

Camden Arts Centre/September-November 2006 File Note #16 Laura Owens

Danny Rolph

Laura Owens

"In seeking to assure myself about what I can be certain of", wrote Descartes, "my thinking proceeds step by step according to my own rules." In my opinion, Laura Owens pursues a similar attitude. Her paintings revel in the pleasure of visual signs, methods and attitudes co-existing for and against each other. Qualities that seem initially incompatible and in opposition with each other quickly achieve a rightness that oscillates somewhere between the eye and the mind.

The familiar and the unbelievable aspects of her imagery are underpinned, I feel, by two key elements. The first element is her technical prowess; it is evident in the incredible range of brushwork and surfaces she consistently creates. The second element is an informed, unpredictable and eclectic attitude towards creating a picture. This attitude is communicated through her exploration of the various languages of painting, adding a charged dimension to the characters or situations that inhabit the work, resulting in a variety of pictorial questions. Her paintings are other worlds that operate out of time and context in which stylistic and historic references can co-habit with well-known or littleknown borrowed art historical characters. (Laura Owens is as adept at referencing American artists like Florine Stettheimer and Grandma Moses as she is Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec or Chinese scrolls.)

Her willingness to experiment with new narratives and methods, often within one painting, is evident in *Untitled* (2002). My first encounter with this work was at Laura Owens' show at MOCA, Los Angeles, in early 2003. I wrote a note to myself at the time which read: "A large work roughly $7' \times 11'$, *Untitled* (2002) has a magic story-telling quality in which day meets night, a variety of animals go about their business, solid and ghostly trees without leaves occupy a sparse landscape alongside a waterfall on the right that gives the painting a vast depth. The wispy stylised clouds that rise from the waterfall touch the moonlit night sky where a cranky owl with Marty Feldman-like eyes waits and watches on a heavily curved branch that straddles the clouds and the night sky becoming more solid as it awkwardly occupies the centre of the composition going down and falling

Untitled 2002 / Oil and acrylic on linen / 213.3 \times 335.3 cm Collection David Teiger. Courtesy Gavin Brown







off the bottom edge at the trunk of the tree. The left-hand branch reaches up through the top of the composition and plays host to a monkey (borrowed from an eleventh-century Chinese scroll) beckoning a butterfly. His three brothers are way off in the background on the right, precariously resting on some rocks and other trees. The trunk of the main tree hides most of the bear who, like the rabbit in the bottom left and the tortoise in the bottom right, stares upwards. The monkeys and the squirrels are doing the opposite and looking downwards. You wander back to the owl who doesn't know now whether to look up or down! Beautifully slight 'rogue' brushstrokes of varying colours that occupy the composition all over are blown around like pollen. Various flora and fauna are strewn around the bottom part of the composition interspersed with scattered playing cards whilst tiny birds occupy the ghostly trees near which deer roam."

Then I looked around at the other work in the show and came back to the painting I have just described. This time I was blown away by the methods Laura Owens had employed, on which I wrote: "Thin washily painted bear next to a greasy, large tree, the rogue brushstrokes that looked like pollen have become oily impasto leaves. An incredibly washy stream touches the sky with its fresh exuberance. Night re-appears brushily on the right behind the trunk and at the top left with a few stylised unrecognisable black shapes. The two main butterflies begin to look enormous, flying towards each other like reckless stunt pilots, under which I now, for the first time, can see the unpainted linen ground." This painting, as you may have gathered from my notes, dazzled and took me to a place without time and



Untitled 2004 / Oil on linen / 46.3 \times 53.3 cm Thea Westreich and Ethan Wagner

 $Untitled 2006 \ / \ Acrylic and oil on linen \\ 74.3 \ \times 53.9 \ cm \ Courtesy \ Sadie \ Coles \ HQ \ and \ collection \\ Florence \ and \ Philippe \ Segalot, \ New \ York \\$

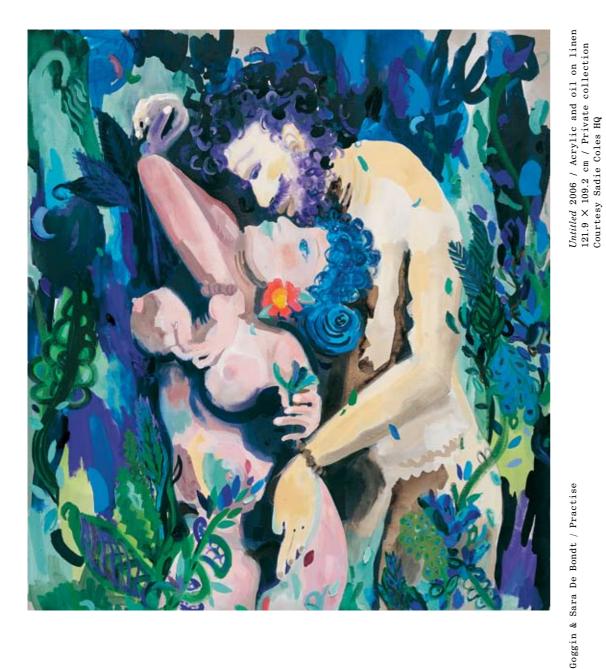


context, its varying narratives undermined and underpinned by an alternative narrative flow.

There has always been a charm and self-mocking quality to Laura Owens' work that re-energises the potential inherent in the act of painting, transforming various time and spatial realities back into an abstracted form. Her pictures have a sleight of hand and, like those of Albert Oehlen or Raoul De Keyser, seem to possess a pretence of ease. Evidence of enjoyment is refreshingly there in the work. I believe there is no irony apparent in her adopting this position, which in turn has created new possibilities or rules for painting to escape the grubby clutches of 'serious' art historical polemics. Genuinely fascinating propositions created in her clever borrowings, samplings or touch have made Laura Owens a very important cultural reference point for a generation of artists, rather like her near contemporary Chris Ofili.

There is a matrix of questions, definitions and meanings in Laura Owens' work that has found and is continuing to find ways to help painting's evolution in the twenty-first century. Her work makes a great claim for the necessity of painting. For me, as another painter, that's pretty hot!

Danny Rolph is a painter based in London. He is represented by Hales Gallery, London and A.R.Contemporary, Milan.



Foremost among the generation of young US artists credited with reinvigorating painting as a medium during the 1990s, Owens has had numerous solo exhibitions in the US and in Europe including Kunsthalle Zürich (2006); Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2006); Shiseido Gallery, Japan (2005); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2003); Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (2001) and Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh (2000).

The exhibition at Camden Arts Centre is Owens' first one-person show in a public space in the UK. Laura Owens is represented in London by Sadie Coles HQ and by Gavin Brown's enterprise in New York.

Reading/Viewing/Listening List Selected by Laura Owens

- Erica Wilson Crewel Embroidery Charles Scribner (1962) ISBN 0684106736
- Muneshige Narazaki The Japanese Print and its Evolution and Essence English adaptation by C.H. Mitchell, Kodansha International (1969)
- Alan Watts, The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are Collier-Mac, 1967 ISBN 0020681208
- Jerome Armstrong and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, Crashing the Gate: Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics Chelsea Green Publishing ISBN 1931498997
- Stanley Donen (Dir.) The Little Prince (1974)
- Marlo Thomas and friends, Free To Be ... You And Me Television Cast Recording (1972)
- Frank Loesser Guys & Dolls Original Broadway Cast (1950)
- Harry Smith (ed.), Anthology of American Folk Music Original Recording Remastered, Smithsonian Folkways (Audio CD 1998)
- Ella Jenkins You Sing a Song and I'll Sing a Song Smithsonian Folkways (Audio CD 2004)
- Michael Webster Lotus Festival Lovethink (Audio CD 2000)

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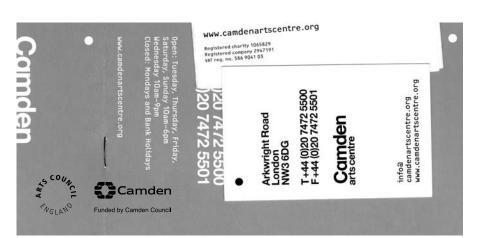
All images © the artist. Courtesy Sadies Coles HQ, London and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York

n / Pri Coles

сm 109.2 cm v Sadie

James

Design:







Untitled 1995 / Marker, ink, coloured pencil, crayon on canvas 183.5 \times 214 cm / Private collection