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Owens' mingling of styles offers multiple delights

by Joanne Silver

BOSTON -- In the universe of Laura Owens' paintings, monkeys dangle from the branch of a tree, bats flit across a night sky, strands of black acrylic spin a spider web, sunflowers recede into distant space or time. Events and scenery flicker into view, in a panorama of visual activity.

Following no particular hierarchy or order, Owens' vistas tantalize the mind and the eye with a restlessness that somehow feels soothing. Instead of settling on one notion of beauty or style or appropriate subject, Owens tries many, often in the space of a single painting. The results are welcoming and inclusive, filled with tidbits gleaned from art and life but devoid of doctrine.

A small exhibition of her new work - at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum through Sept. 16 - proves to be an unpredictable delight. An artist's book she is making in conjunction with this show appears equally appealing -- whimsical but exquisitely composed.

"Ultimately you want to make the painting that you want to be with, not one that is constantly telling you everything it knows," the artist said. "Who wants to be with something or someone like that? It's more fun to be with someone who is willing to go out on a limb."

A year ago, Owens, a young Ohio-born artist now based in Los Angeles, spent a month as artist in residence at the Gardner, poking into its vast and eclectic collections. The Venetian-style palazzo in the Fenway offered a wealth of images, from the badger depicted on a kimono to the golden bats stitched onto a pair of embroidered 19th century Chinese scrolls. Both animals have resurfaced in Owens' art. The badger, looking very much like an animated Disney creature, gazes up from the forest floor at the monkeys in a large painting, untitled as all Owens' works are. Bats flutter across the daytime sky in that work, and also swoop through midnight darkness in a moody nocturne hanging nearby.

In the Gardner Museum's Raphael Room, Owens discovered a 500-year-old Italian embroidery that reminded her of being a young girl, doing needlepoint with her grandmother. Both the elegance of the Italian heirloom and the innocence of Owens' childhood memories are woven into the watercolor-and-pencil drawing she produced. What's missing is the heraldic crest from the original. In its place, Owens has left an empty region at the center of her sheet of paper. Parchment-colored and dappled, as if from age, this section causes the viewer to reflect on both what is in a work of art and what might be missing. Subtly, the unexpected whiteness throws the detailed floral border into high relief. The blankness suggests the chaos that precedes creation, and sometimes obliterates it.

Owens has incorporated an even larger region of white in her exhibition: an entire wall, 16 feet wide and 9 feet high. Standing in the middle of the gallery, surrounded by her own

artistic profusion, the painter said she wanted the wall to "allow your brain a break." For the viewer, the white rectangle becomes another visual element, one that balances the nonstop activity generated by the nearly 9-foot-high monkey painting, as well as the abundance of styles and media sprinkled about the other walls.

Frilled tissue paper curls along the edges of a small watercolor scene of tropical trees embraced by a big, blue sun. Another watercolor revolves around a photograph of a van Gogh painting of sunflowers, onto which the artist has glued her moist and dappled images of foliage, interspersed with felt cutouts that add texture to the multilayered image, and stalks made of spa-ghetti-thin lengths of green and brown paint. If the original van Gogh looks familiar, Owens' treatment demands that it be seen anew. Rather than enshrining art, she wants to let it breathe and live, not just on the walls but also in the imaginations of those who see it. She invites connections between works, placing them in such a way that they resonate across a room.

A meditative, blue-toned painting displays a table, book, pencils and Chinese inkwell holding a long branch bursting with pop-art flowers. On the opposite wall, felt-eyed monkeys hang from a similar branch, their gaze echoing the introspective nature of the other Asian-influenced piece. Scribbled insects speckle the surfaces of a number of paintings - mere dots from far away, but full-fledged bugs from close up. They act as messengers from the artist, pulling the spectator deeper and deeper into a realm bursting with possibilities.