

To Live And Paint In LA: The Work Of Laura Owens

Laura Owens is an LA artist. Having graduated from Cal Arts in 1994, she quickly went from being a local talent to a herald of the re-emergence of painting on the international art scene. For the last two decades, she has been a vital part of the LA landscape, even as she has maintained her distinctive voice in painting – as inclusive of different styles and subject matter as it is serious in its examination of the problems of image making. Throughout it all, she has been a pre-eminent practitioner of LA cool: seemingly laid back, but also intelligent, rigorous, and quietly badass.

In a gorgeous warehouse downtown, you can see the most recent iteration of Owens' paintings and also her relationship to the art community of Los Angeles. 356 Mission Road is simultaneously an exhibition space, a site specific installation, an open studio, a pop-up of the art bookstore **Ooga Booga** and a backdrop for a cornucopia of events that run the gamut from Scrabble Sundays to a theatrical reading of Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*, complete with spaghetti dinner.

It all began with Owens looking for a place, as she describes it, "to show work in the space it was made in, a space imbued with the feeling of the making of it... to have a studio visit that is also an exhibition." Since her paintings are often site-specific, she was thinking of a place with a singular architecture that she could respond to; this space wasn't exactly that, but it was "cheap, available, beautiful and big." The site specificity of the paintings became more subtle, but it was replaced by the opportunity to invite other people to do something in the space.

Some of the resulting projects involve collaborators from the past and present: Owens was interviewed by Kushner for the first issue of the *Believer* in 2003, and Owens recently worked on a book project with Wendy Yao, who runs Ooga Booga. Since Owens and Yao continue to collaborate, and since they share a passion for book making, it made perfect sense to invite Yao to use part of the space. Through a series of unexpected and fortuitous events – someone brought a couch, some furniture came back from another show – the Ooga Booga shop ended up being more finished and comfortable than anticipated. The result was a social space where people come by to look at books, have a coffee, meet up, or just hang out.

It sounds casual and accidental when Owens tells it, but in our conversation, it became clear that there is a driving philosophy behind the way the space has evolved. "I have this love affair with the idea of free libraries and free museums: spaces that are public but you can also have moments of introspection and intimacy with an object or a book," she mused. "But also ideas get circulated there. I think these social spaces are like those libraries and museums but in another way. They're presenting an idea writ large for free for contemplation." With all the events, it's also allowed for the artist to have plenty of unplanned conversations about her own work, which was the point in the first place – to have a show that's also a huge studio visit.

The 12 paintings are installed six to a wall on two facing sides of the warehouse; walls of windows are on the other two sides. I was sure these were the largest paintings Owens had made, until she corrected me; the size of the room and density of the installation lend the paintings a

sense of enormity that is deceptive. I was more inclined to stand in the middle of the room and take in the paintings at a distance than I was to stand in front of any given painting, since up close, most of the painting was either over my head or lost in my peripheral vision.

I also had a strange sense that I was viewing a giant layout for a book: the paintings' identical size and spacing, the graphic quality of their compositions, the computer generated elements, and the motifs that repeat from one painting to another, made me think of a narrative that was in the process of taking shape. I felt the tension that Owens often describes between site specificity and individual works: even as I was aware that a few of the works were truly standouts, I also felt that the quality of the individual works was getting lost in the density of the installation. However, once you do get up close, rewards abound. Owens employs a variety of techniques and media including thin washes, charcoal, impasto, and silkscreen: textures, marks, and disparate imagery delight the eye while confounding pictorial space.

Given the wide diversity of approaches in Owens' work, the subjective taste of the viewer is a large factor in judging the successfulness of an individual painting – or even a motif in a painting. For instance, I thought that the screenprint of the classified ads distracted from the paintings' larger purpose; I found myself reading when I wanted to look. But I couldn't get enough of the painting that was a white canvas with pink and blue scribbles enmeshed with grey grids. And my favorite may be a Matisse-like landscape that is inserted, complete with its frame, into an unprimed linen canvas; splotch-like marks fall outside the frame onto the raw linen canvas. It doesn't have any of the computer generated brush marks that populate the other paintings, and yet it creates a multiplicity of surfaces as surely as the others do.

The current exhibition ends on July 7th, and then the space will be closed until August. There are a few ideas for what might happen next, but it's still up in the air. This is the kind of flexibility and spontaneity that is the backbone of an artist-run space; with any kind of institutional framework, whether a gallery or a non-profit, things have to be scheduled far in advance. It's not clear why artist run spaces proliferate in LA, but it is a glorious happenstance that they do, and the freedom to improvise is something that 356 Mission Road shares with the other artist run spaces here. In LA, with artist run endeavors, "people do things that avoid all those frameworks... something's going to happen and you don't quite know what it's going to be, but people are going to go."

Laura Owens: 12 Paintings is currently on view at 356 S. Mission Road, Los Angeles, CA 90033. For more information and a list of events, visit [**here**](#).

Installation shots by Fredrik Nilsen. Individual works shot by Fran and Doug Parker.

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