

Rob Goyanes, 'Laura Owens at the Whitney'
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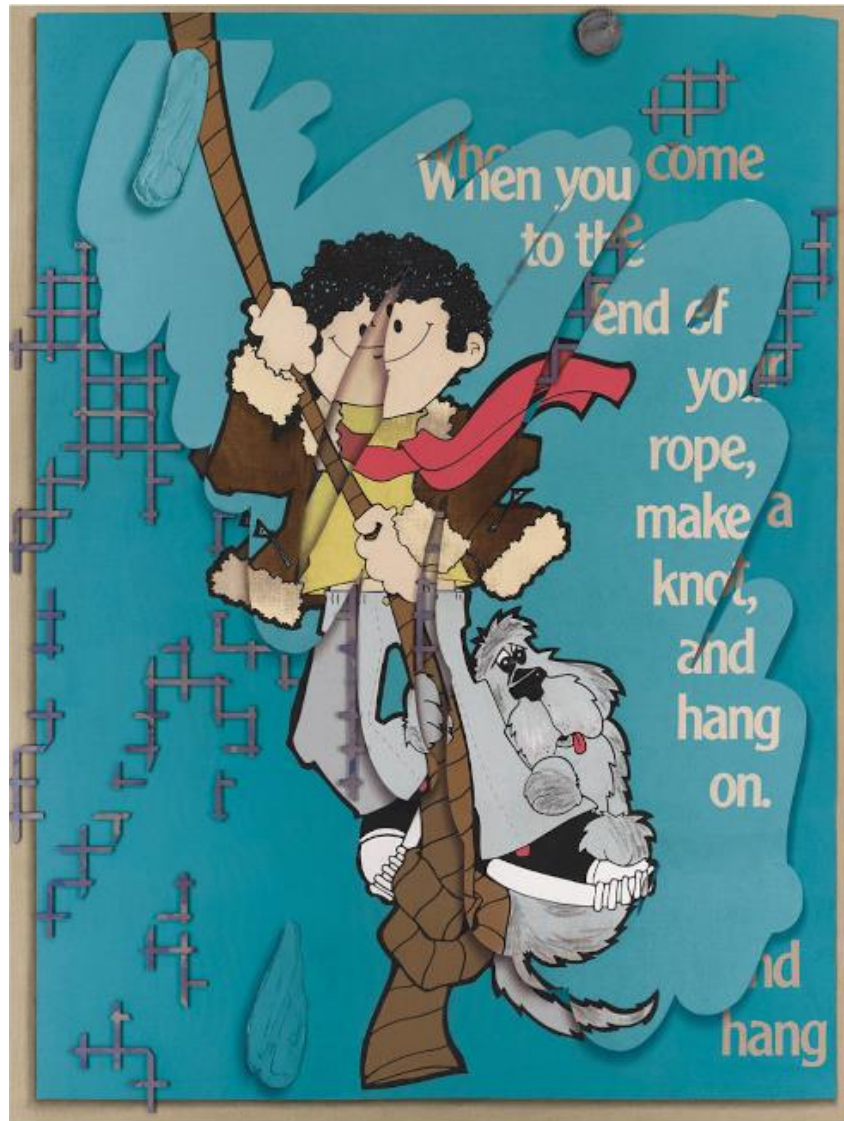
Laura Owens at the Whitney

Rob Goyanes

Dec. 12, 2017

Some critics have said that Laura Owens' art belongs in a category known as "ugly painting." This isn't meant in the derogatory, just that the work has elements that we as a culture don't usually classify as beautiful. Of course, the difference between ugliness and beauty is all subjective and socially constructed. After all, one might find the paintings on view at the Whitney as either, or both, or maybe neither. In this writer's opinion, they're simply incredible.

Known for her mishmash-ing of abstraction and figuration, high and low brow, and all sorts of other aesthetic registers, Owens has a distinct voice when it comes to her painting. And by voice, I mean chorus. From goofy cartoonish adverts to calm landscapes, the range of Owens' talent is striking. Undoubtedly inspired by the pop commercialism and art history of Los Angeles, where she lives and works, the artist explodes multiple categories with wit and prowess.



Detail of Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist and the Whitney Museum.

One work, called *Untitled*, from 2012, has the look of Photoshop interface layers combined with the textured feel of giant glossy markers; the gingham patterns and pumice stones are simply lovely and perfectly arranged. In another work named *Untitled*, this one from 2010, two porcelain-white children stare at each other while in bed, the wall behind them a transfixing deep blue. The bouncing between realism and abstraction is severe, but something about all the work feels endearingly humane.

Which brings us back to the question of ugliness. While it's great fun to look at all these paintings (the clock works are especially spirited), this is not what is typically considered beautiful art. It's gaudy at times, in-your-face, and loudly hued. But this ugliness is inherent to its beauty, and more importantly, to its sharp sense of irreverence. Perhaps the painting that sums up the show best is the bovidae in the forest, its head flung back, tongue sticking out at you.