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A Great American Painter

The innovative work of Laura Owens



Installation view of Laura Owens' "Pavement Karaoke/Alphabet" at Sadie Coles HQ in London. Courtesy the artist / Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

By  Matthew Thompson

VP, director of advisory at AAP

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That [Laura Owens](#) is the most innovative American painter of the past decade was made abundantly clear in a series of solo exhibitions in the earlier part of this decade which culminated in a mid-career survey that recently closed at the [The Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles](#), after earlier runs at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) and the [Dallas Museum of Art](#).

Owens embraced site-specificity and exhibition-making as a way of defending her practice

Owens's exhibitions are always wonderfully precise: often conceived as a cohesive whole, with individual works tailored to aspects of the gallery space. From her time in graduate school at [Cal Arts](#) in the late 1990s, Owens embraced site-specificity and exhibition-making as a way of defending her practice as a painter. Now, at a time when there is widespread anxiety about art being increasingly created for and encountered by collectors at art fairs, it is refreshing that the maturing of a painter's market can be tracked alongside a sequence of exhibitions that were far too compelling to ignore.

A turning point in Owens's practice was with her exhibition at the [Kunstmuseum Bonn](#) in 2011, where her works began to

grow in scale and ambition. *Untitled* (2011-12), for example, consists of 92 small square paintings assembled in a grid; a number of them featuring functional clock hands and thick applications of paint. The clocks prefigure what would come later, in terms of the more tactile paint handling and the addition of all manner of found objects and playful kinetic devices—which break from the figuration that had previously characterized Owens’s work. This work smartly turns on a linguistic slippage of hands and faces, and the fixity of each painting is brilliantly undermined in ways that are both deeply kitschy and profound.



An installation view of Laura Owens’ “12 Paintings” at the 356 S. Mission Road. Courtesy Sadie Coles and the artist

Another notable work is a large-scale, nine-panel piece *Untitled* (2011), which spreads a single composition over nearly all the canvases with a single panel left raw. Areas of thicker, more physical paint coalesce in a series of squiggle-like gestures and drop-shadows which immediately recall the kinds of marks made with computer painting programs, which is where they began—the computer has long been an important sketching tool for Owens.

Certain tendencies—the serialized approach to painting, the application of paint of almost sculptural thickness and the use of the computer during the production process—became even more integral to the works in the “[Pavement Karaoke/Alphabet](#)” exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ in London in 2012. The works achieved tremendous depth and illusionistic space through Owens’s use of the computer throughout. Each work began as a sketch on the computer and, upon completing each layer, Owens would photograph the work, then use the computer to adjust and plan the next layer. In this way, she created a dynamic feedback loop between real and digital space.



Installation photo of “Laura Owens: Ten Paintings” at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts

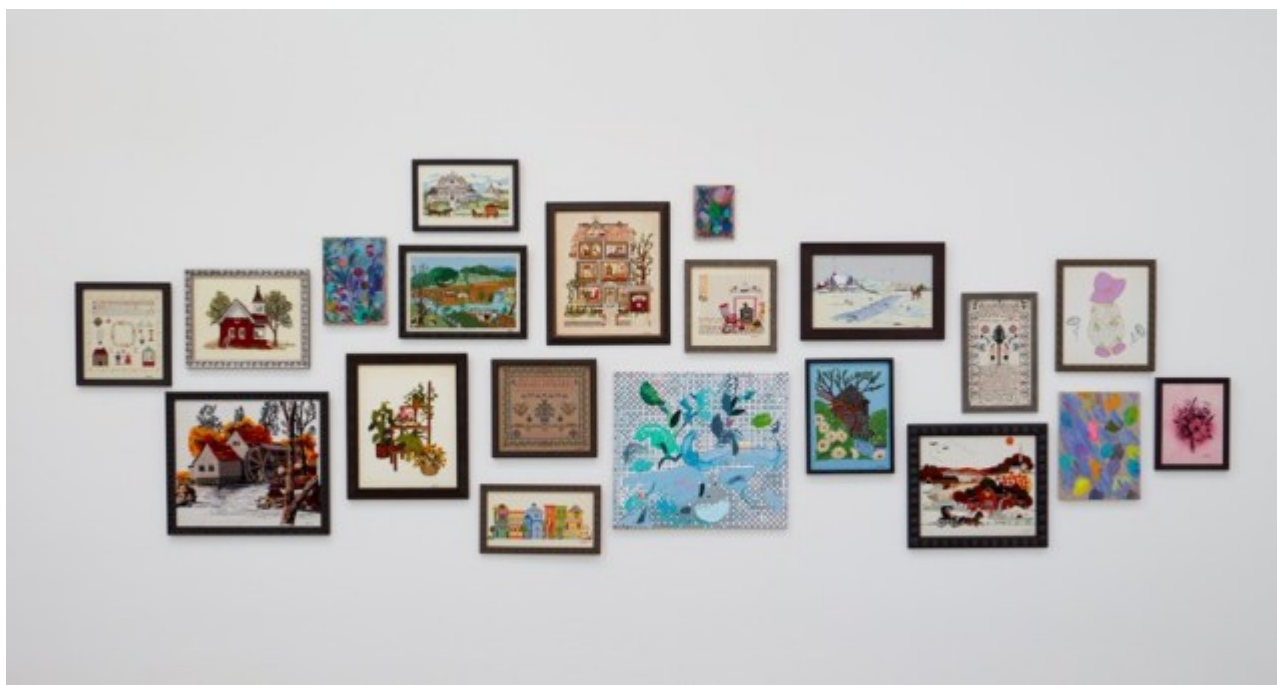
The following year, she had her first major exhibition in Los Angeles in the ten years since her early survey at the Museum of Contemporary Art. “12 Paintings” was the inaugural exhibition at what would become the artist-run space [356 Mission](#), in which Owens constructed a dozen massive new works. Serialized in format, the works move from the consistency of the “Pavement Karaoke” paintings into an explosion of gestures and ideas. At once goofy and muscular, they exude a confidence and joy that pervades Owens’s best work. Many entered institutional collections, with one example acquired by the [Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York, which hung the work prominently in the lobby for the duration of the 2014-15 exhibition “[The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World](#)”.

Pushing things even further, Owens’s exhibition at San Francisco’s [CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts](#) in 2016, ironically titled “Ten Paintings”, was an all-over, immersive installation of silkscreened and printed wallpaper that swallowed the entirety of the exhibition space. Owens completely covered the gallery walls with more than 70 unique, non-repeating strips of handmade wallpaper. Over a background of blown-up, pixelated images of crumpled paper, Owens jammed together text, hand painting, color reproductions of her previous work, and pieces of paper with telephone numbers and an invitation to text questions that were answered by a computer algorithm through hidden speakers. Also hidden behind the walls were ten stretchers, both giving the exhibition its title and furthering the fluid relationship between part and whole that began with the “Pavement Karaoke” exhibition.

The show hit like a lightning bolt

In November 2017, the Whitney Museum mounted a 20-year survey of Owens’s work. Bringing the totality of her practice into focus for many for the first time, the show hit like a lightning bolt. The quality and range of her work, along with her restless experimentation and innovation, was made visible to an audience beyond her most ardent collectors for the first time.

Up until this point, Owens had been relatively invisible at public auction, but shortly after the Whitney show opened, a painting from the “Pavement Karaoke” show was offered in an evening sale at Sotheby’s New York. *Untitled* (2012) vaulted past the pre-sale estimate of \$200,000 to \$300,000 to sell for \$1.8m with fees, a quantum leap from the previous auction record of \$360,500, also set at Sotheby’s, for *Untitled* (2006) just the previous year.



Installation photo of “Laura Owens: Ten Paintings” at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts

Eight of the ten works that have sold at auction for more than \$250,000 have hammered in the two years since the opening of the Whitney exhibition. Most recently, a work from 2019, smaller in scale than the “Pavement Karaoke” picture but similarly luscious in its painting, sold for \$1.1m (est. \$350,000 – \$450,000), at Sotheby’s in May. Private sales of similar works have edged into that territory—and indeed surpassed it, in the case of some of the more ambitious multi-paneled work. Access to Owens’s work continues to be limited on the primary market, owing both to the judicious handling of her

primary market and the relatively modest output that is naturally constrained by the extremely labor-intensive, resolutely hand-crafted nature of her studio practice. As such, Owens' secondary market has developed significant momentum because collectors who want to own a work but are unlikely to get access on the primary market are often willing to spend aggressively on the secondary market.

The relatively recent jump in her prices at the top level, however, seems for the moment to be confined to these more recent bodies of work. Nonetheless, the market for earlier landscape, animal and figurative paintings has started to pick up steam: take the untitled figurative work from 2004 which sold at Christie's in May for \$459,000 (est. \$300,000-\$500,000). What is certain is that Owens's dogged exploration of what a painting can be, long admired by her devoted collectors, has begun to be reflected in the market more broadly.

Owens is one of the most rigorous and hard-working artists Los Angeles has seen for some time. There is a straightforward, matter-of-fact approach in her paintings, laced with deadpan humor, that feels distinctly midwestern (she grew up in Ohio, which might explain it). American cultural innovation has often been a process of appropriation and reworking, and Owens's work is a veritable inventory of paintings tropes and techniques, both high and low, which she has chewed up and spat out in the most elegant and imaginative ways.