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Critic's Choice

Review: Laura Owens' large-scale paintings an immersive experience

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At a time when all sorts of artists are abandoning painting to make works that spill onto the floor and fill the room with all manner of stuff, it's exciting to see Laura Owens pack everything she's got onto a flat canvas.

She's got a lot.

At 356 S. Mission Road, "12 Paintings by Laura Owens" is exactly that: 12 gigantic canvases lined up on two long walls in a massive industrial space whose raw beauty has not been obliterated by overeager renovation. The first hometown solo show of paintings since Owens' survey at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 2003, her straightforward setup plays with space so effectively that every cubic foot of the gargantuan gallery matters.

Owens' powerful paintings function like installations — welcoming visitors into worlds that let us leave the real one behind without forgetting that to do so is a fantasy. Being in two places at the same time may be logically impossible but it's where Owens' art gets started.

Her billboard-scale images look great from a distance, their sharp graphics, charged palettes, illusionistic shadows, painterly lushness and spatial turbulence making for complex experiences that are visually satisfying and intellectually engaging.

Up close, they're even better.

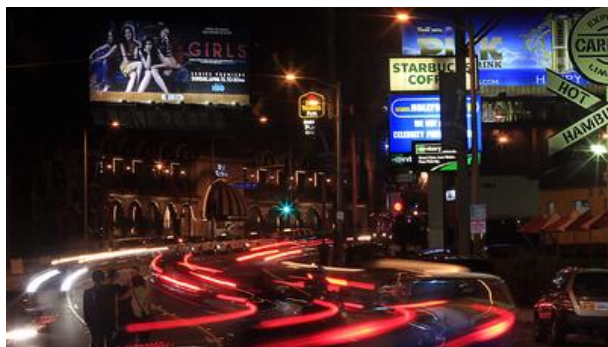
When you stand 3 or 4 feet from Owens' nearly 12-by-10-foot paintings space opens up before you. That's because Owens treats the surfaces of her works as territories where the rules do not apply. Gravity falls by the wayside. Rationality comes up short. Standing back, to survey the big picture from a safe distance, misses the best part of Owens' art: its intimacy, sensuality and whiplash spatial shifts, which give its innocent whimsy real kick.

A master at bringing together disparate images, different ways of applying paint and diverse ways of looking at the world, Owens leaves lots of room for viewers to maneuver. Your eyes glide, often with the greatest of ease, through atmospheric expanses only to slam, unceremoniously, into sections where out-of-sync screen-prints cause optical consternation. Kitty cats, sailing ships and personal advertisements link us to a range of pedestrian pleasures. Stylistic references to such underappreciated painters as Raoul Dufy and Raoul De Keyser bring sophistication into the picture.

In an era of multi-tasking distractions, it's refreshing to find paintings that do the multi-tasking for us, leaving us free to look closely and slowly at details that cannot be seen quickly or from a distance.

356 S. Mission Road, (323) 609-3162, through June. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays. www.356mission.com

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