

# The Comedic Beauty of Laura Owens's Work

At the Whitney, this artist's superb midcareer survey and catalog highlight her art, life and times — and a world of possibility for painting.

By ROBERTA SMITH NOV. 16, 2017

A new self-awareness entered painting toward the end of the 20th century, which initiated an irreverent, sometimes but not always loving interrogation of the medium. Artists of several generations and many stripes pushed this approach forward, ransacking painting's history and conventions, examining it as both a commodity and an object in space, toying with its taboos and its pursuit of a signature style.

One of the most innovative explorers of this vanguard has been Laura Owens, the subject of a jubilant, chameleonic midcareer survey now on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Ms. Owens loves painting but she approaches it with a rare combination of sincerity and irony. Distinguished by a sly, comedic beauty, her work has a playful, knowing, almost-Rococo lightness of being in which pleasure, humor, intelligence and a seductive sense of usually high color mingle freely. Her polymorphous way with motifs and materials recalls the German maverick Sigmar Polke; her intense forward propulsion is not unlike Frank Stella's.

Ms. Owens is unafraid of heavy pinks or frilly brushwork that play the feminine, as well as the feminist, against the macho bravura typical of the medium. Nor is she shy about the allure of the low, greeting cards, cartoons and children's book

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space; the eternal conflict of abstraction and image; the act of looking, including peripheral vision. Some paintings here even make cameos in neighboring paintings.

And throughout there are drop shadows, generally considered tacky, that create delicious trompe l'oeil effects, causing whatever shape or mark they shadow to float forward. They recur in many of the large works Ms. Owens began making in 2013, where they join immense loops and squiggles, swaths of red gingham, printed wallpaper, text and crusty globs of paint.

The show presents about 70 paintings from the mid-1990s to the present, and among the best are two fanciful landscapes. One is pale and serene, and dotted with slithery brown trees and storybook animals and birds; the other pairs lurid purples and pinks with clunky white waves curling along the bottom. Both exemplify Ms. Owens's comedic beauty at its best, partly because, as in Japanese screens, the identities of land, clouds and water remain teasingly in flux.

Born in Euclid, Ohio, in 1970, Ms. Owens came of age in the early 1990s, when an anything-but-painting attitude prevailed at many art schools. She had painted through her undergraduate years at the Rhode Island School of Design. At the California Institute of the Arts, she detoured into installation art, which left her with a permanent sense of paintings as physical things and of galleries as spaces to be activated, as they are, excellently, in this show.

Ms. Owens eventually settled in Los Angeles, and, because she organized exhibitions and collaborated with other artists, quickly became a force in that city's intensifying art scene. Her latest project is **356 Mission**, a large commercial space that she rented with her New York dealer, Gavin Brown, and Wendy Yao, founder of the independent bookstore Ooga Booga, in the Boyle Heights section of Los Angeles, a largely Hispanic, working-class neighborhood. It has drawn **anti-gentrification** protests, including one during Ms. Owens's opening at the Whitney last week.

Ms. Owens's attraction to outré painting styles is apparent right off the elevator. In a 1996 work that reprises Color Field stain painting with a couple of twists, diminishing triangles of stain-painted pink and melon create a deep chasm of pictorial space that is being rained on by big drops of tastelessly globby blue and white. Within the drops are tiny scenes of studio life, including a depiction of Ms.

Owens at work, sitting on the floor, as if to say that despite the sweat and tears, there will be fun. It's not hard to imagine the original Color Fielders, for whom abstraction and flatness were sacred, spinning in their graves. As usual, Ms. Owens gives us plenty of visual data to work with here, but no title. We're on our own, which is both generous and challenging.

In her early years, Ms. Owens was especially partial to pictures within pictures and the glow of raw canvas. A 1995 work, so cartoon-like that you almost expect a caption, is mostly a big, tilting expanse of bare canvas — a floor — extending toward a far-off green wall dotted with numerous tiny paintings. These include a smaller version of the one you're looking at; tributes to artists like David Reed; and mini-works added by friends and family members who happened by the studio while she was working on the piece. The range of styles announces that painting is wide-open.

The main part of the show is on the museum's fifth floor, and winds through and around four separate galleries. (Each is the size of the original space in which the paintings were exhibited.) Two multi-panel works hang at the upper reaches of walls, drawing the eye to areas most viewers ignore. On the eighth floor, Ms. Owens leaps into the round, in an installation piece consisting of five free-standing canvases painted on both sides.

Images and techniques ricochet off one another, enticing us to make connections of all kinds — within the work and across history. We encounter lovers lifted from an Indian temple sculpture; monkeys and lion dogs borrowed from Chinese art; a grape-eating goat surrounded by lovely leaves (some made of felt), suggestive of folk art; and seemingly abstract planes of color that turn out to depict gallery walls, urban skyscrapers or a sendup of a suave brown Hollywood interior.

In a 1998 collaboration with the artist-designer Jorge Pardo, Ms. Owens acknowledges the role of painting as décor. He made simple bedroom sets in shades of brown, orange and pale greens. She made matching paintings that depict large beehives with loopy, cross-pollinating bees buzzing about — a scene she found embroidered on a thrift shop pillow.

A striking recent abstraction, big and red, is dotted with over a dozen wheels (bicycle, stroller, go-kart). It may pay tribute to Marcel Duchamp's first bicycle-

wheel ready-made, but it also echoes a small red painting here — a putative flower still life whose blooms are sewn-on buttons. A recent canvas could be a monumental tribute to Jackson Pollock's swirling allover compositions — even though it is made entirely of cats, drawn freehand in charcoal, pinned down with bits of printed grid and punctuated with bursts of spray paint.

The show — organized by Scott Rothkopf, the museum's deputy director of programs and chief curator, and Jessica Man, a curatorial assistant — is accompanied by an innovative scrapbook of a catalog that has the thickness and glossy pages of a September issue of *Vogue*, which somehow fits. In another instance of Ms. Owens's generosity: each cover (of the first run of over 8,000 catalogs) is a one-of-a-kind silk-screen made by the artist and her crew.

The catalog brims with archival material — notes, sketches, news releases and price lists — and photographs superimposed, with drop shadows galore. Interspersed are oral histories and comments from family, friends, collaborators, former teachers and students. Although there are several essays, the totality is a kind of biography in the raw. (The only downside is that it's not so useful as a record of the actual show.) It documents Ms. Owens's thinking and working processes, her artistic community and the nuts and bolts of her career, starting with typed letters and proceeding to email and text exchanges with dealers and curators, even those for this show. Designed by Tiffany Malakooti, the catalog takes brilliant advantage of Ms. Owens's apparent reluctance to throw things out.

This smart, beautiful exhibition bodes well for painting, exhibition-making and even art-book design. The combination exudes an optimism like that accompanying Kerry James Marshall's thrilling retrospective at the Met Breuer last year. These two artists are very different, but their basic message is that painting can be renewed in ways we haven't seen before, whether it is reshaped by Mr. Marshall's erudite meditation on black life in America, or exploded from within, as in Ms. Owens's worldly, encompassing formalism. That neither artist is among the usual white male suspects confirms once more that difference and diversity are essential to cultural vitality.

***Correction: November 16, 2017***

An earlier version of this review misstated Jessica Man's position at the Whitney Museum. She is a curatorial assistant, not an assistant curator.

***Correction: November 17, 2017***

An earlier version of this review misstated Laura Owens's birthplace. She was born in Euclid, Ohio, not Norwalk, Ohio; her family moved to Norwalk when she was 1. The review also omitted the name of one of the renters of a commercial space that houses Ms. Owens's 356 Mission project. The space is rented by Ms. Owens, Gavin Brown and Wendy Yao, not just by Ms. Owens and Mr. Brown.

Laura Owens

Through Feb. 4 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Manhattan; 212-570-3600, [whitney.org](http://whitney.org).

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