

So Much More Than 'Ten Paintings' in Laura Owens Show at Wattis



Laura Owens, 'Untitled,' 2016 (installation view); acrylic, oil, Flashe, silkscreen inks, charcoal, pastel pencil, graphite, and sand on wallpaper; courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Sadie Coles HQ, London / Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne. (© Laura Owens; Photo: Johnna Arnold)

By **Sarah Hotchkiss**
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If we trust exhibition names, Laura Owens' solo show at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art claims to be just ten paintings. But go looking for those paintings in the airy main space or the smaller gallery behind it, and you might get confused.

Your confusion will stem from the fact that the paintings — if we also trust exhibition guides — are embedded in the Wattis' main gallery walls, hidden behind floor-to-rafter handmade wallpaper. Come the end of Laura Owens: Ten Paintings' run, the hidden panels will emerge, cut from their surroundings, as stand-alone art objects.

This is, when you think about it, a rather brilliant idea. Owens' exhibition can be both a site-specific installation and a painting show — the contents of which can be broken apart and exhibited (or sold) separately after July 23. And since it's impossible for anyone without first-hand knowledge of the installation process to determine where a wallpaper-covered panel ends and the wallpaper-covered wall begins, the entire main gallery is perhaps best viewed as one giant painting.



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This point of view is supported by the flourishes of chunky paint Owens applied around the room after wallpaper professionals finished installing the upwards of 70 unique non-repeating strips of clay-coated paper. The wallpaper itself, an enlarged bitmap pattern of folded and creased paper, segmented by trompe l'oeil Tudor-style wood beams, is filled with other eye-tricking treats made with a variety of printing processes: newspaper clippings from The Berkeley Barb, horoscopes from Free Will Astrology and drawings made by children who share Owens' last name.

Every now and then, one of these pieces of "paper" within the wallpaper encourages the viewer to send text messages to certain 415-area-code phone numbers. "Ask any ques-



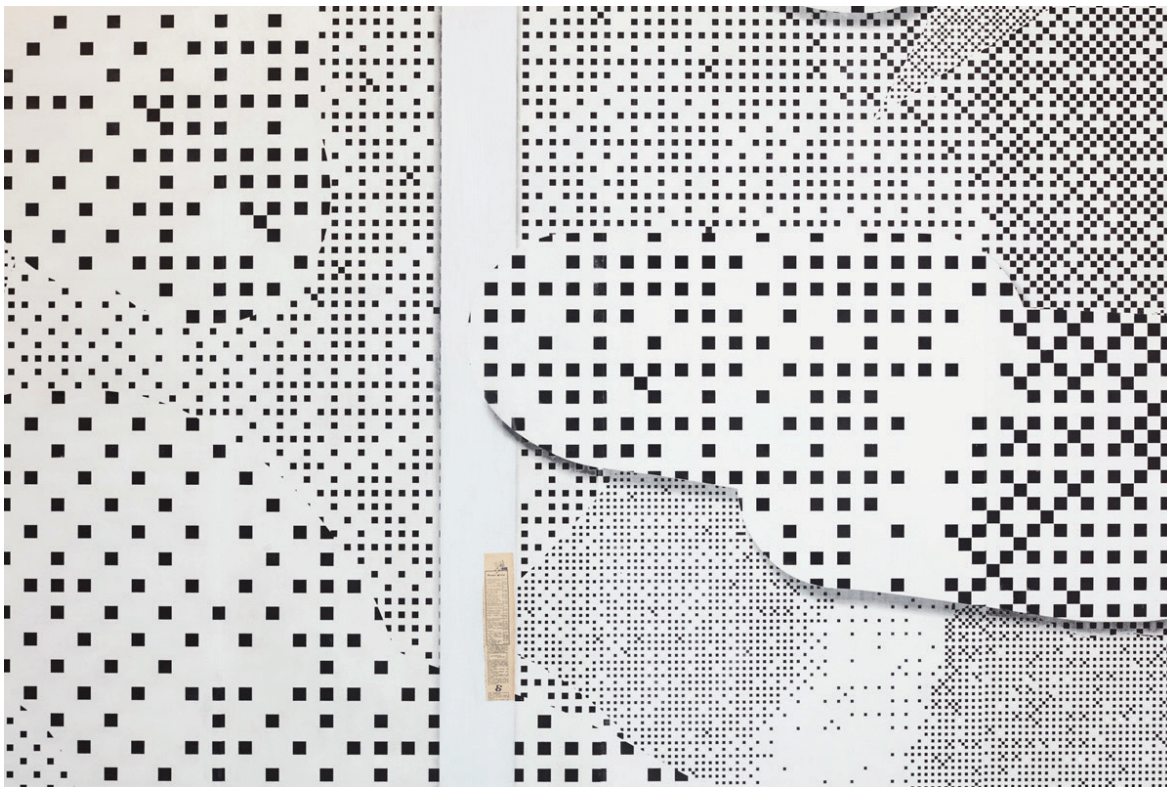
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tion,” says an ad on one, a rambling collection of writing about Los Angeles’ art scene (Owens’ home base) punctuated by emoji faces, “Find the solution.”

And so I texted the painting a question. And lo and behold, the painting answered.

Like the ten embedded panels, the show also conceals a ring of speakers mounted above the phone numbers that activate them. The questions I texted (and later, the random words and phrases I texted) sometimes elicited answers that made sense, at least within the logic of a computerized algorithm of prerecorded sound. Other texts yielded more abstract demonstrations of the speakers’ surround sound capabilities.

In one nonsensical response, a male voice inquired from a hidden speaker, “What’s your sign?” “Libra,” I answered, spurring a loud but nonspecific sales pitch for Libras everywhere.



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Ten Paintings seems particularly interested in astrology, and conversing via text message with unseen voices does have an aspect of divination to it. But after a perfect demonstration of bratty teenage vocal fry asked, “Have you even seen Clueless?” I realized I was looking for answers in all the wrong places.

In the back room gallery, a salon-style display intermingles small, paint-heavy abstract works on linen by Owens with cross-stitch and embroidery by Eileen Owens, Laura’s

grandmother. With these homey references on hand, the bitmap wallpaper pattern in the main gallery begins to resemble cross-stitch patterns, analog illustrations formed with colored thread in a precursor to the digital image's similarly gridded pattern of pixels.



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Ten Paintings proposes a series of tidy juxtapositions (between installation and painting, analog and digital, or flat and 3D), but to read the many-layered papery surfaces of the exhibition through those pairings would be reductive. Ten Paintings contains multitudes: disparate references scattered teasingly throughout wallpaper, inexplicable combinations of objects on the gallery's front desk (ceramic emojis, thick artist books and a full issue of the January 17, 1991 Los Angeles Times) and the endlessly entertaining sounds that issue forth from the hidden speakers.

It's an exhibition you want to spend time with, crouching low and tip-toeing high for embedded clues. It's an exhibition you can commune with — literally — though the answers are less solutions than thrilling auditory surprises.

Laura Owens: Ten Paintings is on view at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco through July 23, 2016. Entrance is free and open to the public. For gallery hours and more information visit wattis.org.