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Industrial building gives artist Laura Owens versatility

Owens uses the 12,000-square-foot space in Boyle Heights to display 12 new paintings she made but also has opened it to the public as an event and performance venue.

March 13, 2013 | By Jori Finkel, Los Angeles Times

When Laura Owens was looking for a studio that could double as an exhibition space for her first show in L.A. since 2003, she considered a variety of buildings. There was an out-of-business Glidden paint shop on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood and a small defunct church on Melrose nearby.

But those spaces seemed too specific or loaded architecturally. So it was something of a revelation when she first visited 356 South Mission Road, a 12,000-square-foot stand-alone industrial building in Boyle Heights that had originally housed a lithography studio in the '40s and later served as storage space for pianos — including Liberace's.

"I knew it was perfect as soon as I saw it," Owens said. "It feels like a studio. It feels like an exhibition space. It feels really versatile."

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And now she is putting that versatility to the test. In January, she opened it to the public with a show of 12 new paintings she had made in the space — supersized canvases at the intersection of abstraction and figuration that bring together playful images of cats, oblique references to Charles Schulz and colorful echoes of Matisse and Cézanne. She also revamped the entrance to make room for an Ooga Booga bookstore in front.

It has become an event and performance space as well. Owens has begun holding karaoke nights and Scrabble Sundays, with plans for screenings, readings and more. Next up: a family day on Saturday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. during which kids can make paintings and bake cookies. (The family day is free and open to the public, but RSVPs are requested at rsvp@356mission.com)

And after her paintings come down — "we're thinking the end of June" — she plans to invite other artists to show their work. One artist she mentioned is Pop art pioneer Alex Katz, who shows with her New York gallery Gavin Brown's Enterprise (GBE): "I think Alex would be great in the space, but we don't just want to show GBE artists."

Brown helped Owens out when she fell for such a large (and expensive) space by putting his name on a three-year lease, but she said he is not running the space like a West Coast satellite of his gallery: "His name is on the lease but we are real partners in this."

Now on view, Owens' paintings, 10 by 11.5 feet, are some of her most dramatic to date. "I wanted to keep doing what I was doing, but do it more emphatically. I was thinking about what it means to be a woman artist and be the mark-maker."

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Another driving idea: what happens to a doodle — say your quick-hit sketch on the day's newspaper — when you blow it up to a supersized scale? And what does it mean to make a true drawing-painting, giving charcoal as much play or weight as acrylic and oil?

One painting, made of all three mediums, features a tangle of cats playing with balls of yarn that you could picture on a student notebook. Another, even more directly referring to the doodling process, shows thick, squiggly marks on want ads lifted from old copies of the Berkeley Barb newspaper.

She said she made about 50 studies before realizing these large paintings — not by mapping out compositions in advance as much as by experimenting with different techniques, whether working to create the right thickness of white paint or trying different versions of "drop shadows" that create the illusion of depth. Then there are the partly hidden or embedded images: an oversized cat in one work and a Snoopy face in another.

Asked about all the cats, she told the story of a family pet named Charlie Boy that went missing earlier this year.

"It ran away the day of my opening," she said. "It's really sad: It was an outdoor cat we found in a ditch, so I had all this hope it would come back. But I think the coyotes might have gotten it."

And yes, the "it" is a bit of a giveaway: "I'm not really a cat person at all," she said. "For me a cat is a playful, animated mark."

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