

Robin Muir. "THE GARDEN ISSUE: ANOTHER COUNTRY..." *The Independent* (UK) March 30, 2002.

THE INDEPENDENT

THE GARDEN ISSUE: ANOTHER COUNTRY Rare textile designs and scenes from nature are the inspiration for Laura Owens' quintessentially American paintings. Robin Muir talks to the artist who is making a name on both sides of the Atlantic

by Robin Muir

Within about five minutes of graduating from the California Institute of Arts (CalArts) in 1994, Laura Owens became the brightest among the bright young stars of the Los Angeles art scene, and was hyped to the heavens. She was brought back down to earth by a personal epiphany, the earthquake of later that year: "It was a wake-up call," she remembers. "I realised it really doesn't matter what you do - you can do anything you want ... "

Now 32, living in LA, and with a growing reputation on both sides of the Atlantic, she's glad she stuck it out. Her colourful paintings sing out with a cheerful effortlessness that frequently obscures their rich textures, the striking pictorial effects and the pleasure to be found in a long, hard look at the detail. So much so that one critic recently wrote in admiration: "Owens pulls off casual without resorting to big statements about low-key. She makes painting look easy ... " Another critic, pausing in front of her pastel hues, declared (also in admiration) that, at first glance, the Owens oeuvre looks a little like the "paintings people buy in department stores to hang over sofas".

But for all her sunny disposition, and her ice-cream parlour palette of colours - described variously as "cappuccino", "pistachio", "peppermint", "rainbow orange" - Owens harbours a secret. It is wilful enough to send shivers up the spines of curators and custodians but, by the same token, so full of naivete and charm that it should delight anyone that has ever felt the urge to slather paint on canvas. Once, a long time ago, at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, she skipped past whatever constraints lay ahead of her to place hands - lightly it must be said - upon her favourite picture, a Van Gogh, relishing the texture of thickly applied oil. "I touched it. Oh God, I was young; I knew it was wrong. f It was only for second - and I didn't press hard. I didn't press at all," she says guiltily. She won't do it again, of course, and if the Met had any sense they should offer this articulate and delightful painter a residency. They already own some of her work.

Owens has already had a month's sojourn at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston where its eponymous founder once feted Whistler and Sargent. It was an experience she enjoyed, "something between Disneyland and the Met", she confided to the critic Neville Wakefield. The galleries and the adjacent hothouse of this Venetian

revival palazzo appear to have suffered no damage at all from Owens's brief stay. On the contrary, its forbidding Art Nouveau-ish interior resonated for a while afterwards with her pleasing, whimsical motifs: vivid flower studies, the hum of her finely wrought dragonflies, the buzzing of her less elegant bumble bees, the playfulness of her more than twice-life-size monkeys, the intricacy of her spiders' webs and spindly plants.

Studies of nature such as these, for which she is best known, appear to be anchored in the traditions of Asian art, in particular those decorative Oriental silk drawings so popular in the time of Whistler, Sargent and Stewart Gardner. But Owens maintains that her work is "specifically American" and that her canvasses possess "a straightforward, Midwestern, no-bones- about it sensibility". By this she means that her work comes out of the American painting tradition and "that naivete that allows you to think you can do anything ... especially being outside New York. You get the feeling that no one is looking over at you, that there's no one shaking a finger at you. You get an immense amount of freedom over here ... "

In London Owens has held two sell-out solo shows at Sadie Coles HQ, but she really came to prominence as one of Charles Saatchi's second wave of "Young Americans" in 1998. "Specifically" American she may well be, but Owens visits Europe frequently, hunting down textiles for inspiration. "I have been to a lot of textile museums; the Ratti Collection near Como [in Italy] and the Abegg-Stiftung outside Geneva. It's in the countryside. You take a bus past fields of cows and reach something like the Getty Museum - really high tech. It's a collection, once private, that belonged to one person and there's just room after room of textiles, everything from 1,000-year- old Peruvian examples to bizarre French 18th-century ones," Owens enthuses. She has also immersed herself in the costume and textiles collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

Her latest creation, *Untitled* (2001), (pictured on the previous page) was based on a sample she found at the V&A on her last visit and which she has kept with her (mentally that is, she didn't actually steal it). A joyful flower study in pastel (she has added "cotton candy" and "sweet- pea" to her palette of delicate colours) with linear Art Nouveau twists and tendrils, and fabric flower heads. This is deceptively simple and thus quintessential Owens; sunny and Californian in essence, but its heart is, meanwhile, somewhere else; perhaps with Whistler on a Grand European tour or in exile in London with John Singer Sargent.