



Text by Michael Slenske / Photography by Davida Nemeroff

LAURA OWENS

BETWEEN THE SHADOWS

MID-CAREER RETROSPECTIVES AT THE WHITNEY AND MOCA SHINE
A LIGHT ON THE ELUSIVE L.A. ARTIST'S LIFE AND WORK.

In the heart of the Firelands (aka the Sufferers' Lands), a block of towns in northeastern Ohio granted to Connecticut citizens whose homesteads were burned by British forces during the Revolutionary War, Norwalk, Ohio is about as far as one can get in many ways from Los Angeles, California. It's home to just 17,000 residents, 92 percent of which are white, and 65 percent of whom voted for Donald J. Trump in the 2016 presidential election. Nevertheless, the Maple City has managed to produce at least one boldface Angeleno. Born in Euclid, Ohio, Laura Owens was raised in Norwalk by a nurse mother and small-town lawyer father before becoming one of L.A.'s (and perhaps the world's) pre-eminent painters—one who, at 48, is still ambivalent about growing up in this Cleveland exurb.

"It's definitely a place where everyone is talking and gossiping and you definitely need to get out," says Owens, who did just that after high school. As a teenager she ran with a like-minded crowd of creative kids from neighboring towns whom she would carpool with—60 miles to Cleveland—to see post-punk bands like The Fall and GBH at iconic venues including Peabody's Downunder and the Agora Theatre and Ballroom. She left Norwalk to study painting at the Rhode Island School of Design, then in the wake of the 1992 Rodney King riots, moved to Los Angeles, where she got her MFA at CalArts. In the ensuing quarter century her work has been exhibited at—and collected by—nearly all the world's top museums, from Los Angeles to Paris; represented by top dealers in New York (Gavin Brown's Enterprise), London (Sadie

Coles HQ) and Cologne (Gisela Capitain); and is currently the subject of an acclaimed mid-career retrospective, which opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York last fall and landed at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA on November 11.

"Let's be honest, she's a rock star," says Paul Schimmel, the former chief curator of MOCA, who organized Owens's first retrospective 15 years ago, when she was just 32. "She was an exceedingly successful young artist, and she was both part of the dialogue and then leading the discussion while still in her twenties. That's a lot. Though to be fair to Laura, having a solo exhibition at such a young age at such a large institution put a spotlight on someone who, I think, was intellectually aggressive but much less of a public figure."

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Schimmel of artist Laura Owens (above).

Inside her voluminous, light-drenched white-cube studio, which sits on a small bluff at the bottom of a steep set of stairs that wrap around a green-shingled hilltop home in Echo Park—one she shares with her second husband, the Iranian-born writer/curator Sohrab Mohebbi, who recently became the curator of Sculpture-Center in New York—it's difficult to reconcile the "rock star" Owens with the person seated on the oversized white sofa before me. Dressed in a gray denim mini-caftan and matching gray Nike trainers, Owens has her wavy brown locks thrown over her head so they rest on her left shoulder. While her oversized gold-framed eyeglasses add a certain disco-era flair to her monochrome athleisure ensemble, her stock expression and tone is sort of a Daria deadpan, and she somewhat resembles the titular MTV cartoon character. She listens intently to questions, taking long pauses to digest them the way a gourmand savors a complex dish, and her answers are extremely well considered. But if you hit on a hot topic, her bright hazel eyes widen—locking in on you with a laser focus—as her tight-lipped smile cracks just a bit and she'll almost giggle with delight. This first happens when I ask about her punk-rock pilgrimages to Cleveland as a teenager.

"I had a really romantic nostalgia for Cleveland in the eighties," she says. "For the past six or seven years I've been trying to figure out how to do a show in Cleveland."

By the time she was 14, Owens was regularly frequenting the Cleveland Institute of Art, where she first saw the work of Caravaggio and the giant stain paintings of Morris Louis. Says Owens, "I think the feeling was just, 'And this, too, is art.'" In the ensuing years Owens has made such claims for her off-trend oeuvre by internalizing the tenets of postmodernism, feminist theory and California conceptualism to create confounding, conceptually-grounded paintings that reference everything from embroidery hooks to bell hooks.

"For decades, and especially in the mid-twentieth century, a persuasive reading of modern painting revolved around the idea of the gestalt—the way every element in a painting coalesced into one totality, one essence that blotted out ambiguity," painter David Salle recently wrote about Owens's Whitney show in the *New*

York Review of Books. "A painting isn't a thing about another thing—it just is." He went on to note that Owens's cornucopic canvases "are very much gestalts anyway, though perhaps of a new kind, something closer in their effect to imagist poetry, and it's their sometimes surprising gestaltness that holds our attention."

Over the years Owens's new gestalts have incorporated countless materials. Some feature thick schmears and/or thin drizzles of oil; others luminous washes of house paint and vinyl flashe. Some reference embroidery, others are literally embroidered, like her 2012 series of square *Alphabet* paintings. Another series of square canvases feature mechanical clock hands painted to camouflage their clockness into the image(s). She's fastened pint- and oversized buttons and bicycle wheels to the surface of primary-colored abstractions. She's grafted fake news onto reproductions of real papers like the *Berkeley Barb*.

Her semi-saccharine, if super serious, subject matter includes portraits of her newly born son Henry Bryan—the artist Edgar Bryan, her ex-husband, is the father of both her children—painted during a 2006 sabbatical in Ohio, where she assisted fundraising efforts for Sherrod Brown's senate campaign. She's painted countless house cats and horses that could jump out of children's coloring books as well as coloring-book templates that are interrupted by Morris Louis-worthy stain paintings. One time she concocted a semi-surrealist tableaux depicting Thierry Henry consoling Alessandro Del Piero after France beat Italy in the Euro 2000 soccer final. It's a puzzling painting that manages to reference a Toulouse-Lautrec scene of a couple in bed, M.C. Escher's *Puddle* and Charles Ray's *Unpainted Sculpture* in a single canvas. In fact her first encounter with the latter, a 1997 sculptural model of a totaled Pontiac Grand-Am painted primer gray by Ray, her late friend and mentor, was an epiphany on par with her early encounters with Morris Louis.

"You don't see how every nut and bolt has been cast in the inside of this car, but you know this has been done, and it actually changes something about the physics of the room and being in the room with this thing that is not just a veneer, it's integral," explains Owens of *Unpainted Sculpture*. "It was a really profound wake-up moment: to see how time could

connect to an object and how you could decide on your own what the art is supposed to be."

This is basically what Owens is trying to do with every one of her paintings: change the physics of the room to the point where the viewer is trapped with this integral work of art. In her early "maximalist"—i.e., maximum animals per painting—works Owens decided to fill these complex narrative landscapes with trompe-l'oeil trees and whispery monkeys, frogs and butterflies. While these wilderness scenes are simple enough, the mark-making is so complex you could stare at the moves for hours. Around this same time she made sequences of drizzle-painted beehives (with varying numbers of attendant bees) that served as complements to bedroom-set sculptures by her then-boyfriend Jorge Pardo for his 1997 solo show at the Bergamot Station gallery of Patrick Painter.

"When I walked in I thought, 'Oh, Laura just pulled the rug out from Jorge, stole the show!'" Schimmel observes in Owens's exhaustive Whitney catalogue, *Owens, Laura*. "She wasn't just doing the most beautiful, amazingly original pictures, but dealing with the whole notion of collaboration—of who's 'on top,' so to speak. And she turned that upside down so that Jorge's sculptures end up becoming the architecture in which her paintings thrived. She made architecture the fixed element. She owned it. It became her thing."

More recently Owens has served up text-laden abstractions that merge advanced-printing innovations (of Matisse-inspired grids screened with powdered charcoal and rainbow gradients of ink, newspaper columns and perspective-altering magnifications of those columns) as grounds to heavily impastoed marks that mimic those in children's painting apps via super-volumized brushstrokes that contain gallons of extended oil.

"I was definitely not supposed to like paintings with monkeys on them and details taken from the decorative arts, but I couldn't stop thinking about this work," says Scott Rothkopf, the Whitney's chief curator, who first encountered Owens's work at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in 2001, when he was studying conceptual art as a graduate student. After admiring the "conviction and commitment internal to" her paintings from afar for many years, he thought she might be an artist he'd like to work with.

"I remember thinking this woman is very, very serious about what she is doing—she doesn't take anything for granted," says Gavin Brown.

"Particularly because I didn't really understand her work," admits Rothkopf. In the wake of the Whitney's Jeff Koons retrospective, the curator wanted to do a show "closer to the ground, and my age, something that mattered to me at that moment," he says. "I remember talking to a lot of artists at the time ranging in age from students in their twenties to a ninety-year-old Alex Katz, and they were all talking about Laura being the painter to watch."

When Gavin Brown met Owens in New York in 1996 at the artist dinner for *Screen*, a group show she participated in at Petzel Gallery, he "popped the question" to her about showing with his gallery, even though he, like Rothkopf, didn't really know her work when the idea came to him.

"I remember thinking this woman is very, very serious about what she is doing—she doesn't take anything for granted," says Brown. "We were basically one step removed from each other, and that may sound like nepotism, but the galleries wanting to show her did not understand her. I said, 'You should show with me and we'll stand shoulder to shoulder.' I just had an instinct about her: She's a force of nature."

A force of nature who isn't afraid of a little pranking, a little humor. For a piece shown at the Museum of Modern Art's 2014 painting survey *The Forever Now*, Owens secretly installed a computer-programmed speaker into her painting, which randomly blasted museum-goers with snippets of the pop band Magic!'s hit *Rude* ("Can I have your daughter for the rest of my life?/Say yes, say yes 'cause I need to know"). She's even made paintings, shown at the *Vienna Secession* in 2015, utilizing the compressed cardboard positives used to make printing plates (or negatives) for 1942 editions of the *Los Angeles Times*. (Owens found the plates two years prior to the exhibition during a home renovation project; the previous owner had installed them as insulation under the siding shingles.)

"I had about sixty of the negatives—sports sections, everything, all dated about three to five

months after Pearl Harbor—so we took them to my studio, printed them, got the negatives, and I made molds to print the positives," says Owens. "They're like etchings or monoprints, but they're very clear. Then I scanned those and acted almost like a newspaper graphic designer. Say I liked the article about the dog who was found in Elysian Park because I lost my dog in Elysian Park, then I put that on the page with an Elon Musk article because there's something about traffic downtown, and I camouflage it by creating the typeface of that paper so it looks seamless. I turn that into a file that I print on nine-by-seven or ten-by-twelve-foot paintings and then do other painting stuff on that."

Despite Salle's assessment about the new gestaltness of her work, Owens insists, "A painting is an object, but it's also the viewer's anecdote about that object, it's also the discourse, it's also the cumulative ways it's talked about by people who never saw it, by people who maybe have seen it only on Instagram. The phenomenological experience of being in the room with the painting will always be a different experience than the story you heard about the painting—your memory of it versus the way you saw it on the internet—but those things are still the painting, this circulation and how it's circulated through capital as a symbol of capital."

Sadie Coles was quick to see the "head-down ballsiness"—and the capital symbolism—of Owens's work, which she first encountered in a seemingly anodyne seascape with impasto seagulls echoed with ghostly drop shadows at the artist's 1997 debut at Gavin Brown. "I think people thought initially they were odd, sort of slightly old-fashioned modernist paintings or something," says Coles. "Then when people engaged in the very rigorous intellectual propositions in terms of painting, people did start to get it." Beyond the intellectual circulation, Coles admits that she and Brown were tightly controlling this (capital) flow in regard to Owens's paintings early on. From the late nineties, Owens's work has gone into the hands of influential collectors, which seems to have paid dividends. Shortly after her Whit-

ney opening one of her paintings fetched \$1.75 million at auction, and there have been waiting lists for new works for years.

While this circulation theory was certainly a truism among curators, collectors and gallerists, critics weren't as convinced early on. Doug Harvey, who never missed a chance to throw a hatchet toward Owens and her work during his tenure at *LA Weekly*, once wrote: "Pollock probably spent more studio time on a single drip painting than Ms. Owens has on her entire oeuvre." Meanwhile *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith asserted that Owens's early paintings were "overly conceptual, they replace skepticism with cynicism, and substitute glib asides about ersatz painting trends, commodification and modern decor for the real thing," only to breathlessly fawn over her Whitney survey, which contained many of the same works Smith once wrote off as glib and cynical. And in a recent profile in *The New Yorker* overtly titled "The Radical Paintings of Laura Owens," Peter Schjeldahl did a half mea culpa—letting Smith shoulder the other half—by writing, "Critics were wary...But, as with me, [Roberta Smith's] initial resistance gave way as the seriousness of Owens's intentions sank in; Smith became one of the artist's most discerning observers."

"If I'm really honest, what struck me then was that Laura was trying to deal with being a female painter and pushing her ambitions beyond the limits of what may be construed as the glass ceiling of her gender," Chris Ofili, who participated in *Cavepainting*, a three-person show with Owens and Peter Doig at the Santa Monica Museum of Art (now ICA LA) in 2002, says in the new Whitney catalogue. "She just seemed empowered as a woman painter. Her paintings have a very light touch but also a punch and weight that can hold your attention. The subjects can seem a bit off, like you don't quite know what you're looking at, or rather the thing that you're looking at seems to be in the wrong context. That destabilizing allows you to stay there a bit longer. I think that's probably what still has me interested in what she's doing."

Opposite: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2016; oil, Flashe and screen-printing ink on linen, 138 by 104 inches.
© Laura Owens, courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York and Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.

*Top left: Laura Owens, **Untitled**, 2012, acrylic, oil, Flashe, resin, pumice and collage on canvas, 108 by 84 inches.*

@ Laura Owens, Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York and Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.

*Top right: **Untitled**, 1997; oil, acrylic and airbrushed oil on canvas, 96 by 120 inches.*

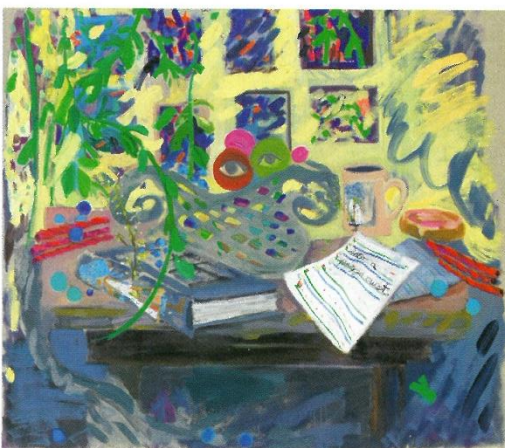
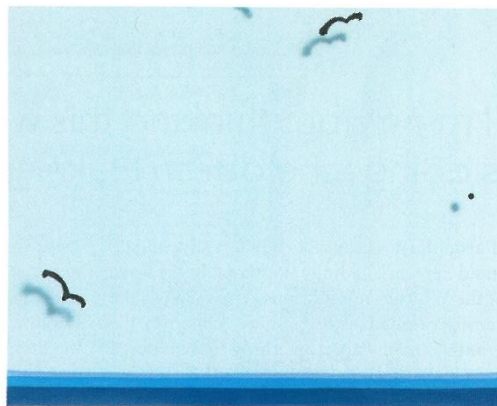
@ Laura Owens, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, promised gift of Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner.

*Right: Laura Owens, **Untitled**, 2015, oil and Flashe on linen, 38 by 42 inches.*

@ Laura Owens, courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York and Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.

*Far right: Laura Owens, **Untitled**, 2016, oil, Flashe, screen-printing ink, charcoal and sand on linen, 108 by 84 inches.*

@ Laura Owens, courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York and Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.



This "Lauranness," as Ofili refers to Owens's approach, was honed at CalArts, where she studied under legendary conceptual artist-professors like Michael Asher and Leslie Dick. Though she focused on painting (while doing some installation work) at RISD during a fellowship at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in Maine, at CalArts she restricted herself to only showing installations. Granted, they were immersive installations with brightly painted walls and fabric ceilings, which she now considers "deconstructed paintings...because they were so collaged," but showing paintings alone at such

a conceptually focused school like CalArts (then and now) was "a non-starter," says Owens. "It was as if you had sewn a quilt or something, but not in a conceptual gesture. When you showed paintings in critique, no one talked; they just didn't have anything to say."

At the time Owens lived in a downtown loft building, also home to the late video artist (and CalArts classmate) Jeremy Blake, along a desolate stretch of Santa Fe Avenue across the river from Boyle Heights. Today the area has become ground zero for the city's gentrification problems while simultaneously flour-

ishing as an extension of the Arts District, with new commercial galleries, museums and artist-run spaces like Owens's once-thriving, now-shuttered kunsthalle 356 Mission Road, which she could see from her rooftop, popping up all over the place. Back in 1992, though, says Owens, "There was nothing there, it was just lofts on the river."

After the 1994 Northridge earthquake rocked Valencia, effectively shutting down CalArts, Owens rethought her painting practice, which she had maintained on the downlow in her studio all along. When the 6.9 magni-

tude quake hit, Owens was in a sixties-style apartment in Atwater Village. "I tried to go out on the cantilevered walkway but it was all cracked," she recalls. "I remember walking out and it was just pitch black and these electric wires were hitting and sparking, electric boxes were blowing up and children were crying. A couple people [on campus] had their necks severed and were triaged in the parking lot of the hospital. It was just crazy."

Amid the aftershocks—both physical and mental—Owens's MFA classes and presentations were relegated to makeshift "studios" at Lockheed Martin. "Many of the students who were the most aggressive and dominating people were like, 'Fuck it, I'm not sticking around here.' It just felt like everything was up in the air and there was no consequences, so what would it matter what I did?" says Owens, recalling she presented her professor Lane Relyea with a truly novel idea: paintings on white walls. "He was like, 'Paintings on a white wall?' And I was like, 'Paintings on a white wall!' As if that was so radical, but that meant instead of everything being in every part [of an installation], you were really supposed to look at just this frame and return to just the frame of the painting, and how could I make that interesting and just say whatever is going to happen it has to happen inside of here?"

With the campus still in tatters, Owens's thesis show—which also featured work from Monique Prieto, Dave Muller and Alex Slade—was installed at the Temporary Contemporary (now the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA). "So this will be the third time I've shown here," jokes Owens, referring to her 2003 retrospective, which featured 40 paintings and works on paper at MOCA's Grand Avenue location organized by Schimmel, who first noticed Owens's promise in two early shows at Foodhouse, a space run by artist-gallerist Robert Gunderman, who went on to represent Owens between 1998 and 2008 at ACME gallery with his business partner Randy Sommer.

In the catalogue, Schimmel describes the installation process at MOCA as "fairly exhausting," with Owens moving a number of paintings he'd already hung. She insisted on showing a last-minute 17-foot-long protest painting, which Schimmel calls "by far the most unknown and unresolved" of the 40 works. But he humored her because it was clear to him that Owens was "the smartest and most rigorous" young painter of her generation.

"She was dealing with decoration and interior design, addressing an aspect of formalism that had been all but dismissed, which is color-field abstraction, and she addressed those very challenging issues to painting by expanding on what painting was allowed to draw upon, not just the history of painting but the history of crafts, of weaving, of design and architecture," Schimmel argues. "And it was coming in a town that had been dominated by conceptual art and sculpture, and in both cases I don't think women then were receiving the kind of attention for their work that they are now. So in a very direct and a very strategic way she was addressing aesthetic, formal and political logjams that were in some ways keeping painting from going forward. She said what is possible and anticipated what was possible for a town that was not really known for painters since the sixties and early seventies."

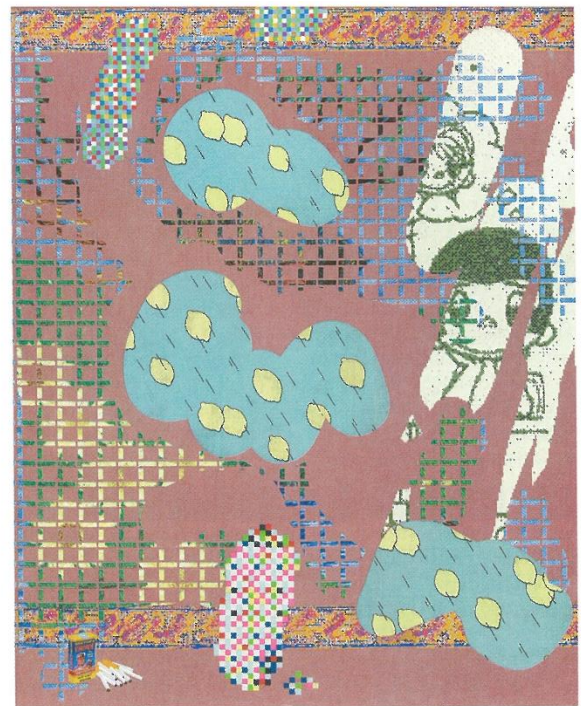
Still, Owens felt the burn of early critics, which didn't stop with the 2003 MOCA retrospective. Her museum show ran alongside a Lucian Freud retrospective, and given the stock comparisons—Freud was "real painting"; Owens was not—I asked if she thought the initial reception to her paintings would have been warmer had she emerged on the scene as a male painter with an outsize personality like Freud (not a conceptual female artist from Los Angeles). "I think they would think that was really radical and ballsy, not like, 'Oh shit, why do we have to indulge her?'" says Owens. "I think that no one wants to feel like they got duped by the artist: Are they tricking me? Am I being trolled? And I think that's what people thought."

What some might consider trolling, Owens would see as an experiment—or investigation—into humility. "Early on I was really into this idea of embarrassment being this place you would go towards," she says. "Not being afraid of being embarrassed is like the opposite of trying to be cool. With a little bit of embarrassment you're recognizing that thing you don't want to know about yourself, or this thing that makes you more human, which I think is all interesting."

Equally interesting—and in some cases mind-blowing—is the great depths she'll plumb to transform things that on their surface might seem embarrassing or kitschy or lowbrow—be it her grandfather's sailboat watercolors or her grandmother's embroidery—into mesmerizing works of art worth marveling over. The sold-out first printing of *Owens, Laura*, featuring 8,000 unique covers screenprinted inside the artist's L.A. studio, is just one example. Or take the piece de resistance of her 2003 MOCA show: the 17-foot-long landscape of placard-carrying protestors riding waves under a concentric pastel horizon. It was the last work to be finished before the opening (just four days before the invasion of Iraq). "I literally went downtown and walked in this protest in the rain against the invasion and then went to my opening," recalls Owens. Bryan recalls, "We didn't sleep for seventy-two hours...On the night before the last minute to install the painting we would set the alarm for thirty minutes and sleep while it was drying, then wake up and sand and gesso. It was literally a nightmare. All night."

While mid-career retrospectives, especially traveling retrospectives with complimentary catalogues, are often quick to conflate (or simply rewrite) unsavory histories that might deviate from the message of any particular artist's creation myth, Laura Owens used *Owens, Laura*—a jump-cutting pastiche of notes, memorandum, photos, asides, invoices and reflections from all the principals in her life (artists, gallerists, curators, her son, her ex-husband)—to give the audience a glimpse into the sausage-making factory that is any successful contemporary artist's career over a quarter-century period.

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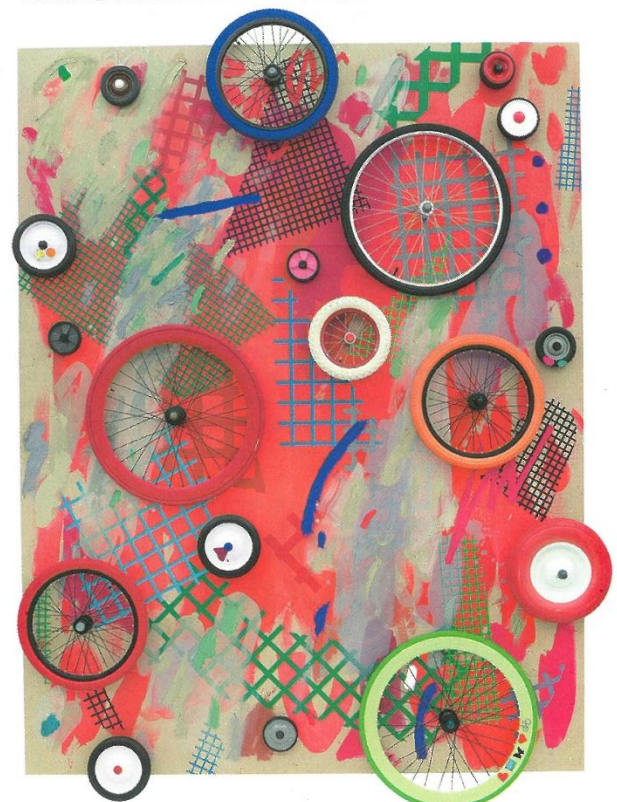
Above left: Laura Owens, *Untitled* (detail), 2012, acrylic, oil, vinyl paint, charcoal, yarn and cord on hand-dyed linen, 33 panels, 35.5 by 33.25 inches each.
© Laura Owens, collection of Maja Hoffmann/LUMA Foundation.



Left: *Untitled*, 2001, acrylic, oil, ink and felt on canvas, 117 by 72 inches. © Laura Owens, collection of Annie and Matt Aberle.

Above: *Untitled*, 2016, Flashe and screen-printing ink on dyed linen, 108 by 84 inches.
© Laura Owens, collection of Kathi and Gary Cypress.

Below: *Untitled*, 2013, acrylic, vinyl paint and wheels on linen, 108 by 84 inches.
© Laura Owens, Maurice and Paul Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles.



"The goal was to offer this peek into the life of an artist and all the things that might go on—the successes, the failures, having kids, getting married, what it's like to have a first solo show at a museum—and it was this whole alternative story that wouldn't be in the exhibition," says Rothkopf, who took numerous four-day trips to Los Angeles for over a year to compile the book. "The risk we knew all along was that it would seem like some narcissistic project to put all this stuff out there, but I felt like the hedge against that was that in every case we had to imagine that even if you didn't know who the players were or care too much about Laura herself, these artifacts would be of interest."

For an artist who is so notoriously private to the point of giving mystique a bad name—a tough feat in the Instagram age—Owens is, dare I say it, embarrassingly open in this book. (Her line edits on the MOCA press release include: "This paragraph does not seem true to me—critics hated my work at first!") Despite the walls she seems to build between herself and the media via museums, galleries, assistants—this interview, the only one she's agreed to do during the MOCA show, is being monitored by her longtime assistant Amy Bauman and the MOCA communications chief—Owens is exceedingly open during our time together and any other time I've run into in her public. Though they might present an inconvenient truth for a journalist, these buffer zones may be a necessary evil for a painter of her caliber, one who is now forced to "drop in quick" to her studio practice with two children and a husband who works in New York.

"Laura's a painter, but she's also a super rigorous thinker," says Gunderman, noting in her first show with ACME she installed a floor-to-ceiling canvas on the back wall. She painted the canvas a monochrome white, mimicking the gallery walls, and there was a large branch running along the bottom of the canvas with a little branch at the top corner with a red dot on it. While there wasn't really enough space in the gallery to get the right perspective, at some angles you could see it was actually a painting of a cherry tree poking through a cloud (or as Owens notes, "It's a branch with a red thing, but not specifically a cherry"). Within a two-year stretch of that show, Owens participated in the

Pardo/Painter exhibition and a three-person show with Sharon Lockhart and Frances Stark at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles. She also made her debut with Brown and Coles. With the latter two she continued her investigations into architecture-and-installation-referencing works (including a shadow of the support beam at Coles's London gallery painted into a pastel beachscape, while in New York the seagull painting was paired against an interior still life featuring that same seascape, along with a painting of a hallway featuring that same still-life, all facing each other inside Brown's space).

"You might not like her paintings, but everybody respects her for the rigor behind her work and she's inspired generations of artists, and how many painters can you really say that about?" asks Gunderman. "They're all focused on the social scene, how to get in a fair, how to get into a biennial, and she's just focused on the work."

There is, perhaps, no better example of this focus than the work that went into *12 Paintings*, the large-scale show Owens opened in January 2013 at 356 Mission Road, a former storage facility that once housed Liberace's pianos. She rented it as studio to create this epic, mic-drop series, which Salle described as "paintings that leave the impression they could be, or do, just about anything. Perhaps their most salient quality is confidence."

Rendered on monstrous 10-by-12-foot canvases, they utilize her signature palette, motifs and methodologies and distill the content into focused, centralized compositions. Some have more than 20 coats of gesso, layered with screenprints of adulterated newsprint; layered with spray-painted, newsprinted and outlined cats batting after ethereal balls of yarn; layered with scribbly hearts floating over black-and-white hashtags; layered with gigantic impasto scrawls, which look like digital doodles from afar and tidal waves of oil up close.

"I had this assistant named Andrew Cannon, who is this awesome artist, and I remember sitting with him when I decided the size and scale of the canvases and what the layout was going to be," says Owens. "I started talking to him about the amount of paint we were going to need, and he was like, 'Wait a minute, there's not enough paint in L.A.'" To remedy the situation Cannon worked with Robert Doak, a

Brooklyn-based paint expert whom John Currin once called "probably the best color guy in the world," to extend her rose magentas, veronese greens and cobalt blues with Tix-o-gel.

Her other assistant, Calvin Marcus, who now shows with David Kordansky, pulled numerous all-nighters, often inventing new techniques from one painting to the next. "We figured out a way to screenprint with charcoal dust, which to me was the most complicated material-tricky thing I'd ever seen. The use of charcoal is really primitive, and we learned to mechanize it and that was special." Marcus ran powdered charcoal with soft paper towels through screens, then another assistant would get up on a ladder and mist a fixative over it. "Once Laura's made a painting, it's kind of done. It's figured out and she's experienced it, so there's no reason to master any of what has just happened. It was like, 'Let's figure out how to go and do the next thing.' That's something I really paid attention to and valued: Isn't it always better to be on the learning side of things?"

By 2015 Owens had moved on yet again to making 300 ceramic emojis (images of which the Whitney just released as actual emojis) for a show at a gallery inside a former Polish soccer club in Chicago where she installed drawings of digital-looking cats and cartoon figures inside the wood-paneled walls. That same year she also created a handmade wallpaper—of bit-map designs, excerpts from the *Berkeley Barb* and snippets of paintings and emails and notes about astrology (She's a Virgo, if that wasn't obvious)—for a show at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco called *10 Paintings*. The titular dibond panels were seamlessly embedded into the wallpapered facade, and at MOCA these exhumed works wrap around the final room of the exhibition.

"You can text these paintings and they talk back to you," says curator Bennett Simpson, who organized the MOCA show, pointing to a number scrawled on one of the middle paintings. "You can be in the space or anywhere in the world and text that number a question, and from somewhere in the space you'll hear an audible answer." Affecting his best Siri voice, he says, "It'll say, 'Oh, that's interesting, try a feta omelet next time.' It's all non-sequiturs. 'Have you considered going gluten-free?'"

As Owens told me during the Wattis opening: “The ‘text a question’ is this appropriated thing from a bunch of pull quotes that are put together over the last fifty years from New York publications describing L.A. as this coming-of-age place.... It’s this provincialism where the ‘other’ is finally going to be this contender against this de facto center, which is New York. But this story has been happening for so long it’s become a joke.”

Unlike the series of conceptual rooms that marked two floors of the Whitney, the MOCA exhibition egresses the Geffen in a more casual, chronological, clockwise maze of sorts, which begins with the seagull painting, then moves on to the monkeys and soccer players, the Par-do collabo, the Ohio paintings of her son (and sailboats), the 2012 *Pavement Karaoke/Alphabet* show at Sadie Coles (reunited in full for the first time in five years) and a series of five gigantic canvases—bolted upright to the floor and fanned out like playing cards—that were originally shown at Capitain Petzel in Berlin in 2015 and that feature her son Henry’s scented marker drawings on the back side of the stretchers. An excerpt from a short story of his is recreated on the front of the canvases, which are meant to mimic 11-by-7-foot “sheets” of lined paper with digital-looking erasures bleeding into hashtags snaking the narrative.

Given all that, it’s hard to imagine an early Owens critic dubbing her the “doodlebug artist,” and though she resented the dig at the time and remembers it as “really evil,” the memory of that cheeky moniker causes her to laugh at various points throughout our conversation. Perhaps because “doodlebug” seems so quaint compared to the epithets being slung at her of late—not by critics but anti-gentrification protesters (a number of whom are local artists)—as a result of the so-called “artwashing” that was supposedly enacted by the trio (Owens, Gavin Brown and Wendy Yao, the proprietor of the Ooga Booga Bookstore) behind 356 Mission Road.

For a good three years after *12 Paintings*, 356 Mission Road did an insane level of programming—with museum-quality shows from Alex Katz, Seth Price, Susan Cianciolo, Kerry Tribe, Rebecca Morris and Eric Wesley as well as various shows around the subject of cats that in-

cluded some 300 artists—all free to the public, all supported by Owens, Brown and Yao, none of whom owned the building in this unincorporated, non-residential stretch of warehouse territory. They weren’t ever protested until February of 2017 (and 356 had attempted to meet with these groups for almost a year prior to this first protest). Then last fall anti-gentrification activists flew protesters out to New York. At the opening of the artist’s Whitney retrospective they carried a banner (“Laura Owens & Gavin Brown Fuera de Boyle Heights”) as they read from a script and chanted “Laura Owens, Gavin Brown, get the fuck out of town.” Inside the museum the protesters also shouted “This is what white supremacy looks like” at museum-goers and made claims that gentrification was worse for immigrant communities than the Ku Klux Klan and Donald J. Trump.

In the wake of the Whitney protest, Owens wrote a letter, which states: “The relationship between art and gentrification is an urgent issue for the art community to discuss and should be further explored thoughtfully and respectfully between artists, civic leaders, and most importantly the residents of the neighborhood....I believe we need to press local government, landlords and developers to make policy changes that protect and shelter all Angelenos. Affordable housing is a human right, and Angelenos need all the support that we can get to battle the housing crisis. We assumed that we shared some of these goals with the protesters, and hoped to work with them to address this issue in Boyle Heights. After refusing to engage in a dialogue, the protesters increased their aggressive techniques, by distributing further false information about us on anonymous social media accounts and bullying and threatening our staff and presenters, including people who are themselves part of vulnerable communities. We do things in public; we have an address; we have a phone number; we are open to criticism; and we welcome discussion. This has made us vulnerable to anonymous insults and death threats left on our voicemail.”

The two sides had met in May 2017—a meeting in which 356 proposed working with the community on land buybacks, affecting policy changes and offering basic services to neighboring residents (from laundry to art workshops for children)—but as Owens noted in her letter, “The protesters

clearly stated instead that their only demands were that we immediately terminate our activities, dissolve 356 Mission Road and hand over the keys to them for unspecified purposes. They insisted that any further meeting would only be premised on our agreeing to these demands.”

“I see both sides of it,” says Betye Saar, who has known Owens for nearly 25 years. “There is this problem with gentrification, and I understand the fear, but it always seems so wrong to blame the artists, because it’s really the coffee shops, restaurants and hotels that follow them.” Saar notes that the anti-gentrification groups, who in addition to delivering death threats to 356 staff and painting “Fuck White Art” on the roll-up of Nicodim Gallery, have followed other gallerists out of Boyle Heights after they left the neighborhood. “They went after Self Help Graphics, and they’ve been there forever,” adds Saar. “Getting rid of those galleries won’t stop the gentrification. That just means someone else is going to come in, buy it, and immediately it’s going to become Starbucks.”

Ultimately the toll of the constant threats on Owens, Yao (who declined to speak for this story) and their staff was just too high. So when their lease was up in May of this year, they decided to close 356 Mission Road. “My dad died last year and my stepdad died two months ago and 356 closed in between those two things, so I’ve had a lot of loss,” says Owens. “All of this to me just speaks to the impermanence of life, and when it’s time to end things, it’s time to end them. You have to just say that is what life is.”

While gentrification is undeniably a problem in Los Angeles, as Owens states very clearly in her letter, the city had major infrastructure plans for Boyle Heights long before she arrived, and just before Owens was being protested in New York, Mayor Garcetti’s office released findings that the population of Los Angeles could grow by one million residents over the next two decades. However, as someone who has been an outspoken political activist for progressive candidates and causes for nearly three decades, Laura Owens might have been a fierce ally of the protesters had she and 356 been allowed to help.

“I think many people feel a great loss because Laura was running, or co-running, one of the most amazing kunsthallen in the world, and it

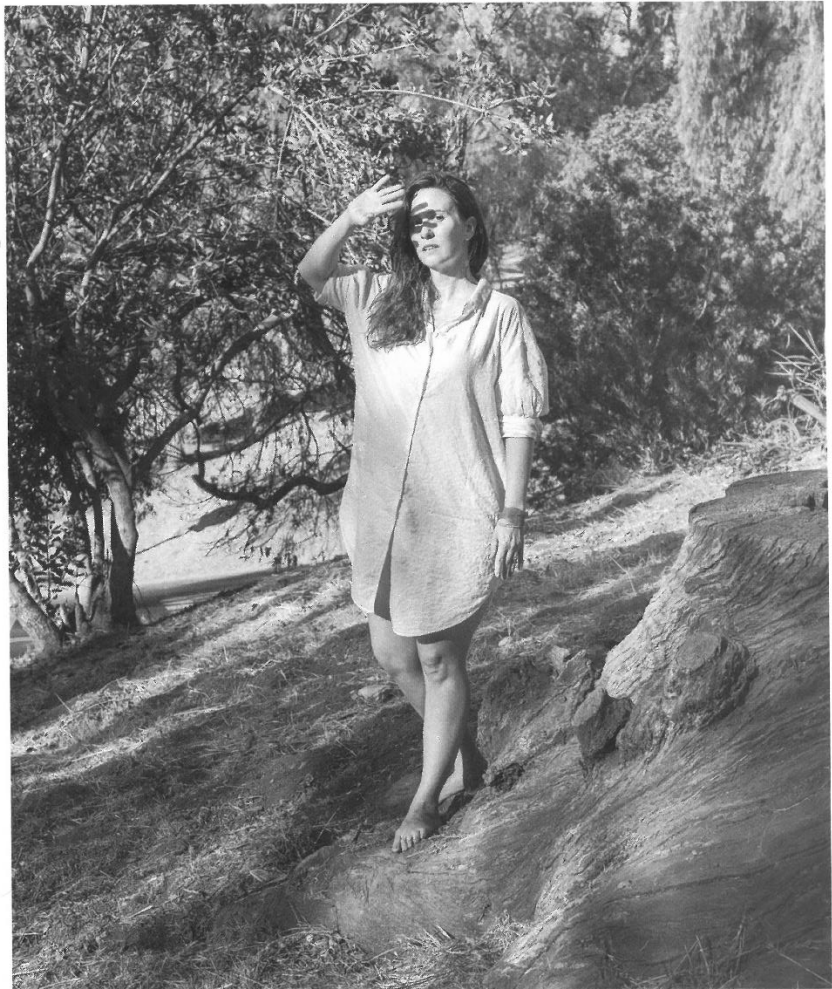
did a lot for artists no matter what one thinks of the political circumstances surrounding her situation,” says Rothkopf. “I’m not saying I’m neutral to those circumstances, nor is she, but I imagine if you talk to artists, curators and people in L.A., they would feel some loss.”

One of those people is Alake Shilling, a young African-American artist who applied for an internship with the space in May 2016. Her story offers a telling case study about the squandered potential of 356 (and Owens’s role in it).

“I thought it would be a good place to learn more about art and make new art friends,” says Shilling. “Still, I thought it would be a longshot because a lot of art communities I’d been around were exclusive, but I was very surprised. In my initial interview I was very welcome. They treated me like family.” Shilling started out doing administrative work, sweeping floors, putting out the free food and beverages for the openings, screenings and artist talks, and participating in the weekly Clay Days workshops. By 2018, however, she was hosting the workshops, which were facilitated out of Owens’s ceramics studio every Wednesday and free for anyone interested in learning about clay. The materials were free, and Shilling helped load the kilns. Eventually some of the people from the gallery saw her paintings and she was offered a solo show, the last at 356 as it turned out. *Monsoon Lagoon*, Shilling’s show of paintings and ceramics, opened in February; the gallery closed its doors on May 13. Over the summer, Shilling’s work was exhibited in Europe, and she’s currently planning for a solo show next year with Karma L.A.

“While I think the protesters thought [356 Mission Road closing] was what the community needed, if they really cared about the community they would have paid attention to what was really going on inside the space,” she says. “Maybe the space wasn’t as integrated as it could have been, but I think they were trying to do that. People from the Boyle Heights community wanted to come to 356, especially something like Clay Days, and they were always welcome. I really feel like the gallery didn’t reach its full potential. It was just getting started.”

The same might be said for Owens, at least regarding the next chapter of her life. She’s been busy making paintings at her studio in Orient,



Long Island, and working hard to get democratic congressional candidate Katie Hill elected to district 25 while going back and forth to MOCA to finalize the installation of the retrospective. During a preview in early October I ran into Owens, who was wearing the same trainers and some workout clothes, her hair wrapped in a bun, which gave her gold glasses a more motherly look. She was friendly, but she didn’t have time to talk. Perhaps she was giving Simpson, like Schimmel, a “fairly exhausting” run for his curatorial money.

Our brief exchange made me think how few people really know this Laura, and how much

of her legacy is wrapped up in politics she wasn’t practicing. Is she the “doodlebug artist” or an “artist’s artist”? Gentrifier or community organizer? The answers, like her paintings, will likely reveal themselves over time. At the end of our studio visit, when I asked her one final question: Post-Whitney, post-356, post-MOCA, what are you going to do next?

“I don’t know,” she says, pausing for what seems like an eternity, as her eyes race around the room. Finally, a devilish Daria grin spreads across her face. “Hopefully I go into my studio and get excited about something.” ●