

Ariella Budick, 'Unabashed fun with Laura Owens at the Whitney'
Financial Times, 24 November 2017

FINANCIAL TIMES

Unabashed fun with Laura Owens at the Whitney

A vibrant New York retrospective showcases a defiantly upbeat individualist



Installation view of the Laura Owens exhibition at the Whitney Museum, New York © Ron Amstutz

Ariella Budick

NOVEMBER 24, 2017

Laura Owens came of age in the 1990s, a time when painting was dead, borders were begging to be blurred, and the establishment demanded that serious artists be politically engaged. Owens thrived in that stringent atmosphere and she's thriving even more now that it's dissipated. In the early years, critics read her girly, candy-coloured acrylics as a sly rebuke of girliness and gaudiness. Her work was seen as the political equivalent of cough syrup: sweet but virtuous. What becomes clear in the Whitney Museum's new retrospective is that Owens' art is and always has been fun. She did what she wanted, and if the theorists went along with it, that was fine with her.

A few tatters of those old clichés about challenging convention still cling to the Whitney show: her “heterogeneity serves as a feminist challenge to ingrained historical hierarchies”, a text panel declares. But the art seems not to care. Owens relishes the cuteness of cartoon ponies, chimps, owls and bears. She fills her palette with pastels, relishes goopy abstraction and notebook-doodle figuration, sticks newsprint, yarn and fabric to canvas, and ices it all with impasto. She even borrows without embarrassment from greeting-card mottos like: “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” It’s a wonder that anybody ever tried to squeeze such an irreverent body of work into a stiff conceptual framework.

She certainly didn’t. Owens was just starting out when she opened her journal and set down 14 commandments under the ironic rubric “How to Be the Best Artist in the World”. Among the items are: “Contradict Yourself Constantly”, “No Guilt” and “Do not be Afraid of Anything”. It’s clear in retrospect that she followed her own advice.

In 1997 she painted a colossal blue canvas dotted with black birds that throw shadows on the azure sky. Since light doesn’t actually work that way, the picture presents a perceptual problem in the guise of a kitschy vista. Are the birds incorporeal omens, abstract runes or models suspended on wires above a cardboard sea? This is monochrome minimalism with a trompe-l’oeil twist, a narrative of clashing styles with a satisfying denouement.

Owens continued to mash up illusionism and abstraction. In one particularly contrapuntal still life — the best work in the show — she squirts pigment in thick flowery blobs and draws a lamp’s glow as a sharp-edged disc. The surface of a shelf vibrates with smears of paint, casting a shadow in the form of a flat field of black. An electric outlet hovers near the floor like a tiny abstract sculpture.

Sometime in the early 2000s, Owens lost interest in that kind of intellectual puzzle-making and dived headlong into winsomeness. She adapted a medieval battle from the Bayeux tapestry, rendering mail-clad cartoon knights in acid hues. In the same gallery a sloppy little rabbit hops, a bouquet of flowers bursts into bloom, and a white horse frolics.

“

At first, critics read her girly, candy-coloured acrylics as a sly rebuke of girlishness and gaudiness

At the Whitney, a text panel attributes this outpouring of deliberate tackiness to the birth of her two children. Maybe, but the love of decoration, of grids and squiggles, surface piled on surface, has more to do with a childlike sensibility than a particular stage of motherhood. There’s an “I Spy” quality to her

work. From a distance, a wall-length untitled frieze from 2012 consists of five panels emblazoned with thick, snaking ropes of paint. Approach, and you can pick out a background of vintage classifieds from a time before Tinder and Craigslist: “INTELLIGENT, attractive but [shy] male, 20, desires warm girl to teach me facts of life” and “WANTED: gaunt, pallid movie extras . . .”

The Whitney's installation complements the coyness with a peekaboo installation: in one gallery, a row of paintings hangs high up near the ceiling, partially blocked by a partition wall. The only way to see them is to sneak behind the wall, sidle down a narrow hallway, and look up — except you can't get a full view that way, either. Owens may have a penchant for obviousness but she also knows how to keep a secret.

Owens comes from a long line of witty individualists with a flair for bright colours. Like [Florine Stettheimer](#), she forged an unabashedly feminine style, indulging the joy of pink. From Matisse she absorbed a luxuriant sensuality. Her chameleonic adaptability and close encounters with bad taste align her with [Francis Picabia](#), who in 1923 wrote: "What I like is to invent, to imagine, to make of myself at every moment a new man, and then to forget him."

But because Owens has little use for schools or gurus, her work brushes these precedents only lightly; she is insouciant about influence, too. It's her determined cheer, rather than coded resistance, that makes her matter. Dipping into her world makes us smile, which in these days of perpetual outrage is the most countercultural thing of all.

To February 4, whitney.org



Detail of 'Untitled' (2014) © Laura Owens