



## How Laura Owens' New Boyle Heights Exhibit Moves Painting Forward

By **Andrew Berardini**  
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What can paintings do? According to Laura Owens, they can be clocked and stretched, gridded and smeared, silkscreened with armies of cats and personal ads, representational and abstract, both a surface and ever simply, at the end, a picture.

In the late '90s and early 2000s, Laura Owens was one of those rare meteors in the art world, instantly attracting attention (while also finding detractors). Thanks to a headful of knowledge and a brushful of history, a menagerie of simple, abstract animals danced right out of books and into her canvases. Maybe those paintings sometimes shimmied with Matisse's frank and naked joy or flattered the lyrical fantasies of Henri Rousseau, but the colors were all wrong. Or rather, all wrong in that way that was altogether all right with Owens, from electric blue to radioactive yellow — colors that if you mixed them together in an outfit, people might take you for colorblind.

Born in Ohio but living for years in Los Angeles, she consciously takes from a dozen avenues of art history, from post-Impressionism to Japanese screens, along with less high-art diversions like quilts and embroidery, newspapers and computer programs, a self-aware cultural mélange academics used to call postmodern, with all its self-consciousness. I don't think that Owens ever implies for a moment that we're looking at anything but a painting — though she thankfully lacks some of that movement's knowing smirk.

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Though history and reference jostle and flow through Owens' work, giving the whole shebang a good strong skeleton, what makes them alive is flesh and blood: the weird, distinctly personal emotions, dreams and memories of their maker. Not to say it's easy to spot anything biographically literal in any one of her canvases (though a few swirly red hearts sneak in her latest crop), but you feel it. A critical-historical-theoretical blender didn't make these things up, a real live woman did.

In her new exhibit of 12 large paintings at 356 S. Mission Rd. — Owens' studio, which she's turned into a gallery — her earlier palette hasn't disappeared but just grown dancier, a dynamic army of colors stripped out of '80s sticker collections and soaked out of Punky Brewster's socks, both synthetic and vibrant, in the neighborhood of neon but fuzzier. Here we have a teenage girl's

lipsticked and doodled Trapper Keeper, schooled by Miró and freed by feminism, aged and evolved to a level of supreme compositional sophistication.

If Owens is doing anything in her first major exhibition in Los Angeles since her solo show at MOCA in 2003, she's exploring with humor and skill the possibilities of paintings. It doesn't wholly make sense just to isolate a single work — these feel entirely intended to be seen and felt together as a single exhibition. (They're all untitled). To peel one off the pack is to miss the point. In one painting there's a childish clipper ship, each sail with its own pattern, hanging next to a multilayered abstraction of intersecting grids over a lavender wash, then top-layered with big beautiful swirls of a pale violet painted like idle doodles. Adulterated with other vibrant hues, the huge licks of pink and mint paint curling across the surface resemble more a Photoshop paint tool than an actual brush. These two paintings and all the ones around them are held together by recurring phrases, a distinct palette, and a formal style (in writing it's called a voice) that brings all the seemingly disparate elements into a satisfying whole.

But, more than satisfying, her current show is really important. She fully brings the often isolated medium of painting back into a bigger conversation.

Conceptualism, in L.A. and beyond, has been the dominant art school for what seems like ages now. In this loose movement begun in the 1960s and '70s, ideas took precedent over the materials, with a language of archives and indices, puns and grids, and an emphasis on dematerialization — meaning art without objects, from performance art to empty rooms mixed with a statement and a dream. From its

inception, conceptualism redefined what it meant to make art, but in the last fifteen years, the artists involved have become the central focus of curators and historians, reassessed prominently in magazines and given scads of retrospectives: John Baldessari, Lawrence Weiner and Dan Graham being three examples who have come through L.A. museums.

Students and youngsters who thumbed through the magazines and wandered into these shows were invariably influenced by the modes and methods of conceptualism. Curators cycling through all the retrospectives reacted by tending to prefer new artists that were like the old ones, and the market mostly followed.

Conceptualism and related movements became dominant, to the point that by the '80s critics were declaring the "death of painting." With academics rushing to justify it, conceptualism's jokey, rebellious spirit got sucked out of it, becoming at times yawningly doctrinaire. In this last decade, the bend in the critical conversation has been such that now, not only can ideas take precedence over materials, but there's a sense they should. This account is a bit reductive, and conceptualism wasn't the only thing going on all these years, but it certainly felt like a big, mostly pleasant gust of air you couldn't ever move without getting brushed by.

I'm not saying Laura Owens didn't get brushed by that big gust of air too. But of all the painters coming out of the '90s, those souls trying to slink past the "death of painting," Owens was one of the brightest and perhaps least afraid to be silly and human and perhaps even potentially bad. Always connected to material and medium in a way that just wasn't conceptualism's jam, Owens let the paint inform her fantastical landscapes and tense Technicolor abstractions.

What's become conceptualist orthodoxy has been punctured a hundred times in a hundred places. Owens certainly didn't kill it, but looking up from her show it feels surely gone. Other attacks and attempts to move past conceptualism have tended toward a dunderheaded emphasis on formalism, complete devotion to material over ideas. Owens happily doesn't abandon or ignore conceptualism, but pushes toward a space where ideas and materials matter.

Painting has long felt isolated from the rest of art. Because of the influence of conceptualism, painting felt separate, somehow more stupidly commercial and certainly less cool. Now, in part thanks to Owens, it doesn't.

Owens isn't alone here, you feel her former professor Mary Heilman at her back and a whole community of women painters to her left and right here in L.A. becoming individually masterful in this medium, including Dianna Molzan, Mary Weatherford, Rebecca Morris, Alex Olson and Sarah Cain, to name a few. Artists in other places have attempted recalibration and redefinition for painting in other ways: London's Merlin Carpenter and New York's Wade Guyton are surely pushing painting in new directions, but with a certain cynicism.

In her new exhibit, Owens realizes much of the promise of her early years with a loud and powerful declaration for painting to be returned to the serious conversation around art. You may not be charmed by every dip and swirl or able to explicate every choice, but it would be silly to deny these paintings their force and vision, both of which are sweeping. Composed by hand and with computers, painted with silkscreens and brushes with an array of colors stripped straight from the synthetic array available when picking a website's colors, Owens' work has intelligence, heart and humor — 12 paintings that feel like a single gesture, in a way that bends the space of the room. Possibilities are just openings in the end, windows pointing out to other places. With these paintings she's surely opened some sizable windows, twelve feet high and rising.

12 PAINTINGS BY LAURA OWENS | 356 S. Mission Road, Boyle Heights | Through June | (323) 609-3162, 356mission.com

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