

**Laura Owens
at the Wattis
Institute
(L.A. in S.F.)**

**April 28–
July 23, 2016**

The current Laura Owens solo exhibition, *Ten Paintings*, at the Wattis Institute in San Francisco, is a perplexing visual poem. What are the “paintings,” and how are they paintings? The walls in the first room are plastered floor to ceiling in 70 clay-coated, silkscreened, drawn and painted-on sheets of paper. Throughout the space, there are architectural nods to both Owens’ studio space and the exhibition space itself. Overt and implied optical illusions abound, but Owens never regresses to impressing, and this is perhaps what is ultimately most impressive. The show has been rigorously conceived as a totalized environment, filled with repurposed works and reclaimed spam emails. It reveals hints of intimacy,

Keith J. Varadi



and revels in advertisements for detachment.

Despite the lack of discrete canvases on display, Owens still insists on deeming the works "paintings." This insistence feels equally sincere and satirical, and the motif carries on into the next room, where she includes a few of her (now) semi-signature paintings and a salon-style installation composed of pieces made by her own family members (her grandmother's embroidery, her brother's childhood drawings) along with a curious collection of other sundry small-scale two-dimensional works. Even when she deploys a gimmick—visitors can send text messages to the applied wallpaper, eliciting a robotic response—the result doesn't feel forced; it feels time-sensitive.

This sensitivity to time (and timeliness) is astounding, and can be tied to one of the simpler statements that the curator, Anthony Huberman, makes about this work in his associated text: "Many tag Owens' work as 'Painting 2.0.'" Largely, this refers to Owens' actual use of Photoshop, her emoji sculptures, and Instagram-influenced subject matter. The literalness of this angling (by both artist and curator) is timely; i.e., hashtags pointedly tend to have a quick expiration date. Owens though, unlike most other contemporary artists infatuated with the mimetic processes of online networks, has figured out a way to utilize the ephemeral nature of browsing and scrolling.

Owens has made herself gradually, and increasingly, available in her work, while also understanding and citing history (painting and otherwise) throughout her most recent exhibitions. In *Ten Paintings*, her incorporation of vintage local newspaper listings (via back issues of *The Berkeley Barb*) becomes an explicit micro-gesture, whereas her construction of a flattened-out, pastel-infused black-and-white pixelated labyrinth of muddled content, evocative of the ethos of '70s conceptual art, is more of an implicit macro-gesture. This holistic approach allows her to be as generous as possible with her audience, while simultaneously acknowledging the myopic solipsism of a solitary studio practice—a complexly self-aware balancing act.

Huberman claims, "Objects, images, or videos need a frame or a context in order for them to seem like art. Painting doesn't." Of course, anyone can recognize a painting as art, and often, they do; but context affects painting as much as any other art form. If one's aunt or uncle purchases a painting from a thrift store, it ends up in their living room. If Jim Shaw makes the same transaction, the painting ends up in the New Museum. Owens does not overlook this ironic reality. Each aspect of her practice—the application or execution of any given idea—illuminates or complicates the others.

Since Owens first came to prominence out of graduate school at CalArts in the late '90s, she has

continued to push on painting, sometimes taking multiple left turns, and often landing at unpredictable destinations. Yet, it wasn't until the recession hit in 2008, and many people seemed to give up on the market (and, with it, painting), that Owens really began to own the medium. In the face of futile impossibility, Owens went into full-on swagger mode and began building the framework for her most confident and ambitious works to date.

These ideas sharply coalesced three years ago when Owens exhibited a series of large new works, *12 Paintings* (2013), as the inaugural show at her (then) newly unveiled warehouse space, 356 Mission, in Los Angeles. These paintings were bold in their Pop art color schemes and directed compositions, and brash in their unflinching, unwavering laissez-faire attitude. This relentlessly multifarious yet deferential outlook on one's own standing in a bigger, broader community—again on both the micro- and macro-level—ideally serves as a generative point to cycle through ideas in a profoundly productive manner. In principle, this malleable form of reflexivity comes with some distance; the harder one squints, the clearer the picture. Although, the risk one certainly runs with this strategy is that so much time will be spent naval-gazing that the individual will simply develop astigmatism.

In any case, the past few years have seen Owens' specifically squinted vision willfully straddle the printed

and digital, the real and virtual, the personal and professional with egotistical dexterity and assumed vulnerability. In an extremely tenuous election year, in which galleries are closing, auction houses are scrambling, artists are being taken advantage of, and another recession looms as a real possibility, alternatives seem to be the only source of hope. Owens here, at the top of her painting game, in a city presently so sure of solutions, proves once again, with "paintings," that alternatives must be sought and (can be) found.

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Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016 (Installation view) (2016). Image courtesy of the artists and Hauser Wirth & Schimmel. Louise Bourgeois: Art © The Easton Foundation/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Brian Forrest.

2

Carl Cheng, *Supply & Demand* (1972). Venus flytrap, insects, plastic case, humidifier, wiring, grass, wood pedestal, grow lamps, 47 x 24 x 18.6 inches. Image courtesy of Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McClane.

3

Joan Snyder, *Spring* (1971). Oil, acrylic, and spray enamel on canvas, 78 x 108 inches. Image courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery.

4

Eleanor Antin, *Margaret Mead* (1970). Umbrella, chair, binoculars with case, thermos, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and Diane Rosenstein, Los Angeles.

5

Performing the Grid (Installation view) (2016). Images courtesy of Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design. Photo: Chris Warner.

6

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

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