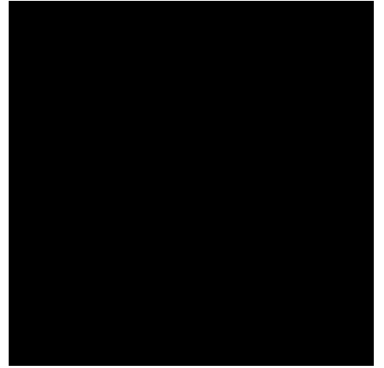
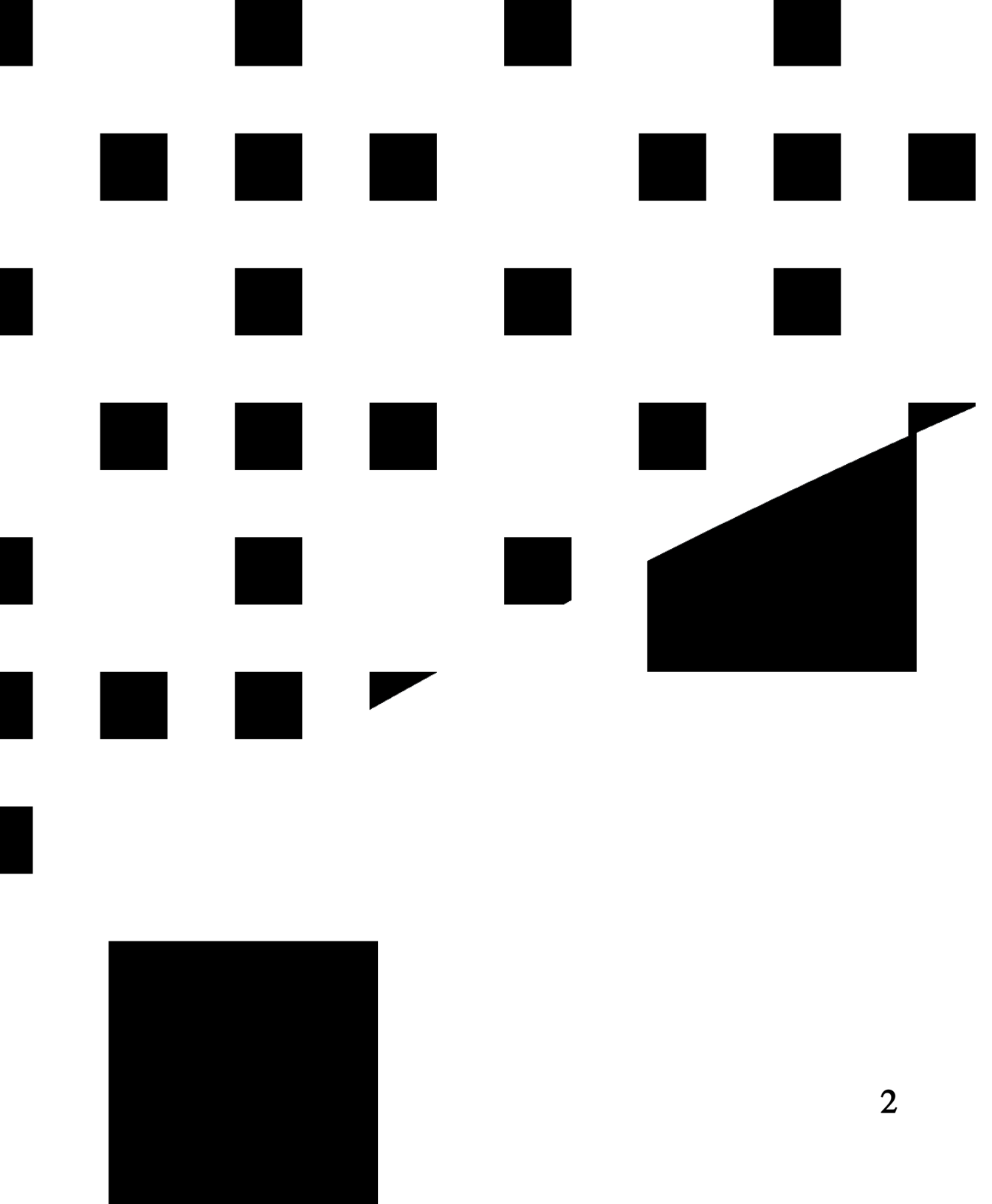




**This is an exhibition of new work by
Laura Owens.**





Pick your battles is usually sound advice.

When it comes to painting, there are many battles to choose from: flatness versus depth, materiality versus illusion, abstraction versus representation, the epic versus the everyday, the grid versus the gesture.

Laura Owens picks them all, and plays both sides. In the words of one critic, Owens is like Mondrian in drag. She self-consciously *overperforms* the act and the idea of painting. She makes paintings that look like paintings.

Owens has described painting as onomatopoeic—like *hiccup*, *splash*, and *meow*—because it contains that to which it refers. Contextualization, content, and aesthetics aside, a painting is always already art. As soon as we see one, we know what to do and recognize it as art. Even the unprimed stretched canvas for sale at Walmart is a signifier of art, before any marks are made on its surface. Objects, images, or videos need a frame or a context in order for them to *seem like art*. Painting doesn't.

If a museum helps objects become art, then hanging a painting in a museum is like turning into art something that's already art. It's like calling a hiccup a hiccup.

For Owens, this opens up a place for irony in the Shakespearian sense of a play within a play, where the audience understands that actors are acting as actors. Her paintings, in that sense, are paintings performing the role of paintings.

But the difference between performance and overperformance is an important one. While both are calculated interventions within the logic of painting, the latter incorporates the use of humor in the form of caricature, irony, or perversity. More than being *funny*, there is always something *wrong* in a Laura Owens painting. Her images are childish but too monumental to be for children; they are abstract but too full of language to be speechless; they are pretty but too impolite to please everyone; they are bright but too obscure to be Pop; they are hung on the wall but too sculptural to remain there; and they are huge but not made by a man.

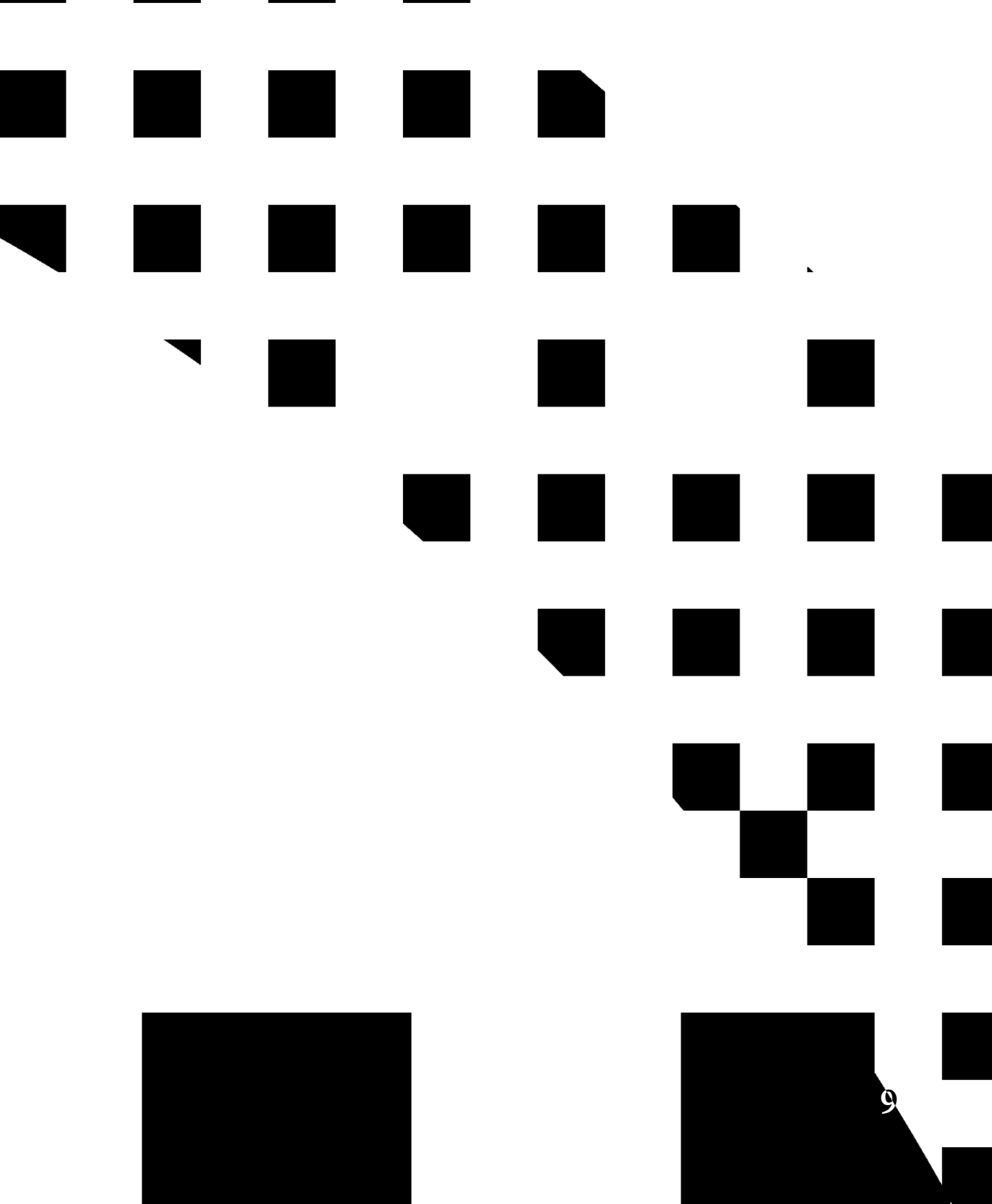
Many like to quote Owens when she says she “wants paintings to be a problem” or, more specifically, that she’s interested in painting that “comes out into the room, almost punches you in the face,” and is “confrontational.”

While each of those is an accurate description of Owens’ work, they also leave out some important nuances. For example, when asked her thoughts on Jeff Koons’s work, she referred to a model she once met, who had “no mole or misaligned tooth.” While it’s true that Koons’s paintings of La Cicciolina are certainly confrontational, they lack an imperfection that would make them “impolite.” They’re not quite—what’s the word—*embarrassing* enough?

A useful example of Owens's take on the impolite is her recent series of artist books based on spam emails. Like a porn star, spam is often crass and in-your-face, appealing to the lowest common denominator—although, unlike sex, it is an annoyance more than anything else. Spam is also, Owens discovered, often completely useless: in attempting to purchase the merchandise advertised in these emails, the artist found that often nothing was actually for sale and the products were nonexistent inventions. Therein is the misaligned tooth, the exposed embarrassment. Therein is the overperformance: an annoying in-box interruption that is in fact doubly annoying. It's an impolite impolite piece of spam, a sales pitch that doesn't actually sell anything.

Many tag Owens's work as "Painting 2.0." Not only does she use Photoshop to make her compositions, the argument goes, but they even *look* Photoshopped, what with all the erasures and drop shadows. Spam, of course, comes through email and is distributed via algorithms. Owens also recently made a series of emoji sculptures. And why else would she paint cats, if not because they are so popular on Instagram?

But there is nothing "virtual" about her work. Unlike the layers that can appear and disappear with the click of a mouse, hers are physically *there*. They sometimes involve fifty applications of gesso, or objects attached to the surface of a canvas (bicycle wheels, laser-cut wood, clock parts). Scanners, silkscreens, scissors, cloths, paper, computers, projectors, masking tape, several different kinds of paint, brushes, palette knives, melamine tabletops, walls, and the concrete floor of her studio—that's what it takes to make a single piece.



Owens often forces painting to perform tasks other than painting. Some canvases contain the battery-powered hands of a clock, even if they don't tell the time. Others suddenly emit sound. Many contain text. Some look like screens, others look like paper. Most are conceived with a specific site in mind.

In a recent exhibition in Berlin, Owens's paintings stood upright in the middle of the gallery. They came off the walls, were attached to the floor, and were installed in a staggered line. A viewer who stood in a specific spot with the right line of sight would recognize a text that ran across all five paintings.

These were paintings of sheets of notebook paper. Their installation made them into successive pages, albeit much larger and more sculptural than any notebook. *Untitled* (2014), shown at MoMA in 2014, is a single painting that also incorporates the same notebook paper. *Untitled* (2014), shown at the Whitney Biennial, was based on a motivational poster from the 1970s. Another recent body of work began with old newspaper layouts the artist found under the siding of her house.

Paper has been creeping into Laura Owens's work.

If painting is supposedly priceless, paper is decidedly not—it's common and cheap. Painting is forever, paper is not. Paper is for drawings, doodles, sketches, or notes. Paper therefore demands and instills a distance from painting. It makes sense that Owens would be drawn to it.

In Berlin, Owens separated her paintings (of sheets of paper) from the walls. In San Francisco, she does the reverse: the paintings *are* the walls.

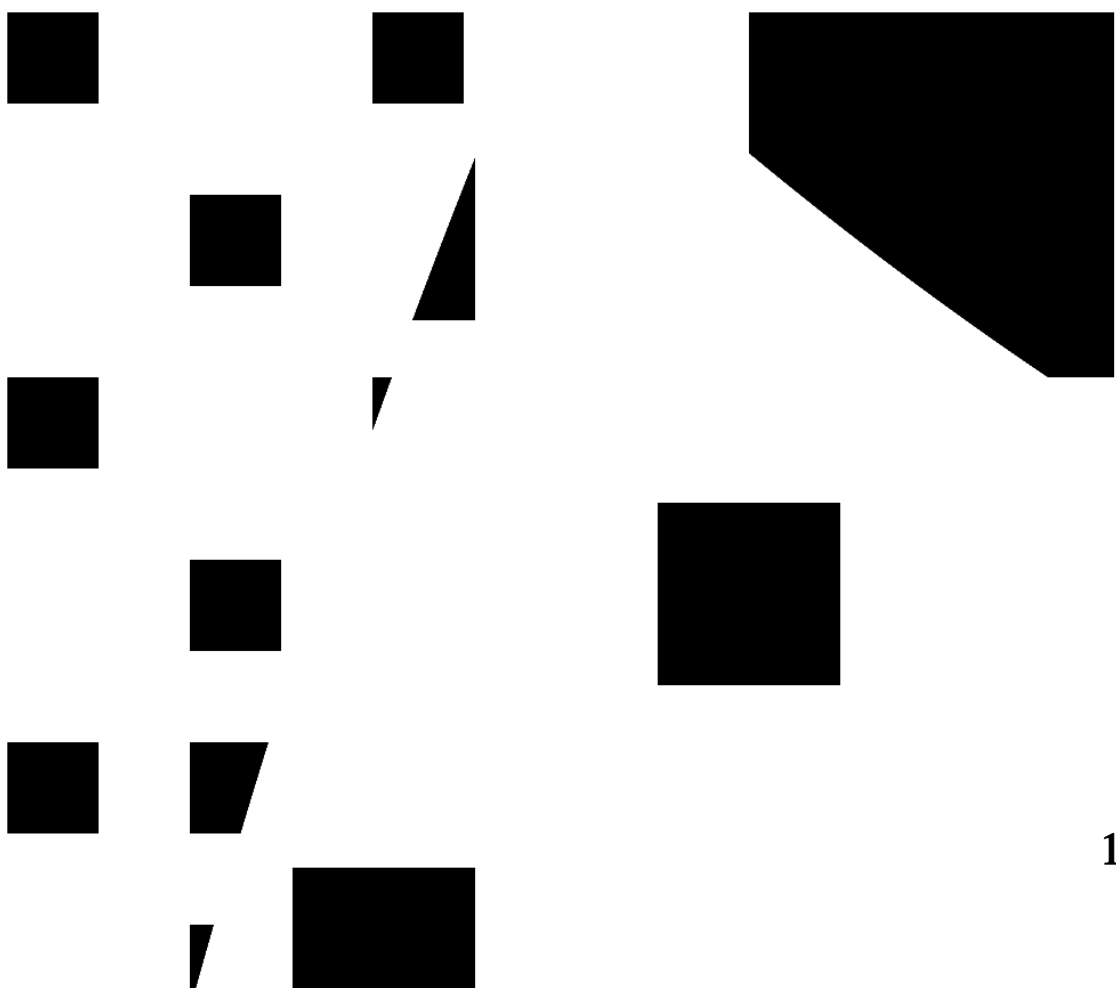
Wall + Paper = Wallpaper. Completely covering the gallery walls are more than seventy unique, non-repeating strips of handmade wallpaper—paintings made on clay-coated paper with silkscreened patterns, process color images, charcoal and sand flocking, and hand painting. Greatly enlarged images of creased, folded and torn paper appear as a bitmap pattern beneath images of actual-size architectural details from the artist's studio, her grandmother's embroidery, of drawings her brother made as a child, a Sister Corita Kent postcard, old emails, classified ads from vintage copies of *The Berkeley Barb*, and details from the artist's own previous work. These images often seem to hang on the wall with *trompe l'œil* shadows. Text messages sent to the wallpaper trigger a sound component. In places, the wallpaper pretends to reveal a space behind the wall itself—as if wallpaper had been placed on top of a wall that had more paper behind it. The mural is divided by images of Tudor-style wooden beams that correlate in places to the actual architecture of the exhibition space. Done at this scale, it's not "interior decoration" but is an epic mural, which, like most murals, interacts and overlaps with its site.

This self-reflexive doubling, the act of placing art on top of art, echoes throughout Owens's work. It appears visually, with drop shadows placed on top of drop shadows and lemons on top of lemons. It appears physically, with one painting continuing or picking up on a pattern or phrase begun by another painting elsewhere in the room. It appears in the way her books are meant to be seen as paintings and her paintings are meant to be read as books. It appears linguistically, with wallpaper made of walls and paper, or with sight aligning with site.

Laura Owens feeds painting its own tail so that it ties itself up in knots. She stresses it, distorts it, and laughs at it.

This is an exhibition of paintings of paper with paper paintings of paper patterns on painted paper performing as painting. Paintings of paintings hang in a second gallery.

Anthony Huberman



Laura Owens (b. 1970, Euclid, Ohio) lives and works in Los Angeles. Recent solo shows include Secession, Vienna (2015); Kunstmuseum Bonn (2011); Kunsthalle Zürich (2006); Camden Arts Centre, London (2006); Milwaukee Art Museum (2003); LA MoCA (2003); and Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (2001); among others. Major group exhibitions include *Painting 2.0*, Museum Brandhorst, Munich (2015); *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*, the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2014); *Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2004 and 2014); and *The Spectacular of Vernacular*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2011). Owens is cofounder of 356 S. Mission Rd., a contemporary art exhibition space in Los Angeles.

Laura Owens is on view at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, from April 28 through July 23, 2016, and is curated by Anthony Huberman and organized by Leila Grothe.

Laura Owens is made possible thanks to the generous support of Komal Shah and Gaurav Garg, and Gavin Brown's enterprise.

Booklet illustrations by Laura Owens.

The CCA Wattis Institute program is generously supported by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Grants for the Arts / San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund, and the Phyllis C. Wattis Foundation; by CCA Director's Fund contributors Patricia W. Fitzpatrick, Judy and Bill Timken, Chara Schreyer and Gordon Freund, Catherine and Matt Paige, Ruth and Alan Stein, Robin Wright and Ian Reeves, Laura Brugger and Ross Sappenfield, Lauren and Jamie Ford, John Morace and Thomas Kennedy, and the Rotasa Foundation; and by CCA's Curator's Forum. Phyllis C. Wattis was the generous founding patron.

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