

Laura Owens Speaker Notes

I've discovered that I have a hard time understanding and appreciating a lot of contemporary art. When I first googled Laura Owens' works, I was frankly underwhelmed by how unoriginal I found it to be. But, as with most art, the more I looked the more I saw, metaphorically, conceptually, and visually.

you can really see the influence of her studies in installation art throughout her work. She tends to balance amongst the genres of abstraction, representation, process and conceptualism, embracing all and simultaneously rejecting as much as possible to forge her own unique style and concept which has helped her stand out in the contemporary art world.

So most of Laura Owens' art is actually not very deep at all. In fact, it's often not the painting she's interested in at all. The paintings are nothing without the context of a gallery space. She emphasises pale, flat colour in a lot of her work and uses giant canvases sometimes reaching all the way up the wall from floor to ceiling to blur the line between installation and painting. She leaves large empty spaces on canvases to further push her paintings into the gallery walls.

None of her work is titled, leaving even more up to the interpretation of the viewer. The work seems totally flat, like you went into MS paint with the magic brush tool and messed around. But Owens' paintings, no matter how innocent, are not a mess at all. Intricate, thoughtfully planned, elaborate and skillful, Owens' work transcends what many call "contemporary art" by nearly becoming a reflection of the viewer's preconceived ideas. By having no identity and no purposeful deeper meaning than that which you see obviously, each painting is an exploration of what some might say is the driving force of Owens' career: Phenomenology.

Phenomenology is the philosophical study of the appearance of things, the way things appear in our experience, and our experience of the appearance of things. In some ways, the gallery itself becomes the subject of Laura Owens' work, and by that extension, her exploration of phenomenology includes how the works interact with each other within the space.

A paper from Stony Brook University wrote that Owens "makes the viewer feel as if the connection between other works is broken by their presence".

"The conceptual does not provide insight into the sensuous".

While many artists, including Owens herself, have tried and failed to properly express their conceptual process through their finished product, Owens' work tends to lean on the side of anti-conceptual altogether. Not only to avoid that common struggle, which I'm sure happens no matter what you do as an artist, but to leave her work more open to interpretation and innocent contemplation by the viewer through their senses rather than what they're told explicitly through written words or obvious visual cues and representation.

As she paints everything to be relatively on the same plane, flat and flush with the gallery walls, it is skin-deep in terms of the artist's intention. She considers everything within her perceptual field to be worthy of canvas space, not only nature and architecture, which are often associated with brute and obvious non-meaning. When Owens paints nature, she includes culture and human influence as well, but without obvious hierarchy between imagery- perhaps not "of" the world but "about" the world. Perhaps hence her stressing of the sensuous viewing of her work.

Owens' work is greatly inspired by Florine Settheimer, Henri Rousseau, Grandma Moses, Horace Pippin, Edward Hicks, Helen Frankenthaler, and Morris Louis. More contemporary artists include: Mary Heilman, Alex Katz, David Hockney, Jonathan Lasker, David Reed and Monique Prieto.

“She acknowledges it as the foundation for her conceptual strategy, which counters traditional ideas of the painter’s heroic isolation with collaboration.”

She writes, “I started that just because I tried to paint from the things that I was doing, and one of the things I was doing was going to museums a lot.

The paintings want to be read with fairytale-like metaphors and meanings, but we know that the artist put no meaning other than an interest in the gallery space and phenomenology behind them. That dichotomy in itself is a bit of a paradox; that the paintings are going to be read into by the viewer, even if, and perhaps especially if, the artist states that there is no deeper meaning.

a narrative is sewn together; however, plot is unidentifiable. Instead, Owens’ draws on this storytelling tradition that originated in an oral culture where the embellishments are open and left to interpretation.

for Owens it is more a process of removal. Her removal ultimately will remove the artist from the painting

For Owens the process begins with drawings and collages of images that might then be scanned and manipulated with Photoshop in an exploration of scale and color. The drawings are covered with numbers corresponding to her homemade color chart. Sometimes, drawings are enlarged to a full-scale cartoon that could be applied directly to the canvas. Before beginning to paint, she will experiment with the color combinations and applications of the paint on study canvases. She is looking for a reliable foundation to stand on before beginning; however, all of this construction is, “ a trick of the brain to make you think it’s failsafe,” however, she continues, “It also wears you out.”

struggling through the process was not as interesting as doing tests and executing the painting after I figured out all of the elements and how they were going to work together.”

The approach Owens takes is more in line with the Renaissance and Baroque painters who worked through sketches and studies primarily in a studio environment. Similarly, Owens does not use a white canvas; instead she paints on a dark brown linen working dark to light, which is a technique she shares with the old masters.

When she builds up enough confidence, when her raw materials are prepared, techniques are all worked out in advance, colors are determined, and sketches are at the ready, she then begins to paint. At this point, she enters a zone where, “‘good’ or ‘bad’ doesn’t make sense.”

“compositional cohesiveness” combined with an, “insistence on the process” and a ability to draw from a, “seemingly endless arsenal of art-historical references.” (Sutton)
All of the above is woven together without ever looking academic or inhibited.