Datebook

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ART REVIEW

Johnna Arnold / Gavin Brown's Enterprise

Laura Owens has papered the walls of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts with hand-printed sheets.

Wallpaper exhibition compels and conceals

Over time, Laura Owens' work reveals surprising depths

By Charles Desmarais

The Laura Owens exhibition on view at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts is a pulse-quickening experience. It feels fresh and open — a wide visual expanse with a far horizon. It is a field richly complicated by thickets and rabbit holes — suggestions of places partially glimpsed, hidden and waiting to be explored.

Laura Owens: Ten Paintings: Noon-7 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, noon-5 p.m. Saturdays. Through July 23. CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 360 Kansas St., S.F. (415) 355-9670. www.wattis.org.

The Wattis Institute's handling of the exhibition, which runs through July 23, may be a case study in how not to make new friends for contemporary art, but we'll get back to that.

Owens' work has received much attention, including major museum

Owens continues on E3

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Photos by Johnna Arnold / Gavin Brown's Enterprise

The Laura Owens installation at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts is titled "Ten Paintings," but visitors won't see any paintings at first glance.

Artist's wallpaper compels, conceals

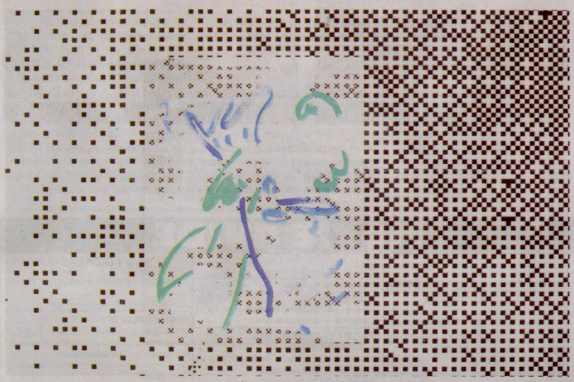
Owens from page E1

and gallery exhibitions, since she received a graduate degree from the California Institute of the Arts in 1994 (she still lives in Los Angeles). She's with hip galleries in New York (Gavin Brown's Enterprise) and London (Sadie Coles HQ), and even created her own (unnamed, influential) exhibition space in Los Angeles with Brown and another partner.

The work has also generated a great deal of writing while pretty much confounding criticism. In shorthand, let's call her a late postmodernist, given her long and deep interest in worn-out images and other cultural leftovers — from children's book illustrations to print advertising to gift wrap — as the subject of her painting.

As smart as her pictures are, they are, blessedly, also great to look at. I prefer the more complicated description provided in a wall label by Wattis director Anthony Huberman, who points out that Owens straddles and "plays both sides" of the supposed divides in painting: between flatness and depth, materiality and illusion, abstraction and representation, epic and everyday, grid and gesture. The simple fact is that she is an original, not subject to such binary distinctions.

I wouldn't have thought it possible, but Owens ups the ante in the new work presented in the Wattis show. Papering the walls with large hand-printed sheets, she has created a vast picture of layers of images in various stages of dissipation. Gaseous clouds of pixels and picture-parts unravel, carrying along image-objects from the artist's past and present like celestial bodies in an expanding universe, or rending in giant tears and splits. It's an all-over work of multiple print techniques, piled one atop another; troweled-on schmears of paint in pastel colors build out physically from trompe l'oeil spaces and structures, all high-key the colors and tones. It took a few minutes to orient yourself, to realize that you were, effectively, lost inside the very fabric of a painting, floating among the colors and forms.



Owens has created something unique using technology designed to crank out repetitive images.

There is more than a whiff of the perverse in all this, of course, and it runs throughout the exhibition. Historically, wallpaper was a relatively inexpensive, multiple alternative to one-of-a-kind mural painting or woven tapestries; almost from its inception, it had the additional advantage of being easily tailored to the size of the room because repeat designs could be matched, edge to edge, sheet to sheet. Here, though, Owens has laboriously created a non-repeating, unique object, but using technology designed to easily create unlimited images.

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There are yet additional elements of the show, which I find less convincing. If you carefully examine some realistic, old-looking advertising that has been illusionistically "stuck" on the walls, you'll be prompted to text questions to a phone number. Sounds emanate in response from speakers buried in the walls — snippets of music, nonsensical or poetic phrases — most of which add little to the experience. In the back gallery, individual objects that are more like the artist's usual work, and much closer to traditional paintings, are hung alongside her grandmother's needlepoint exercises, coyly implying that there is no difference between so-called high art and the cliched.

The exhibition is called "Ten Paintings," but there is no way to deduce the significance of that title from anything provided to the viewer. Where are those works? Why, they're mounted on 7-by-9-foot aluminum sheets embedded in the walls: The panels were papered over along with the rest of the gallery. When the site-specific show is over, the panels will be cut from the walls and become individual "paintings" to live on, offered for sale and exhibition elsewhere.

And here is where I take issue with the Wattis and its ultra-cool attitude, the kind of posturing that perfectly embodies just what turns many people off from enjoying contemporary art, or even indulging a nascent curiosity. The fact that those 10 paintings lie hidden in the walls is not revealed in the wall text or in the (otherwise well-written) free 16-page exhibition brochure. I know about them because, despite my stated preference to a public relations person and to the director that I wished to see the show on my own, I was given that information, along with other germane details, by Huberman. I came to the gallery unannounced, but within minutes my cover was blown and I had the director by my side, "explaining" it all to me as I stood there protesting in vain.

Why is this a problem? Well, apart from frustrating both my opportunity for an unmediated first experience of the work and my consumer-advocate responsibility to see the exhibition as all visitors see it, it assumed something I find troubling: that, as one of the anointed (I also observed wealthy donors getting the same treatment a few days later), I somehow "deserved" access to information denied to the rest of the audience. By conscious policy, the public exhibition arm of an educational institution — the well-respected California College of the Arts — picks and chooses who gets to know such details. Indeed, rather than embrace the uninitiated, by providing the tools that would allow people to make their own discoveries, the institute creates hurdles: it imposes its interpretation when it chooses, ungenerously holds back information at a different whim.

That disdain for new audiences is hardly limited to this one instance, and surely not confined to the Wattis Institute. It runs far too deep in what we call the contemporary art world — a phrase itself bloated with arrogance, even as its meaning is perfectly understood.

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1