

Overview



Laura Owens, *Untitled (LO 272)*, 2004. Color spit bite aquatint with soft ground etching. Paper size: 39-1/2 x 44-1/2"; image size: 29-1/2 x 35-1/2". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

Laura Owens

A peacock sits in a tree with the moon behind; a fox is reflected in a pond; a startled chicken looks down from a branch; a blue horse with a decorated tail prances; a whale spouts in a stormy sea. "Giving Girl Stuff a Good Name" is the headline for a March 2003 review in the *Los Angeles Times* of Laura Owens's recent survey show at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (LA MOCA). The headline, however, is just the starting place. Christopher Knight, who wrote the

review, praises Owens's paintings as "hugely ambitious" and "eminently reasonable." "They don't posit painting as a grandiose struggle with life-and-death forces," he says. "They don't pretend art is the most important thing going. ...Owens is at the leading edge of a large coterie that has brought painting back to prominence—not through bombast but by dismissing both its pretensions and those of its grandiloquent detractors."



Laura Owens, *Untitled (LO 271)*, 2004. Color spit bite aquatint with aquatint and soft ground etching. Paper size: 33 x 28"; image size: 24 x 20". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

Owens has said that she approaches her work in “a matter-of-fact way in order to take some of the preciousness or exclusiveness out of the history of the practice.” She sees art as a “speculation of possibilities” and believes that an artist’s life work is “a whole proposal for a way of looking at the world.” That proposal develops over time, changing and expanding, and subject matter is the least part of it. In fact, in addition to many paintings with subjects like those you see here, she has made portraits, landscape paintings, and at least one painting in which numbers are the subject. She also sometimes paints works designed for a particular space, and works composed of parts with specified spaces in between. “I am not interested in making people uncomfortable but at the same time I don’t have an interest in paintings that are truly passive,” Owens says. “The best paintings are ones that require an active, discerning viewer.”

If you spend a little time letting your eyes roam around in Owens’s etchings, you may be surprised at the depth of space in which you find yourself. It is a rolling space that pulls you

from point to point with a strong physicality only partly accomplished by the traditional means of chiaroscuro and perspective. Rolling waves or rolling horizon lines partly explain this, but how a flat chicken that looks almost pasted on can stand with such convincing precariousness in a three-dimensional space made only of brush strokes and blobs is beyond me to explain. No wonder he looks crazed! It is especially remarkable that Owens has accomplished her particular spatial magic in these relatively small, all-of-a-piece etchings. Her paintings, in which space is the hallmark, are usually very large, and in them thin washes of paint contrast with thick swatches straight from the tube to add a degree of actual dimensionality to the illusory space she skillfully creates.

I remember forty-two years ago in my first etching project with Wayne Thiebaud I tried to offer him techniques beyond etching’s traditional small plates and fine lines, and he said he was happy with those for the moment because he wanted to find out if he was relying too much on paint thickness and large scale in his paintings, new at the time, of pies and cakes.



Laura Owens, *Untitled (LO 270)*, 2004. Color spit bite and soap ground aquatints with aquatint and soft ground etching. Paper size: 33 x 28"; image size: 24 x 20". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

He wanted to see if he could “make it work with an economy of means.” Laura Owens is thirty-four. She had not been born when Thiebaud and I had that conversation, but I see her as cut from the same cloth as Thiebaud, the cloth used for what you could call the fearless explorer painters. In 1971, Thiebaud made a large color etching of a clown, saying it was a crazy thing to do, but very challenging. In the same way, Owens talks about a painting of a sunset she made in 1997. “This to me seemed like the hardest painting to make or maybe the most embarrassing, probably because it is such a cliché or because there are so many bad romantic paintings of sunsets. For me, it was the challenge of making it work—of making it interesting—that was inspiring. ...I make a lot of studies of paintings before making the final version, and for this one there were quite a few bad sunsets before I made some decisions about how to limit the color and paint. I ended up looking at Hokusai and Japanese prints in order to make decisions about the way I wanted the paint to be put down.”

There are, of course, crucial differences in attitude between

Thiebaud and Owens, so widely separated in age. The art world presents different givens now to artists than it did in the early '70s when Thiebaud made his clown etching. At that time, artists talked about installation art as being matter-of-fact and opposed to the illusionist art of painting. Painters, in general, weren't dealing with it. By the time Owens painted her sunset in the late '90s, installation art had become illusionist, or at least pictorial (as opposed to matter-of-fact), and most art school graduates had of necessity dealt with it. Owens, herself, did installation work as a student. Peter Schjeldahl, reviewing the 2004 Whitney Biennial in the *New Yorker*, talks about an “epiphany” he had in front of Owens's painting. “It struck me as an installational piece pulled flat. Why go to the trouble of deploying things in real space when, with painting, you can make their essences comprehensible at a glance? As a bonus, if you're Owens, you can enhance the encounter with hauntingly sophisticated color.”

Schjeldahl brilliantly pointed out installation art's influence on the deep, almost clunky space in Owens's paintings, but if



Laura Owens, *Untitled (LO 269)*, 2004. Color spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 25-1/2 x 15"; image size: 15-1/2 x 7". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

prancing horse that ended up blue in the finished work—this was the last print finished, though the first begun. She had brought illustrated books with her—I remember one on American folk art and another on Japanese brocades—but the horse came from her imagination and she drew it several times on paper before she drew it on a copper plate. Over the course of the project, she became skillful with spit bite aquatint, painting acid on the various plates. As time went on, the horse became muscular as she bit the plate again and again. She was delighted that once an image is etched in the plate it remains the same through unlimited color trials, unlike painting where changing colors means adding paint, or scraping and adding, and consequently changing the structure of the work.

I asked Owens later for the sources of the images she used in this set of etchings, and she told me the chicken is from a brocade in the Japanese Chamber at the palace Huis ten Bosch in the Hague, Holland. "The brocade is at least 200 years old, and its origin is in question, whether it is Japanese, Chinese or Dutch." The bird in the small print and the peacock in the large one are from 18th century American embroidery. The Arctic scene comes from scrimshaw. Her copies are not faithful, but the distinct characters of the original images

remain. In imagining someone long ago choosing each one as worthy of the lengthy attention required for carving or embroidery, I began to think that the charm is enduring—this "girl art" is not juvenile, as is much of the art labeled that way today. Owens says her subject matter is not symbolic. "The Northridge earthquake happened my last semester of grad school. I was pretty sure the building I was in was going to fall over. It didn't," she says. "But I stopped worrying about making art so much and just made stuff I liked and wanted to see."

Owens has said that arriving at the conclusion of a work involves momentum, which she builds slowly in her studio. At Crown Point, momentum developed quickly and was sustained as Owens worked with three printers, Catherine Brooks, Emily York and Dena Schuckit (who was in charge). "I usually have trouble starting and finishing things," Owens said, surprised at how much work came out of the two weeks she spent with us. Paul Schimmel, in his catalog essay for Owens's LA MOCA show, uses the word *collaborative*, a word often associated with printmaking, to describe how Owens works in her own studio with images from other artworks. Owens, he says, "counters traditional ideas of the painter's heroic isolation with collaboration." I asked Owens about this, and she said "collaboration happens all the time, in that we are influenced by so many outside events and people. I am sure the work I made at Crown Point would have been different had I been working with three other printmakers or at another print shop all together." And then she went on to talk about a different kind of collaboration, which she has done frequently in creating exhibitions or installations with other artists. "I have collaborated with a lot of artists," she said, "and I think the main difference between that and printmaking is that I don't have any say over how the other people participate and we usually determine the idea (materials, space, objects, etc.) together." The word *collaboration* can be used in different ways. In printmaking, the artist has all the say.

Schimmel's thought raises an interesting question in regard to printmaking. Does the old-fashioned artist working from a position of "heroic isolation" take less well to making prints than someone like Owens who is part of a generation of artists interested in collaboration? In the abstract, you would think so. But in searching back into Crown Point's history, I don't see a lot of difference. I think that any good artist who wants to make prints can do it.

During the time Laura Owens spent in the Crown Point studio, Mary Heilmann dropped in to sign a few prints from an earlier project. The two artists were delighted to see one another. Owens had been Heilmann's student at Cal Arts and



Laura Owens, *Untitled (LO 273)*, 2004. Spit bite aquatint with soft ground etching and drypoint printed in blue. Paper size: 22-1/2 x 17-1/2"; image size: 16 x 11-1/2". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

I had my druthers, I would change his word “essences” to “connections.” Owen’s work isn’t about the essences of the creatures depicted in it. Her success depends not so much on her cute animals as on the marvelous elbowroom they have. They are neither confined nor isolated. Despite hints of doom, they are o.k. There’s no double meaning, no irony. Both pleasure and precariousness are in the pictures. I like them because they make me smile and feel a little cocky for a while.

Owens lives in Los Angeles, and since receiving her M.F.A. from the California Institute for the Arts in 1994 has had a lot of art world attention, especially in Europe. In fact, Holland Cotter felt called upon to end a 2004 *New York Times* review of a solo show by saying “She, too, is a painter in progress. A lot is there, but canonization is premature.” Of course, that is true—Owens would be the first to say so. But it’s also true that her work, like much work from California (including, until recently, that of Thiebaud) can easily be perceived by critics steeped in New York angst as less serious and inventive

than it really is. Despite what some have called the slap-dash first impression of Owens’s paintings, she develops them slowly and builds them thoughtfully. Like most artists, she has rituals for getting started. “If I just start,” she says, “I’m a little too self-aware.”

She begins by “maniacally cleaning up all around the studio, scraping a pallet, taking out the trash, etc. Then after 45 minutes or so I might mix a few colors, maybe with the intention of using them for a test, then I return to cleaning. I go back and forth for an hour or so, cleaning/painting, until finally I am just working on the painting.” Working on the painting, at the start, means working on tests, drawings, and sometimes even full-scale cartoon images. She often draws from art images in books. Sometimes she scans her drawings or found images into a computer and rearranges elements and colors, then copies the bits she likes into the painting. “It’s almost like teaching myself to paint the painting I am going to make,” she says.

In the etching studio, Owens began with a drawing of the



Laura Owens in the Crown Point studio, 2004.

often mentions her as an influence, though Heilmann is an abstract painter and Owens's paintings do not resemble hers. The best type of influence an artist can have on another is the kind that doesn't show until one considers the ideas behind the work. Heilmann, originally from California, shifted from making anti-form sculpture to painting around 1970 and since then has been making paintings in New York in a breezy style that pioneered a casual attitude interesting to many young artists today. "I'm not adverse to gorgeousness at all," Heilmann has said. "I just want it to look like it happened without a struggle."

Owens has followed Heilmann's example in taking out the big theories of art and leaving in pleasure and fantasy. This

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small body of work in etching is one piece in the construction of her life work, her "whole proposal for a way of looking at the world."

—Kathan Brown

—The direct quotes from Laura Owens are taken, unless otherwise noted, from two interviews: the first with Benjamin Weissman in *Cakewalk*, Winter 2003 and the second with Gean Moreno in *Flash Art*, October 2003.

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