Left: **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1999**, acrylic and oil on canvas, 102 × 122". Below: **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1997**, oil, acrylic, and airbrushed oil on canvas, 96 × 120". Opposite page, from left: **View of "Laura Owens," 2017–18**, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Center: *Untitled*, 1996. Top: *Untitled*, 2011–12. Photo: Ron Amstutz. **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2014**, acrylic, oil, vinyl paint, silk-screen ink, charcoal, and wheel on linen, 108 × 84".

# Laura Owens

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK

**Amy Sillman**

*Contradictions should be appreciated for letting change emerge.*
—Carolee Schneemann

**WHAT DO I KNOW ABOUT LA**, but my first reaction to the Laura Owens show was, *Wow, this is so West Coast*. Paintings made in LA always struck me as being these huge, clean things, which I figured was because they were designed to be visible from the highway. In New York City, we walk around, so our painting surfaces aspire to the condition of sidewalks—dirty, scruffy, and layered. In fact, painting history generally reflects a city's local conditions, its techniques of the body; consequently, some cities have developed more levity in their paintings, others a harsher critique. LA has both. In the catalogue for Owens's show, Monique Prieto recalls some of these coastal differences: "People coming out of East Coast schools were so comfortable being painters. . . . They weren't having big doubts. . . . At CalArts we'd had to sword fight through any critique we brought a painting to . . . like, 'This is all New York wants from you?'" To upend old-school (i.e., East Coast) formalism, ambitious painters like Owens and her peers threw humor, debasement, and self-reflexivity at it. Owens in particular took liberties with space. Her early work is about wittily reconstructing the spaces within painting, using extruded vanishing points, floors on drunken tilts, and crazy scale shifts, all in the service of literally finding new places for herself to *be*, in painting terms. In her hands, space is a *feeling*.

A loose confederation of Owens's fellow painters participated in this rethinking of painting, and, significantly, many of them were women. She and Mari Eastman, Rebecca Morris, Prieto, Ruth Root, Frances Stark, and Mary Weatherford came to painting (post-1970s/'80s) after decades of hostility between pro- and anti-painting forces, and the energy among these figures can be seen as partially a rejection of a rejection. The ground in LA was already fertilized by a heady mix of critique and feminism, with projects such as Womanhouse and the Feminist Art Program and critical teachers like Michael Asher and Charles Gaines. But after years of authority figures telling everyone what *not* to do, or diagnosing painting as something that should just disappear, critique—especially feminist critique—was revitalizing to painting.

The teleological line—that painting was an all-male one-way ticket to hell—was clearly in need of reexamination. At CalArts, the presence of Mary Heilmann, a cool painter role model, brought some news, as did that of David Reed, a professor who, with his deep knowledge of painting, must have been a fountain of information. Reed has always been a vocal champion of generations of underknown painter-outliers, promoting an alternative canon that includes many females and non-Caucasians. He was the curatorial adviser for the 2006–2008 show "High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967–1975," which unearthed a decade of these vigorous practices. And beyond that, as I've written about in *Artforum* ("AbEx and Disco Balls" [Summer 2011]), even if painting *were* dead, it seemed to live on ad absurdum, so its tattered corpus was available for, if nothing else, scavenging, misappropriation, and camp.

So Owens and her peers flaunted chromophilia, shoplifted form from formalism, dealt in craftiness and sentimentality—things both brash *and* fussy—and cracked jokes. Drawing on the legacies of feminist art history and the prediction of (fellow painter!) Allan Kaprow about the blurring of boundaries, they took up materials from everyday life: string, lightbulbs, gingham, notebooks, stickers, kitties, seashells, washcloths, etc. I wouldn't call this "female" life, because I find such essentialist divisions problematic, and it could be noted critically that the show feels very not-queer. Though its catalogue contains Simone de Beauvoir's foundational feminist assertion that femininity is psychosocially shaped, and features essays by the likes of Rozsika Parker, bell hooks, Stark, and Sianne Ngai, gender categories are not destabilized or taken up critically within the exhibition. The show's feminism appears more as a project of subjective empowerment than of collective political engagement. OK, it's a painting show. Painting *is* pretty subjective, and the personal *is* political, but I would note that the show leaves certain questions open, such as: How might change occur *in painting*, and *for whom*? Can painting offer a model of alterity, in either form or use?

**ONE OF THE MOST** interesting aspects of Owens's work is that photography is *not* at its center. Digital logics, yes, but the photograph, no. Instead, drawing carries out the task of mimesis—an explosion of drawing both handmade and

cribbed from elsewhere, of *everything* in the world: trees, buildings, numbers, monkeys, soldiers, ladies, couples, fruit, boats, cats. The show overflowed with handwriting, outlines, cartoons, sketches, stencils, shadows, and their graphic proxies, drop shadows. The magic of drawing—and Owens is a fantastic draw-er—is that you can remake anything you see or think of with your own hands. You *take* a picture, but you *make* a drawing. Owens exploits all the alterations possible in her imaginative reinscription of the world, yet with an incredibly literal mind. The artist's literalism is especially evident in her deployment of painting in architecture. Her work's scale is basically 100 percent, in the sense that its size is often determined by the walls on which it is intended to hang. (This device was further emphasized at the Whitney by the curatorial decision to remake one of the rooms of the show at the same size as the original space where the work was shown.) Yet the flat-earth reality of Owens's positioning continually gives way to flights of fancy and illusion, and the show underlines this impulse toward twinned tactics: A painting is a wall; a painting has a twin; two paintings mirror each other; a mirror is a window; a painting is a world. Once you notice this motif of doubling, the real running parallel to the imaginary, you see twoness everywhere.

**Owens exploits all the alterations possible in her imaginative reinscription of the world, yet with an incredibly literal mind.**

This struck me like a bolt of lightning early in the show while I was standing in front of *Untitled*, 1999, a large painting that seemed at first like an abstract field of gestures, until it hit me: *Oh—a tableau = a table!* And then, *eureka!*, I realized: Every mark in the painting could flip into its equivalent as an hors d'oeuvre. There were funny rectangular outlines that could be toasts; a thick paint blob that looks like a schmear; green strokes that might be celery sticks; red-green ones as olives and pimentos; a wine stain or the trail of a cigarette's smoke rendered in the exact colors of those same things. Everything sort of was what it was, exactly as it wasn't. Double twoness! From then on, Owens's imagery opened up to me as having a flatly direct and slightly funny reading. When I saw a ruler, it literally meant *size*. A heart was romance. A couple, a double bed, meant a relationship, consummated literally by birds and bees. Fairy tales suggested the presence of children. The personals showed loneliness; etc., etc. Is the work so literal-minded that it's without metaphor? That's a good question. In fact, Owens's sense of humor appears neither arch nor ironic. Even the *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* drop shadows in *Untitled*, 1997, evoke not snark so much as a thrifter's glee in the "so-bad-it's-good." (By the way, Owens's drop shadows evoke those of an older painter, James Havard, the poster boy for a group of '70s artists called the Abstract Illusionists, the *wrongest* painters in SoHo back in the day. Havard's work used tricks from '80s desktop publishing and strokes that look like gaudy thickets of Day-Glo cake frosting. His work wasn't "bad painting," it was *bad* painting, like what would happen to modern art if there were no such thing as critique, ever. Owens, a literalist of high-low, peers eagerly into the bottom of the barrel to see what is usable down there.)

What is the effect of this literalist's uncanny? For one thing, it signals that the *worst* possible reading of this show is pleasure: "*Fun!* Sensuous! *Joy of Painting!*" Not at all. Once you get to paintings with phrases like WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS or WHEN YOU COME TO THE END OF YOUR ROPE, the literalist cues leading up to these messages say that the viewer can take these phrases at face value as signs of distress (even with their "cheerful" lemon-man character). But look at the spliced and diced figures and grounds in these works: They bristle with techniques of paradox and alienation. Once you understand Owens's operations of constant twoness, you become aware of the shadow underneath doubling, its nemesis: *aloneness*—even though, in her hands, it's a contradictory loneliness without solitude, or emptiness without loneliness. All her paintings, especially the most recent ones, sit on the cusp of such paradoxes. They are lonely but crowded, too loud to be intimate, too ridiculous ("CATS!") to be sincere, too synthetic to be earnest, yet with jokes, artifice, and illusion, they signal a body earnestly vexed, beset by difficulties. In contrast to the elegant and spectral way that photography hinges presence and absence, Owens's work alienates the body and plays tricks on the eye with impossible vanishing points and absurd repetitions; situations where the body should be reflected yet isn't, or is relentlessly mirrored; images that appear as illusions, or that disappear around corners or behind walls, down claustrophobic corridors or up way too high to be visible. By emphasizing this clumsy prehensile body of ours, and the need for a hand to draw, Owens's most recent work confronts the practical logistics of first-person perception even in a shattered digital multiverse. In their grandiose scale, her surfaces loom over us or splay out sideways or laterally and backward, and in doing so carry out painting's primary demand: that we behold IRL. ☐

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