

WHITNEY

Whitney Museum
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PRESS RELEASE



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2014. Ink, silkscreen ink, vinyl paint, acrylic, oil, pastel, paper, wood, solvent transfers, stickers, handmade paper, thread, board, and glue on linen and polyester, five parts: 138 1/8 x 106 1/2 x 2 5/8 in. (350.8 x 270.5 x 6.7 cm) overall. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase with funds from Jonathan Sobel 2014.281a-e. © Laura Owens

THE WHITNEY TO PRESENT MID-CAREER SURVEY OF THE WORK OF LAURA OWENS

NEW YORK, October 25, 2017 – On November 10, 2017, the Whitney Museum of American Art will open the most comprehensive survey to-date of the work of Los Angeles-based painter Laura Owens (b. 1970), one of the foremost artists of her generation. The exhibition will be the first mid-career survey in the Whitney's new downtown home and is organized in close collaboration with the artist by Scott Rothkopf, the Whitney's Deputy Director for Programs and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator with curatorial assistant Jessica Man.

Despite her stature as one of the most influential artists of her generation, Owens's work has never been presented in depth in New York, and this exhibition will be her first major museum show in the United States since her landmark early career survey organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 2003. The exhibition builds on the Whitney's longstanding commitment to Owens, who has been featured in two Biennials, and is significantly represented in the Museum's collection. It also extends the Museum's ongoing commitment to presenting definitive surveys of mid-career artists, such as its critically acclaimed recent exhibitions of Glenn Ligon and Wade Guyton, also curated by Rothkopf.

Rothkopf noted, "As we contemplated the subject of the Whitney's first midcareer survey downtown, Laura seemed like the perfect choice. For more than two decades she's pushed painting forward with tremendous energy, intelligence, feeling, wit, and guts. It's been thrilling to watch her work develop so boldly in recent years

and to hear so many artists ranging in age from their twenties to their eighties express such passionate interest in her work.”

Drawn from the Museum’s important holdings of Owens’s art, as well as private and public collections in the US and abroad, the exhibition will feature approximately 60 paintings dating from the mid-1990s until today. Unlike many survey exhibitions that tend to emphasize their subject’s early breakout achievement, the Whitney will highlight Owens’s significant strides over the past few years, stressing how her early work serves as a preamble to her gripping new paintings and installations.

Making dramatic and inventive use of the Whitney’s building, the exhibition will be divided among three spaces on the Museum’s fifth and eighth floors. The fifth floor will host the main body of paintings, organized in loosely chronological chapters within an unusual architectural display that capitalizes on the gallery’s open floor plan and river views. For the first time in Owens’s career, walls and spaces will be custom-built specifically to evoke the original physical environments of some of her early site-specific works with an aim toward highlighting this crucial—if often overlooked—aspect of her practice. The eighth floor gallery will house Owens’s large scale installation of freestanding paintings shown in Berlin in 2015.

About the Artist

For more than twenty years, Laura Owens has pioneered an innovative-approach to painting that challenges traditional assumptions about the nature of figuration and abstraction, the relationships among avant-garde art, craft, and pop culture, and the interplay between painting and contemporary technologies. Owens emerged on the Los Angeles art scene shortly after completing her studies at the California Institute of the Arts in 1994, at a time when painting was viewed with suspicion by the academic establishment and many of her peers favored more conceptual approaches to art-making. Owens bucked this prevailing trend with a series of large-scale canvases marked by their grand ambition on the one hand, and their incorporation of humbler, low-key marks and subjects, on the other, merging abstraction with goofy personal allusions, as well as materials that seemed more the province of craft stores than the fine arts. References to cartooning, doodling, and a high-pitch, sometimes pastel palette served as further irritants to ingrained painterly pieties.

Over the ensuing decade Owens established herself as a key voice pushing painting towards a new conception of site-specificity grounded in the social, poetic, and architectural conditions of a particular place. Early on, she demonstrated a keen interest in how paintings function in a given room and used trompe-l’oeil techniques to extend the plane of a wall or floor directly into the illusionistic space of her pictures. These canvases often featured paintings within paintings and sometimes paintings within those, creating an effect of Russian nesting dolls that confused the boundaries of actual and pictorial space, as well as reality and representation. Owens’s approach offered a highly original conception of how a portable painting might allude to its initial setting (and its siblings in a series) while nevertheless remaining distinct from it, unlike the in-situ wall paintings of previous generations. These works demonstrate a self-conscious and reflexive relationship to the physical world they occupy, while opening, almost paradoxically, onto a lush space of reverie, conjecture, and play.

Owens’s interest in American folk art, historical tapestries, and other vernacular forms led her to fill her canvases with imagery and materials, such as felt appliqué and needlework, that were anathema to more serious discourses on painting and to some of her critical commentators. Yet this omnivorous approach to source material and technique allowed her to push painting forward and to engage broader social issues in surprising ways. In the aftermath of the United States’s call to war following the events of 9/11, Owens turned to almost childlike depictions of 19th-century American soldiers and medieval images of knights to address our increasingly bellicose national conversation. Her longstanding preoccupation with supposedly “feminine” colors and motifs from charming animals to infantile gestures, as well as her allusions to romantic love and motherhood (including the incorporation within her work of her own children’s drawings and stories) has led to a disruptive rethinking of feminism in art. Apart from imagery and palette, she regards her questioning of dominant hierarchies and conventional notions of “good taste” as a feminist attack on artistic orthodoxies.

Over the past five years, Owens has charted a dramatic transformation in her work, marshaling all of her previous interests and talents within large-scale paintings that make virtuosic use of silkscreen, computer manipulation, digital printing, and material exploration. Wild blown-up brushstrokes push off finely printed appropriations from newspapers and other media sources; actual wheels or mechanical devices like clock hands spin across a painting’s surface; images shuttle between the physical and virtual worlds to arrive back on canvas magically transfigured by their journey. In a 2015 Berlin exhibition, Owens precisely positioned a group of five, large, freestanding paintings in a staggered row so that from a specific vantage the writing on their surfaces resolved into a unified image in the eye. The following year she created an installation at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco where paintings were embedded within walls covered in custom-printed wallpaper. Visitors were encouraged to interact with the installation by sending text messages to various numbers that triggered elliptical spoken replies broadcast by hidden speakers. Such bold experimentation with painting, sculpture, reference, and process have made Owens an important exemplar for younger generations of artists, many of whom cite her work as a key touchstone. Furthermore, she is a co-founder and programmer of 356 S. Mission Rd., a collaborative art gallery, bookstore, and event space that

hosts regular exhibitions, readings, and screenings and has become a crucial gathering place and beacon for the Los Angeles art community and beyond.

Owens's work has been presented in exhibitions at numerous institutions around the world, including notable solo exhibitions at The Wattis Institute, San Francisco (2016); Secession, Vienna (2015); Kunstmuseum Bonn (2011); Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht (2007); Ausstellungshalle Zeitgenössische Kunst, Münster (2007); Kunsthalle Zurich (2006); Camden Arts Centre, London (2006); Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia (2004); Milwaukee Art Museum (2003); Aspen Art Museum (2003); the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2003); and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (2001).

Her work is in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; the Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the San Francisco Museum of Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and the Tate Modern, London, among others.

About the Catalogue

Owens and Rothkopf have conceived of the catalogue as an inventive companion publication in the form of an expansive 664-page visual and verbal narrative tracing the interplay between her life and art from her childhood until today. The volume interweaves new writing on her work with excerpts from a wide variety of texts on related themes. Rothkopf will provide an introduction, accompanied by new and excerpted essays by Berlin-based critic Kirsty Bell; Gavin Delahunty, Hoffman Family Senior Curator of Contemporary Art at the Dallas Museum of Art; Pulitzer Prize-winning *Los Angeles Times* food writer Jonathan Gold; *Artforum* Contributing Editor Bruce Hainley; Stanford University Professor Sianne Ngai; Francine Prose; and David Foster Wallace, among others. Topics range from the history of wallpaper and kitsch to artists as far flung as Francisco de Zurbarán Elizabeth Murray. The amply-illustrated volume will showcase Owens's paintings within a rich trove of archival imagery including exhibition announcements, installation photographs, personal correspondence and source material, supplemented by an oral history with commentary from fellow artists, collaborators, assistants, dealers, and other longtime friends. Taken as a whole, the book will situate Owens's artistic output, diverse interests, and personal history within a larger cultural matrix, arguing for the vitality of contemporary painting in its fullest formal and social possibilities. Each book will feature a unique cover silk-screened by hand in the artist's studio.

Exhibition Support

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About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists at a time when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for more than eighty years. The core of the Whitney's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists themselves, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

<i>Toyin Ojih Odutola: To Wander Determined</i>	Through February 25, 2017
<i>An Incomplete History of Protest:</i>	Ongoing
<i>Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1940–2017</i>	Ongoing
<i>Where We Are: Selections from the Whitney's Collection 1900–1960</i>	Ongoing
<i>Do Ho Suh: 95 Horatio Street</i>	Ongoing
<i>Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World</i>	November 3, 2017–January 28, 2018
<i>Laura Owens</i>	November 10, 2017–February 4, 2018
<i>Experiments in Electrostatics: Photocopy Art from the Whitney's Collection, 1966–1986</i>	Opens November 17, 2017
<i>Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables</i>	March 2, 2018–June 10, 2018
<i>Zoe Leonard: Survey</i>	March 2, 2018–June 10, 2018
<i>David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night</i>	Summer 2018

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Museum hours are: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Sunday from 10:30 am to 6 pm; Friday and Saturday from 10:30 am to 10 pm. Closed Tuesday. Adults: \$22 in advance via whitney.org; \$25 day of visit. Full-time students and visitors 65 & over: \$17 in advance via whitney.org; \$18 day of visit. Visitors 18 years & under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 7–10 pm. For general information, please call (212) 570-3600 or visit whitney.org.

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