vinelike flowers. "Owens makes wonderfully lyrical drawings," says curator Pieranna Cavalchini, "but she also has a masterful sense of composition and balance."

The museum's crewel, embroidery, and other textiles were also a source of inspiration for Owens, who layered references to them in her latest work. The 19th-century Chinese silk hangings in particular fascinated her. "There are these amazing landscapes and flowers," she explains. "You really believe they're paintings until you go up close and see the millions of microscopic threads." The discovery was a liberation: "It's such a cliché doing flower painting but, at some point you have to say, 'I'm going to paint flowers, and that's okay.' Besides, it's less about what you do than how you do it." ■

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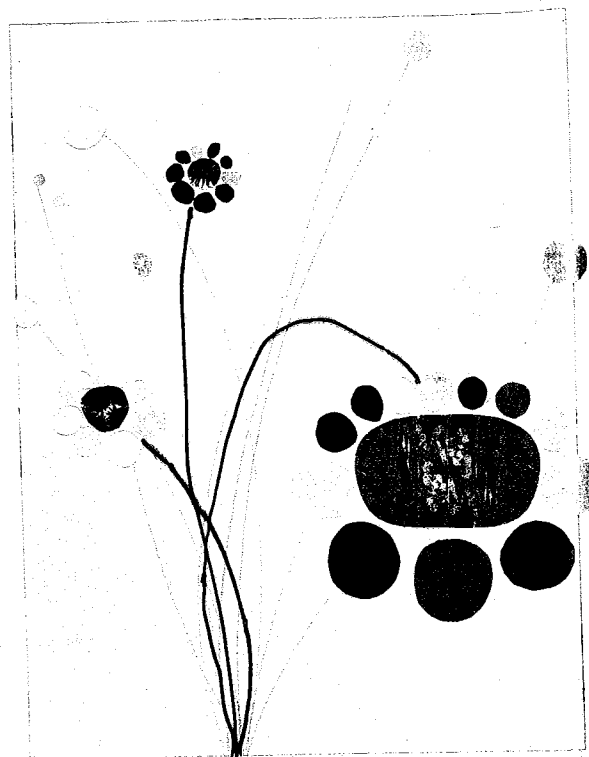
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Top to bottom: *Untitled*, 1994 (oil and acrylic on canvas; 120"x96"). *Untitled*, 2000 (photo, colored paper, acrylic, and pencil on paper; 16"x12").