

New Sophistication in Owens' Landscapes

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DAVID PAGEL, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Laura Owens' second solo show in Los Angeles is much more sophisticated than her 1995 solo debut. Fresh, snappy and expansive, her beautifully installed landscapes at ACME Gallery show the young painter to be among the more talented of her generation.

One of the best things about Owens' big, cartoonish canvases is that their compositions have been determined both by what they depict and where they are hung. For example, the show's only diptych has been installed in a corner, with each of its tall, vertical panels occupying an adjoining wall.

Along the left edge of the left panel, Owens has painted just a sliver of what must be a thick tree trunk. Just beneath the top edge of the right panel is a small branch with a single leaf dangling from its tip. These two little hints are all that is needed for viewers to fill in the missing components and complete the landscape in their imaginations.

To assure you that you're on the right track, Owens has included an image of the implied tree's middle section reflected in a puddle in the lower part of the right panel. With great efficiency, her diptych creates the impression that you're standing under a tree alongside a country lane, or looking through a pair of windows at such a picturesque scenario.

On another wall, the exhibition's centerpiece maintains a similar delicacy and edgy tenuousness, despite measuring 14 feet by 11 feet. Coming within an inch of both the floor and ceiling, this painting depicts a dense bank of fog that has almost completely blocked out a wooded landscape.

Its crisp white surface simultaneously stands in as an intensified version of the gallery's pristine white walls and functions as a picture hung there. Doing

double-duty as the backdrop and the star of an open-ended drama, Owens' abstract image turns figure-ground ambiguity into a three-dimensional game that includes the viewer's body.

In the small front gallery, her most dazzling painting takes its dimensions from a frosted window. Owens' close-up of a single silhouetted tree combines the flickering insubstantiality of shadows with the vivid clarity of direct sunlight. Indebted to Alex Katz's seemingly simple landscapes, this untitled piece accentuates the poise and fragility of his deceptively superficial Pop pictures.

Until very recently, painting was presumed to be an art of autonomous objects, while photography was the medium of choice for artists concerned to address the context in which such works were viewed. In contrast, Owens belongs to a generation for whom the distinction between solitary object and shifting context no longer makes sense.

By taking their surroundings as their subjects, her supple works elbow their way into an art world dominated by discussions of institutional contexts and peripheral conditions. With their foot in the door, Owens' stylish vistas make room for painting's fleeting and fugitive pleasures, which always begin with individuals.

ACME Gallery, 6150 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 857-5942, through Nov. 14. Closed Sundays and Mondays.