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## Culture Jammers

Novelist Rachel Kushner and painter Laura Owens join forces as they both gather new acclaim

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The painter Laura Owens and the novelist Rachel Kushner have been friends for almost fifteen years. In 2003, they became neighbors when Kushner moved into Owens' Echo Park neighborhood. That same year Owens became the youngest artist to receive a retrospective show at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles. Then Kushner's literary star began rising, with her first novel, *Telex from Cuba*, nominated for a 2008 National Book Award. Now her just-published second novel, *The Flamethrowers*, has generated glowing reviews-in the New Yorker, critic James Wood compared her to Flaubert-and excited buzz among the literati. Producer Scott Rudin scooped up the film rights, just two weeks after Kushner learned that she'd been awarded a prestigious Guggenheim Grant. Owens, meanwhile, is regularly hailed as one of the most important American painters working now, with numerous solo shows to her credit.

The two friends consider themselves "aesthetic allies." Owens' paintings often suggest fragments of folkloric or literary narrative, and Kushner's new novel is set largely in the New York City art world of the 1970s (with forays to an aristocratic Northern Italian estate and the tumultuous political protest scene in Rome). Last year, Owens and her high-flying New York dealer, Gavin Brown, decided to co-produce a huge new space in a converted Boyle Heights industrial building, which they named after its address: 356 Mission. Working there, Owens finished twelve enormous, joyful paintings that will be hanging through the spring. They've been embraced by critics as, in the words of one, "a loud and powerful declaration for painting to be returned to the serious conversation around art."

"I just really wanted to show my paintings in L.A., and to show them in the space in which they were made," Owens says. "And the space was so large-I decided to do more than just show art there." So Owens and Kushner thought up an event that would bring their work together in a literal way: a spaghetti dinner at 356 Mission that would bring to life a scene from *The Flamethrowers*-a fictional dinner party that takes place in Mark Rothko's old Bowery loft. They began lining up actors to read the parts of the radical '70s artists and poseurs Kushner invented for her novel. In early April, with the event a few weeks away, Kushner was still trying to convince Paul Reubens, aka Pee Wee Herman, to read the part of enigmatic conceptual artist Stanley Kastle. With plans for 120 guests chowing down on pasta, listening to Kushner's witty dialogue as Owens' canvases presided on the walls, the evening promised to perfectly capture the buoyant mood of the current Eastside L.A. culture scene.

Kushner is full of praise for Owens, as well as hopes for the future of 356 Mission. "Laura has always struck me as a singular person," Kushner says. "She's influential, and probably has a lot of power in the art world, but she's not interested in power or fame. She's interested in doing stuff -with other people."

Owens, for her part, admires the way Kushner defines her characters while retaining an air of mystery around them. She loved the first book, but calls *The Flamethrowers* "a lot more ambitious in weaving these two countries and narratives together. The way she can describe how a social interaction is happening-it's very perceptive and subtle."

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