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Laura Owens: Pavement Karaoke/Alphabet

William Kherbek reviews the eponymous show by American artist Laura Owens at Sadie Coles HQ



Installation view, Laura Owens, Pavements / Karaoke Alphabet. Copyright the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

With a title like *Pavement Karaoke* it's hard to keep images of forty-something, withering cool kids trying to artfully blunder through *Gold Soundz* or *Haircut* without losing their self-awareness. Happily — or perhaps sadly — that particular vision of hell does not feature in the eponymous show by American artist Laura Owens at Sadie Coles HQ on New Burlington Place. Instead, the show is composed of a series of large canvases in the upstairs gallery and a group of smaller ones in the downstairs gallery. Like the title, the show is divided between the *Pavement Karaoke* section upstairs and works which deal with representations of the alphabet downstairs. Self-consciously a show of two halves, after spending some quality time getting to know the paintings in the upstairs, it was at first quite difficult to engage the downstairs canvases in the same way, but suddenly, they kind of bloomed.

It isn't easy making interesting paintings these days, what with even good artists thinking that a few squiggles on their iPhone converted into oils suffices to become "Now", but Owens' works manage

the elusive trick of meaningful dialogue with predecessors and intense realisation of individual vision. It's a marvel that they escape history so deftly, not least given the fact that the works use classified adverts from the 1960s and 70s as a strange species of almost Cartesian grounding for granules of volcanic rock and strips of heavily worked paint. Maybe, contre Mr. Malkmus, you can quarantine

the past. The adverts are interesting as anthropology, but have an impressive way of melting into near abstraction underneath the paint. Owens' impastos seem to take in as much of human endeavour as the adverts beneath them, colours interpenetrate and resist with vibrancy and hunger becoming genuine, if brief, adventures. Slanted they may be, and enchanting they certainly are.

The basement works somehow run into a kind of trouble the upstairs works avoid. Each canvas, combinations of embroidery and paint, is a representation of a letter of the alphabet in various degrees of abstraction. Its strange how the sheer density of words in the images upstairs

serves almost to free the surrounding paint, but with the alphabet works, it's impossible to see the letters as anything other than letters. There are a few works where the letters are nearly invisible but the whole time, in the leading way the canvases are arranged, you find yourself asking "where's the letter in that one"?

This isn't to say there aren't some nice surprises, for example a lovely grey, black, and yellow composition that swirls out from a few typeface curves, but the pieces show just how hard it is to defeat the isomorphic quality letters have. And, in that, perhaps there is a kind of profundity, the linguistic significance of the sentence has an organicism that can sometimes render its meaning invisible, but but letters almost never disappear no matter how hard you try to obscure them. Possibly Owens is constructing a larger metaphor about the way human creations like the glyphic forms of letters come to dominate the mind even beyond natural objects. It would be a very sophisticated critique of society, both consumer society and society as a construction, and a kind of warning.

Pavement Karaoke/Alphabet runs until 17 November at Sadie Coles HQ 4 New Burlington Place, London. For more information visit sadiecoles.com