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## REVIEWS

### NOVEMBER 2015

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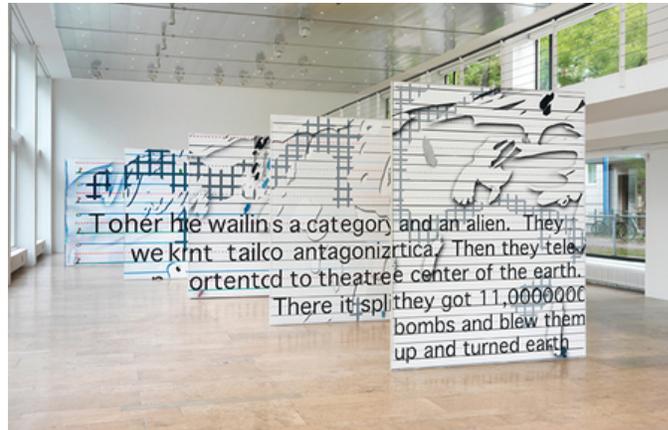
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### Laura Owens

CAPTAIN PETZEL



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2015, oil, Flashe paint, acrylic, silkscreen inks, and gesso on linen, five panels, each 108 × 84". Photo: Jens Ziehe.

The five freestanding canvases that make up Laura Owens's *Untitled*, 2015, were arranged in a diagonally angled row, like a scaled-down painterly cousin of Richard Serra's *Promenade*, 2008, or a scaled-up line of ready-to-fall dominoes. This setup encourages viewers to walk around and among them, inspecting their lively versos. Still, there is only one technically *correct* viewpoint. Look down the sequence from its head, fine-tune your position by shuffling your feet, and the visible overlapping fragments of text printed on the frontages—texts whose point size grows as the paintings recede, compensating for distance and suggesting, together, a single flat plane—suddenly snap into readability, if not profundity: THERE WAS A CAT AND AN ALIEN. THEY WENT TO ANTARTICA [sic]. THEN THEY TELEPORTED TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH. THERE THEY GOT 11,000000 BOMBS AND BLEW THEM UP AND TURNED EARTH

—it cuts off. The punch line is elsewhere. Payoffs, so suggests the deeply smart state-of-painting proposal that Owens has concocted here, don't derive from standing still. The correct position is no fixed position at all.

Her writing, stenciled, sits on horizontal lines that recall a child's exercise book. If you're standing at the far end, these become more numerous, stylistically varied, and primary-colored in inverse relation to the paintings' nearness. Move instinctively toward blooming color, inspect the canvases closely, and they open up and complicate, revealing themselves as admixtures of application. The texts mingle with digitally printed, abstract, black-and-white imagery that suggests a drop-shadowed map of coastline, or perhaps melting Antarctic sea ice, land gone fungible. Combined with a wavering trellis of gray that weaves across the surfaces, the shadowing underlines the work's generalized seesawing between flatness and depth. Both of these, in Owens's gaming, can be illusory. What look like Easter eggs appear: lustrously fat splotches of vivid and pungent paint, some of them—ha-ha—digitally drop-shadowed too. The final canvas is a melee of registrations: hand-applied paint, stenciled text, digitally printed lattices, and emoji (flowers, sun behind clouds).

Owens was equally busy on the backs of the paintings, where fanned-out arrangements of blocky, pixelated forms—if you squint, they look like stencils of some sort of animal, perhaps horses, dolphins, or tortoises—spread across the brown linen. Encountering these and more emoji (blueberries, licorice, cinnamon bun) was like gobbling power treats in a video game: a little infantilizing. And pleasurable. Near the stairs to the basement, in a corner of an unlovely, low-ceilinged, carpeted room, was one more canvas, smaller, traditionally hung: a splashy, giddy, *jolie-laide* pastiche of Mediterranean modernism, depicting a strewn desk. On it, alongside a book, a basket, and two hovering disembodied eyes, was what—judging from all the parti-color lines—would be the last page of what began upstairs. Its scribbled text, completing Owens's sentence, read: . . . INTO A PIZZA CRUST.

If disappointment tinged the absurdist comedy, it was site-specific: traditional painting exiled to the basement, while work that absorbs and refracts the digital flourished upstairs. Yet Owens, in offering her audience the "flat" experience of reading that comes when her sentences anticlimactically line up, has also inveigled them into physical space, into the sensual physicality of paint, into a polemic that never feels like a lecture. Yes, painting must adapt to survive, the alternative being that lonely basement ghetto. At the same time, she suggests—contra many other painters who interface with our latter-day condition—it might profit from being less screenlike, more sculptural. The crucial takeaway, though, is the mood of

Jo Applin on **Imi Knoebel**  
 Sherman Sam on **Ellen Gronemeyer**  
 Kathy Noble on **Larry Johnson**

**Glasgow**

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Lillian Davies on **Anita Molinero**  
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**Berlin**

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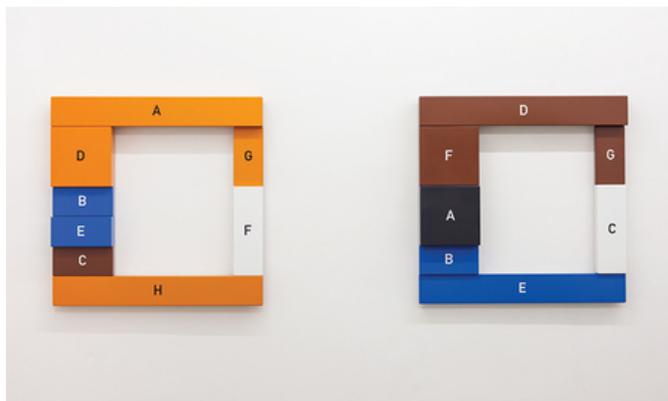
enablement. In Owens's hands, this median position looks less like catch-up than like a field of opportunities—for looting, needling, mongrelizing, cavorting. The old paradigm? Pizza crust, she said.

—*Martin Herbert*

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**Thomas Locher**

SILBERKUPPE



View of "Thomas Locher," 2015. From left: A–H, 2002/2015; A–G, 2002/2015.

As if to recall the consistency of his project over the decades, some of the works in Thomas Locher's exhibition "Post-Information" were as much as twenty-five years old. *Gestell* (Frame), an aluminum shelf engraved with letters, numbers, and black rectangles, dates from 1990. *A. 1–Z. 2*, a wooden board on which horizontal black bars as well as letters and digits are inscribed, is even older, from 1989. On the facing wall were two reliefs, composed of rectangular panels of varying thickness painted in different colors. Each is marked with a letter. Insisting on their objecthood and defying any attempt to reduce them to an unambiguous interpretation, even embracing paradox, these vintage pieces feel astonishingly youthful.

Locher launched his career in the mid-1980s, when faith in the potential of communication had begun to crumble. The question of communication has preoccupied him ever since. Yet his works are not Conceptual or post-Conceptual disquisitions. Rather, they function like snares: *A. 1–Z. 2* and similar pieces prompt us to look for a system behind the varying thicknesses of the rectangular panels and wonder how the letters relate to the shapes and colors—we might even recall Piet Mondrian's geometric systems. And before we know it, we have become embroiled in communication.

That is exactly Locher's purpose: to inspire reflections, questions, ideas through the interplay of formal and semantic elements and of aesthetic and grammatical rules while acknowledging the disenchantment concerning the impotence of communication. The works are designed to undercut any unequivocal proposition—what used to be called "message." No system underlies the placement of the letters and the dimensions of the panels in *A. 1–Z. 2*. "Post-Information" means information that no longer moves along a straight line toward a fixed destination, as the theorists of the 1970s argued. In the real world, such a unidirectional flow of information is always an illusion.

And yet: There is such a thing as information, as five works from the six-part series "Politics of Communication," 2000, demonstrate by combining pictures with excerpts from theoretical essays on communication. One bears the words THE CODE BELONGS TO ALL. TO WHOM BELONGS THE MESSAGE? next to pictures of office furniture clipped from architecture magazines or sales catalogues and sorted, in the manner of a sociological study, by quantity: individual chairs, chairs and tables, entire ensembles. The texts are held to the boards with magnets, so that the artist can rearrange them as desired.

Locher's art lacks any systematic quality. However, the viewer may identify an implicit reference. The furniture, some of it created by renowned designers, and the texts, with their emphasis on efficiency in communication, point to Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's book, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), which argues that by championing authenticity and individual creativity, the "aesthetic critique" of capitalism has actually been complicit with the rise of neoliberalism. The charge surely cuts to the quick, and yet strikingly few artists have chosen to address it—as Locher suggested in conversation, the issue is so fraught that most prefer to ignore it. The primacy of efficiency in the design of the office furniture and the quest for efficient communication that animates the texts send a clear message: Boltanski and Chiapello may have a point.

—*Noemi Smolik*

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.

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