

People 2013

Laura Owens: Painting in Space

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Blogs



Kevin Scanlon

Laura Owens

One of the fascinating Angelenos featured in L.A. Weekly's People 2013 issue. Check out our entire People 2013 issue here.

On a balmy Saturday morning in March, a smattering of popcorn decorates the cement floor of a large warehouse in Boyle Heights, currently the studio, exhibition and event space of L.A.-based painter Laura Owens. The night before, the attached art-book and music store, Ooga Booga #2, hosted Asha Schechter's book launch and a screening of what Owens describes as a "really weird *Peanuts* movie." Soon, the kernels will be replaced by rainbow sprinkles and sequins from Owens' free cookie-making and painting day for kids.

Owens, 42, isn't around, but it's doubtful she'd apologize for the mess. The merging of traditional private studio and public exhibition/event space has allowed her to participate in her indefinite show, "12 Paintings by Laura Owens," beyond the opening, allowing both artist and audience to spend more time than usual with each other and with the work. It also sometimes means dealing with people "dissing me to my face," she says.

Owens recalls critic Peter Schjeldahl's perspective on L.A. as a city with relatively few public spaces, where "there are only private spaces — fenced haciendas of self-maintenance and self-invention — surrounded with the soft, dreamy, zinging-with-light nowhere in particular." "He sees this as a problem," she says, "while I think that it generates really interesting art."

In New York, Owens says, "Everyone wants to figure out where in history their work is going to get slotted into, and really people are almost working to justify why they're taking up space on that island. Here, there are almost these secret pockets of space that you open up into."

Owens' primary studio in the Echo Park hills, behind the house she shares with her two kids, is one of those spaces. On the floor are large balls of dried oil paint and pigment — her fluorescent formulas — like hibernating paintings in bright shells waiting to hatch. Many of her handmade books — collaborations with other artists — are here, too. Owens has recently taken to bookmaking because, compared with other media, "There's something about the process of reading a book and physically holding it in your hands that takes the pressure off."

That relief is the same reason she paints in series, in which "any one painting doesn't have to be a painting. ... Some can just be complete duds," she says. "It's the experience of the whole, so you almost need some that are not that great, that are interruptions into whatever it is that's going on."

Perhaps L.A. helped take pressure off of her as well. Thanks to MOCA, the Ohio-born artist already had her first solo exhibition behind her by the time she was 33.

Last year, she turned down a faculty position at Columbia at the last minute to keep her family on the same coast when she realized her marriage to L.A.-based artist Edgar Bryan wasn't going to last and accepted that "I'm just here."

Owens isn't busy justifying why she's taking up space in this metropolis. She's likely in her Boyle Heights hacienda, and you're welcome to visit.