

**LAURA OWENS**

**Parkett 65 - 2002**

# Laura Owens Paints a Picture

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RUSSELL FERGUSON

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My title is taken, of course, from the old series in *Art News*, which followed the progress of a painting in the studio of a well-known artist. On one hand the series reinforced the traditional idea of the artist's studio as a place of almost alchemical transformation, yet at the same time it partially de-mystified it by lifting the veil a bit on the prosaic work of making a painting. With some contemporary artists, such a title would be ironic, and the text would feature an account of the artist on the telephone while fabricators labored on the piece. But Laura Owens really does paint the old-fashioned way. Mostly, she is alone in the studio, with only occasional help from an assistant on tasks like stretching canvas and applying masking tape. She doesn't paint to a deadline. On any given day she is just "trying to make the best painting I can make at that moment."<sup>1</sup> There is an old handwritten sign on the studio wall: "Make stuff." Whatever she makes, though, "it's definitely going to be a painting."

Owens recently made a big painting (UNTITLED, like all of her work). It's seven feet high by eleven feet long, and it depicts an Edenic landscape, with

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trees and flowers, and a river. There are animals everywhere: a bear and monkeys, squirrels and rabbits. Fish frolic in the river; butterflies fill the air. It is the making of this painting that will be my focus here.

The work has a double life, the parts of which are separate, yet deeply connected. On one level, it's a picture of a better world: a peaceable kingdom where all of nature co-exists in idyllic harmony. On another, simultaneous, level, it's a painting: an elaborately composed arrangement of paint on canvas that is inevitably part of a complex dialogue with the whole history of the medium. There is a constant back and forth between the creation of a pictorial world and the act of painting itself. For the work to be successful, a certain harmony needs to be achieved that will encompass both elements.

Harmony, in fact, is the real theme of the painting. It provides the motif: even when a monkey reaches for a butterfly, it is playful rather than predatory. And the same theme pervades the construction of the composition in which each of the many animals has a certain independence: none dominates. The largest animals—a monkey and a bear—are discreetly half-hidden behind a tree trunk. The trees themselves are dispersed across the canvas so that they leave the visual frame on all sides, while a single trunk arches ambiguously into the relatively empty space at the upper right. Empty space is as important



LAURA OWENS, UNTITLED, 2002, oil and acrylic on linen, 84 x 132", detail; full image on preceding double page. /

OHNE TITEL, 213 x 335 cm, Ausschnitt; ganzes Bild siehe vorangehende Doppelseite.

(PHOTO: DOUGLAS M. PARKER STUDIO)

here as occupied space. Among the animals, a latticework of cross-directed looks serves to send the viewer's eye roaming in turn all over the huge canvas. The landscape in which the activity plays out is divided into sectors, but remains surprisingly unified. Owens works with apparently unmodulated fields of color that nevertheless resolve themselves into a convincingly deep space, punctuated by unexpected incident.

In the studio, when Owens is not painting, as she prepares to paint, she is often thinking about solutions that others have used to address issues as they emerge in her own work. Tiepolo's *Tasso Cycle* (1743–45) in the Art Institute of Chicago has been a recent inspiration, not just because of the paintings' sumptuous palette, but also for their sudden shifts in tone, and the seemingly isolated passages that both disrupt and confirm the compositions. It was these paintings that taught her to think of a painting's back, middle and foreground as related, but also as potentially discrete parts.

The process begins with drawings. There are traditional drawings, but also collages. Any of these might also be scanned, and then manipulated with PhotoShop to find the right scale for a number of disparate elements. There are also experiments with color. Sometimes an entire drawing will be covered with numbers, corresponding to her own homemade color chart, until it looks like a paint-by-numbers kit. For the big new painting she made a full-sized cartoon, although she did not pounce it. Instead she moved it around, back and forth in front of and sometimes behind the painting as she worked on it. In many ways this intimate, tactile relationship between preparatory drawing and finished painting echoes the way in which de Kooning used his drawings to trace over and alter a composition that was already underway on canvas.

The drawings are followed by a number of studies on canvas that explore either a color combination or a particular motif from the proposed composition. Just as importantly, these studies delay the actual start of work on the large canvas, which requires the slow build-up of momentum. All the delays, Owens says, are like "a trick of the brain to make you think it's failsafe. It also wears you out, so that you can do

it. If I just start, I'm a little too self-aware." Psychologically, before beginning a big painting like this, there has been "a whole month of freaking out, but also getting excited."

That mental process is followed by a number of physical preparations that are simultaneously practical and somewhat ritualistic. She mixes huge amounts of pigment—Pompeii reds, Italian pinks—loading up dozens of the tinfoil lasagna trays that serve as her palettes. "It's like revving your engines, getting psyched up," she says, although it is also true that "You can pass the moment to make a painting." There is always the right moment, just as in other areas of life.

Athletes often have elaborate rituals that they must carry out before their events. Their purpose is not merely to appease superstition; they also serve to calm nerves and empty out the mind, so that when the time comes to perform, action will not be impeded by too much conscious effort. Paradoxically, this state can only be achieved through years of grueling practice. For Owens, all the freaking out and all the physical preparation are the stages she has to go through before getting to the point at which she can work confidently, in the zone where "good' or 'bad' doesn't make sense." Yet this sense of building up to the action of painting has little in common with Harold Rosenberg's famous fifties formulation of the canvas "as an arena in which to act," his hymn to the unforeseen inspiration that must be found in "the painter's muscles and in the cream-colored sea into which he dives."<sup>2</sup>) For Owens, the canvas is not an arena in which to fight. Rather, her preparation serves to imbue her with a spirit of strategic calm.

The first decisive mark on a white canvas will register immediately, setting the tone for whatever development the painting will undergo. But Owens no longer uses the white or cream-colored canvas that has been the norm since the era of action painting. Instead, she has begun painting with a dark brown linen as her support. Like the old masters, she now works slowly from dark into light.

Her first work on the canvas itself was to block out the silhouettes of the smaller trees and their branches with masking tape. Then the first painting: the monkey, brushed in with a dark water-based ink.





LAURA OWENS, *UNTITLED*, 2000, collage, watercolor, and pencil on colored paper, 10 x 7" / OHNE TITEL, Collage, Wasserfarbe und Farbstift auf farbigem Papier, 25,4 x 17,8 cm.

By wetting the canvas before applying the ink, she can achieve a satisfactorily fuzzy, furry edge to the silhouette. She's been painting monkeys for about three years now. They derive from those of the anonymous eleventh-century Chinese painter known as the Gibbon Master, in particular his *MONKEYS IN A LOQUAT TREE*, a large hanging scroll that belongs to the Palace Museum in Taipei. Chinese painting is clearly important to Owens, not just for particular models such as the monkey, but more broadly for its ability to create depth out of flatness, and for the alternative it provides to Western perspectival systems.

The next stage was to apply very thin acrylic washes: green and brown for the earth, dark blue

and white for the sky. Then the clouds were loosely masked out and a light blue wash added. A greener blue was used for the stream below. The rabbits, the bear, and the squirrels were painted in acrylic. Then the monkey was masked out before a clear matt medium was laid down over everything that had been done so far.

After the medium had dried, the bigger trees were painted, using cutout paper as a template. First they were built up with as many as twenty layers of thin gesso, sanded down between each layer. Then they were painted with house paint, about ten different colors mixed by Owens and thinned-out with Floetrol, which makes the paint more flexible and slower to dry. This watery house paint was nevertheless applied quickly over the dry, chalky gesso, in about half an hour, with the rest of the canvas masked out. Then, painting in oil, Owens added the small monkeys, some more squirrels, turtles, and butterflies. Unusually for Owens, she re-painted the butterflies four or five times, in search of the right overall balance for the painting. At the same time, she went back over the whole surface with oil paint, thinly in the landscape, more thickly in certain details. Most of the flowers were painted in at this point, and the work was, finally, almost complete.

All the time she is painting, Owens is referring back to her drawings and studies, yet also to her original conception of the entire work. Sometimes she can misplace part of the original image she had in mind, "like when you tell your dream in words, you lose track of it." When she began the painting she was thinking about a kind of Rousseau jungle, but, as she puts it, "it ended up a bit more French countryside."

The hand of cards at the center of the bottom edge was added last, to hold the foreground, when it seemed that everything had become perhaps too equalized, too much in harmony. Even after such extensive preparation, and such intensive work on the canvas itself, it seems that spontaneity, and indeed chance, still have their part to play too.

1) Unless otherwise noted, all quotations by Owens are from a conversation at her studio on April 8, 2002.

2) Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1952), p. 25.

LAURA OWENS, UNTITLED, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 64½ x 49½" /  
OHNE TITEL, Acryl auf Leinwand, 164 x 126 cm.





*LAURA OWENS, UNTITLED, 2000, acrylic, oil, and watercolor on canvas, 66½ x 72" /  
OHNE TITEL, Acryl, Öl und Wasserfarbe auf Leinwand, 169 x 183 cm.*