



## LAURA OWENS

"I FEEL NO SHAME ABOUT HAVING  
PAINTINGS BE AS GRANDIOSE AND  
RIDICULOUS AS POSSIBLE."

*About working in a landfill and becoming a nun.  
Or maybe a midwife instead.*

**I**n an era when many younger artists struggle with issues of heroism and the weight of achievements past, Los Angeles-based painter Laura Owens seems to have opened her umbrella and floated over the art historical baggage collecting on the tarmac. Owens borrows where she pleases—from modernist movements past such as Color Field, Op Art, and Pattern and Decoration, from European painters like Rousseau and Toulouse-Lautrec, from anonymous mediums such as textile and embroidery. Art historical references and any sort of imagery, high or low, that Owens feels like incorporating are co-opted with finesse and a clear-eyed sense of no-fuss entitlement, in service to a larger goal: her own precise vision for what makes a painting pleasurable to behold. Despite this precision she is highly versatile, and her paintings vary from abstraction to figuration to kooky nature landscapes in which the animals cohabitate in a harmony that limns the absurd (a monkey reaches out playfully to a butterfly, an owl stakes out a fragment of moonlit night amidst

a backdrop of blue sky and puffy clouds). Owens's flowers—magnificently tropical and poisonous-looking, or humble and wan—are unconstrained by any sort of botanical accuracy. She balances impressive paint-handling with a dose of purposely humble de-skilling. Or she can opt for sheer virtuoso, such as in her deft figurative depiction of a romantic embrace (Untitled, 2003), which has the delicate luster of a silent movie still, as if the kissing couple were floating in an iridescent soap bubble.

Owens has had meteoric success since graduating from CalArts in the mid-nineties, and this spring her solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art opened in Los Angeles—a mid-career survey that seems all the more impressive for the fact that the artist is only thirty-two years old. One criticism that has been leveled at Owens is that there is too much of a feel-good quality in the work, which would be a problem if her paintings were maudlin or shallow or overly cute, but they are not. Regardless, a new canvas in her Moca show reveals a darker side: a large-scale desert scene of scrubby trees and rolling

hills, with machete-wielding men in ten-gallon hats and pentagram-adorned pullovers roaming the landscape on horseback. Above, an oppressive sky radiates chilly hues of putty and greenish-gray. When I first saw this painting, it brought to mind Cormac McCarthy's dark tale of the Western frontier, *Blood Meridian*, despite the playfulness in the rendering of Owens's desertscape—a contrast that made the reference all the more eerie. Owens, who had been up for three days finishing it, was standing next to me. "The guys in the pentagram shirts are Bush and his pals," she explained. I pointed to a lone hand that emerged, goofily, from an earthmound near the bottom of the painting. She said matter-of-factly, "That's doom and destruction."

This interview took place in Owens's painting studio, which is two adjoined storefronts in Eagle Rock, a northeastern hamlet of Los Angeles. —Rachel Kushner

**THE BELIEVER:** I'm curious about your depictions of bats. Are they just fun to put in paintings, or is there some deeper personal interest on your part?

**LAURA OWENS:** Recently someone accused me of having only the benevolent in my work, and I think the bats were my attempt at a certain point to bring in less benevolent imagery. But bats have a lot of different meanings depending on which culture you're talking about, meaning they're not always seen as bad. In China, you'll see them in embroidery, and they aren't the menacing-looking type of black bat. I think they signify good luck. But then there's a Tiepolo painting at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, about the triumph of virtue and nobility over ignorance, and I think ignorance is signified by bats...

**BLVR:** Because they're blind, allegedly.

**LO:** Right. So I incorporated them in the work thinking they might be interpreted as something malevolent, but actually, I see them as fully benevolent. It's a private joke to myself, I guess.

**BLVR:** They're in service to gothic symbology but secretly, to you, they're not at all macabre. Have you ever seen one sleeping? They actually look quite charming when they're just hanging upside down.

**LO:** I haven't seen just one of them, isolated. In Austin, Texas, while visiting my sister, I went to a bridge from which they all take off at dusk. That was really fascinating. An unbelievable amount of bats. They kept coming out from beneath this bridge for like thirty minutes in streams of hundreds and hundreds.

**BLVR:** Your comment about the bats seeming secretly benevolent brings me to my next question. I tend to think of your paintings more as treasure chests than receptacles, and I wonder, where do the bad feelings go? Let me rephrase that. Do you wait until you have something pleasurable to share, or do you have a way of keeping the paintings sunny despite your own troubles and internal discord?

**LO:** I feel like there's a space of personal freedom for me where my art-making happens. When I go to that space, I'm completely in this world of possibility. There's no inner emotional state that I could compare it to; it's a space that has its own properties, and they don't have to do with happy or sad or any of that. I would never say to myself, "Okay, let me go into this space of freedom in order show you about the pain I have." Do you know what I mean? I'm not *in* the space of freedom if I'm in pain. I'm in sort of a contracted, negative, or dark space. My work gets created in this space of freedom, and that's why a lot of it has to do with experimentation, invention, and sort of a juxtaposition of things you wouldn't normally juxtapose. I keep using the word "freedom"—I know there's probably a better word, but maybe I feel like painting doesn't have enough of that as a category so I'll use it anyway. But as far as sitting in front of one of my paintings and saying, "Oh here's an emotionally charged, happy painting"—I don't get that as a viewer of my own work. I more get a feeling about the process of creativity, the synapse of connections happening.

**BLVR:** I would agree that innovation is absolutely one of the qualities of what I called the treasure chest, but it's a pleasurable innovation. You're not figuring out clever ways to depict severed heads.

**LO:** I'm thinking about a painting of a dead horse lying in a forest... I don't think I *wouldn't* ever put those kinds



of things in the work—but then again if I did they would probably end up with a positive spin—an aura of acceptance of whatever has happened.

BLVR: Your work is not at all a forum for the expression of negative ideas and feelings.

LO: That's not something I want to put out there, and I actually just don't feel that my negative or desperate or hopeless ideas are that interesting. They're usually from some place of "Oh, so-and-so said something mean to me," or "Isn't it shitty that this person got elected."

BLVR: Does the current geopolitical gloom propel you into the studio, for distraction and release, or make you want to stay under the covers in your pink-painted bedroom?

LO: Actually, it's inspired conversations I've been having with a few friends of mine about maybe taking some time off from art and just becoming activists. So that's sort of my first response to the current state of affairs. One of the last paintings I made for the Moca show was my own response to the situation in the United States, although I doubt that multitudes of people will walk up to that painting and interpret it as political, and that's totally fine with me.

BLVR: Can you talk about technique? I heard once that you told a class that at a certain point you figured out that most of the time, if a painting wasn't working out, its problems could be worked out technically—in other words, that problems and solutions are both most likely technical, and not questions of content, or underlying concept.

LO: In art school, they teach you to struggle through the process: If you have your image down, you've painted it, and it's not looking the way you wanted it to, you can do wet on wet—you just keep moving the image around, like the way de Kooning worked. You just keep painting over and over and over. For me, at some point, the idea of struggling through the process was not as interesting as doing tests and executing the painting after I figured out all of its elements and how they were going

to work together. I have a really pragmatic approach to making the paintings—it's a process of doing lots of tests on small canvases, trying out different materials, or rearranging things until what I have coalesces with my original intention of how I wanted it to look. And a lot of times the first three or four tries will be just terrible, but they won't be the actual object—just the preliminary sketches—so I keep going until I get it right.

BLVR: So once you've come to your conception of the painting you stick to it and just try to find a way to realize that conception. You don't discard it and try to find something else, or modify it depending on where your process takes you.

LO: Right. It's really different than just diving in, which is how a lot of painters work. They throw something on the canvas, respond, throw something else on the canvas, respond, or they have a preconceived way of working that has to do with the materials and the steps you go through with the materials until you're finished with a painting. I don't use either of those methods; some people have commented that it's more of an old-fashioned way of working, through sketches and studies, maybe like the way fresco painters used preliminary cartoons. I get to a point with the sketches and tests where I know about three-quarters of what the painting will look like, and then I make it. At that point, I'll look at it and ask, "What else needs to happen?" Which is a sort of no man's land where you can either go too far or do too little and you have to carefully gauge where to stop.

BLVR: I read that Rousseau's imagery came from picture books, since he never actually visited the jungle.

LO: Yeah, I read that too.

BLVR: And Alex Katz once replied, when asked whether his landscape paintings derived from nature or from art, that they came unquestionably from art. The nature imagery in your work clearly references a wide range of art history—eighteenth-century embroidery, Chinese and Japanese landscape painting, Rousseau, obviously. But I also get the feeling that, unlike Katz, some of the references and meanings in your depictions





Laura Owens, "Untitled," 2002. Oil and acrylic on linen, 84 x 132 inches. Collection of David Teiger, New York. Courtesy of Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York

of nature are more internal, more personal.

LO: So do you think it doesn't look like it comes from other art? Or just not completely.

BLVR: It definitely is coming from other art, but when I read the Katz quote I took it to mean that even if in Katz's own retinal experience he sees things and those things get translated into a landscape painting, for him, symbolically, the work's meaning lies in its reference to art, and not to his natural environment or anything to do with its intrinsic qualities and meanings. By comparison, I sense that your depictions of nature transcend your relationship to art history and convey something more personal as well.

LO: Oh, I hope they do. Each particular painting has a sort of grab bag of places it's coming from, and those get kind of mixed and chopped up and moved around, and

among those elements can be just something that happened on a hike or it can be a painting I saw in a museum or a drawing I made. There's no limit as to what the work is referencing. It could be an unknown artist... frequently, I'll see something in an artist's work that is really a minor, minor part of the artwork—like a shadow on someone's face from a hat, and I'll think, "Oh my God that's the best thing!" And I'll turn that one element into a painting. Instead of looking at the art, the totality of the artwork, and taking that in and using it, I'll take little pieces, and I think of that as a more personal and interpretive quality that's coming from within. I'm not sure a lot of other people would walk up to the same artwork and see the shadow on the person's face from the hat and be like "Do you see that!" It's about noticing things that interest you, and that definitely happens with the natural world as well. Looking at relationships between different things in the natural world and what



it is that interests me about them. But the work is definitely not meant to depict the natural world.

BLVR: It isn't?

LO: Well, when I think about depicting the natural world I think of, say, botanical drawings, and all of my paintings are sort of shorthands—notations, if even that. A lot of the animals I put in the paintings, it's very hard to say which animal they are—a badger or a squirrel or something in-between. In terms of the rendering, it's not accurate or anything, especially compared with people who went out into nature researching botany—there's a whole history to that that I think of as painting that depicts nature.

BLVR: There is a doodley, lavender and rose pink canvas in the Moca show with these Miróesque lines. The signature on that painting is on the upper left corner, upside down. I'm wondering: Was including a joke about the subjectivity of orientation a way of mediating the so-called grandeur, or grandiosity, of a big, abstract painting?

LO: I didn't intend to put the signature on it when I was making it; it happened later. I knew I wanted to do something with this space pen I had, so I drew all over the canvas with it, and then I stained it in places, but it didn't feel finished somehow. I was at that place where the canvas was mostly done but I had to kind of go with the flow of figuring out what was next, and how much more to do. I had this all-over pattern, referencing Miró and textile design. It had a nice spatial quality with a lot of the canvas showing, but I felt like it wasn't finished. There needed to be a figure, and a figure-ground relationship. At some point I just thought, Okay I'm going to simply sign it with this tube of paint, and then right after I did it, it occurred to me to have it upside-down. The humor for me is how far above your head the signature is—it's dislocated from the sign of the artist in such a distinct way that it could almost be a self-portrait of a sort. I think what you said about the joke on orientation was something that I responded to after the fact. But in terms of thinking that I needed to take away from the grandeur of the painting, I feel no shame about hav-

ing paintings be as grandiose and ridiculous as possible.

BLVR: In terms of your drawings, and use of collage elements in the drawings, you seem to be open to almost anything—Popsicle sticks, used checkbooks, colored tissue paper, an abstract photograph, yet it seems to me there's always the sense of a concise logic to your selection. The materials can be whimsical and add a parodic or humorous layer to the drawings, but then again they seem dead serious in that they remain in service to aesthetic unity. Does this selection process come naturally, or is it sometimes a difficult proposition, what to incorporate and whether or not it's working?

LO: When I pick up any sort of thing at all, there's an immediate feeling—a yes or a no as to whether it will make it into a drawing. But as far as describing the process of how I know—I don't know if I could. I just know right away if something can work or not. There tends to be a sort of mundane quality to what I select—things from around the house, around the studio. I'm not ashamed of the craft shop—the art supply store—and I don't need my work to be anti-art store, but I also believe in using things that are just sort of around—it makes sense to me. In terms of what I select from among the everyday, a lot of times there's an illusionistic quality to the objects I choose. Things that, when you pick them and maybe rearrange them, look like other things. Sometimes a collage element I hit upon can inspire the entire drawing.

BLVR: So you saw a used, empty checkbook and you thought, *windmill blade*.

LO: Well, I knew I was collecting those old checkbooks for a reason. I had planned to put them in the recycling bin and then I thought oh, what a nice color—that manila of a checkbook back is very specific and warm and nice. They were all sitting there in a kind of de Stijl pattern, with the pale blue spine, and then I configured something that looked like a windmill and that was that.

BLVR: It hadn't occurred to me when I looked at that drawing: windmills plus de Stijl equals regional coherence!

LO: Wow. I hadn't thought of that either.

BLVR: A vernacular painter you admire, Grandma Moses, said that she came by her scenic vision to be a painter in a flash—when the hubcap on a car at her farm caught her eye with a fish-eye reflection of the surrounding, familiar countryside. That seems like so much mythology, but still, I wonder, are there moments you can conjure that shaped you, early on, as a painter?

LO: I can imagine things like that happening and inspiring specific paintings—where you look in a rear view mirror or you see a certain sky. In terms of my inspirations to become an artist, I think they come from early ideas and impressions about community, and the type of community I wanted to be in, and the type of thinking I wanted to do. It's more of a philosophical viewpoint of my position in society, and how I wanted to function as a worker. I didn't want to work for a company. In high school I was good at math and everybody wanted me to do something with that—mathematics or engineering—which was a nightmare scenario for me. Meeting other artists and going to punk rock shows at that age, there was a feeling of freedom and community that I wanted to partake in.

BLVR: You did an artist residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, where you stayed in a carriage house on the premises. Did you get to wander around in the museum when it was closed?

LO: I did get to do that somewhat, although at that museum they had one of the worst art thefts of the twentieth century.

BLVR: Right, the Rembrandt.

LO: The Rembrandt, the Vermeer, actually it was like five paintings. So their security is top of the line. You can't wander around by yourself, but you can do a flashlight tour, where one of the guards takes you after hours without turning on any of the lights. I got to use a flashlight and sort of poke around the collection, which was actually one of the most amazing ways to look at the artworks. That museum is so overwhelming in terms of

its hodgepodge, so much juxtaposition, that the illumination from the flashlight sort of put this great frame around a limited area to take in at a time. You could really see what was going on; I actually noticed a lot more of the nuances among the juxtapositions on the flashlight tour than on the many occasions when I'd looked around the museum in regular daylight hours. Some of the weirder, more interesting things to discover were how Isabella Stewart Gardner positioned little objects. She has this one display case of silver from all over the world—a glass case of about four shelves—and in it, way in the back, is a jade figurine of a person that is lying down flat. It's very intentionally placed that way. I don't know what Gardner's feeling was about that figure or who it represents, but it's a little dead person lying in that case, among all the silver—something no one would ever have noticed. People who have worked there for like ten years had never noticed it.

When I arrived for my residency people who had worked there for many years admitted right up front that they still hadn't seen all the little nuances and juxtapositions that Gardner had created in her museum. It's kind of amazing—this woman collector, curator of the twentieth century, installation artist. It's insane when you consider all the liberties she took with the artwork, in making it her own by virtue of her arrangements. If you're a purist, you go in and say, "Oh my god how can you have this Titian above the—" I forget what kind of fabric she has hanging on the wall underneath it—and then the chest and then the vase and it's all...

BLVR: Co-mingling.

LO: Yes, and co-mingling really disturbs a lot of the purists, who want to see the historical and cultural divides instead of the meshing. A lot of times Gardner will set up the arrangement of things in a room so that the gazes of the individual portraits are looking at one another. A lot of people have stories about who each one represents: her dead son, her dead husband, or herself, and these people are looking at each other either in respect or in dismay or whatever. I think what she's done has actually inspired a few paintings of mine.

BLVR: Like your monkeys who gaze at each other from



separate, large-scale canvases? Another work that comes to mind is a pair of paintings that you and Edgar Bryan, your boyfriend did—self-portraits talking to each other on the phone—another sort of gaze and gaze back type of relationship, although I suppose you did those before the Gardner residency.

LO: The monkeys I did before but the portraits we did later. The self-portraits Edgar and I did have more of a metaphorical gaze. We hung the paintings across from each other but the eyes don't link up. I think the Gardner experience inspired the painting I ended up making almost two years later, which was my maximum-animals-per-painting painting. I wanted to make a painting that was overloaded with different animals looking at each other, their gazes shooting you from through the painting from left to right.

BLVR: It seems to me like a lot of artists struggle with their relationship to the history of modern art and the weighty contributions of, say, Smithson and the Minimalists. This seems mostly a phenomenon that strikes the males. You manage to borrow where you please and avoid getting road blocked, or overrun, by your references. Do you think this has anything to do with a feminine outlook—a female tendency to democracy, diplomacy? I guess I'm making an assumption with the first part of the question, in service to the second. Let's start with the first part, about the hierarchy of the past.

LO: When you were asking your question I immediately got the image of what happens when you see people as superior to you. Something happens. If you have heroes, and they're way way above you, it usually means you have to have some people that are inferior to you. I feel like I am constantly looking at everyone I meet and trying to see them in an equal way, with equal standing to me. So that means I have to go into the experience of viewing a van Gogh painting with the mindset, Oh this guy was standing in front of an empty canvas and just painted it one day, you know? There was a real human being who made this painting, not a heroic untouchable, inhuman god. This person went to the bathroom and had all the normal human problems with, you know...

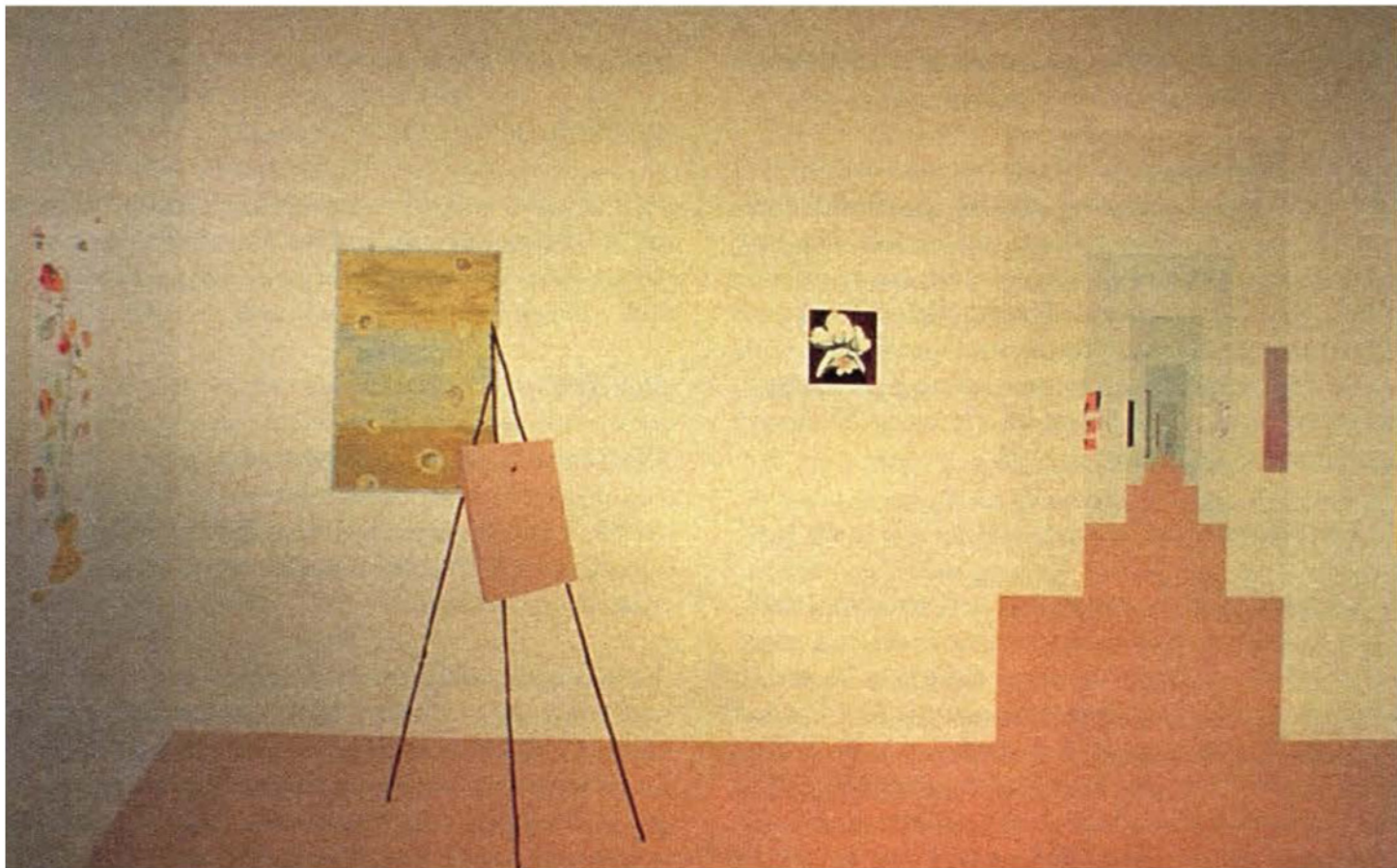
BLVR: Faults and petty concerns...

LO: Yes. And most people who think they can't live up to the great painters of the past, often times have a group of people they think they're better than. That's been my experience. They think they're better than someone else, and they think someone else is better than them, and there's a hierarchy going on. I feel like what's most important for painting—which has been hierarchically on the top for a really long time in terms of what is considered fine art, by comparison with something like a comic book or what's considered low art—is that painting should open up laterally to include other cultures and things that don't immediately resonate as a painting but are obviously of equal contribution to the genre. When I look at textiles from Peru or from India and use those elements in a painting, it doesn't in any way erase the functional quality of those works. It's not an either-or proposition—that when you take something to the museum you turn it into “fine art” and erase all the contextualization of it. Rather, all sorts of things can co-mingle and be as influential to young artists as, say, a Mondrian. Does that make sense?

BLVR: It does. That kind of democratic plundering seems like it would demystify the process of painting and the weight of past accomplishments somewhat. Is that the case?

LO: Yes. One of the reasons for the hierarchy's existence is just the dollar value that's been associated with actual objects. It's very misleading—a certain dollar value is associated with a certain work, and not another one—this sort of value attribution really doesn't have much to do with the practice of painting. If you're interested in that as an artist, well, maybe you're a different type of artist. But someone who's a practitioner, more likely than not, is looking at painting more formally, or in terms of meaning, which transcends hierarchy. In that frame of mind, you can look at Valentine collages from the 1800's, and they can influence you just as much as a sculpture from Greece or any other “high” art.

BLVR: Right. Please pardon the sweeping generalization, but in terms of the gender question I asked before,



Laura Owens, "Untitled," 1997. Acrylic and oil on canvas. Courtesy of Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York

I really do feel that it's more of a female tendency to take in a horizontal view of things, and to not consider the practice as a resuscitated heroism or what have you, in dialogue with Old Masters.

LO: Well I think that I'm going to be including a lot of anonymous female artists in what I look at and incorporate. Most textiles are created by women. Generally, most stuff that's not in the canon is created by women.

BLVR: Right, and from the Old masters to the Minimalists, it's mostly men.

LO: It's ninety-nine percent men. But my interests, what I'm including, these things are in my own personal canon of art history: what I think is important, as far as looking at, and thinking about, a two-dimensional surface. In order to be relevant, I think a lot of male artists should and probably are thinking in the same ways. The culture has moved in a more democratic, pluralistic

direction. You now find a lot of people who are looking outside of the mainstream of the history of art for their mentors. Maybe not *heroes*, but mentors.

BLVR: Who comes to mind readily, among your contemporaries?

LO: Chris Ofili definitely is somebody who's making up his own canon, but I think everybody kind of has to do that now. It's sort of a prerequisite, otherwise, the weight of art history is what gets you. It brings in that crusty, stodgy feeling—when you look at a work of art and you feel that the person hasn't stepped outside, hasn't looked in other wings of the Met, hasn't gone to a natural history museum. In a certain way I can get into the crusty paintings just for their amazing ability to have endurance, but for me, they would still be on the same level as, say, a group of folk artists that I would see and admire.



BLVR: You once worked at a landfill, when you were a teenager in Ohio. What was that like?

LO: This might seem completely hypocritical to what I said about not wanting to work for the man, but the landfill was a city-run service, and I really like how many breaks government workers have, and the way in which your life is regimented by those lunch breaks and fifteen-minute afternoon breaks. And I really liked some of the rigidity of the bureaucratic system, which has a whole set of what is right and what is wrong. It's all very restricted and structured.

BLVR: That's kind of kinky, Laura!

LO: I know. As a job for a seventeen-year-old, I really liked it. You had to know a very specific, finite amount of knowledge in order to weigh the trucks in, and to weigh them out. And there were set rules like, you had to have a tarp on your truck bed when you showed up at the landfill with your load. And as an employee I had the power to say, in a logical and non-emotional way, "You can't deliver that without a tarp over it." People would get frustrated and respond, "What do you mean? You want me to just pull out of here, put a tarp on, and then come right back?" I would look at them and say, "Yes, that's what you'll have to do if you want to dump your trash—it's the law." It had its appeal.

BLVR: You were a bureaucratic automaton!

LO: I was a bureaucratic automaton, but it was kind of nice to have these very set rules. What I really liked is that the landfill is a space that causes culture clash, and there would be Amish people coming in to get rid of their trash, and middle class people, and then of course all the city workers, and all the people who worked for BFI haulers, and the private industry. Just seeing what was in the trash was interesting. There were some really weird sort of folksy people who came to the dump. People who just don't exist in a metropolitan area, kind of marginal people who work for a few small businesses at night, taking their trash out and cleaning up. There were these three brothers who came to the landfill a lot. Two of them didn't speak, and one of them wasn't allowed to

ride on the inside of the truck.

BLVR: He had to ride in the back?

LO: He kind of hung onto the side. The truck had all these brooms and rakes and things on the outside of it. I'd see those brothers once or twice a day, everyday. This was a fifteen thousand-person town.

BLVR: What town is this?

LO: Norwalk, Ohio. That's where I grew up.

BLVR: I was wondering if the landfill gave you a kind of larger sense of what on the planet is salvageable, and what has to be buried?

LO: Sometimes somebody would come to the dump and you'd see they had a bike or something that was obviously usable in some way—stuff that didn't need to be thrown away but someone just didn't want to take the time, or they didn't know what to do with it—and you would go and sell it. I sometimes took stuff home. But pretty quickly you came to understand that the landfill was not the Salvation Army, and you don't want to be doing that too often. In terms of the non-salvageable, what was really interesting was seeing how much food the food industry dumps. If they get the salt just a little too high, or too low, or what have you, they bring huge amounts of whatever it is to the landfill. Like Pepperidge Farm had a cookie factory near there—

BLVR: Wait a minute...I thought they made those things in Maine.

LO: That's just the advertisement. The sanitation guy would come in and—it was kind of gross—you would open the back of his blue truck and there would be mounds and mounds of these packages of cookies—an entire batch that had to be thrown away. So the other workers and I, we'd be taking little packages of Pepperidge Farm cookies out of the back of the truck...

BLVR: And eating overly salted cookies.

LO: I couldn't taste the difference at all. They were just slightly flawed in one way or another.

BLVR: Somewhere in something I read about you, you mentioned the paintings of Larry Poons. Did you know that he's a motorcycle racer now?

LO: No way.

BLVR: People in the motorcycle world pretty much only know him as a racer, and at a certain point it was "found out" that Poons made paintings. This was at the racetrack, and it was this absurd piece of information. Guys in race leathers standing around going, "Did you know Poons supposedly is a *painter*?" They thought it was the funniest thing.

LO: None of them knew he was an abstract painter?

BLVR: They had no idea. And to them, it seemed like the most fey, random thing in the world. He's a sort of bad-ass character in the race world—this grizzled guy who dyes his hair green and races vintage motorcycles. They just all thought it was hysterical. Like finding out that a heavyweight boxer also makes ships in bottles or plays on the amateur Scrabble circuit or something.

LO: That is insane—wow!

BLVR: What would you be doing if, like Poons and his secret racing life, you decided to start a second, secret vocation, totally apart from painting?

LO: I know what my answer is but I don't know if I can say it. Okay, here goes: I think I would want to be a nun.

BLVR: Really—no kidding?

LO: Or something very similar to a nun. I was raised Catholic but I'm no longer a practicing Catholic. I think I would like to do something where I would be in a nature setting, in hermitlike conditions. Cloistered, helping the poor as my daily activity. That's the first thing that comes to mind.

BLVR: That's so interesting. Could you give up romantic love to have that life?

LO: Sure—I mean, I wouldn't want to give up my current relationship, but if that didn't pan out I could see going in the direction I'm describing, to some type of ashram maybe, and becoming a celibate, solitary individual whose life is devoted to something spiritual.

BLVR: Is this an idea you've always had?

LO: Yes, I think I've thought about it since I was a little kid, and known I could see myself doing it. Recently, I read about this woman who got divorced when she was middle-aged. She gave up her regular life in Beverly Hills and became a nun. Now she lives in a cellblock, among the prisoners, in a prison in Tijuana. She counsels them and helps them, teaches them to read, assists them in writing letters to their families, stuff like that. She has her own little non-profit that helps them get aspirin, eyeglasses, false teeth, and bail.

BLVR: When you read about her, it was a life that appealed to you?

LO: It sort of did. In a certain sense just the idea that you could have this second life that was radically different, when you're fifty or sixty or something. I think I would also enjoy being a midwife. I really like watching babies be born. ★

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