

The Unbearable Lightness of Painting

Thomas Lawson

I always think that a good way to open an essay on any artist's work is to offer up a description of a typical piece, thus establishing a set of themes which can then be developed into a convincing narrative of a career. In that spirit I might begin by pointing to a painting by Laura Owens from 1997 that depicts the receding spaces of a picture gallery (plate 3). Awkwardly off-center, a spindly tripod easel partially blocks the view of one of the fictive paintings on the wall. There are no people in the gallery, no student painter at work at the easel, no indifferent viewers watching creation in action or gazing at the works in the collection. Overall the painting is pale, even faint, and as a result the floor appears to rise up as a suppressed image, a kind of silhouetted skyscraper pushing through the deserted galleries. The empty rooms and the latent, almost phallic image of the floor might call to mind an alarming string of overinterpretations, a kind of homage to a dread-infected surrealism, but there is something un-insistent in the way the picture is painted that puts that scenario to rest. Instead it seems rather cheerful and more than a little tentative, as if asking how a work of art begins, and how it ends.

Writing this kind of essay is always difficult. There are so many expectations. The artist wants the work described fulsomely, generously, accurately, and to be placed, with perceptive precision, within or against a particular tradition. The curator seeks something similar, with perhaps more emphasis on the wider view, providing historical justification for the selection of this artist over all others at this particular moment. The readers demand no less, although they might settle for fewer adjectives expressing admiration and a more direct explanation of how the work actually works, how to look at and interpret the evidence given. All this is to be delivered in a style that is crisp and clear and leads briskly to an authoritative conclusion about art and society, with the artist providently offering the crucial lens to understanding our current situation. Overall, what is wanted is an argument, a narrative of positions taken and not taken, an edifice of meaning. This is no easy task when the artist begins each work with the question: What shall I try next?

I might begin with another work then, perhaps a tall, vertical painting from the following year (plate 7). This one has no recognizable imagery at all. Instead, its surface is animated by an endless looping line reminiscent of that Bauhaus-to-Kindergarten classic, taking a line for a walk.¹ In this

case the line is made in ink and the spaces filled in with pale swabs of acrylic color. It might remind some viewers of a particular type of artsy fabric design while making others think of the “all-overness” of a Jackson Pollock, here rendered as one-dimensional schema. There is nothing else to be seen except the artist’s signature in the top left corner, upside down. This in turn could lead the over-informed to think of Barnett Newman’s signatures. Does this mean the work embodies an idea of critique, a pairing of the machismo of Abstract Expressionism with a more feminine idea? One could rest there, but it would not seem nearly enough. In fact the painting would seem to foreclose on such narrow interpretation and offer up something more expansive. And the bigger question being raised seems to be concerned with origins: Who makes a work of art? How does she get started? How does a painting come into being?

Plotting the development of an artist who is obsessed with the difficulty of beginning a new work is a near impossibility. For that artist is always beginning again, only each time with more intimate knowledge of the difficulty. Thus the development is one of false starts, cold starts, quick starts, sweeping flourishes, and sudden stops.

Owens’s paintings, which to supporters seem unerringly on-target in their odd mix of knowing charm and destabilizing cruelty, are not always received with enthusiasm. They appear to many to be relentlessly coy about nothing very much, to be taking up a lot of space without delivering sufficient *gravitas*. A feature of the most dismissive arguments against her work—that it is bratty or too studentish—is the lack of specificity, the unwillingness to describe the actual paintings. This strikes me as a significant omission. It is as though the paintings cause these detractors to feel ashamed. Of what? Perhaps of being confounded in their ability to instantly classify, and therefore tame, works of art.

Owens’s paintings are not easily classified. They appear awkwardly charming with an open, apparently easy accessibility that proves more and more evasive the longer one looks. Let me begin again, this time with two descriptive passages that appeared in separate issues of *Artforum* several years ago. I do this to indicate the effect Owens’s paintings can have and the difficulty of capturing that effect in words. Introducing an interview with the artist, Susan Morgan wrote: “Lines sweep into our peripheral vision, speed along as daringly as fearless schoolgirls sliding on ice, then burst

unexpectedly into shapes—tiny spiraling volcanoes of color, wavering horizons, or bulky clouds.”² And in a review, Jan Avgikos wrote:

[In Owens's] most ambitious “abstract” painting—the one with scoops of “tasteful” colors in pale blue, coffee, lime, and white—the carefree, even subtly euphoric play with paint seduces. The effervescing mounds are animated by an orbital field of painterly marks that spin off into blue space, nuggets of paint that seem to crash in fissures where edges don't meet, and rainbow-variegated smears and squiggles that ricochet around the painting, sometimes spiraling into deep space, at other times slapping up against the picture plane.³

These few sentences carry us on a wild ride through a roller coaster of literary effects. Both critics seem to me to offer fairly accurate descriptions of what are extremely elusive works. Morgan captures the exuberant, fun-loving aspect of the paintings, while Avgikos telegraphs their sense of staccato uncertainty. Both offer head-spinning catalogues of colors and actions and variations on descriptions of little lumpy bits of paint. Both describe work that is simultaneously frenetic and serene, suggesting that an out-of-control kineticism somehow produces a dreamy lyricism.

Let me now attempt to describe a newer work, a large, untitled work of 2002 (plate 23) that offers a bucolic landscape that would surely bring a smile to the hardest heart and most cynical eye. The painting is so over-the-top charming that I almost stammer with embarrassment as I begin, for under the scrutiny of language the painting collapses into another string of lists—here of corny clichés. There are trees and flowers, a lot of sky, and some animals. It is with the animals that the trouble with interpretation sets in, for this menagerie is an ill-matched lot, calling for something of a stretch in explanation. There is a bear, a tortoise and a fish, a white rabbit, an owl and some other birds, several monkeys, a squirrel, some deer, and a smattering of butterflies and bees. Some of these creatures are diurnal, others nocturnal; some favor woodland habitats, others prefer the plain. None seem particularly suited to this patch of earth. The land is bleak, yet it supports a surprising selection of wildflowers not exactly in seasonal synchronicity. And as the flowers bloom, the trees, whose barren branches form the dominant armature of the whole composition, seem wintry, even blighted. The overall picture delivers a spectacle of an ideal world that may or may not be benign. Not a simple landscape then—more a catalogue of landscape attributes. Maybe I need to search for ways to talk about landscape painting as a kind of halfway house of representation, a kind of painting that depicts the seen, veers into abstraction, and is potentially full of allegorical meaning. Can I push it and claim



it as a real allegory, an update on the arcadian pastoral? The playing cards in the foreground, with their suggestion of fickle fate, might suggest such a reading, but then again...

The composition of this work is dictated by the pattern of the tree branches and animated by the exchange of glances between the enchanted creatures. The surface of the work is an encyclopedia of painterly marks and procedures. There is the inky stain of the monkey, the acrylic washes of sky and land, the strange emulsions of the trees, the oil paint worked virtuoso-style and as simple dabs to depict wildflowers. The space of the painting rushes from a represented distance to the actual surface of individual marks and back again. This is a weird, airless space—both open and claustrophobic, expansive and simply flattened out. It begins to seem as if Owens is willing to use every item, every trick, every gesture from the repertoire of painting history, but not to make a polemical point. Instead she seems eager to insist that she is not making any such claim. She appears to want to liberate the work from meaning and do so in an unironic manner.

Untitled, 2002 (detail)

Thus we might begin again: Owens's paintings are challenging and difficult. They are each quite particular, not conforming to any notion of serial production or thematic development. They insist on being looked at, closely and over time. They demand an attentive gaze, a careful accounting of parts. They sometimes seem smart-alecky, but are also often very earnest. They resist analysis.

Every artist faces the dual problem of ends and means: what to do and how best to do it. This may sound trivial, maybe even obvious, but no art is easily won, and no artist can begin work without an idea to motivate her. That idea may involve a subject or a procedure, but once certain decisions are made, other things tend to play out automatically. For instance, an engagement with a particular material process means that it may take precedence over subject matter, consideration of the role of the viewer, the relationship of art to society, or any other motivating idea. Here are some of the issues facing an artist who decides she wants to paint: First there is the entanglement in a long tradition, which may—according to many observers, assorted pundits, and opinion makers—have run its course. Buying into these so-called endgame theories or not, no painter can be blind to the horrifying ease with which various techniques and strategies come to seem vapid and pointless after the briefest of exposures. The history of twentieth-century painting is a history of various kinds of resistance and refusal, all too often followed by a capitulation to the repetition demanded of all successful marketing strategies. The collapse of rigorously intellectual, non-representational painting into bland decoration is the easiest example. But we also know well the deflation of the rhetoric around the figure into sentimental coyness, while the in-between genres, landscape and still life, seem forever caught on a seesaw of triviality and non-meaning.

And then there is the issue of influence. Solutions to the problem of painting have been so hard-won that they cannot easily be handed on. There is an intimation of this with the difficulty seen in the followers of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, who so often seem like also-rans, not ambitious enough. Many of the fiercest arguments in the New York art world of the 1940s reverberated with the recognition of this problem—how to make painting anew after Picasso. And the difficulty was only more pronounced in the second half of the century with Pollock, Newman, Philip Guston, and Jasper Johns—all apparently inimitable. The battles were fought as theirs alone, the victories individual and often temporary. As a result attempts to form a school around a style of painting keep on leading to a collapse into pastiche. Thus the emergence of the postmodernist solution, the preemptive pastiche

we might call "the Gerhard Richter syndrome," a method whereby the collage/appropriation/quotation of a wide variety of styles, images, and procedures creates an effect of tragicomic despair by turns melodramatically dark and giddy with a silly enthusiasm.

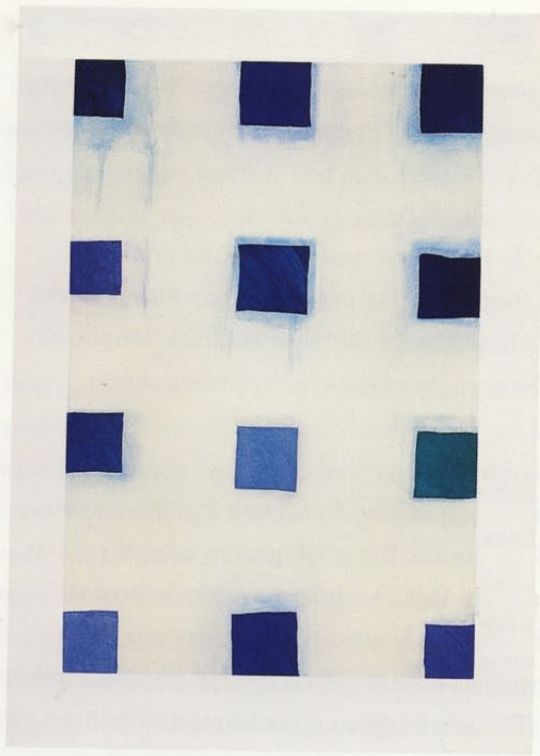
Such is the understanding of the plight of painting in New York and Northern Europe, an understanding weighed down by the heaviness of deterministic theories of history. In such an atmosphere, in which the shadow of the apocalypse is ever present and thus always slightly ridiculous, skepticism undercuts high-seriousness and reduces it to a joke. The heavy light of New York painting, once sublime, in time becomes merely absurd and overwrought.

Against this the lightness of the West Coast appears unencumbered and free. Here the great overlooked tradition—encompassing the deadpan of Edward Ruscha and the goofiness of Billy Al Bengston, the serenity of Craig Kauffman and the acuity of John McCracken—has never been seen as quite serious enough. The bright, hedonistic light of Los Angeles painting offers a generous invitation to the viewer to participate, to play. The paintings, in all their diversity, tend to be about being there, in the studio, in the gallery—alive and free of dread. This is a tradition more aligned with that of the Mediterranean, in which it is the privilege of visual art not to show consequences.

Owens echoes this when she says, "A painting should fit into your life. I think that I picked up that idea from Mary Heilmann and her way of working. I met her when she was a visiting artist at CalArts, and she had a profound impact on me. Although she's extremely serious about what she's doing, she has a very casual approach to making a painting."⁴

There, in a beautifully understated observation, is the difference. Although Heilmann is now based in New York, she remains in attitude a West Coast artist. There are two things important about her approach to painting: a carefree relationship to the idea of subject matter and a concern for the intricacy of arrangement. Heilmann is not weighed down by New York's evolutionary theory of art, with its predetermined plot.

[Her] brand of "postmodernist-affirming modernism" does not call for the end of history but continues to write a different, non-evolutionary story that takes pleasure in playing and mixing. Her paintings are traces of painting's past and allow us to establish a necessary analytical distance to this past as a historically directed process without



actually losing contact with it. Heilmann's painting does not get stuck in its analytical commentary nor does it persist only as a speculative theoretical attitude. Her paintings always reveal a space where painterly surprises, personal memories and emotions can co-exist.⁵

This is a formalism of sorts, but not a reductive one—something rather more open-ended.

It is this open-ended quality that resonates with Owens; it is in seeking her version of it that she is able to articulate the specific nature of her own defining oppositional stance. (I write this from a belief that all contemporary art develops from a resistance to a prevailing understanding of the world.) Owens's resistance is to a specific form of language, one she feels to be entrapping. She works against interpretation and for a privileging of the visual, and especially of the visual as manifest in the painted mark. Is this a return to formalism? Certainly not in the academic sense, but perhaps it is in some way akin to the erotics of vision espoused by Susan Sontag in the early 1960s.⁶

Mary Heilmann
Blue Angel, 1996
Aquatint; edition of 40
40¹/₂ × 28¹/₈ inches
Spring Street Workshop



Another way of looking at these paintings is to consider them in terms of place, how they sit in the world. By this I mean both how they represent the space we inhabit and how they inhabit the real space of the gallery. What is the physical relationship between painting and viewer?

When Owens was invited to have an exhibition in 2000 at Inverleith House in Edinburgh, she traveled there to decide what to show. The gallery is a graceful Georgian house: a simple, well-proportioned rectangle of stone and glass atop a slight rise that gives the rooms on the main floor a sweeping view over parkland and the distant city skyline. These rooms have the high ceilings and tall windows of their period, and as a result are suffused with light. Paintings look very good in these spaces. After seeing the gallery, Owens was convinced she had to include new work that would acknowledge and respond to its elegance and the distraction offered by the view out the windows.

Her decision was to paint two landscapes, one a broad, expansive view of hills and loch (plate 18), the other a vertical moonscape partially obscured by a cherry-blossom branch (plate 17). It was a sly decision, remarking on but not quite making fun of the romance of the Scottish landscape and its attendant painting traditions, the exoticism of the botanical gardens within which the gallery sits, and the situational aesthetics of international exhibition-making.

The paintings are stunning, more aggressively imagistic than most of Owens's previous work. Both are serene, saturated with atmospheric color—the pinks and pale blues of the mountains at dusk, the



darker blues and blacks of the night sky. Both are articulated by the bare branches of a tree blocking the giant orb of sun or moon, creating a foreground space for the viewer to inhabit and providing a frame for the view in the classically romantic, Caspar David Friedrich vein. Both also feature an homage to Japanese art and garden design, not just in the cherry-blossom imagery but also in the sweeping lines and color schemes. Yet again the contradictions: the paintings are quite acid, the pinks and blues not quite in harmony, the relationship to space not so accommodating or so comfortable. They confront each other, and the viewer, with an irreconcilable difference. Although they look right, they are not at home.

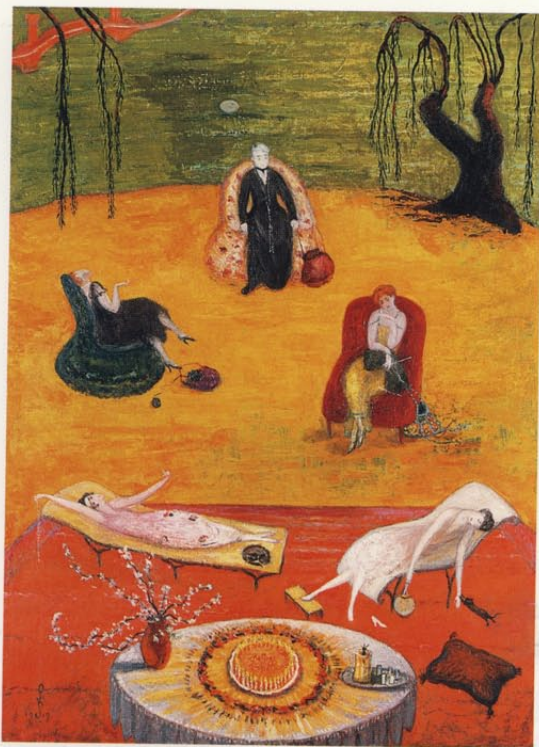
What medicine does all this sugarcoating disguise? Does the viewer feel laughed at for liking this, for falling for the schmaltz? Well, yes and no. Talking in her studio, Owens asks if I saw Charles Ray's Halloween decorations some years ago. I hadn't, so she describes, with appreciative glee, a lumpy bush in the artist's front yard brought to animal life with a set of googly cardboard eyes. This acknowledgment of an almost guilty pleasure, the recognition of the power of cliché to please us in an uncanny way, to bring us outside ourselves, is central to her work. As Mungo Thomson has argued:

the work is a farcical representation, rendered with pathological sincerity, of what art is supposed to look like. All the cues are present to signal "painting": if the raw materials of the medium aren't being trotted out—unpainted canvas and pigment straight from the

tube—then the historical record is being used as raw material. Clichés abound in Laura’s paintings: allusions to the traditions and archetypes of Modernist abstraction, landscape, figuration, assemblage, the romantic, the maritime, and the postmodern, all figure in. The work seems to want to see how deeply the tropes of painting, and of looking at paintings, have been culturally absorbed; how well-traveled the path is from original to standard to generic.⁷

The connection to aspects of West Coast painting, and in particular to the West Coast-inspired work of Heilmann, rings true on a gut level, but it would be hard to draw direct parallels. Can we draw a lineage? Talking about the large doodle painting I described earlier in this essay, Owens admits to an admiration for the textile designs of the Chicago Bauhaus. This might allow us to infer a link to that tradition of women artists who sought ways of making abstraction concrete, connected to traditional cultures and daily life. But her 1998 series of beehive paintings (plates 8 and 9) hold this notion at arm’s length. These paintings are around six feet tall, almost square, and nearly identical. In each the image of a large beehive and handful of buzzing bees is laid out against a beige ground. The hive is a dome shape shaded in simple blocks of browns, ochres, and oranges—the colors of the 1970s. Over this the bees are drawn with extruded paint in what has become an Owens signature, looking a bit like needlework. As a result of this complex of references the pictures have a homespun, handcrafted feeling, like the work of an embroidery class. They don’t exactly come across as a celebration of women’s work, but neither are they a critique nor a put-down. They offer a more fond acceptance, resigned to what is there. The whole is an exercise in uninflected delivery that, amplified by the repetition of the series, might be taken as Warholian, but without the cynicism.

Another artist Owens has mentioned with admiration is Florine Stettheimer, whose 1920s dreamscapes with social bite, animated by a complex *contrapposto* of painterly styles, certainly seem congenial. Stettheimer’s technical playfulness, so often mistaken by the overserious for amateurishness, finds a kindred spirit in Owens. The sexy, mischievous fun in the earlier artist’s abrupt line and thick impasto—similar to the contemporary ceramic work of Beatrice Wood, another in Stettheimer’s and Marcel Duchamp’s quick-witted circle—has sometimes been dismissed as camp. But as Linda Nochlin, writing about Stettheimer, says: “there is justification for seeing Camp—in many ways a fiercer and more self-assured continuation of the half-petulant, half-parodic foot-stamping poses of

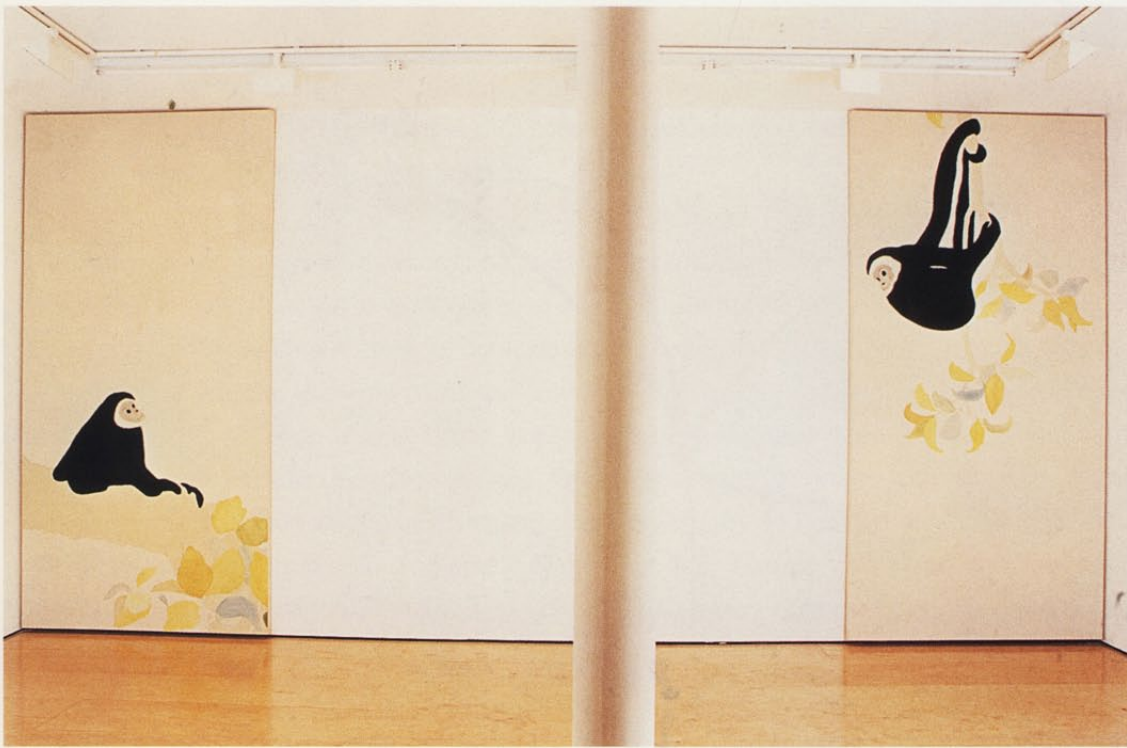


fin-de-siècle Decadence—as a kind of permanent revolution of self-mocking sensibility against the strictures of a patriarchal tradition and the solemn, formalist teleology of vanguardism.”⁸

This seems a helpful idea to keep in mind when looking at Owens's pair of monkeys from 1999 (plate 11). These are two tall canvases, matched up like huge sentinels at a gate. The gate here is the back wall of the gallery; the space being protected is that privileged area against which artist and public both cast their dreams. The guardians of the imagination in this case are not mighty giants or fabulous beasts but a pair of monkeys smiling cutely at each other across the void. The paintings are funny, even silly, but also offer a consideration of relationships and possibilities, of decisions not made.

A good part of any day in Los Angeles is spent driving, alone, through streets devoid of meaning to the driver, which is one reason the place exhilarates some people, and floods

Florine Stettheimer
Heat, 1919
Oil on canvas
50³/₈ × 36¹/₂ inches
Brooklyn Museum of Art. 57.125
Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer



others with an amorphous unease. There is about these hours spent in transit a seductive unconnectedness. Conventional information is missing. Context clues are missing.⁹

This is Joan Didion describing the dislocated space of our city, the space that denies the narratives that drive our idea of the metropolis. This is what makes us suspect we do not live in a real place. Such a suspicion drives many, especially those from more traditional urban backgrounds, to see the city through eyes of abject dread, to understand the spirit of the place as malign. But, as Didion notes, others find the lack of a driven narrative exhilarating, even liberating. Such is the space Owens describes.

One way to understand this space is as freeway space, a carefully engineered space that is never truly known, a space moved through. Driving on the freeway we are anchored by the seat of our pants to a sense of being in the present, but we are never sure exactly where we are. We are conscious of all that is around us—gaze concentrated ahead and flickering to mirror behind, peripheral vision somehow aware of other vehicles—but we are not recording what we see, not looking. Then suddenly

Untitled, 1999, installation view, Sadie Coles HQ, London, 1999

we notice something—an exit sign, a flashing light. Perhaps we catch it in time, perhaps not. This is the space of Los Angeles driving, of sort of knowing and following the flow of street and traffic, almost lost but confident of finding the destination.

Owens consistently plays with perception and the methods painters use to manipulate perception. The eye is constantly being led astray, teased into an understanding that does not pan out. The spaces she configures are elusive, to be navigated by intuition rather than knowledge, for the knowledge does not add up. Different paintings contain elements of linear and atmospheric perspective, illusionistic shadows, *repoussoir* effects. In some areas paint soaks deep into the fabric of the canvas, in others it remains startlingly on the surface. Consider a recent painting, a square desert landscape in taupe, green, and blue washes with strange sponge effects and cacti drawn in outline with extruded paint (plate 26). The great unfolding space of the high desert is here collapsed onto a spare but decorative surface of painterly marks. Signs of interiority are used to describe the great outdoors in such a way that one could get seasick.

In such paintings the artist describes a journey but refuses to lead us to a destination. She is not interested in that kind of lesson. Her work does not offer a neatly wrapped message, for it is about something more complex, more human, than a preconceived idea. It is about the wandering curiosity necessary to make art and the daily challenge implicit in the decision to paint for a living. As she describes it, this is about “Waiting until it gels, sitting through the pain. Like the hard part of meditation.”¹⁰ She is talking about the inertia of the studio, the weight of expectation, which brings about an overwhelming urge to lay down and stop. And then there is the exhilaration of a new beginning.

Owens offers a simple, generous kind of comedy, accepting the treasures of the given, relishing the conditions of here and now. This is a subtle act, requiring droll precision with an unflinching gaze. On the surface it is an entertaining and sweet art form, but it is also an art of cruelty towards accepted notions of taste and decorum. It offers a hard look at what painting is and how its practice and reception might fit into daily life. It offers a grace in the present, a lightness of being, of touch, of thought.

1. “It goes out for a walk, so to speak, aimlessly for the sake of the walk.” *Paul Klee: The Thinking Eye; The Notebooks of Paul Klee*, ed. Jürg Spiller (New York: George Wittenborn; and London: Lund Humphries, 1961), 105.
2. Susan Morgan, “A Thousand Words: Laura Owens Talks About Her New Work,” *Artforum* 37, no. 10 (summer 1999): 131.
3. Jan Avgikos, “Laura Owens at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise,” *Artforum* 37, no. 5 (January 1999): 119.
4. Owens, in Morgan, “A Thousand Words,” 131.
5. Martin Prinzhorn, “Images as the Symptoms of Painting: The Antitotalitarianism of Mary Heilmann,” *Afterall*, no. 5 (2002): 51.
6. “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.” See the conclusion of Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation” (1964), reprinted in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 14.
7. Mungo Thomson, “From my Junkyard to Yours,” *Parkett*, no. 65 (2002): 85.
8. Linda Nochlin, “Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive” (1980), reprinted in *Florine Stettheimer: Manhattan Fantastica* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995), 102.
9. Joan Didion, “Pacific Distances” (1979–91), in *After Henry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 110.
10. Laura Owens, in conversation with the author, September 2002.