

BROWN, BLUE, AGAIN AND LAURA OWENS' LUMINOUS WAYS OF GOING SANE

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Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2006, acrylic and oil on linen, 63 x 45 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

Echo Park, Los Angeles

I reached Laura Owens' house and studio, lost in my mind, walking my thoughts through large fields of colour. The ground has waves and the sky embraces the universe with flat, parallel orbits. Because brown and blue areas share the same space with graceful agreement, sky, earth and water seem to merge into each other, while animal and human stories move across the paintings and do not care whether they are believable or not.

A few blocks from her place a black owl looks at me from the porch of a cottage. It's a painted stone. A blue pillow is barely balanced on her head. She looks annoyed. Ten minutes further a miniature castle emerges from the bushes. It is to me as if they both, castle and owl, had escaped from the painter's dreams. July 2, 2009.

In her 1999 statement in *Artforum*, Laura Owens sounds crystal clear, "You really want to make the painting that you want to be with. Not one that is constantly telling you everything it knows. Who wants to be with something, or someone, like that? It's more fun to be with someone who is willing to go out on a limb, embarrass themselves a bit." In her words paintings have a life, each of them a unique fragment of the universe. The artist would wait for up to a couple of years before she talks about them. In the meantime, her paintings keep defying common sense and deviating from the subject, which, in these days, matters so much. The coat of "what is it about?" has become a heavy weight on our heads, and forces us to bow to impersonal objectivity, as if



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2006, acrylic and oil on linen, 80 x 60 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

art pieces were cold corpses on anatomic table. How shall we cut them?

Because Laura Owens' paintings are all untitled, I will only mention the year they were made. About her children, instead, Laura can talk extensively: the boy is four years old, the girl is 18 months and she already knows what and how she wants to eat.

"A painting should fit in your life." Does it mean it should not harm the dance of your motherhood, for the most contrasted, uncontrollable throbs of your mind are allowed to stay in the paintings, lain in a girl stretched out on the back of a horse, electrifying her hands and her braids, while she crosses the darkness that melts foliage and branches? 2003. Miniature stars look down at her, tiny eyes hidden in a broken tree, or were the stars in the girl's eyes? Can she see through the mist, the firmament which is in her mind?

Frankly I don't believe that the very many visual sources on which Laura Owens has posed her attention count for more than the little owl on the porch. Literal representation is not her goal, nor her process. Three hands crossed near a wall become a painted wild sprout of fingers pushing their vigor out of their forms as cacti do; red, blue, purple with the effort of wanting to grow, the wrists below with cuff and watch, like plants from the mouth of a vase. Maybe they also inspired the portrait of two women, one red haired, and the other blond, whose busts gush from only one thin waist, sensually expanding vertical tension until they press their red lips on the face of the same man. I might be wrong, my own way of seeing it.

Laura Owens' paintings have a language of their own, and a very specific feeling: one can be enchanted, along with the artist, by a leopard crashed on a branch so heavily she seems exhausted, one pupil looks up, the other looks down, while her tongue is being scratched by three curved nails protruding from her paws: perplexity. 2005.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2005, oil and collage on linen, 37 3/4 x 43 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2003, oil and acrylic on linen canvas, 6 x 7 feet.
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

2004: a landscape seems painted by opposite hands, Hieronymus Bosch and Disney at the same time. Illusionary depth without perspective: Laura Owens' secretly wearing browns and blues when the day is over. The surface becomes moist, vaporous, woody, or foggy, vanishing and subtle. At times, ungraspable figures of light, at other times bodies punching out, sensuality, directly from Picasso or Gauguin, naked bodies blown by desire. Life changes through time and paintings should fit too with whatever happens, or they might disintegrate as if hit by a bomb, making the animal's eyes scared and angry. 2006.

Images are not icons; the way they are painted is what counts. Talking with Tomma Abts, Laura Owens was surprised by Peter Doig's idea that the paint should just "assist the image, allow it to exist."

"It may sound strange because I have a lot of images very securely rendered in the paintings, but I definitely think of the paint as primary: the paint itself has to feel alive over (or inside) the image. If this isn't happening, then the paintings feel very stagnant or claustrophobic. I am thinking about the paint as paint rather abstractly most of the time."

One of the most abstract images I found in Owens' recent work is a tiny, red ladybug recurring in two paintings, delicately held between thumb and forefinger of the left hand: by a naked feminine creature growing leaves and wings from her head, maybe – who knows – on her way to become a swan, 2006, and by a naked baby emerging from a jungle of thoughts. It is hard not to be dragged into the playground of an artist who lets her senses go away from the illusion that ideas are the natural and strong leaders of human lives.

Ladybugs are what we hold in our hands as we think of pregnancy, birth, or the first chirping of children pulsing in our body like music, or colours: they cannot be described. The cautious gentleness toward the insect is bigger than any understanding, but also brings up bewilderment, and a questionable sense of wonder, as if a red dot with tiny legs were the real thing, the required anchor for psychic survival. I rarely thought a painter could be so wise, and definitely sane. Once more I could be wrong.

In her studio, July 2, 2009: "If I had to know why I was doing anything I would have done nothing. The mind plays tricks on you, giving the impression you do stuff for a reason, and it is not true. Anything can be a painting, but you have to commit: holding down and feeling your way through."

Laura Owens is a serious, meticulous worker. Starting from a feeling, she draws and redraws, needing months of preparation before she is able to see what the painting

is going to be. Since 2003, the year of her retrospective at MOCA (Los Angeles), to find the right time for working has been hard. She fed her children, had mastitis. Looked at Madonnas in old paintings with real participation, became more interested in figures. But social boundaries, the sentiment that good life is designed by politics and the marketplace, in a word by those "who know" how to run other people's lives – the same happens in the arts – do not touch her.

"Our culture is so limited about things that are not agreed upon: norms, spirits, things you do not see. There is a lack of touch with what's out of day-to-day." Heavy shoes and feet on the ground, she adds, "The washing machine exploded yesterday." The plumber is about to come, no less consubstantial with the art making than the air from the windows.

Laura Owens, ten years ago, wrote that her paintings are specifically American, with roots in Midwestern America (she is from Euclid, Ohio); "It's a straightforward, no-bones-about-it sensibility and a certain sense of humor." She does not have a good feeling about the conservative, Christian environment of her native town, agitated by gossip, with no escape in a movie theater or a shopping mall. There weren't any.

"To survive you had to develop something in yourself in order to stay sane. If somebody had seen a seventeen-year-old girl smoking a cigarette in class, in two hours everyone knew. To get donuts after church was the main activity, along with the video-rental place. But, to get bored is good. Kids have to develop on their own."

"Police and teachers were in charge. We were supposed to believe that yellow people start wars. I desperately wanted to get out. Finally my parents, when I was in high school, sent me to a summer camp for the arts in Michigan. Nobody was making fun of me if I liked to do big paintings. It changed my life."

"Conclusion is the course of all/ At most to be perennial/ And then elude stability/ Recalls to immortality" (Emily Dickinson)

The artist can walk across the stage disguised with moustaches, on a cross-eyed *papier-mâché* horse moved by human legs, once more telling the story of the sky meeting the ground, before the curtains close. Whatever the mood of the paintings, hierarchy and ideological formulas are banned from her scenes. *Andante con moto*, her paint takes you from detail to detail, figures are not irrelevant, and yet they are not of great importance. There is air in her imaginary world, and your brain can breathe.