

Laura Owens

Interview with Brad Phillips

BP: *Ms. Owens, You did a residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in 2003. You subsequently showed that work and turned it into a publication. The reason because it seems like you and the Museum are a perfect combination - but that experience informed the work you are making now?*

LO: Yes, it has. Mrs. Gardner used textiles and fabric in very liberal ways throughout the museum. Probably because of this I was drawn to the textile department and got to look at a lot of the textile collection that is not shown. The conservators told me where I could look at more amazing textiles in Europe, so I made a trip to a number of museums and got backstage appointments, which was fantastic. In some ways it opened my eyes to another world of "painting" (or is that older and more widespread). Most textiles in these collections are anonymous, and that led me back to folk art, much of which is also by "anonymous." A chain of events has continued to inspire me and get me to look outside prescribed histories of painting, allowing me to add to the canon.

More specifically, I made paintings for the exhibition that investigated a Japanese Kimonos Gardner owned and drawings by Eiji in the collection.

And - in a more specific yet abstract way - Gardner used the whole museum as an "installation." I thought about this a lot, the many finely and amazing groups who work there pointed out how many of the portraits "rearrange" in one another through hallways and rooms seems to tell a story. I definitely picked up on this and it intrigues me can we see that I try to do this within several works you're doing.

BP: *I like the idea of works communicating with each other. The downside is that you avoid your work to be able to hold its own, as that communication with other works isn't necessary. You're sort of knowing for me being still down to a single word or style. Does that make a lot of sense, or are you comfortable with following your instincts? I've seen and more interested in instincts lately, and you seem to have a good relationship with yours.*

LO: I don't really see that as a downside. I think that the work contains a sort of anecdotal history that travels forward with the piece. You never know, really, where the work will end up, so it definitely can't rely on the context for completion. However, that sort of history can be interesting for a painting. And you have to remember that the work keeps moving and changing.

I generally try to keep my own questions about a work's final success or failure on hold. Looking at it in black and white seems (to me) as interesting as seeing the work as fluid. There is a certain feeling in the studio that I have when a work is "finished," and over time I have learned to trust myself - even if another piece of me might want to overwork something. Also, the first time I show a work the location or site can be useful as motivation or inspiration.

Following my instincts comes naturally to me. Leaving things open in terms of what to paint, how to paint, has always been the interesting part. It is also sometimes awful, because it is a lot like starting over every time.

I have realized that I can't get away from myself so much - how hard I try to rely on my color and use what happens. It allows the work to unfold over longer spans of time than perhaps one show or even a few years. Back to school I tried to plan things out and really have a clear idea as to the what and why of everything I made. This work ended up being boring for me, as I returned to painting, and I liked that, although I mean, so that when speaking about my work, it had a much longer shelf life for me as a viewer.

BP: *Pop neurologist Malinda Glanzhoff has written that 10,000 hours of anything can render anyone an expert. Do you think you've spent 10,000 hours looking at and making art? Because I know I have, and I think that's part of why I am comfortably working mostly instinctively and not worrying about the why's and what's and all that. Is that a question? No. Hell it is, I guess. But remind me sometimes of Gains and sometimes of Morris Louis and in that gap there is a great deal to resemble.*

LO: This reminds me of something that someone told me, I think, Tim Elmer said - but maybe he was quoting something historical - that every artist has to first make 300 really bad paintings. It is unavoidable. I always tell this to my students, but I don't think it makes them feel any good... I always think it will help them just get going and trying to make "art" and just paint.

I feel very at home around art. I could imagine that comes from a broad familiarity or just time just into looking at art. At the same time there are many works I love but never yet, and I know that when I do see them it will probably change my whole perception of art. This happened just six years ago when I visited the Prado in Spain for the first time. It was so overwhelming and altered so much of my thinking. I really felt that it deepened a basic sensitivity to painting and looking. This happens to me periodically when I see something for the first time, or even when I see something I may have previously passed by or read about in books a first, and had.

It is interesting that you bring up Gains and Morris Louis because I have very strong and clear memories of my first experience with each of them.

This conversation reminds me a little of the Hindu religion and polytheism. One way of looking at it is that polytheism is a necessity because God cannot be expressed in just one form; you need all the different forms to see the different aspects of God, like walking around something and seeing it from all sides. Sometimes I think this is how I resemble being interested in such different artists every work is an aspect of the same experience, and you need many of them to get a sense of the intensity and intensity of that experience.

BP: *Tell me about your emotional reaction to Gains and Morris Louis. I remember being at the Newington Chapel in Padua and having 15 minutes to look at a Gains piece. There was graffiti scrawled on the wall from the 19th century "I believe you love." It was an incredible addition to the scene. And I think that, oddly, Morris Louis is*

making a comeback. Does that mean Kenneth Noland is back too? Something about those color field work painters seems so arguably necessary right now.

LO: These emotional reactions are embedded in who I was at the time, it's hard to express fully. I can only give you the biographical picture of what happened and how it changed what I thought a painting could be. For instance, seeing Morris Louis at the Cleveland Museum of Art - I was a child on a field trip, my body was much over the painting was large. It changed something about my perception of walking towards a painting and what that could mean. It felt incredible but also very powerful.

BP: *Do you make paintings that are bigger than you are, hoping to get that feeling back again?*

LO: I think I make larger paintings to be able to play with a type of liberation and bodily experience that is different than in a small painting. Also, the imagery or content sometimes demands the work.

BP: *Do you want to tell a bit about what you're working on right now? Also, I usually ask people - Matine or Pissarro? Seems to be a sort of limbo art.*

LO: I am working on making heads and a few largeish paintings - kind of in the middle of it all, so it's hard to talk about it. Matine or Pissarro. I guess I feel compelled to say Matine, and I am sure Pissarro isn't give a shit if I don't pick him.