

## Laura Owens

Whitney Museum of American Art

Felix Bernstein

Laura Owens is perhaps best known for her post-digital canvases that bend painting and pixilation in uncanny ways. In contrast, her retrospective at the Whitney Museum shows a painter, who since her move to Los Angeles in the early '90s has been meticulously concerned with how the mind encounters text, image, information, and objects without offering any one technique for mediating contradictions in texture, taste, language, and genre. The work featured, about 70 paintings from the mid-90s to the present, shows that she has developed over time without a hackneyed scheme of rote progression. Her paintings are often produced in serial clusters—a continual re-contextualization delays the immediate consumption of any one painting in the show, and often points to site-specific structures. This includes inventive work with Jorge Pardo's furniture that blurs the lines between functional and dysfunctional objects, paintings-of-furniture and furniture-paintings. Found texts and images are not fodder just for conceptual operations or pure painterly abstractions but uniquely integrated together with neither aspect gaining precedence.

In an untitled painting from 1995, Owens paints angled lines representing a bug-eyed view of a floor that leads to a wall with a cluster of square and rectangular paintings, many of which were painted on directly by friends and family. This is just one of many of her works that makes one think of the collaborative, serialized, and diachronic construing of meaning in painting; not just for the painter, utilizing many means to produce her artwork, but also for the viewer, whose vantage is never static. Her 1997 series of paintings for a New York gallery feature a *mise-en-abyme* effect of paintings-in-paintings, investigating how one sees “paintings in the periphery while looking one head” and “how memory works in the painting.” Her astute knack at cross-reference extends into the show's colorful and glossy catalogue embedded creatively into seat cushions in the museum, with unique silk-screened covers. While, a series from 1999 includes a painting that is a stretched version of another, with the lines between digital alterations, screen-printings, and re-painting blurred.

The complexity of her unfurling, diachronic schemes is particularly striking in an age of Instagram-ready *couleur de rose* photography, clusterfuck masculinism, corporate lobby post-minimalism, and hand-me-down conceptualism; predicated on the instantaneousness of art. But this should not be reduced to a quirky sensibility, whimsical affect, or cartoonish post-Internet collage. Owens rather shows a rare ability to meld optical textures with conceptual framings, humorous critique, and ecstatic vision.

The show's tour de force is a five-panel untitled work from 2015 that occupies the Whitney's eight floor—from the proper distance, the five panels domino into a single image for each side of the panel. One side shows digital writing on gridded paper with intruding graph and drop-shadowed textures. The other side shows pixelated doodles, occasional words, and multicolored shadowy grids. The large panels are accompanied by a small oil painting that could be a prior study or posterior encapsulation of the giant panels. The small painting has an expressionistic enthusiasm with no hint of mechanical

reproduction, and shows a desk with a sheet of paper that reads in cursive, “into a pizza crust.” The paper represented here and on the panels has colored, graded lines; the kind used to learn to write. On the giant panels, the writing on graded lines feel more like a billboard, the handwriting changes to standard font, and we lose sense of the childlike hunger. Instead, the words, which are culled from a fairy tale by her son, Henry Bryan (then nine-years-old), read like found and collaged online language. The other side shows his drawings of scented marker flavors, but has the in-distinctiveness of touch-screen art. When it feels suddenly too digitally flat, stray globs of thick paint cause a three-dimensional interruption over the smooth surface.

It is precisely the indeterminacy of her jump from stream-of-consciousness to language-practice to standardized font to painterly gestures that shows the instability and ingeniousness of her representational strategy; akin to Eugene Ionesco’s use of language-learning-pamphlets in his absurdist play *The Bald Soprano*. Owens’ flipping from the macro to micro, blurry to clear, personal to conceptual, pixelated to painterly, prompts reflection on the jagged accrual of meaning, not just by the child learning to write, but also the adult learning to process an aestheticized information economy. This strategy is even clearer in her works that paint over silk-screened newspaper writing; highlighting certain areas with floating doodles, and covering other areas with gray paint. Rather than archly pointing to a given structural irony, as in the Warholian tradition, her use of found text points to the imaginative, fanciful, and arbitrary aspect of reading. Other paintings use found imagery from children’s books and cutesy depictions of animals. Born in Ohio in 1970, Owens is part of a legacy of feminist painters, who push oft-maligned feminine, cute, and cartoony content to the point of abstraction. The curators frame her use of kitsch as upending the heroic, masculinist seriousness of painting. And yet the paintings also play complex structural tricks, disintegrate and re-integrate the grid, and use known avant-garde tropes (such as a painting with bicycle wheels that nods to Duchamp) that can be theoretically austere, as much as it cute or zany.

The show’s labels sometimes use Owens’ deft deconstruction of painting as an apologia for painting—symptomatic of the modern museum’s aversion to rigorous medium specificity in diffident, feminist, and queer artists. This stems from a phobia of painting, along with traces of expressionism, and modernism, unless performed by pre-approved male masters. For artists who fall outside the textbook history, medium specificity without explicit *détournement* is *verboden* unless accompanied by established tropes of the avant-garde—bicycle wheel irony, the grid, narcissistic-feedback-loops, and readymade-subjectivity. As the modern museum canonizes feminism and the maternal quotidian, it has chalked it all up to that now-old medium, *new media* (kinetic, performative, expanded, hybrid, 2.0), in an effort to wipe these practices clean of the taint of medium-traditionalism (be it in theater, dance, painting, film). The need for art to be perceived as ever-refreshing-site of dialectic breaking colludes with the demand of the attention-deficit-museumgoer for each room to feel as a radical break with the consciousness of the boring passé moment before. This can eliminate the possibility of thinking through the historical continuum that artists like Owens traverse in their development of what becomes known as *the re-new*.