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ART IN REVIEW; Laura Owens

By HOLLAND COTTER APRIL 2, 2004

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Laura Owens is a good painter -- no more, no less -- with an insistent critical cult following. Indeed, some writers manage to insert her name, with mantralike regularity, into almost everything they write. Probably as a result of the hype Ms. Owens, though only 33, has already been given a traveling career retrospective. I saw it in Los Angeles last year, and it was an example of way too much too soon. The aesthetic of scattershot styles, motifs and ideas for which she has been praised was, over the course of a museum show, nowhere near varied enough, and her loose, light technique seemed wan.

The new work in her show here looks more persuasive, mostly because there's less of it. (This is also the reason her single painting in the Whitney Biennial looks as good as it does.) As usual she picks up motifs from lots of sources: folk art, Baroque painting, fashion and modernist abstraction, with a few Asian effects thrown in. A big painting of a military band being whisked through the night in a magic coach is wonderful, sweet and tough, full of mystery, like the best kind of children's book illustrations, here projected to a monumental scale.

Nothing else is nearly as good. Her study for El Greco's "St. Sebastian" adds nothing to the original; it seems to be here just to indicate that, yes, she, too, is on message about a historical figure who has enjoyed a minor so-bad-he's-good critical vogue since his recent retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Ms. Owens has a reputation as an influential artist, a role model for other, even younger American artists interested in painting. But she, too, is a painter in progress. A lot is there, but canonization is premature. HOLLAND COTTER