

Owens' vision requires an educated eye

Understanding artist's intent can require some serious homework

NATO, A Potato And The Republic Of Plato is the catchy title of a sculpture by Liz Larner that's outlasted my visual memory of the work. Curious to know why, I consulted the book in which I'd seen it illustrated, *Sexed Universals In Contemporary Art*. The photograph shows a forgettable square Plexiglas column but the text describes a remarkable component – a petri dish with bacteria on paint from the NATO building.

Larner came to mind twice when looking at Laura Owens' paintings at the Camden Arts Centre and that was before I knew that both live and work in Los Angeles and are notable alumni of CalArts.

One reason was that Owens' decision not to use titles, to encourage personal interpretation of the images, made me think of titles which add a valuable dimension, as in the NATO example. Being fond of words, Untitled always disappoints.

The other was that I'd thought Larner unusual in avoiding a signature style but my initial impression was that Owens was doing this too. However, it is the references to all manner of art and craft in Owens' work – from Toulouse Lautrec to crewelwork – that makes the studies for large works, hung together in one gallery, resemble a group show.

I had thought, until I began research on Owens, that my inability to appreciate and hence reluctance to write about this exhibition, which ends a two-month run on Sunday, was that if you don't recognise all these



Alison Oldham
ART

references you're not getting what the artist intended. To be told in the exhibition brochure that Owens is "adept at referencing American artists like Florine Stettheimer and Grandma Moses" is not encouraging.

But Californian artist Mungo Thomson suggests Owens' intention is actually to test the limits of our knowledge: "to see how deeply the tropes of painting and of looking at painting have been culturally absorbed, how well travelled is the path from original to standard to generic."

Owens says her paintings are "very specifically American and have a lot to do with where I come from." She grew up in Euclid, Ohio, and cites American folk art as a major source of inspiration. On my first visit to the exhibition, I was charmed by a folksy horse with a teardrop-shaped upraised hoof.

But on a second visit, I saw why Owens' detractors find her art cloyingly sweet and "too hip and too coy by half," according to

LA-based critic Irit Krygier: "Hallmark Card-like renditions show squirrels, rabbits, turtles, owls, butterflies or bears in landscapes that are one part Japanese painting and another part Disney cartoon."

Owens is credited with reinvigorating painting for a younger generation of artists in the 90s. Her expertise is demonstrated by the casual trompe l'oeil in a large canvas that is virtually all sky blue but with black forms suggesting birds in flight. But the "birds" have shadows and appear to be placed inches in front of the canvas, an illusion only foiled by close inspection.

What I didn't realize until I saw Sarah Kent's Time Out review was that this work is "an affectionate spoof on colour field painting." Its humour, she claims, is lost without immediate recognition of this.

Color Field is a type of Abstract Expressionism that began in America. Lyrical effects of colour were explored by filling canvases with solid colour and omitting recognisable imagery. Kent was a student at the Slade where Robyn Denny, at one time a colour field painter, was a tutor.

For those less in the know but wishing to be so, there's a tour of the exhibition led by CAC, director Jenni Lomax on Sunday at 3pm. To ward off discomfort about ignorance, keep in mind TS Eliot's assertion that "The circle of our understanding is a very restricted area."

Open 10am-6pm daily until Sunday at Camden Arts Centre in Arkwright Road, NW3.



Top: Unfilled 2004 by Laura Owens.

Above: Unfilled 1996 by Laura Owens.

Pictures courtesy of the artist/Gavin Brown



OPEN STUDIOS

THIS weekend and next, craftspeople throughout London are participating in Hidden Art Open Studios 2006, timed to suit those looking for a unique Christmas gift. Artists at these complexes and others also open their doors, making this a great opportunity for an arty-crafty walkabout.

There's a cluster of interesting studios on the third floor of Chocolate Factory One in Wood Green which tend to be overlooked. In one, Penny Elder shows the artistic outcome of her trip to Antarctica. "The vastness and coldness of this remote wilderness has strongly influenced my paintings, monoprints and screenprints," she says.

Next door are Vaughan Melzer's photographs, including evocative landscapes with trees and powerful black and white portraits of local people.

Hidden Art's organisers describe the Chocolate Factory as "a hotbed of creative and artistic talent housing more than 100 artists and designer makers." It's in Clarendon Road, N22, and studios are open noon-6pm Saturday and Sunday.

A Highbury ceramicist with an international reputation is opening her studio at 147 Archway Road, N6, this weekend and next. Gabriel Koch makes individual vessel forms with tactile burnished surfaces and distinctive smoke patterning.

At Highbury Studios, there's a group show of 16 established and emerging artists titled Saudade, a Portuguese word that means a feeling of longing for something one is fond of, which is gone but might return in a distant future. It can be seen from noon to 6pm from today until Sunday and next Thursday until next Sunday at 5-7 Hornsey Street, N7.

For more information, go to www.hiddenart.com and www.saudadexhibition.co.uk.



Rebecca Salter at work.

Absorbing art of Salter deserves a good look

ONE of Rebecca Salter's densely worked canvases resembles deeply ridged bark, another appears to be covered with silvery snail trails. Three months spent living alone in a lakeside studio deep in the woods of New England, on a residency at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, provided inspiration for many paintings and drawings in her exhibition *Bliss Of Solitude* at the Beardsmore Gallery in Kentish Town.

The sinuous upright forms of drawings reflect reeds in the lake and the branches of trees in a spinney overlooked by the studio's wall of square-paned windows.

A horizon line appears for the first time in these paintings which also benefit from a

technique Salter recently adopted. After seeing partially rubbed out watercolours by Turner's contemporary Alfred William Hunt, Salter now sands roughly half the finished painting, increasing the luminosity of the chosen area.

However, this is almost always below the horizon line rather than above, which would have suggested sky.

Salter's paintings are wholly abstract, with the overall patterning of American painter Agnes Martin or, closer to home, the late Birgit Skiold or Hampstead's Edwina Leapman.

Salter, who lives and works in north London, shares with Martin and Skiold an interest in transcendent Asian philosophies and lived for six years in Japan.

Oriental textiles and calligraphy seem also present in the paintings, whose subtlety cannot be conveyed by reproduction and only experienced with contemplation.

"In the muted colour cadences and detailed surfaces there is encouragement to linger, absorb and to ponder difference," writes Anna Moszynska in the catalogue essay.

She suggests following Agnes Martin's advice that looking at art – certainly art like this – should be like looking at the ocean: "You just go there and sit and look."

At 22-24 Prince of Wales Road, NW3, until December 2, Tuesday to Friday 10am-5pm, Saturday noon-5pm.