



Playing "Would You Rather" with Laura Owens

By Rebecca Bates

The recipient of the 2015 Robert De Niro Sr. Prize considers living in a Richard Tuttle world, destroying her own artwork, and becoming a nun.



Artist Laura Owens. Photo: Stefan Ruiz.

For Los Angeles–based artist Laura Owens, the physical space in which she paints directly affects the final paintings themselves—their size, their ambition, even how they ought to be exhibited. In 2013, in partnership with Gavin Brown, she converted her former studio in an airy, expansive former warehouse at 356 S. Mission Road into an exhibition space, an early entrant in Downtown L.A.'s burgeoning arts district. For the gallery's inaugural show, Owens presented a series of massive paintings. In a video produced by MOCA Los Angeles for the exhibition, Owens says, “The space is huge, and I think it would be super perverse and kind of not interesting and too clever and weird to [be] like, ‘Oh, tiny paintings in a big space’... You have to rise to the occasion of this.”

This last statement seems to speak to Owens's oeuvre as a whole, which is strikingly guileless but doesn't shirk ambition. The Ohio-born, RISD- and CalArts–trained artist is a chameleon, often blending the gestural brushstrokes of Abstract Expressionism or street graffiti with the graphic, illustrative elements of Pop art and a sly wit (large, upside-down signatures; appended tricycle wheels). When faced with a choice between indulging in the romance of materialism at the far end or the cynicism of conceptualism at the other, she chooses neither. With every new series and exhibition, Owens's work seems to take on a new sensibility, each piece still undeniably and wholly identifiable as hers.

It's this tendency toward thoughtful experimentation that won Owens the 2015 Robert De Niro Sr. Prize and \$25,000 through the Tribeca Film Institute. In light of this accolade, and her upcoming show, April 28–July 23, at the CCA Wattis Institute in San Francisco, we invited the artist to play a round of the game *Would You Rather*.



Laura Owens, "Untitled," 2006.

Paddle8: In a 2003 interview with the Believer, you talk about having worked at a landfill as a teenager, and idealizing the cloistered, hermitic life of a nun. So, if you had to leave the life of an artist behind forever, would you rather... manage a landfill OR run an abbey?

Laura Owens: I would rather not manage or run either. I wouldn't want to be the boss. I would want someone assigning me tasks.

P8: Would you rather... be forced to recreate and exhibit the same exact piece again and again for the rest of your career OR be forced to create one work, continually add to it, and exhibit only that one work for the rest of your career?

LO: Definitely the first option, since you don't have to think or do anything. I would just make all of the paintings at the same time so they were ready to go for each installation. Hopefully I would have something else going on, like making children's books.

P8: For the rest of your career, would you rather... only be allowed to create work using children's coloring books as source material (similar to your oils on linen from 2013 depicting a smiling hippopotamus) OR only be allowed to create work using a 1980s version of MacPaint?

LO: Why not both?

P8: Would you rather... be forced to only produce paintings featuring at least one pink cat (a la your pink cats rendered in oil and screen printing ink) OR be forced to only produce very straightforward, text-based paintings, a la Baldessari's A Painting that Is its Own Documentation, which you reference in an Artforum interview as a good example of a "painting within a painting."

LO: The Baldessari is a much better painting. I would rather do that.

P8: Would you rather... spend eternity stuck in a Takashi Murakami painting OR live in a world where all the objects (furniture, vehicles, homes, electronics) were assemblages and sculptures by Richard Tuttle?

LO: The second one sounds great. Living surrounded by Richard Tuttle's work sounds more amazing than Merzbau.

P8: Would you rather... destroy one of your works or set of works (and which would you choose) OR be forced to destroy a famous work by an artist you admire, and who would that artist be?

LO: It sounds more fun to destroy my own artwork. Actually, I gave a painting to Joe Sola and Michael Webster to be destroyed as part of a performance they did in 2013.

They cut it up with a Sawzall and threw the pieces into a wood chipper. It was a good performance.

P8: Would you rather... only be allowed to use scissors OR only be allowed to use a gardening spade as your primary tool while painting for the rest of your career?

LO: Scissors. I love scissors. But it would be hard to beat the Matisse cut-outs.

P8: You've been vocal about your love of Los Angeles and how that has shaped your artistic practice, and certainly there is a healthy and growing contingent of master painters working in Los Angeles. You've also mentioned admiring the way 18th-century artist Giovanni Battista Tiepolo renders the sky in his paintings. Would you rather... live for another 100 years to help found the Golden Age of Los Angeles Painting OR travel back in time to see the rise of an historic Golden Age, and which Golden Age would that be?

LO: I'm pretty sure the age of painting is coming to an abrupt end soon, so I would rather go back. I don't know where. Maybe a Bloomsbury-style hangout sesh or checking out the Omega Workshop scene would be fun.

In other sessions of "Would You Rather," Jerry Saltz contemplates being trapped inside Prada Marfa with Donald Trump, and Art F City's Paddy Johnson considers living in a Hieronymus Bosch painting.