

# LAURA OWENS

Los Angeles-based artist Laura OWENS is deeply committed to the medium of painting, imbuing her work with art-historical references and exploring both abstraction and figuration. She chose art, she says, because it was “the one subject that didn’t have an answer.” Owens’s recent paintings have been conceived as parts of a greater whole, expressed in their manner of exhibition: playful investigations of the serious concepts of ephemerality, meaning, and value.

Her interest in the exhibition-making process led her to cofound 365 S. Mission Road in Los Angeles in 2013, which launched with a show of her works entitled *12 Paintings*. The space has gone on to hold exhibitions by a range of emerging and established contemporary artists. On October 5, Owens will open a show of new works at Sadie Coles HQ, London.



Laura Owens  
 UNTITLED, 2012. Acrylic, oil, Flashe, resin, pumice,  
 and collage on canvas; 108 x 84 inches  
 Included in the exhibition *Pavement Karaoke/Alphabet*, Sadie Coles, London, 2012  
 Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome; Sadie Coles HQ,  
 London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne



Laura Owens,  
 UNTITLED, 2015  
 Acrylic, oil, and Flashe  
 on linen, with powder-  
 coated aluminum strainer  
 Five panels,  
 each 108 x 84 inches  
 Installation view:  
*Capitain Petzel*,  
 Berlin, 2015  
 Courtesy the artist/Gavin  
 Brown's enterprise, New York/  
 Rome; Sadie Coles HQ,  
 London; and Galerie Gisela  
 Capitain, Cologne

Mark GODFREY is the curator of international art at Tate Modern, London, focusing on art made after 1945. Here, he discusses the provocative contradictions of Owens’s practice.

Words by  
 Mark GODFREY

The Capitain Petzel gallery in Berlin occupies a rectangular space formerly used as a car showroom. On one long side is a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows; on the other side is a balcony with windows above. Most artists offered an exhibition in this vast and porous space have created false walls to block out the windows or to divide the room, and hung their works on those walls.

Laura Owens left the space totally open. She installed just a single work: a suite of five paintings, lined up in the middle of the room at regular intervals on the same longitudinal axis, moving backward from the entrance of the gallery to the rear. On the lateral axis, they were staggered: the painting closest to the entrance was further to the right as you entered the space, while the last painting was set toward the left, nearer the street-facing wall of windows. Each painting formed a freestanding wall; you could walk up to and around each one. When you rounded the first, you realized that the backs were painted, too – with pixelated colored images of fruits.

The front of each canvas was divided into two sections. The upper halves contained abstract bulbous patterns, dropped shadows, grids, and whippy dollops of brushed-on paint; the lower halves resembled lined paper with painted texts in different sizes. As you walked around the room, the individual

texts didn’t make much sense, but when you returned to the entrance, one vantage point suddenly brought them all together: the lettering was now uniform, because the texts further away had been painted larger, and the lines of text ran across all five paintings, telling one continuous story, which had been written by Owens’s child. “There was a cat and an alien. They went to antarctica. Then they teleported to the center of the earth. There they got 11,0000000 bombs and blew them up and turned earth.” Bemused by this truncated end, with its lack of resolution, you might have left the scene and descended the stairs to the basement, where you would discover a further painting, totally different in scale, appearance, and chromatic range, a somewhat brushy picture of a room with a desk with, on it, a single sheet of lined paper bearing the words “into a pizza crust” – the denouement of the story upstairs.

The past few years have been a very fertile time for painting, and especially for new approaches to exhibition-making. I’m thinking of Wade Guyton’s Whitney retrospective, R.H. Quaytman’s Kunsthalle Basel survey, and Albert Oehlen’s Kunsthalle Zürich project. Owens’s Berlin show at Capitain Petzel, which took place in summer 2015, felt to me like an extraordinary and complex contribution to this list. By creating paintings that served as walls, rather

than paintings that hang on walls. Owens radically re-imagined what a painting show should be. But at the same time, it was clear that she was also working, in a very novel way, on some of the most traditional themes in painting's history.

The story goes that Renaissance painters created the illusion of deep space by using perspective to paint distant things smaller than near ones, whereas modern painters found ways to emphasize the flatness of the canvas. Owens grabs this story and knots it up: she achieves the illusion of a flat object – a sheet of lined paper – by creating a reverse perspective, with the distant lettering painted larger. A more recent story is the opposition between geometric and gestural abstraction: one line associated with Mondrian, the other with abstract expressionism. Owens isn't the first artist to refuse this stark division (Mary Heilmann was one of her teachers), but she does it especially convincingly in these paintings, filling in some of her wavy, bulbous shapes with a rigid grid pattern. A third story opposes handmade painterly practices and machine-made marks: de Kooning's brushwork versus Warhol's silkscreens, for instance. In Owens's Berlin show, these two modes come together as well; she uses both silkscreen printing and brushwork, but she confuses the associations we bring to them. Printing can actually be laborious, requiring painstaking manual work, and is anything but an automatic hands-off process, whereas the addition of an im-

pasto brush mark may be as much automatic as expressive.

Owens's show was also a new intervention in the history of painted text. In choosing a text from her child's notebook, she wasn't making motherhood a subject in her work; rather, she was using her everyday experience as source material. Yet the text wasn't a mere childhood story. Each single painting

revealed words that weren't visible in their entirety from the master viewpoint: "antartica" became "antagonizing"; "cat" became "categories"; "was" became "wailing". Tellingly, these adult concepts, often expressing anxiety and turmoil, came into view just as the space-collapse fantasy disintegrated, as if to show that the imaginative world of childhood is just as precarious as the maintenance of a single position in the gallery.

## "Owens radically re-imagined what a painting show should be"

Owens's Berlin installation came in the middle of a very productive period for her. It began with her show at Sadie Coles in London in 2012, where seven panels along a single wall spelled out the words "Pavement Karaoke," within the paintings and in the gaps between them; each individual panel also functioned as a single painting, covered with pink checks, actual gingham cloth, impasto paint filling

in curvy shapes, and even appliquéd pumice rocks. Next came *12 Paintings*, an exhibition mounted in a massive converted industrial building in Los Angeles that Owens has run as her own space since then, partnering with Gavin Brown and Wendy Yao of Ooga Booga store and publishing house. Owens also contributed exceptional works to the Whitney Biennial and to MoMA's painting survey *The Forever Now*. The latter show included one painting also based on a story written by a child on Smart Start lined paper: clearly the seed for the Berlin exhibition.

While the Capitain Petzel show can be seen as a step in this series of projects, many of its ingredients relate to Owens's work from previous decades. Her interest in paintings-as-walls recalls two 1997 paintings of gallery walls, depicting imaginary spaces whose walls are covered with canvases like her own. What made the series so memorable was not only the idea of a young artist imagining her work populating a space, but the way Owens created quite radical compositions from this fantasy. *Untitled* (1997), included in Owens's Sadie Coles exhibition



Laura Owens  
 UNTITLED, 1997. Acrylic and oil on canvas; 96 x 120 inches  
 Included in the exhibition *Laura Owens: Paintings*, Sadie Coles, London, 1997  
 Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome; Sadie Coles HQ,  
 London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

Laura Owens  
 UNTITLED, 1998  
 Acrylic and pen  
 on canvas  
 144 x 84 inches  
 Courtesy the artist/  
 Gavin Brown's enterprise,  
 New York/Rome;  
 Sadie Coles HQ, London;  
 and Galerie Gisela  
 Capitain, Cologne

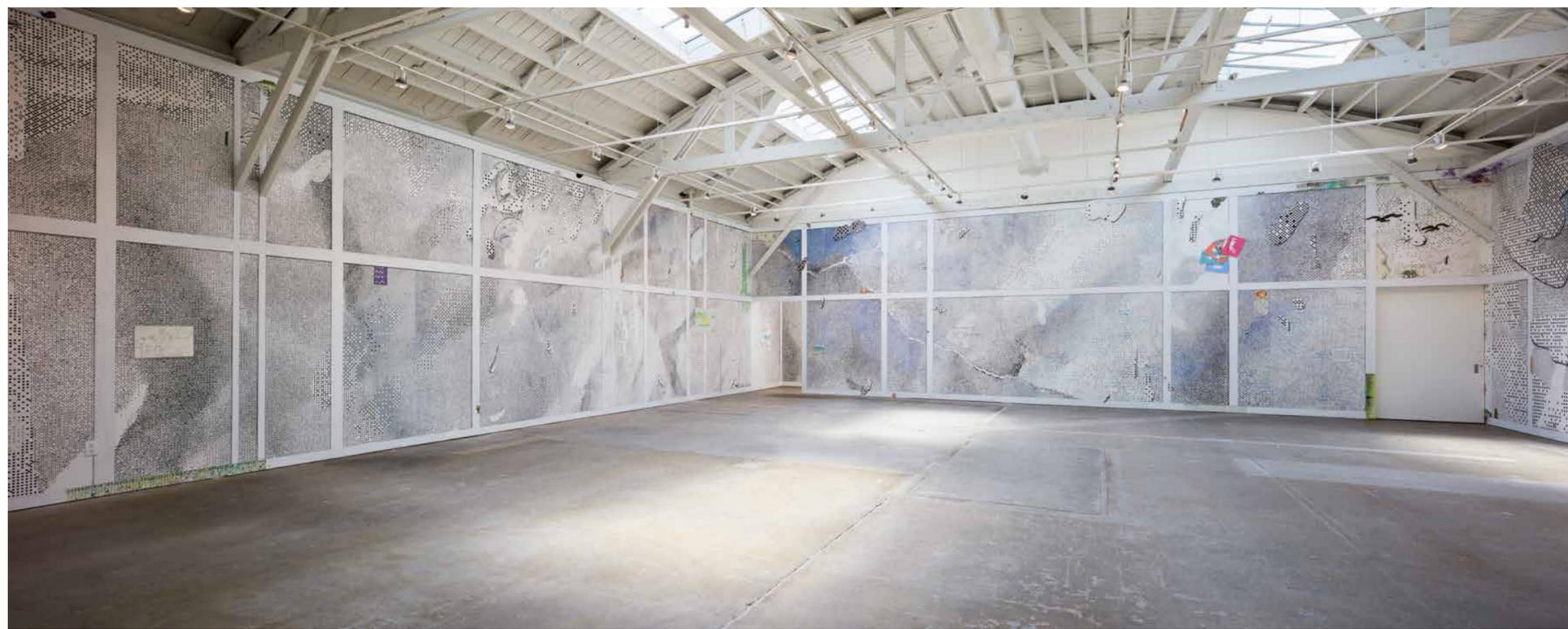
that year, showed an enfilade of gallery spaces receding from the viewer. But as much as the painting appeared to create a simple illusion of deep space, it contained a complex visual conundrum. In the foreground was a simple easel holding an empty canvas, colored beige to match the tone of actual raw canvas. This was “depicted” flatness. Owens used exactly the same color for the immense, undifferentiated beige floor. Unlike a floor in a Renaissance painting such as Raphael’s *The School of Athens*, where tiles diminishing in size indicate receding space, Owens’s blank floor read as a ziggurat-like shape, becoming a flat, abstract presence that interrupted the illusionism of the rest of the composition. As you gazed at the painting, the floor began to feel less like a floor than like an expanse of raw flat canvas, akin to those at the center of modernist paintings such as Morris Louis’s *Unfurleds*. A partner to this painting is another 1997 work, made for Gavin Brown’s New York gallery. This was a rectangle whose central white square Owens left entirely blank; on both sides, a series of walls receded at acute angles, each hung with a single painting seen from the side, so that the end of the stretcher bar was visible, and the painting’s face was at a ten-degree angle. The painting was staggeringly brave, with its central void – a depiction of the blank end of a wall *and* a monochrome within a trompe l’oeil realist painting – and it offered a powerful example of how a tradition of white monochrome painting that might have seemed exhausted (after Malevich, Newman, Rauschenberg, Ryman, and Baer) could be intelligently refreshed by a young and intelligent painter working in the late 1990s.

## “Owens has always known that to renew painting you have to ruin it, too”

Owens’s Berlin show also extended her long-standing interest in the idea of painted writing; she has consistently mined “improper” kinds of writing. Many painters in LA before her have used painted lettering: think of John Baldessari’s 1960s’ paintings bearing texts sometimes made by a sign painter; or think of the way Ed Ruscha painted the Hollywood sign or mimicked the look of film titles or advertising typography. Owens casts her net far wider, taking in types of lettering and writing that serious art-school students might be taught to avoid. For instance, the monumental pastel loopy-pattern

painting from 1998, *Untitled*, now in the Whitney collection, is signed with a very “girly” loopy signature – but upside down, which brilliantly rescues it from being a cliché to playing a part in the composition. In her series *Alphabet*, from 2012, Owens looked back to embroidered texts of the kind her grandmother once sewed. For her these kinds of texts are not “lower popular forms,” to be reclaimed for art; they are not “women’s work,” to be revalidated; they are just simply the kind of lettering that is as much a part of her history and her life as any other kind of lettering, such as the advertising copy she mined in the Whitney Biennial painting or the newsprint she silkscreened onto the *Pavement Karaoke* paintings.

Owens’s follow-up to the Capitain Petzel show was an exhibition at CCA Wattis in San Francisco, from April to July 2016, that was a kind of response to it: the former had paintings as walls in the middle of the space; the latter showed paintings *within* the walls and left the space empty. That show was called *Ten Paintings*, but it seemed to be a continuous image wallpapered onto three walls of the space – the wallpaper having been made by complex processes of silkscreening, printing, and flocking. In many areas, Owens added meringue-like whips of paint directly onto the wallpaper. The overall “image” seemed abstract, but it was derived from a scan of a crumpled and torn small ball of paper. The different planes and shadows of the crumpled paper were rendered at this huge architectural scale as pixels, which also echoed the cross-stitch samplers by the artist’s grandmother, Eileen Owens, that were displayed in a small gallery beyond. These planes and shadows were broken up by a framing grid of white lines that continued the lines of the beams and struts connecting the walls of CCA to its ceiling. That is to say, one element in the composition of the wallpaper was derived from the architecture of the space.



Laura Owens  
UNTITLED, 2016  
Acrylic, oil, Flashe, screen-printing ink, charcoal, and sand on wallpaper with sound components; dimensions variable  
*Installation view of Ten Paintings, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, 2016.*  
Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

Moving in closer, you found many smaller images and silkscreened texts: sheets of paper with emails, drawings made by Owens’s kids, kitschy pictures of flowers, boats, cats; scans of equipment used to create this kind of installation. Then there were several images of pieces of paper with instructions to text questions to a few different San Francisco numbers. When you sent a text, the installation “spoke” back to you, through loudspeakers embedded at six locations in the walls. More than 1,000 answers were possible, from the curator Anthony Huberman laughing his head off (a response to the question “What does the curator think?”), to a long sentence in Mandarin (a response to the question “How much are the paintings?”), to a siren-like sound (a response to “Who is Laura Owens?”). While I was in the gallery, I texted the artist and asked her to text the show. Shortly afterwards, weird sounds wafted across the space. If you text “Where are the paintings?” you get the answer back, from all over the room, “Here... here... here... here...”

And what of the show’s title, *Ten Paintings*? Fixed onto the walls in exactly the same way as the wallpaper, and flush with it, were ten panels sized 9ft by 7ft. These ten paintings would be excavated when the show was de-installed, but during the show they were hiding in plain sight, there before your eyes but impossible to see as discrete objects. Two neighboring paintings might have abutted each other, or been at some distance apart; one might have been placed higher up the wall than the next. Though all were the same size, you could not

distinguish them, because there was no way to determine where their borders were.

Owens’s CCA Wattis installation crossed pixelation with embroidery and fused decorative illustration with a radical exploration of scanning, shading, and gesture. As a retort to the crass but prevalent idea in contemporary-art criticism that paintings are somehow less “interactive” and therefore less democratic than other kinds of art, Owens created a deliberately ridiculous form of interaction by enabling *this* painting show to respond to questions put to it by text message. But the show’s most brilliant concept was the hidden paintings: a canny response to the demand from collectors to own her work. On display, the paintings were invisible as individual objects; with the show over and the *Ten Paintings* revealed, they are forever orphaned from their context. The installation cannot be recreated, because the remaining portions of wallpaper will have been destroyed and because – due to the architecturally determined framing grid – the show could only be remounted at CCA. But that will never happen. Owens has always known that to renew painting you have to ruin it, too. Sometimes that means covering canvases with colors, loopy patterns, pictures, and children’s stories that some may find kitschy, or slight, or too cute. But sometimes it means setting up an original exhibition situation that can never be repeated, so that her paintings, however beautiful and impressive, will always be missing something: their first home.