

The New Criterion

Art

"Laura Owens"

The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
November 10, 2017–February 4, 2018

Wandering through "Laura Owens," I couldn't help but wonder when The Whitney (or MOMA) (or The New Museum) (or name the venue) will be mounting a retrospective of paintings by James Havard. Should the name not ring a bell, perhaps the art movement of which Havard is an exemplar will: Abstract Illusionism. Should that strike a similarly muffled note, consider the floating brushstroke—a thick slur of paint, typically rendered in acrylic, with a cast shadow airbrushed below it. During the mid-1970s, Abstract Illusionism—a showy amalgam of The New York School, Pop Art, commercial illustration, and trompe-l'oeil painting—was, if not the rage, then notable enough to elicit its fair share of adherents and collectors. The style isn't without its gratifications—an attraction to novelty seems to be woven into our DNA—but there's a reason Abstract Illusionism has a slim purchase on popular memory: contrivance and trickery don't tend to have legs. Illusionism may be an integral component of the art of painting, but when it's put forth as style—denatured, slick, and wholly self-referential—it can make for vacuous going.

How familiar Laura Owens (b. 1970) is with Abstract Illusionism, I don't know. She must be: the correspondences between her work and that of Havard are uncanny. The most consistent motif in Owens's oeuvre is, after all, the floating brushstroke—endowed, at this historical juncture, with a glossy sheen redolent of digital technology. Impastoed patches of oil paint hover over the surfaces of the pictures; "under," too—Owens enjoys trading in now-you-see-it-now-you-don't perceptual games. How the accompanying shadows are painted is a mystery. In the age of Photoshop, do people still use airbrushes? In terms of media or genre, Owens is up for anything. No methodology or style, whether high tech or old school, is out of bounds. Threading needle through canvas and color correcting on the computer; imagining Morris Louis by way of Damien Hirst; advertising intimacy while embracing anonymity; flouting idiosyncrasy and poaching upon the industrial; positing superficiality as abundance—it's all good. "I really believe," Owens stated in a recent interview, "that art can do things that other things don't do." So how come "Laura Owens" is marked by a fizzy air of desperation?

Owens's art doesn't usher in an era of meaninglessness; it serves as blissful confirmation. Postmodernism, having undergone an ignoble passing, has nonetheless left an indelible mark on culture. Descriptors like "kitsch" and "pastiche" don't signify for a generation weaned on value-free nostrums. Over-intellectualization in the cause of self does. In the exhibition catalogue—an immaculately designed production that aspires to being slapdash—we encounter a 1994 notebook in which Owens lists "things my paintings mean to me." Coming in at numbers 1 and 2 are "Fuck Everyone!" Dismiss this as pro forma juvenilia if you'd like, but, in the end, isn't Owens's *mot* the operating theory behind Postmodernism and its forebear Conceptual Art—that is to say, a distinct turn away from engaging with an audience to the me-me-me imperatives of The Artist? Reading on, we learn of Owens's goal to create "nothing whole/nothing completely convinced" and of a "short attention span & my self-consciousness towards mark making." Credit goes where dubious credit is due: Owens has fulfilled these ambitions. At the Whitney, ADHD has been transformed from a quantifiable medical disorder into guilt-free entertainment.

Owens puts one in mind of Robert Rauschenberg. Like Rauschenberg, albeit with less bon-homie or grit, Owens is a work-horse with a "can do" attitude, an omnivorous temperament for whom no medium is off limits and collaboration is a token of democratic goodwill. The materials that go into a single Owens piece can be dizzying. An untitled work from 2014—seemingly based on a Hallmark card—was made with ink, silkscreen ink, vinyl paint, acrylic, pastel, paper, wood, solvent transfers, stickers, handmade paper, thread, board, and glue-on-linen—done in five parts, no less! Over-all, Owens's paintings skew large—a typical canvas measures around six by eight feet. When the work isn't large, it's copious in amount. An untitled suite of canvases, each measuring twenty-four inches square, numbers in the nine-ties, although only fifty-four are on view.

These smaller works either line the upper reaches of the gallery or are cordoned off in a darkened passageway. (Actually seeing the paintings is, apparently, beside the point.) The entirety of the eighth floor contains an installation of five huge, freestanding paintings. Set apart at intervals of several yards, these pictures—done on “powder-coated aluminum strainers”—feature, on one side, oversized reproductions of a handwritten story by Owens’s son, Henry; on the other, silk-screened marks and notations, oversized again.

Stand at a specific angle in the gallery and you’ll see how the disparate panels align into an M. C. Escher-like orchestration of thwarted perspectives. Elsewhere, Owens mixes and matches cartoonish paintings of beehives with bedroom sets designed by Jorge Pardo, and welcomes the assistance of sundry technicians and craftsmen, not least the carpenters who custom made the benches at the Whitney—each of which serves as a repository for the exhibition catalogue. The most newsworthy

of Owens’s partnerships is 356 Mission Road, a community art center in Glendale, California. A joint venture with her dealer Gavin Brown and Wendy Yao, a friend and bookseller, 356 Mission Road has been the subject of criticism by the Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement, a community-activist group “born from the complex specificities of Los Angeles.” This free-form coalition has accused Owens of aiding and abetting the gentrification of the surrounding working-class neighborhood. In a statement, Owens responded to the group’s protests with deliberation and evident sensitivity. Which may be the only time the artist has, albeit under a cloud of bad PR, acknowledged an audience—any audience—in a constructive manner. At the Whitney, in distinct contrast, out-reach isn’t in the mix—unless, that is, one derives satisfaction in the pretensions of official culture indulged in at their most willful, overweening, and gratuitous.

—*Mario Naves*