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THE RADICAL PAINTINGS OF LAURA OWENS

Since childhood, she has grounded her life in being an artist. Along the way, she's forged new directions for her medium.

Serious but friendly, a woman who rarely jokes but readily laughs, the Los Angeles artist Laura Owens, forty-seven years old, was pleasantly dishevelled in mom attire: shirt, baggy shorts, sneakers, big glasses. "Don't be afraid to make mistakes," she said to the children in each of the five classes she spoke to on Career Day, in June, at her nine-year-old daughter Nova's public elementary school. She accompanied the advice with a PowerPoint slide of herself after falling from a low scaffold and being splattered with blue paint from a pail that had followed her down—a studio mishap, in 2013, that an assistant had paused to snap before helping her up. The next slide showed her paint-smudged face, smiling—no harm. The kids seemed fascinated but perplexed, as well they might have been. An essay could be written on the semantic distinctions, which Owens had just elided, between mistakes and accidents, and between accidents and pratfalls. I recognized one of the turns of mind that characterize Owens's influential inventions of new things for the old medium of painting to do. I couldn't match it when a fifth-grade girl asked me, as a drop-in careerist, how to become a writer. I said that she was one already, if she was writing. With a thought to Owens, I added that she should carry a notebook around, so that people would see



Owens in her studio in Los Angeles: "How do you keep things moving along?"

Photograph by David Benjamin Sherry for
The New Yorker

that she is a writer. Owens has grounded her life, since childhood, on being, and being regarded as, an artist. The Whitney Museum's description of an upcoming show of her work there as "a midcareer retrospective" seems superfluous for someone who has never not been in midcareer.

The first slide that she had shown the children was of a drawing she said she had made when she was a teen-ager. It will be included in the Whitney show. Dark and smudgy and heavily worked, it depicts a silhouetted figure in a jail cell, reaching forward through the bars, which cast long shadows, toward a dog dangling a key from its mouth. The dog appears uncoöperative. She told me that the image may have come to her in a dream, which she has no wish to analyze. The second slide documented a civic-poster contest that she had won when she was fifteen—promoting a county foster-care program for children—in her home town of Norwalk, Ohio. Third, from four years later, came a painstaking pencil copy of a photograph of the Beatles. She demurred when I remarked on her evident early giftedness. "I don't believe there's such a thing as innate talent," she said. "It's about desires and passions that lead to a focus on certain things and seeing the world in a certain way."

For the retrospective, Owens and the Whitney curator Scott Rothkopf have created an astonishing catalogue, both epic and intimate: six hundred and sixty-three pages of reproduced works, critical essays, literary texts, photographs, clippings, memoirs by friends, journals, correspondence, exhibition plans, and ephemera. (Each of the eight thousand copies comes with a unique silk-screen cover, handmade in Owens's studio.) The first major item in the catalogue is a memoir by her mother, Carol Hendrickson, a public-health nurse, who recalls once having casually suggested to Owens, then a teen-ager, that she consider pursuing commercial art or teaching art to children. Hendrickson writes that her daughter "was very upset with me, and tearful, and said, 'Don't you think you'll ever see my art in a museum?' And I thought, 'An art museum? Wow!' So I stopped short for a second and said, 'Well, yes, of course I think that.' " In a journal that Owens kept in her early twenties, she wrote a fourteen-point list entitled "How to Be the Best Artist in the World." Among the dictates: "Think big," "Contradict yourself constantly," "No Guilt," "Do not be afraid of anything," "Say very little," and

“Know that if you didn’t choose to be an artist— You would have certainly entertained world domination or mass murder or sainthood.”

Owens showed the children a slide of an effortful drawing from a life class that she had taken while still in high school. She followed it with mostly abstract works from her years at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she graduated with a bachelor’s degree in fine arts, in 1992, and at the California Institute of the Arts, where she earned a master’s, in 1994. At *RISD*, she said, “I was so happy to be among people who like to make things”; and, at CalArts, “I learned philosophies and ideas of art right now.” She displayed one work that wasn’t hers: “The Blue Window” (1911), by Matisse, a still-life set against a landscape. She said, “I love that because it is so very beautiful.” But mostly she stuck to themes of enterprise—“Send your poems out into the world,” she told a girl who said that she wrote poetry—and resilience. “When you make a mistake, see what’s good about it,” she said. “Mistakes are little windows into what is possible.” She told me that her most productive time for working has always been between ten at night and three in the morning, nowadays often after a multitasking day at her studio in Boyle Heights, just across the Hollywood Freeway from downtown—a low-income neighborhood where she also runs a celebrated art-and-performance space, 356 Mission Road, which has lately found itself a target of anti-gentrification protests. In the hours around midnight, she said, “I get down and focused. Making mistakes, wiping them off. Really communing. At night, it’s a matter of hearing the work, after walking past it all day.”

Owens’s soft-spoken earnestness held the kids’ attention even when she flashed images of complicated abstractions, such as a series, “Pavement Karaoke” (2012), that congregates thick impasto, crisp grid designs, effulgent stains, silk-screen newsprint (from a nineteen-sixties underground paper, the *Berkeley Barb*), collaged gingham, and fragments of lava rock. But the figurative ones went over best. One, from 2004, was of a cartoonish, gangly horse that appears scrunched to fit onto the canvas. “How do you make horses?” a girl in a class of hearing-impaired first graders asked. Owens said, “I look at a lot of pictures of horses.” A teacher suggested a demonstration. On a large sheet of paper, Owens drew three rectangles. In one, she swiftly limned a more

straightforward equine. In the others, she rendered a rudimentary mountain range and an owl. “See?” she said. “You can do anything!” The results looked simple and guileless in the way of art by children, but fluent and decisive. (Not easy for an adult to do.) A small boy lit up when, on the spot, the teacher taught him the binoculars-like hand sign for “owl.” A girl demanded a mermaid, which Owens drew beside the horse. The drawings stayed with the class when we left.

I first became aware of Owens in 1996, when one of her paintings in a SoHo group show invaded my sleep. The strongest young artists of that time, drilled in critical theory and wielding newer mediums, disdained painting as weak-minded and archaic. Most of the picture “Untitled” (1995), about six feet high by seven feet wide, is taken up by a few red diagonal lines on a pinkish ground. They indicate a floor seen in perspective—or half of one, because the lines converge toward the right edge of the canvas—topped by a triangular slice of mottled green wall spotted with some four dozen tiny abstract paintings-within-the-painting. (Artist friends of Owens had daubed in some of those, at her invitation.) A couple of nights after viewing the work, I dreamed that an annoying young man was pestering me to tell him if paintings by an old woman, perhaps his grandmother, were worth anything. To get rid of him, I gave them a glance. They had an aura redolent of the Owens. I became so wildly enthusiastic that the guy backed away from me. I believe that his qualm crept in when I reviewed the group show for the *Village Voice*. I wrote that Owens’s work, although charismatic, was perhaps clever to a fault: “an advancing weather front of tacit quotation marks” and “not beautiful, but ‘about’ beauty.”

I wasn’t ready to accept that Owens had hit on a necessarily willful new direction—not exactly forward, but fruitfully sideways—for painting, my favorite art form. She knew the critical challenges, from Draconianly avant-gardist CalArts, and was taking them head on, with crackling wit and a haunted heart. Was new art supposed to enforce awareness of its physical and institutional environs? Owens envisioned an exhibition space, such as the one that you stood in to view her picture. A painting about looking at paintings, from an alienated distance, this “Untitled” is itself a painting to be looked at, as closely as you like. The dinky abstractions, fictively remote, are smack on the surface. Funny, faintly melancholy, and fantastically intelligent, the work somewhat recalls the philosophical

cartooning of Saul Steinberg, but vigorously brushed at a commanding scale. I think that there is a figure in the picture, albeit an invisible one. It's the viewer: you, or, in my case, me. I came to see that what I had taken for arch skepticism was strategic sincerity.



Unusually for Owens, the painting was inspired by a specific work of a past artist—“Studio Interior” (circa 1882), a sumptuous piece by William Merritt Chase, in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—while not much resembling it. She never imitates a style or, really, has one of her own. Rather, she has adopted craft techniques and teased out iconographic and formal ideas from whole fields and genres of the pictorial. Gestural and color-field abstraction, digital imaging, American folk art, Japanese landscape, children’s-book illustration, dropped shadows, greeting-card whimsy, clip art, wallpaper design, silk screen, tapestry, typography, stencils, recorded-

sound elements, and mechanical moving parts (in one series of paintings, shapes with hidden motors function like clock hands) take turns or combine. Slam-bang visual impact co-occurs with whispering subtlety. Owens’s art imparts a sense, from first to last, of being in the middle of a process that doesn’t evolve but that spreads, deltalike, from a mysterious headwater. However strenuous technically, her work is reliably feather-light in feeling, even at architectural scale. “Ambitious” seems both too heavy and too petty a word for her. Her drive seems impersonal: a daemon, which she hosts. Recently, I posed that notion to her. It seemed to strike her as over the top. She said, “I think about what is required of me.”

Owens was a contrarian at *RISD*, chafing at male painting teachers who pushed latter-day variants of macho Abstract Expressionism and condescended to their female students. One of them suggested that the women in his class paint from life, encouraging abstraction among the men. Owens, painting abstractly, organized a club with other dissatisfied students to pursue a curriculum of their own. At CalArts, she imbibed intellectual rigor, including from the late conceptual artist and legendary teacher Michael Asher, who intended his site-specific, temporary works to undermine the conventions of art institutions. (One whole show of his consisted in removing a wall in a gallery to expose the business office.) He discounted painting. Yet Owens took to “using house paint and making a lot of big

canvases,” she told me, with “giant shapes and then small, concentrated moments of things,” such as bits of still-life. You know at a glance that they are by Owens, not from their looks, which are miscellaneous, but from how they feel: vaguely familiar and acutely strange.

Owens took a keen interest in whatever her peers were up to, eschewing competitiveness. “It’s debilitating to think that this person is above me and this person is below me. I want to be in a conversation with someone. Why can’t I think I’m talking to my favorite painters?” For example? By making a “painting for Cézanne to see,” Owens said. What would she and Cézanne discuss? “Definitely paying attention to what each mark is doing.” She said of Cézanne, “He is the god of paying-attention-ness.” Owens’s marks have a secondhand feel—indeed, with ghostly quotation marks, the echt Gen-X finger gesture—but they breathe liberty. (“You can do anything!”) The effect has nothing to do with virtuosity. She said, “I don’t like somebody fetishizing their skill level. Painting is one of the few mediums—I don’t know, maybe cinematography is another—where the skill level can just take over and really seduce people. It’s not that I don’t appreciate pieces of art that are done well. But how do you keep things moving along?”

Owens told me of her first visit, when she was a young girl, to the superb Cleveland Museum of Art. She saw at a distance an immense color-field painting by Morris Louis and walked toward it. As she approached, “the painting got bigger and bigger and I got smaller and smaller.” Add that memory to CalArts smarts and you have a take on Owens’s first New York solo show, at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, in 1997, and her first in London, at Sadie Coles, the following year. The former featured a vast painting of a blurry seascape with two curly “W” shapes, representing seagulls in flight, which appeared to cast shadows onto the sky behind them. A landscape at Coles was similarly large and customized for the space. (Owens has stayed stubbornly loyal to those two middle-range dealers, and to Galerie Gisela Capitan, in Cologne, despite wooing from richer and more prestigious galleries.) The work at Coles was installed facing a window across a room that had a pillar in the middle. Owens painted a shadow of the pillar onto her canvas. Both paintings felt as much like places as like pictures, anticipating Owens’s engulfing installations of recent years.

Critics were wary. Roberta Smith, in the *Times*, detected “cynicism” in the seagulls painting: “monochrome meets kitsch.” But, as with me, her initial resistance gave way as the seriousness of Owens’s intentions sank in; Smith became one of the artist’s most discerning observers. Meanwhile, certain artists caught Owens’s drift immediately. Rachel Harrison, the daring and influential sculptor, recalled for me the Gavin Brown show, with its “thick paint and comical flat shadows”: “I found it exceedingly deft formally, while demonstrating that although painting was pretty unfashionable at the time, it was still possible to throw a bomb.”

Owens’s idea of suiting paintings to sites, in a sort of conceptually self-conscious new baroque, has paid off in such dizzyingly complex recent works as a one-off installation, “Ten Paintings,” last year at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, in San Francisco. The paintings didn’t exist yet, except in the potential form of concealed panels that shared a continuous surface of room-girdling handmade wallpaper: in effect, a single painting, more than fourteen feet high and more than a hundred and seventy-three feet long, executed in acrylic, oil, vinyl paint, silk-screen inks, charcoal, pastel, graphite, and sand. Non-repeating bitmap patterns, derived from a scanned piece of crumpled paper, underlay passages of newsprint reproductions, fugitive brushwork, a micrographic version of Picasso’s “Guernica,” and attached whatnots, including a watercolor of a sailing ship by Owens’s grandfather, patterns of embroidery by her grandmother, and a drawing by her younger brother Lincoln, who is a chef in New Orleans. Prevailing blacks, whites, and pale blues, with purple accents, imposed a gently rhythmic unity. At intervals on the walls, phone numbers were printed, with invitations to text any question that a viewer might have. The nearest of eight concealed loudspeakers would deliver an answer in a male, female, or robotic voice, to spooky or daffy effect, from a computer that Owens, with technical help, had programmed to recognize a hundred key words. (Imagine an ultra-high-tech Magic 8 Ball.) To the query “Where are the paintings?,” all the speakers replied, “Here!”

When the show closed—with no prospect, Owens said, of ever being repeated—the supports were cut out. I saw the results hanging at her studio, each nine feet high by seven feet wide, and terrific:

arbitrary fragments of the wallpaper which, owing to the formalizing power of rectangles, feel discretely composed. Cropped, the installation's ambient energies become compressed dynamisms. The works' derivation makes them highly original aesthetic objects. On the model of Duchampian readymades, perhaps call them "made-alreadies": created by being revealed. In the studio, heaps of the surplus wallpaper, like outtakes on a cutting-room floor, awaited possible roles in works to come.

In a vertiginously hilly part of Echo Park, near Dodger Stadium, Owens shares a tidy two-story house, clinging to a steep slope, with her second husband, Sohrab Mohebbi—an Iranian-born writer and curator who works at Redcat, a CalArts-affiliated art center in downtown Los Angeles—and her two children, Nova and Henry (who is twelve), from her previous marriage, to the painter Edgar Bryan, who lives nearby. She told me by e-mail that when she moved to Los Angeles to attend CalArts, in 1992, she was put off by how "dry" a place it is, the climate and architecture "so jarring." "But after two years I felt very differently. Felt easy and familiar." Oak, deodar, citron, and pepper trees and capricious gardens crowd up to the stairs and patios around Owens's house. A sleek building below contains a studio and room for guests.

I was invited for dinner one summer evening. Owens's mother—who moved from Ohio to Los Angeles eight years ago, and, last year, into a house next door with her second husband, Richard Hendrickson, a retired small-city-newspaper reporter and editor—brought salad. Pasta and sauce materialized amid the comings and goings and breezy chat, in the open kitchen, of Owens and of friends from her capacious circle of artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, and other creative Angelenos. ("I would be nowhere without them," she told me.) Two or three times, the frenetic family dog, a rescue mutt named Molly, escaped the house and had to be recaptured. Downstairs, Henry and Nova took turns practicing the piano.

At twilight, we all took a walk—or a hike, what with the hills—a half mile or so to a park and back, in a sort of mood, at once energized and haphazard, that I now associate with Owens. In company, she is cordial and voluble—nice, in a word—but with what often seems a fraction of a mind that is occultly

busy elsewhere. The first thing that you notice about her is her gaze, wide-eyed and fixed on you, as if you had dropped from the sky. It takes a moment to realize that you are not obliged to be commensurately interesting. She consumes so little social oxygen that people around her tend to get a bit high, laughing at anything. She submits to being interviewed as you might to being treated by a trusted dentist: it's endurable and over with soon enough. I found myself repeatedly apologizing to her for the imposition. She seemed not to hear. She was answering questions.

Owens's father died of complications following knee surgery this year, in July. He was a flamboyant attorney, who strutted around Norwalk in a Stetson. Her parents divorced when she was seventeen. She credits her father with having instilled in her a fervent liberalism, which has prompted her to engage in feminist causes and in campaigns for Democratic candidates, but which is only rarely and obliquely expressed in her art. Raised Catholic, she left the church in rebellion against its anti-abortion doctrine. I was startled when, in her car one day, as she drove us between gallery shows, her usual mildness gave way to flaming rage. We had seen a policeman hassle a young guy whose offense, it appeared, had been to cross a street so lackadaisically as to impede the cop's car for a few seconds. "That is so like them!" she said of uniformed authority. She told me a maxim imparted to her by her father: "Never tell the police anything."

But Owens adores rules, even, or perhaps especially, trivial ones. In an interview with one of her close friends, the novelist Rachel Kushner, in 2003, she described a summer job that she had had when she was seventeen: checking trucks hauling trash and garbage into a landfill. She recalled, "I had the power to say, in a logical and non-emotional way, 'You can't deliver that without a tarp over it.' People would get frustrated and respond, 'What do you mean? You want me to just pull out of here, put a tarp on, and then come right back?' I would look at them and say, 'Yes, that's what you'll have to do if you want to dump your trash—it's the law.' It had its appeal." An anarchic stickler: that's Owens.

Owens can be certain that her Echo Park house was built in 1942, because a renovation, in 2013, discovered paper stereotype plates (used to cast lead cylinders for printing) of the Los Angeles *Times* from that year. They had been employed as flashing beneath the shingled exterior.

Transferred to silk screens in a complex procedure involving monoprint molds, the antique reports of distant war and of local events, and the commercial and classified ads, now do double duty as text and texture in some of Owens's paintings. The source and content of the plates both do and don't matter to her, it seems. What counts is their specificity, as things distinct from other things that are like them. "All art now is collage," she said to me, with reference not just to cutting and pasting but to the incorporation of methods and images with prior uses. "Heterogeneous in form," she explained. "Against the different paradigm of the Gestalt object, like a Jackson Pollock painting—a single image that jolts you. Now art is all about being constructed out of relationships between parts."



"Untitled," by Laura Owens, from 1987.

Courtesy the artist; Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

"Say very little," Owens told herself in her early-nineties journal. And, in a way, she maintains that policy, even when going on at length about her art. Her public talks, delivered with an air of

professional duty, tend to be remarkably boring. But get her on the subject of another artist and she brightens. She and I discussed by e-mail the country-music paragon Patsy Cline. I commented on Cline's way with the 1952 chestnut "You Belong to Me," rather a high-class number for a country girl: "Fly the ocean in a silver plane . . . Just remember till you're home again / You belong to me." Cline sings it with wondering respect for its decorum, such that the song is no longer about a fancy girl remonstrating with her fancy guy, but about Cline's imagining of what it's like to *be* such a girl, with such a guy. Owens commented, "She has a way of singing that feels like she is so relaxed and confident, that what she says, it could be anything and I'd believe she meant it but on an even deeper level than the words could convey." That's the very tenor of the borrowed images that Owens paints: not appropriations but vicarious embodiments.

In 2003, Owens became the youngest artist ever to be given a retrospective at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art. By that time, she had begun to gravitate from abstraction toward fanciful figurative imagery, loosely brushed. "I decided I needed to bring in the human figure, because it was something that I was leaving out, and to break the habit of working for sites. To push myself." In 2006, she returned to Ohio for a year. She helped her mother buy a new house with a four-car garage, which became her studio, and painted her baby Henry, Edenic landscapes, flowers, and wacky animals, such as the horse that she showed to the schoolchildren. The works often suggest to me the state of mind of a new mother too tired to think while too dedicated not to work. Owens confirmed the impression in an e-mail: "Being a mom and still making art involves absolutely opposite parts of your brain. One is really selfish and the other is absolutely selfless." The domestic turn in Owens's life and subject matter dismayed friends when she returned to L.A. "It was uncool. I was told by many people, 'Well, that's the end of your art career.' " How did that make her feel? "Angered," she said. I think that the gawky pictures were a way for Owens to reconnect with the soul of the girl who had tried to get just right the vision of a figure in jail and a sassy dog. She wasn't going to be embarrassed about it.

Owens was asked, in 2003, to contribute to a feature, in *Vogue*, of self-portraits of women artists. She says in the Whitney catalogue, "I said no several times because my work doesn't really deal with self-representation." Finally, she made an insouciant watercolor of herself, seen from the back, standing in

a small boat and talking to the sun. A bird perches on a wave, and Owens's dog bobs past on a piece of driftwood. "I sent the image off to *Vogue* and Anna Wintour rejected it." Such occasional offenses to elegant taste may explain a wobbliness in the market for Owens's paintings. Her works sell briskly to devoted collectors but less well on the investment-minded secondary market, which favors reliable product lines. Her peak at auction—three hundred and sixty thousand dollars, at Sotheby's, a year ago—is hardly peanuts, but it lags the millions for works by some of her contemporaries, all stylistically consistent and nearly all male. Even after two decades of growing fame and esteem, her art's values retard transposition into prices.

One day, I met with Owens in her main studio. Consumed by preparations for the Whitney show, she had no special work in progress. She was wearing an off-the-shoulder cashmere sweater, but over a white T-shirt that rather sabotaged the chic. As usual, her long brown hair was pulled up in a knot with no evident advice from a mirror. I watched while she and an assistant, David Berezin, huddled at a computer to color-correct pages for the Whitney catalogue—difficult by computer, she said. "Digital color shoots out. Real color is reflective." Getting the right blue for the sky in a photograph of Owens and a friend on an outing in Death Valley took most of a minute. Other assistants worked at other computers. Phone calls were frequent. Owens Skyped at one point, also about the catalogue, with Scott Rothkopf, in New York, in editorial detail so granular that I almost fell asleep. The studio is like a cross between a factory and a laboratory. One colossal space is equipped with worktables and contains leaning stacks of big, well-used silk screens on heavy metal frames. Another room, merely vast, is hung with unfinished paintings in what seemed a tentative simulacrum of a museum or gallery show. She said, "I want to see how they look with each other. What works, what doesn't." The mismatched paintings on the day of my visit felt like actors at an audition. If someone looked at me the way Owens was looking at them, I'd be scared. Crowded bookshelves, a couch, a large coffee table, chairs, and kitchen accessories furnish rough amenity.

The studio is in a building next door to 356 Mission Road, a two-story stuccoed-brick hulk, built in 1926, that was once a printing plant and then a piano warehouse. It sports a stately corner entrance

on a dusty, all but untrafficked stretch of blocks, zoned for light industry, that are quiescent by day and deserted at night. It was vacant when Owens found it, in 2012, while in search of a space as a studio that could also house an exhibition—her first in L.A. since 2003—of works that she would make there. She rented it with support from her longtime dealer Gavin Brown and her friend Wendy Yao, the owner of an avant-gardish Chinatown bookstore, Ooga Booga. The show, “12 Paintings,” installed on a dramatic scale with the austere immensity of the building’s ground-floor space, proved to be more than the sum of its parts. The effect gave Owens the idea, in partnership with Brown and Yao, to make 356 Mission Road a *Kunsthalle*—a non-collecting museum for exhibitions, performances, community workshops (there’s a weekly one in animation, for children), lectures, a branch of Ooga Booga, and fund-raisers for liberal causes (never for itself and never taking a commission). The venue has hosted hundreds of events. Subsisting on sales from shows and, whenever needed, on contributions from Owens, it amounts to a work of art in itself—and, lately, a bull’s-eye for controversy.

A shadowy group, the Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement, has picketed and otherwise publicly opposed 356 Mission as a symbol of the increasing gentrification of the largely Latino neighborhood. This agonizes Owens. She wrote to me, “I have conducted myself and lived my life as an engaged citizen in my city and my various communities,” and she has empathy for victims of displacements that are “tragic and very real.” Last spring, she sought and got a meeting to discuss the situation with members of the activist group, who proved unbending. “Their single and inflexible demand is that we hand over the keys of the space to them and end 356. It is also very important to them that I ‘leave graciously’ by signing a document saying I agree with all their ideas and I have learned from them.” Subsequently: “All of the staff and our friends have talked this over, asked community members, done research and do not believe we have found any evidence this will result in the reversal of gentrification.” It’s a fact of experience that the appearance of artists and galleries in low-income areas reliably portends rising real-estate values, with dire consequences for many residents. What’s rare in the case of 356, which owns no property and has no monetary investment in Boyle Heights, is the sensitivity of its leader, on the horns of an irremediable dilemma. An adage

about the inevitable fate of good deeds springs to mind. So does an unlucky resonance of Owens's creative disposition.

"A painting seems to never not be art . . . even whether it is sitting on the shelf in the art-supply store or in the dumpster," Owens said in a symposium, earlier this year, at the Museum of Modern Art, on the heroically perverse French Dadaist Francis Picabia. (Why bother vying to win at a game that can't be lost?) Analogously, an art space can never not stand for art, whether up your street or on the moon. "Making mistakes is part of the work," Owens told the children at her daughter's school. Will 356 Mission turn out to have been a mistake for her? It will be an illuminating one, if so. Conceived in the hope of opening a window of social possibility, 356 may instead have hit a stone wall of political rancor.

Owens said to me, "I really believe in art, that art can do things that other things don't do. It's important to try, and fail, and to believe that things can do things." She is a genius of revelations, along the lines of that premise. She revealed twenty years ago, and has kept doing it, that what seemed a terminally exhausted state of painting could be a garden of unlimited, freshening delights. Now she confronts a larger imbroglio. Does art still, if it ever did, matter beyond the commercial and institutional bubbles of the art world? Can aesthetic pleasures have ethical payoffs, imparting lessons for life? Or does life overrule rationales for art altogether? These are not abstract questions for Owens. They spur her to propositions that, availing or not, solicit dead-honest responses of eye, mind, and heart.