



# Laura Owens

Camden Arts Centre / September—November 2006  
File Note #16 Laura Owens

Danny Rolph

# Laura Owens

“In seeking to assure myself about what I can be certain of”, wrote Descartes, “my thinking proceeds step by step according to my own rules.” In my opinion, Laura Owens pursues a similar attitude. Her paintings revel in the pleasure of visual signs, methods and attitudes co-existing for and against each other. Qualities that seem initially incompatible and in opposition with each other quickly achieve a rightness that oscillates somewhere between the eye and the mind.

The familiar and the unbelievable aspects of her imagery are underpinned, I feel, by two key elements. The first element is her technical prowess; it is evident in the incredible range of brushwork and surfaces she consistently creates. The second element is an informed, unpredictable and eclectic attitude towards creating a picture. This attitude is communicated through her exploration of the various languages of painting, adding a charged dimension to the characters or situations that inhabit the work, resulting in a variety of pictorial questions. Her paintings are other worlds that operate out of time and context in which stylistic and historic references can co-habit with well-known or little-known borrowed art historical characters. (Laura Owens is as adept at referencing American artists like Florine Stettheimer and Grandma Moses as she is Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec or Chinese scrolls.)

Her willingness to experiment with new narratives and methods, often within one painting, is evident in *Untitled* (2002). My first encounter with this work was at Laura Owens’ show at MOCA, Los Angeles, in early 2003. I wrote a note to myself at the time which read: “A large work roughly 7' x 11', *Untitled* (2002) has a magic story-telling quality in which day meets night, a variety of animals go about their business, solid and ghostly trees without leaves occupy a sparse landscape alongside a waterfall on the right that gives the painting a vast depth. The wispy stylised clouds that rise from the waterfall touch the moonlit night sky where a cranky owl with Marty Feldman-like eyes waits and watches on a heavily curved branch that straddles the clouds and the night sky becoming more solid as it awkwardly occupies the centre of the composition going down and falling

*Untitled* 2002 / Oil and acrylic on linen / 213.3 X 335.3 cm  
Collection David Teiger. Courtesy Gavin Brown



*Untitled* 2006 / Acrylic, oil and felt on linen  
213.3 X 274.3 cm / The Dakis Joannou Collection Foundation



off the bottom edge at the trunk of the tree. The left-hand branch reaches up through the top of the composition and plays host to a monkey (borrowed from an eleventh-century Chinese scroll) beckoning a butterfly. His three brothers are way off in the background on the right, precariously resting on some rocks and other trees. The trunk of the main tree hides most of the bear who, like the rabbit in the bottom left and the tortoise in the bottom right, stares upwards. The monkeys and the squirrels are doing the opposite and looking downwards. You wander back to the owl who doesn't know now whether to look up or down! Beautifully slight 'rogue' brushstrokes of varying colours that occupy the composition all over are blown around like pollen. Various flora and fauna are strewn around the bottom part of the composition interspersed with scattered playing cards whilst tiny birds occupy the ghostly trees near which deer roam."

Then I looked around at the other work in the show and came back to the painting I have just described. This time I was blown away by the methods Laura Owens had employed, on which I wrote: "Thin washily painted bear next to a greasy, large tree, the rogue brushstrokes that looked like pollen have become oily impasto leaves. An incredibly washy stream touches the sky with its fresh exuberance. Night re-appears brushily on the right behind the trunk and at the top left with a few stylised unrecognisable black shapes. The two main butterflies begin to look enormous, flying towards each other like reckless stunt pilots, under which I now, for the first time, can see the unpainted linen ground." This painting, as you may have gathered from my notes, dazzled and took me to a place without time and



Untitled 2004 / Oil on linen / 46.3 X 53.3 cm  
Thea Westreich and Ethan Wagner

Untitled 2006 / Acrylic and oil on linen  
74.3 X 53.9 cm Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ and collection  
Florence and Philippe Segalot, New York



context, its varying narratives undermined and underpinned by an alternative narrative flow.

There has always been a charm and self-mocking quality to Laura Owens' work that re-energises the potential inherent in the act of painting, transforming various time and spatial realities back into an abstracted form. Her pictures have a sleight of hand and, like those of Albert Oehlen or Raoul De Keyser, seem to possess a pretence of ease. Evidence of enjoyment is refreshingly there in the work. I believe there is no irony apparent in her adopting this position, which in turn has created new possibilities or rules for painting to escape the grubby clutches of 'serious' art historical polemics. Genuinely fascinating propositions created in her clever borrowings, samplings or touch have made Laura Owens a very important cultural reference point for a generation of artists, rather like her near contemporary Chris Ofili.

There is a matrix of questions, definitions and meanings in Laura Owens' work that has found and is continuing to find ways to help painting's evolution in the twenty-first century. Her work makes a great claim for the necessity of painting. For me, as another painter, that's pretty hot!

Danny Rolph is a painter based in London. He is represented by Hales Gallery, London and A.R.Contemporary, Milan.



Untitled 2006 / Acrylic and oil on linen  
121.9 X 109.2 cm / Private collection  
Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ

Design: James Goggin & Sara De Bondt / Practise

**Laura Owens** was born in Euclid, Ohio in 1970 and lives and works in Los Angeles. She studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence (1992), Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and the California Institute of the Arts (1994). At Cal Arts she met the abstract painter Mary Heilman who was to have a significant influence on Owens, who also cites American folk art as a source of inspiration.

Foremost among the generation of young US artists credited with reinvigorating painting as a medium during the 1990s, Owens has had numerous solo exhibitions in the US and in Europe including Kunsthalle Zürich (2006); Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2006); Shiseido Gallery, Japan (2005); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2003); Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (2001) and Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh (2000).

The exhibition at Camden Arts Centre is Owens' first one-person show in a public space in the UK. Laura Owens is represented in London by Sadie Coles HQ and by Gavin Brown's enterprise in New York.

---

**Reading/Viewing/Listening List** Selected by Laura Owens

- Erica Wilson *Crewel Embroidery* Charles Scribner (1962)  
ISBN 0684106736
- Muneshige Narazaki *The Japanese Print and its Evolution and Essence*  
English adaptation by C.H. Mitchell,  
Kodansha International (1969)
- Alan Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*  
Collier-Mac, 1967 ISBN 0020681208
- Jerome Armstrong and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga,  
*Crashing the Gate: Netroots, Grassroots, and the  
Rise of People-Powered Politics* Chelsea Green Publishing ISBN 1931498997
- Stanley Donen (Dir.) *The Little Prince* (1974)
- Marlo Thomas and friends, *Free To Be ... You And Me*  
Television Cast Recording (1972)
- Frank Loesser *Guys & Dolls* Original Broadway Cast (1950)
- Harry Smith (ed.), *Anthology of American Folk Music* Original Recording  
Remastered, Smithsonian Folkways (Audio CD 1998)
- Ella Jenkins *You Sing a Song and I'll Sing a Song*  
Smithsonian Folkways (Audio CD 2004)
- Michael Webster *Lotus Festival* Lovethink (Audio CD 2000)

---

**Published to accompany the exhibition**

**'Laura Owens' at Camden Arts Centre** 29 September–26 November 2006  
Organised in collaboration with Kunsthalle Zürich

All images © the artist. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London and  
Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York



Camden



Funded by Camden Council

[www.camdenartscentre.org](http://www.camdenartscentre.org)

Open: Tuesday, Thursday, Friday,  
Saturday, Sunday 10am-6pm  
Wednesday 10am-9pm  
Closed: Mondays and Bank Holidays

020 7472 5500  
020 7472 5501

[www.camdenartscentre.org](http://www.camdenartscentre.org)

Registered charity 1065829  
Registered company 2947191  
VAT reg. no. 586 9041 03

Arkwright Road  
London  
NW3 6DG

T +44 (0)20 7472 5500  
F +44 (0)20 7472 5501

Camden  
arts centre

info@  
camdenartscentre.org  
[www.camdenartscentre.org](http://www.camdenartscentre.org)



Cover: *Untitled* 2006 / Oil and acrylic on linen  
76.2 × 83.8 cm / Courtesy Gavin Brown

*Untitled* 1995 / Marker, ink, coloured pencil, crayon on canvas  
183.5 × 214 cm / Private collection