

Laura Owens

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART,
NEW YORK

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AS THE CULMINATION of Laura Owens's midcareer retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, her masterful five-canvas frolic *Untitled*, 2015, stood upright on the otherwise pretty empty eighth floor, topping the exhibition like the bouncy ponytail of a debate-team captain full of ambition and Fruit Roll-Ups. With *Untitled*'s monumental emblems of store-bought cuteness, Owens pulled viewers into surprisingly heavy semiotic traffic, first by playing with categories of the literal and the virtual: She heaped up some brushstrokes in thick dollops of paint, and rendered others as cartoonish, drop-shadowed swaths of erasure, like trails left by a giant fingertip dragged across a foggy window. Owens pulled the horizontal domain of written language into the upright domain of pictorial imagery, too: Fragments of a short story written in a grade schooler's sans serif appeared against pictorial backgrounds rendered to look like giant sheets of penmanship paper. (The guidelines even obeyed conventions of landscape, ornamented with dainty flowers on the bottom, puffy clouds on top.) She further tempted viewers to consider Peircean categories with, of all things, logos for scented markers; for each oversize logo, a written label accompanied a graphic icon, with the labels for each color/scent becoming increasingly necessary as the signifying power of their accompanying icons waned. (Sure, the word *mint* convincingly names the color/scent signified by a green leaf, but is that brushy black curve really *licorice*, and is that brown spiral really a *cinnamon bun*?) As if this

weren't enough, Owens also pulled off a daring perspectival conceit: Elements on each of *Untitled*'s five receding canvases together resolve into a single unified image when viewed from just the right spot. Summarizing the cerebral exuberance with which Owens has long interrogated her medium and reveling in painting's capacity to contemplate its own semiotic fault lines, *Untitled* assumes the stature of a neo-Baroque encomium to artifice, a twenty-first-century *Las Meninas* whose infanta is named Holly Hobbie.

Untitled might have collapsed beneath the weight of its own cleverness were it not for curator Scott Rothkopf's open, uncluttered approach to this space. In the rest of the exhibition, by contrast, Rothkopf indulged Owens's penchant for bold installation, packing her protean output into a fun house of custom-made hallways and mini-galleries. Paintings lined walls near the ceiling, slid into corners, or lurked in shadows. A few works represented each phase of Owens's career-long mission to shake her medium's foundations—from early collaborations that distributed artistic production across multiple actors (as when she invited friends and relatives to fill in each of the small "paintings" depicted in *Untitled* of 1995) to adventures in The Decorative (particularly in the room that featured Jorge Pardo's dorm-ready furniture, whose color scheme was complemented by Owens's sunny paintings of bees). Viewers could enjoy the myriad ways in which Owens adulterates virtuosity with self-deprecation, especially in the small room whose walls were crammed salon style with paintings of a white horse, kissing couples, and other embarrassing emblems of adolescent fantasy, most painted with skillful reference to some of art history's wispiest modernists (Chagall, Stettheimer).

In many respects it was the temporal and historical self-consciousness of the exhibition that energized this retrospective. Thanks to an elevated row of Owens's many clock paintings, in which the hours tick by in real (though uncalibrated) time against a gamut of different compositions, the medium of painting seemed to have become a clock-watcher, eager to be timely, worried about aging. In more recent works, Owens tested the endurance and obsoles-

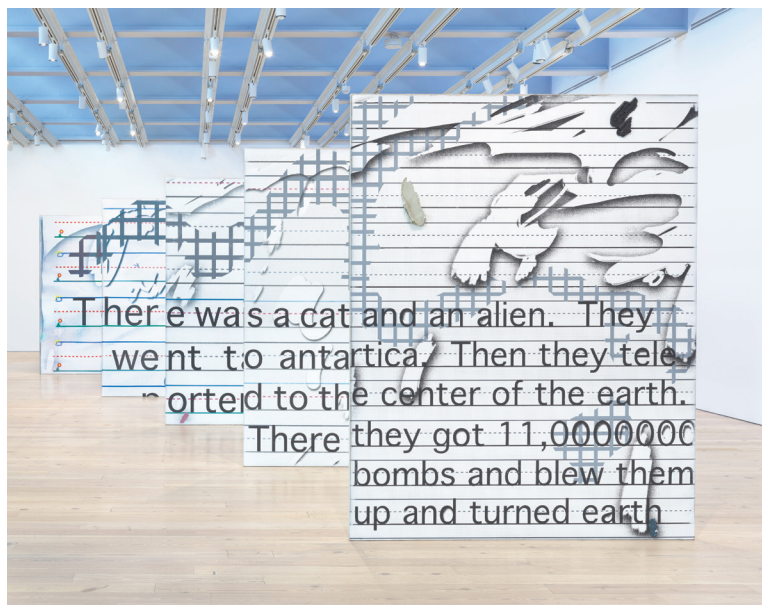
cence of painting as a medium by plastering canvases with antiquated cartoons and slogans of the "when life gives you lemons" variety; unlike the cartoon imagery, whose expired styles can only inspire nostalgia among anyone who lived through the 1970s, the cheesy slogans have been given new life thanks to such incubators of banality as Facebook.

Painting's preoccupation with its own mortality is hardly new; what *is* new is the present context, in which a major woman artist exhibits an oeuvre under the twin cultural burdens of being both middle-aged and mid-career—encumbrances that are particularly acute for a female artist who, now approaching fifty, has built a career in part on signifiers of cuteness. All those fluffy animals and painterly scoops of Neapolitan color could seem incongruous for an artist who is now inarguably a grown-up. But Owens manages to convert even this potential challenge into another tool for considering art's historicity, by comparing experiences of youth and age with the

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maturation of painterly convention. When Owens puts time-worn strategies of mediated gesture to work in her *Pavement Karaoke* suite of 2012, she may still do so in a girly pink palette, but her title gleefully confesses that mediated gesture might now supply both the ironic pleasure and generational baggage of yesteryear's indie music drunkenly ventriloquized. With silk-screened personal ads cribbed from a California newspaper published around the time of Owens's birth, the *Pavement Karaoke* paintings thread personal memory through temporalities of art history and popular culture, rendering the project of making art at midcareer as something that can be self-aware and joyful all at once. □

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Left: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2015, acrylic, oil, and vinyl paint on linen, powder-coated aluminum strainers, five panels. Installation view, 2017–18. Photo: Ron Amstutz.
Below: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2006, acrylic and oil on linen, 9¼ × 7".
Right: View of "Laura Owens," 2017–18. Untitled works from the seven-part suite *Pavement Karaoke*, 2012. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

