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Laura Owens

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One of the pieces drawing substantial attention in the Whitney Biennial is Laura Owens's painting of a Tim Burton-esque tree, its branches laden with forest creatures. A study for the piece sits quietly downtown at GBE (Modern). There is more blank space, and it feels a little like a plein air sketch, but it's just as interesting and self-assured as the more elaborate version uptown. The confidence Owens has in each of her brushstrokes has always been one of the prepossessing qualities of her work. What appears clumsy, hesitant, and unrefined turns out to be sophisticated, brash, and surprising. In this show Owens lets figures picture more strongly than she has in the past; there are dancers and a striking watercolor reminiscent of Andrea Mantegna's 1480 portrait of Saint Sebastian pierced by arrows. The two highlights are very big and very small, respectively: One is a giant canvas on which Owens has masterfully stained a midnight blue sky and painted a delicate carriage bearing what looks like a military brass band; the other is a little, almost ecstatic abstract collage of pinks and oranges and yellows that looks like it was composed for the pure enjoyment of it.



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