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'THE ONLY THING I'M AN EXPERT ON IS MY OWN WORK': JORDAN WOLFSON AND LAURA OWENS IN CONVERSATION IN LOS ANGELES

BY *Catherine G. Wagley* (http://www.artnews.com/author/cwagley/) POSTED 12/08/15 1:22 PM

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The announcement for the artist discussion between Jordan Wolfson and Laura Owens.

COURTESY 356 MISSION

Jordan Wolfson was explaining that he is not gay, and that it's a misreading of his work to assume that he is.

“But you do say, ‘I am gay,’” the painter Laura Owens pointed out, wryly. She sat beside Wolfson in front of a large audience at 356 Mission in Boyle Heights, just east of Downtown Los Angeles. The words appear on the very first page of his newly published book, *California*, and in his 2014 show at David Zwirner in New York, a masked animatronic dancer mouthed along with a recording of Wolfson whispering the sentence.

“I also say ‘My mother is dead,’” Wolfson pointed out. (She remains very much alive.)

“Is it wish fulfillment?” Owens asked.

“It’s fiction,” Wolfson answered.

The two artists appeared together on Thursday evening to launch their new books. Owens’s is a career-spanning monograph published by Rizzoli. Wolfson’s is an artist’s book chronicling the Zwirner show. The cover of her book features a close-up of painted marks on raw linen. His features a garish close-up of the animatronic lady.

Neither the books nor the artists have that much in common on the surface—Wolfson, who began showing about a decade ago, makes videos and sculptures with dependably high production value and insolent attitudes, and he’s pop obsessed (Beyoncé and Lady Gaga feature on his soundtracks). Owens, who has been working in Los Angeles since the 1990s, has worked hard to establish the seriousness of her seemingly casual paintings. She runs the nearly three-year-old space 356 Mission with the support of Gavin Brown, her New York dealer. Born in 1970, she is ten years older than Wolfson, a gap that wouldn’t necessarily matter if Wolfson didn’t affect such distinct youthfulness (“I show at big galleries that treat me like a teenager, and I behave like one,” he said during the talk).

The announcement 356 Mission sent out featured Wolfson’s animatronic woman dancing in front of an unapologetically loose painting by Owens. It was a weirdly compelling image, and the rows of chairs set up in the concrete-floored gallery had nearly filled by the time the talk began, half an hour behind schedule.

Wolfson started by posing a long-winded question. “For a while you were kind of an artist’s artist,” he said to Owens, mentioning “new illustrationism,” Surrealism, and a recent shift in her work. “The paintings have taken on a new kind of formal complexity,” he said. “I’m wondering if you could respond to that.”

“Um, I’m trying to think—” Owens began, biding time rather than floundering. She mentioned vaguely figurative work she did in the late 1990s, then asked Wolfson to clarify how her paintings related to Surrealism.

“I just think they’re really good,” Wolfson responded. Then she was questioning him, about his interest in what he called “the heterogeneous way” collage acts and aggressive German painters like Georg Grosz and Otto Dix. “I’m really a non-expert,” he said.

“On your own work?” asked Owens.

“The only thing I’m an expert on is my own work,” he responded.

The discussion between the two of them couldn’t have lasted more than 20 minutes before Owens suggested they turn to questions.

Since audience members had dropped handwritten questions into a jar on their way in, all the questions already sat in front of Wolfson. He pulled one out.

“Who is your favorite artist, not including yourself?” he read. “I don’t have one,” he answered, then remembered his love for Chuck Close and Cady Noland. Owens went with Mary Heilmann.

In response to a question about this year’s Pantone colors (rose quartz and serenity, a light blue), Owens recounted a childhood experience with an ice machine’s turquoise interior. She had been under four but still remembered.

A brief, uncomfortable pause followed a question about the shooting in San Bernardino, which had happened the day before, only 60 miles away. Someone wanted the artists to respond.

“In general, guns should be banned,” said Wolfson.

“Jordan, truth or dare?” read another question. He chose dare, and then switched to truth when Owens seemed at a loss.

“How much pain are you in?” she asked him. “I don’t really believe you’re in pain. But I want to believe you’re in pain.” Recklessness permeates videos like *Raspberry Poser* (2013), and the bearded protagonist in *Animation, masks* (2012) talks about how nice it is “to wake up in the morning all alone and not have to tell somebody you love them when you don’t.”

“Whatever happens in my life, I’d be a liar to say it doesn’t somehow trickle into my work,” Wolfson answered, but didn’t go much further. This is how the talk progressed, veering toward dark ideas and then quickly veering back toward the surface. This might have been frustrating if the artists hadn’t moved so quickly from one point to another, as if performing a comedy routine meant for an audience with obscure taste and a short attention span.

“Anyway,” said Owens, “you want to end this?”

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Wolfson pulled out one last question about video games. He liked *Star Fox Adventures* and *Mario*, he said.

There would be books for sale in the back, Owens announced, at “some amount of discount.”

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