

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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ARTFORUM

LOS ANGELES

Laura Owens

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Visitors to Laura Owens's exhibition "Books and Tables" might be surprised to find that the show consists of just that. Although she has been showing her handmade books for more than ten years, Owens has never before displayed them in a solo presentation without an accompanying installation of paintings. In the absence of the latter, the viewer's eyes are pushed away from the walls and down toward the ninety-nine books spread out across six tables. Made in a wide variety of colors, sizes, configurations, and paper stocks, the books each ask for a slightly different mode of engagement. Some pop up, some become animated as you flip them, one folds out into a twenty-foot-long strip, and others just call for the usual page turning. Those viewers who are familiar with Owens's paintings (which probably includes many, given that her midcareer survey traveled to the city's Museum of Contemporary Art in 2018) will find familiar motifs and optical tricks. The cats, horses, bees, newspaper clippings, layered and collaged images, and decontextualized gestural marks are all there, but at a decidedly smaller scale. While the books' groupings are loosely thematic (growth, entropy, music and math, fraud, and van Gogh), each display also has a few tricks up its sleeve. For example, on the entropy table, some books are shuffled around on the wooden surface by an invisible hand (a hidden mechanism involving magnets).

Owens's previous exhibition of new work in Los Angeles was the inaugural show at her space, 356 S. Mission Rd. (now closed after a five-year run that generated controversy for the gallery's role in gentrifying the city's Boyle Heights neighborhood). That 2013 show featured twelve paintings, each eleven and a half feet tall, hung in a proportionally enormous warehouse. More than six years later, Owens has downsized considerably while simultaneously expanding upon concerns at the heart of her practice. Her paintings have always brought attention to the means of their making and have always asked the viewer to move in a little closer (or step farther back) to puzzle over a drop shadow or to try to untangle layers of patterns. She is devoted to attracting not just the beholder's attention but her *participation*. Deborah Kass has described Owens's work as "off-the-cuff casual, but deconstructing formalism."

In this show, Owens heightens visitors' attention to their own embodied participation—how moving from page to page, book to book, affects their viewing experience. Demoting the primacy of the disinterested or objective eye (as high formalists would have it), Owens solicits attention from nearly all of the senses. With this move, she has dramatically reframed her



View of "Laura Owens." 2019–20.

longtime concern with painting's physicality and materiality. In a 2019 book titled *Horses*, for example, I could run my finger across the equine forms, feeling the difference between pencil, pastel, and Flashe paint as I let their microscopic residues accumulate on my fingers. A few books smell strongly of wintergreen. Some tables involve an audio element that fades in and out. A book of cats is full of textured collage elements that beg to be stroked, and a sparkly book about stage magic left specks of glitter on my fingers. A show that emphasizes touching the art could easily lapse into a gimmick, but the decision actually felt refreshing.

The exhibition asks viewers to think not only about the way they see art but also about the way they interpret it or locate its meaning. Owens's tables are replete with drawers (sometimes drawers within drawers) that can be opened and explored. Resisting my presumption that there might be something special or revelatory hidden inside, Owens has arranged for the books within to be very much like the ones without. A book on the math and music table depicts a stereotypically moustached detective holding a magnifying glass to his eye. The text next to him reads: HOW QUICKLY CAN YOU BREAK THIS CODE AND READ THE MESSAGE THAT IS WRITTEN BELOW? If the books tell us anything, it's that the point of viewing art isn't to quickly break a code. I spent longer in this show than I expected or intended to, and in that time, thought more about myself as a participant. With her ninety-nine books, Owens foregrounds the seemingly infinite meanings participants create simply by touching, sniffing, and looking.

— Ashton Cooper

JANUARY 2020 219