



See how our auto insurance rates compare:

Click for
free quote. 21st CENTURY
i21.com

Allstate | \$1,000 | VS. | \$682 | 21st Century

[latimes.com](#) | [Print Edition](#) | [Archives](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

Friday, February 15, 2002

ART REVIEW

Bristling With Attitude

"Cavepainting" displays fresh thoughts about painting, by three artists of strangely complementary temperament.

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT, Times Staff Writer

"Cavepainting" is a small exhibition, but it blows through the galleries of the Santa Monica Museum of Art like a fresh breeze. There are just nine paintings, three new works by each of three artists: Scottish-born, Canadian-raised Peter Doig, 42, who has long lived in London; Chris Ofili, 33, who also works in London; and, L.A.'s Laura Owens, 31. The artists show with the same New York gallery, and they are said to have undertaken an ongoing dialogue in the last few years. They also acted as curators of the show, and the installation is spare and poised. It's a thoroughly satisfying affair.

What connects the three painters, aside from commercial affiliation in New York? The answer isn't technique or style. Doig might be called the most traditional of the three, his large oils commanding a variety of painterly procedures to conjure mysterious urban scenes and landscapes. Ofili, by contrast, pushes two-dimensional surface decoration to a voluptuous extreme, composing glitter and tiny dots of bright acrylic color into sinuous tendrils and rhythmic, scalloped patterns, either to create explosive abstract shapes or decidedly romantic images (a pair of lovers, a nude odalisque). For her part, Owens smears, stains, stipples, brushes, collages and daubs, establishing a virtual inventory of mark-making possibilities on linen; these marks get turned into recognizable images (plants and animals, especially) or remain abstract.

What these very different works of art do share is an attitude—a kind of studied crudeness. Coarse, earthy painting is typically associated with the raw qualities of Expressionism, but the deliberate, premeditated quality of these pictures works against that interpretation. Save for the highly personal, idiosyncratic distortions of color, shape and space in each, there's nothing remotely Expressionist about them. Instead, a relaxed dreaminess is pervasive.



This untitled painting by Laura Owens in included in the exhibition "Cavepainting."

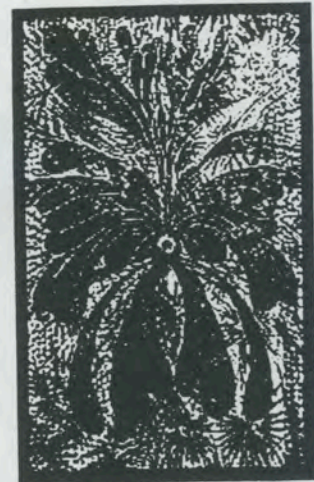
field, day and night can happily coexist.

The studied crudeness of these paintings helps explain the show's allusive title. The invocation of cave painting reflects a sense of starting from scratch. Fifteen thousand or 20,000 years ago, before there were paintings in the caves of Altamira, Spain, or Lascaux, France, there was no art that we know of.

"Cavepainting" conjures the artist's studio as today's cave, with the painter working in isolation as secular shaman attempting magic on the canvas with some colored pigments.

The crudeness in this show's works makes a pointed distinction between handmade pictures and today's proliferation of high-tech images, which are inevitably slick. Meanwhile, their carefully studied quality acknowledges the 30-year reign of Conceptual art, which eradicated emotive self-expression from the lexicon and is now at a definitive end.

The best part about the works in this show is that they betray no sense whatever of painting being some treacherous, beleaguered or conflicted field. Remember the old moral arguments over "the death of painting," which was widely



"Triple Eye Vision" by Chris Ofili.

Doig's whimsical "Gasthof zur Muldentalsperre" shows two storybook figures, each dressed in elaborate, old-fashioned military garb, at the gated entrance to a fortified dam whose heavy masonry construction is rendered in jewel-like colors. Off in the distance, beneath a melting sky reminiscent of Edvard Munch, a lone canoe floats across the dark lake.

Ofili, like a latter-day Henri Rousseau, locates the recumbent African nude of "Triple Beam Dreamer" in a fanciful, thoroughly imaginative jungle. She spouts multicolored milk from her breast, like a celestial figure by Rubens, while the artist's signature balls of elephant dung are encrusted with acrylic dots in the colors of rubies, emeralds and onyx, as if they were Fabergé eggs.

The repertoire of painted marks in Owens' big, untitled canvas is twisted into a blissful Edenic landscape of the imagination, where logic is suspended but wonder prospers. Spider monkeys play with butterflies, a night owl hoots at the full moon and a gentle bear pads toward a sunny brook. On a painted

asserted three decades ago? In this exhibition, whether to paint or not simply isn't at issue.

Given the proliferation of painting since the early 1990s, any claim that painting doesn't matter is pretty old-fashioned—a debate that might as well be argued in Latin, the academic language of the priesthood.

"The death of painting," as a viable premise for making new kinds of art, is long-since dead. Today's more captivating question isn't whether to paint, but how.

"Cavepainting: Peter Doig, Chris Ofili, Laura Owens." Santa Monica Museum of Art, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Building G1, Santa Monica, (310) 586-6488, through March 31. Closed Monday and Tuesday.

Copyright 2002 Los Angeles Times