

Painting After the Digital Revolution

Liz Trosper

*"Only as subjects can we speak.
As objects, we remain voiceless—
our beings defined and interpreted by others."*

—bell hooks¹

Laura Owens. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, November 10th, 2017 to February 4th, 2018; Dallas Museum of Art, March 25th to July 29th, 2018; and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, November 11th, 2018 to March 25th, 2019. Exhibition organized at the Whitney Museum of American Art by Scott Rothkopf, and overseen in Dallas by Anna Katherine Brodbeck and in Los Angeles by Bennett Simpson with Rebecca Matalon. Catalogue distributed by Yale University Press, 664pp., \$45 paper.

Is this true of painting? Do paintings speak for themselves? Or do we rely on social constructs—writing, research and interpretation by others? If so, is it possible for the artist to intervene in this process of interpretation? *Laura Owens* does. Her works are encoded with content that questions the context of the work of art and the ways it is received for interpretation. She uses corollary material—such as the exhibition catalog—to connect context and meaning, involving herself in the interpretations of her artwork.

Laura Owens is all about history—the discourse of formalism and the future history of painting as a dialectic involving women in more substantial ways than heretofore. *Owens* has tapped into the stream of painting discourse as a dialectic and as an intellectual pursuit. She isn't trying to make good art. She's trying to create new, hard questions for herself. In so doing, she is trying to trouble the power structure of the system using its own language—high formalism—starting each painting with the question, "What can a painting be?" *Laura Owens* attempts to answer the most fundamental questions in painting, put succinctly by Frank Stella: What is a painting and how does one make a painting? This approach lends to the exhibition's aura that it is equally about body and brain—painting, a sensual medium, as intellectual pursuit. Thinking and doing.

That *Owens* is a knowing student of painting's history is obvious, and the connection between *Owens* and Matisse is well charted. Where the 20th century master speaks of art being like a good armchair, *Owens* talks about making painting



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2016, acrylic, oil, wood and collage on canvas, 69 x 62 7/8 x 2 in. (175.26 x 159.7 x 5.08 cm), © Laura Owens, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, promised gift of a trustee.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 72 in. (167.6 x 182.9 cm), collection of the artist, © Laura Owens, courtesy of Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York and Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.

accessible—work like the custom, shaped and embroidered seat cushions placed throughout the exhibition to hold copies of the *Laura Owens* catalog. The cushions function literally, and the catalog figuratively, as armchairs for the viewer. The *Laura Owens* catalog itself, each with unique printing on the cover, is both an invitation to accessibility, with its essays and background material, and an attempt by the artist to

intervene in the process of interpretation by scholars and viewers alike.

When I see Owens's early work, with its flattened spaces and canted angles, I am reminded of Matisse's 1911 *Red Studio*. Matisse's depiction of the stacks of paintings in the studio, paintings within a painting, relate not only to themes of time and space found in Owens's work, but also to the constant remediation of images on digital

platforms such as Instagram and Reddit. Through the trope of paintings within paintings, *Laura Owens* finds a way to synthesize thousands of years of painting history with the total upheaval in work and leisure wrought by the digital revolution.¹ Owens's work takes a digitally savvy approach to investigating the present condition of painting, situated within the endless remediation of images in the digital age, and the spaces of art: where it's made, its computational spaces (digital and analog) and its exhibition spaces.

In her large-scale newspaper panels from 2015, space and time are densely layered for the viewer to experience bodily, in terms of scale, and then to slowly unravel in our minds as a visual puzzle. Complexly built, these works bear the markings of multitudinous layers and modifications in the digital space that anticipate the physical processes of serigraph or paint. The newspaper imagery is sourced from a wall covering revealed during a renovation project in Owens's home. The paintings collapse time, referencing the time of the newspaper's printing, the events reported, the newspaper's discovery, the digital image manipulation, the image printing, the overpainting and the unfolding time of the present in which they are viewed in the gallery space. The large scale of the paintings, and their collapsing innards, reference time, space and the fluidity of digital images, while pointing to the humble finitude of the human body experiencing art within time.

Owens's work holds the tension of the human body—its hands and its brain. Thinking and doing. The artwork is as calculated and methodical as it is playful. Signals of control, alternating with free play, are coded in the painstaking trompe l'oeil techniques: densely layered Photoshop masks,

images gesturally overpainted with themselves, slowly stitched marks that look uncontrived and digitally fabricated freehand marks. Careful, methodical, quiet consideration is present in the work. Surgically laid daubs, meticulously masked edges, intricately laser-cut forms present themselves in pristine form. We see playful explorations of value using both illusionistic drop shadows and physically created cast shadows. We see plentiful doodles and scribbles, signaling a daydreamy freeness, at the same time as we notice extreme focus in the time-consuming layers and stitching embedded in the work. *Laura Owens* points out that contemporary painting can no longer afford the overly simplistic, brutish, physical connotations that are the legacy of Pollock, nor the Apollonian and aesthetically bare legacy of conceptual art. Contemporary painting demands both and more.

Under these conditions, we join the artist in considering questions about what a painting can be and do. In looking at an installation of clock paintings from 2011-2012, we ask ourselves why a painting would tell us what time it is? Is the analog clock an apt object-as-analogy for the current condition of painting? Or by combining paint, canvas and the clock arm as a mark, does each become something more, something funny, transcending the limitations of any one part? This fundamental questioning, using play and quotidian objects, brings the viewer's attention to the spaces and objects around us and invites us to question them.

Kirsty Bell writes "the works themselves are characterized by levity and assuredness."² For some, this is true, and yet some are more sparse and contemplative or even riddle-like. I would rather characterize Owens's work as exemplifying the culture of play, humor, and irony found in the image-drenched culture of Reddit. The paintings beg us to

1 As explored by Claire Bishop in "The Digital Divide," *Artforum* (September 2012), pp. 435-442.

2 "On Laura Owens's Idea of Edges," *Laura Owens*, p. 418.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2006, acrylic and oil on linen, 56 x 40 in. (142.2 x 101.6 cm), © Laura Owens, collection of Charlotte Feng Ford.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2001, acrylic, oil, ink, and felt on canvas, 117 x 72 in. (297.18 x 182.88 cm), © Laura Owens, collection of Annie and Matt Aberle.

be irreverent of the spaces in which we view them. Because of this, there is a disconnect between what the museum space is designed to do and the content of *Laura Owens*. Under the *éminence grise* of Edward Larrabee Barnes—or any other starchitect—these works are under duress to evoke levity. The artwork seems ill at ease among guards, gallery attendants or whatever you want to call them—essentially among whichever human beings are tasked by the power structure to watch you looking at the art.

Owens's work brings attention to the inflexibility of context through its own fluidity and works stealthily in the space between dichotomies. For example, in a lecture at UCLA's Hammer Museum, she talks nimbly about abstraction and photorealism, the Italian Renaissance and early 20th Century painting, all in the same breath. Owens references bodily experiences with both Color Field (e.g. Morris Louis), and photorealism (e.g. Richard Estes). Owens's work, like that of Elizabeth Murray, embodies

Through the trope of paintings within paintings, Laura Owens finds a way to synthesize thousands of years of painting history with the total upheaval in work and leisure wrought by the digital revolution.

This is precisely the kind of meta-absurdity that Owens's artwork questions. In concrete echo chambers, words like "sublime" or "awe" seem to fit but words like "playfulness" don't. Anxiety about the expensive artworks and a general distrust of the viewing public systematically kills levity. Robert Hughes's 2008 documentary *The Mona Lisa Curse* is never far from my mind when I'm placed into these uneasy relationships with expensive art, viewing it under the watchful eye of guards. This might mean that we need artists like Laura Owens more than ever, because it highlights the somewhat inflexible and specific ways that museums have been built and the kinds of viewing that they cultivate. Like Elizabeth Murray's work, perhaps Owens's work "helps us forget the increasingly dangerous circles in which we seem to be spinning."³

³ Francine Prose, "Somewhere Else Completely," originally from *Elizabeth Murray: Paintings 1999-2003*, reprinted in *Laura Owens*, p. 305.

these "tensions and reconciliations," of being compared, in positive ways, to the patriarchs of high formalism, such as Matisse, rather than to her female predecessors working on formal investigations, such as Hilma af Klint, the inventor of Abstraction, Liubov Popova, Sonia Delaunay, Hedda Sterne, and of course, Elizabeth Murray, who worked similarly in between illusory and abstract spaces.⁴ One can easily see—and it is spelled out in the catalog—a strong formal influence of Elizabeth Murray in the sculptural, protruding and shaped portions of Owens's work, the edges and the space of the canvas not being contained within a traditional pictorial frame or plane. This dialectic, and the feminist historical connections it raises, connects with the ideas explored by Gerda Lerner in her histories of feminist consciousness and of patriarchy.

With an exhibition like *Laura Owens*, perhaps we could put an end to the cyclical refrain put so well by Linda Nochlin:

⁴ Prose, "Somewhere Else Completely," p. 305.

“Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” If you have to ask that question, you are not paying attention. The Dallas Museum of Art’s execution of the exhibition, however, confirms that Nochlin was right. Art is a social struggle “mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast.”⁵ That great men have stood on the shoulders of giants and that great women have had to keep reinventing their own histories is an idea from Gerda Lerner’s *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*. Both Nochlin and Lerner offer intellectually rigorous methods for rectifying the systemic flaws in patriarchal historical practices. At the same time *Laura Owens* revels in art history, it also seems to be pointing out that “women can reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses in general, and at the same time that they destroy false consciousness.”⁶

Laura Owens was billed by the DMA as an opening to a year of exhibitions celebrating “pioneering female artists,” and I wonder why this exhibition dazzled viewers in New York without being labeled “women’s art”? What does it say about Dallas? What does it say about how the DMA views women that this nationally touring exhibition of one of the most successful American artists—female or male—wasn’t shown with the same pride of place as Pollock’s black paintings? Why wasn’t an effort made to replicate the dazzling trompe l’oeil spatial effects of the Whitney installation when the museum rebuilt Betty Parsons’s gallery for *Blind Spots*—a very narrow slice of Jackson Pollock’s practice? Hard questions abound in response to the question of “pioneering” women.

5 Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971), in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (Routledge, 2018), p. 158.

6 Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, p. 176.

One thing is without question—that the Dallas installation of *Laura Owens* diminished its content, shown in disconnected spaces with little buildout. Some of the show was on view in the main halls of the museum and billed as a freebie. The main body of the exhibition was shown in the Hoffman Galleries, a space usually occupied by the *Concentrations* series—exhibitions for emerging and underrepresented artists. While the physically disjointed spaces might connect with Owens’s themes of time, space, body and brain, and meta-critique of context, it seems to indicate that the identity politics espoused in the exhibition PR are less than genuine in terms of an honest pursuit of equitable treatment within the institution—and what’s worse, it shed poor light on the art.

To truly support pioneering women, the DMA might have considered using their platform with *Laura Owens* as an attraction for a broader museum effort to give platform to under-recognized female artists. While there are certainly forward-thinking feminist curators at the DMA working hard on this front, it seems that the prevailing tendency of exhibitions has been to reflect, rather than challenge, the dominant culture. For example, during the twelve-month program of exhibitions led by “pioneering women,” three of the ten major exhibitions in 2018 were by women. Of the women shown, artists such as Laura Owens and the Guerrilla Girls are international art stars. Neither exhibition contributed significantly to bringing recognition to previously unrecognized women artists. This is marginally true for Ida O’Keefe, as the sister of an art historical icon.

The problem with this kind of effort is that it has to be sincere and backed not only by a few sincere members of the curatorial staff, but by the museum as a whole. Here, the DMA did not even achieve parity or equity in its roster of artists. One would only

have to survey female assistant professors or professors of painting nationwide to get a shortlist for “pioneering women” that would actually constitute a pioneering effort, rather than re-presenting exhibitions already anointed elsewhere. The pipeline is there, but even if the DMA did not believe this, they could pioneer by looking at programmatic support of working women artists. This kind of conversation and advocacy is desperately needed in the American South, an area far behind the rest of the developed world in supporting working women, let alone female artists. Examples of innovative efforts on this front include Mother House Studios in the UK, Aviatrix Atelier in Berlin and even networks like Cultural Reproducers in Chicago. These pioneers are making serious headway in providing the structural, material, and personnel support for women artists so that they don’t have to choose between artwork production and procreating.

Laura Owens speaks openly about her intent to “disrupt the narrative of the historical heroic painter.”⁷ Kirsty Bell writes, “These works are aimed right at the messy edges where the identity of an artist or painter is in constant collision with other simultaneous identities as lover, mother, teacher, colleague, or friend.”⁸ Throughout *Laura Owens*, viewers can see what they might interpret as evidence of her female, mother-human embodiment—buttons, childrens’ cartoons, macramé, her son, cut paper, puff paint—but playfulness in Owens’s work predates her motherhood and competes with it. Navigating the channel of motherhood is difficult, riddled with un-childlike, non-free responsibilities. *Laura Owens* provides a model of the mother

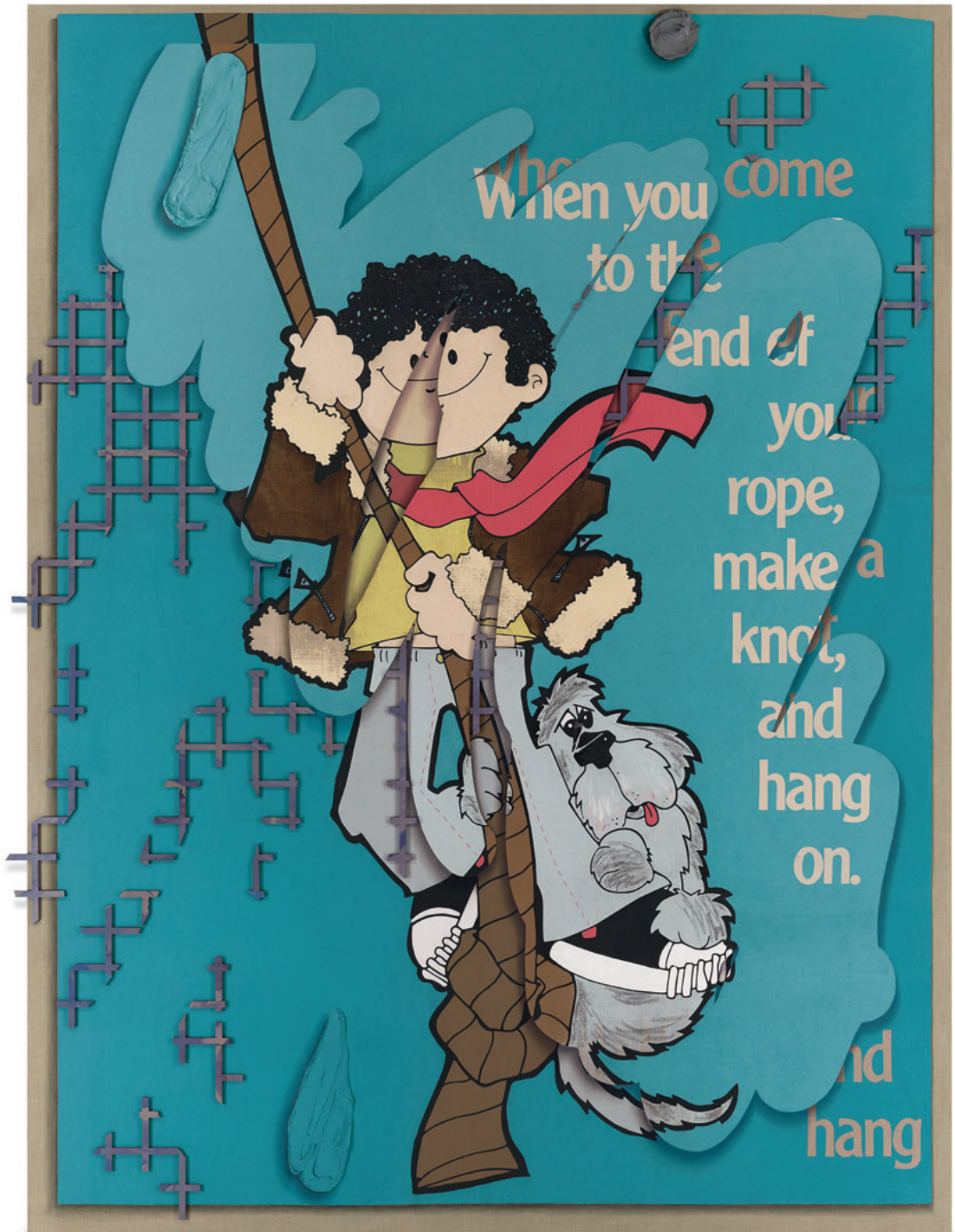
as human being, as artist, as creator that goes beyond overly simplistic interpretations of her visual motifs. The artist has forged a successful career during her childbearing years, without sacrificing in the name of hegemonic myths about what a female artist can reasonably do. Advancing Lerner’s model for the creation of feminist consciousness, *Laura Owens* provides broad shoulders for other women to stand while disrupting he-man mythologies.

Laura Owens used sometimes beautiful and delightful, sometimes visually puzzling artwork to ask us hard questions about the mythologies of the heroic male painter. Why should we expect anything else from an artist who has founded her practice on asking herself ever more challenging questions? The exhibition pointed out that too many people are happy to rest on the laurels of past accomplishments in formalism, believing arrogantly that everything that could be accomplished in terms of formal investigation has been accomplished by the patriarchs of the medium. Pushing back on the cyclical narrative of the “pioneering” woman artist, *Laura Owens* pointed out the insufficiency of simply patching new women into the all-male discourse of painting history.

Laura Owens interrogated space, time, body, and brain, giving us material evidence of a creative practice that incorporates the realities of painting after the digital revolution. The exhibition also interrogated the power structures of art, its interior spaces, its geography and its hegemony. The exhibition’s installation in Dallas demonstrates that context changes everything for an artwork. Whether intended by the artist or not, *Laura Owens* compelled us to question the hegemonic spaces of the museum, emboldened by the disservice of the museum’s installation, but also perhaps the inflexible constraints of the architecture itself. **A**

7 Laura Owens, lecture at UCLA Hammer Museum, February 3rd, 2011, online at <https://vimeo.com/92311793>

8 Bell, “On Laura Owens’s Idea of Edges,” p. 420.



Laura Owens, *Untitled* (detail), 2014, ink, silkscreen ink, vinyl paint, acrylic, oil, pastel, paper, wood, solvent transfers, stickers, handmade paper, thread, board, and glue on linen and polyester, five parts: 138 1/8 x 106 1/2 x 2 5/8 in. (350.8 x 270.5 x 6.7 cm) overall, © Laura Owens, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchased with funds from Jonathan Sobel.