

An Absence of Preconceived Notions:
How Laura Owens' Light Painting Style Captivates Audiences
And Creates Whimsical Worlds of Personal Wonder

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Born in Euclid, Ohio and inspired by the free-spirited style of the West Coast,¹ Laura Owens is a postmodern artist whose style, upon first glance, is best characterized by adjectives such as light and cute, as this type of art is characterized by “flatness, bright color, and innocent, whimsical, or otherwise non-serious subject matter.”² From populating canvases with an abundance of animals from discordant habitats to bees buzzing around a miscolored hive to a mother holding her vivacious daughter, Owens paints with a gentle hand and creates work with atmospheres that are reminiscent of childhood, similar to styles one would find in picture books. Contrary to how contemporary male artists of Owens argue that this lightness is a natural byproduct of her femininity, I assert that the lightness and cuteness Owens employs in her paintings serve the greater purpose of creating a whimsical world that allows viewers to experience art immediately and personally. Through her use of varied subject matter, technique, and material, Owens is able to craft worlds that are free of her own imposed, preconceived notion, giving the viewers of her work complete autonomy over the individual experience that they share with her charming and imaginative paintings.

One of the male contemporaries who attributes her light style to her femininity is Chris Ofili, someone she’s actually worked with on an exhibit before. Ofili said of Owens, “[She is] trying to deal with being a female painter and pushing her ambitions beyond the limits of what may be construed as the glass ceiling of her gender... She just [seems] empowered as a woman painter. Her paintings have a very light touch but also a punch and weight that can hold your attention.”³ Ofili’s opinion is not singular, and though he has a point when he states that Owens’

¹ Slenske, Michael. “Laura Owens: Between the Shadows.” Los Angeles Times, November 26, 2018. www.latimes.com/design/la-design-la-laura-owens-20181126-story.html.

² Foltz, Jill Erin, “Cute and Comfortable: The Rise of the Marginalized Aesthetic in Contemporary Art,” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Dallas, 2014): 9.

³ *Owens, Laura*, Edited by Scott Rothkopf (New Haven: Yale University Press, with Laura Owens, 2017), Exhibition catalogue.

work can capture the attention of audiences despite the lightness of her “feminine” style, it has little to do with the fact that she is female. Owens is not a revolutionary contemporary artist because she lets her gender inform her work in such a restricting manner; rather, Owens is revolutionary because she opened new worlds through her stylistically unique paintings.

Owens, through her whimsical paintings, aims to create an experience for the viewer that is *only* about the painting before them; she does not impose a deeper meaning through her paintings because she wants the viewer to observe and feel what is immediately there rather than focus on some preconceived, sophisticated notion set forth by the artist. To do this, Owens employs light colors, a lack of perspective, and a plethora of various textures, creating works that are pleasant at first glance and bewildering upon further analysis. Take, for example, her painting, *Untitled*, which she completed in 2002. Painted on linen with acrylic and oil, this piece exhibits a bucolic landscape and is incredibly charming, serene, and pleasing to the eye. The subjects of the painting are plentiful: trees, animals, a blue sky, and green terrain. Among the animals are butterflies, monkeys, rabbits, bears, squirrels, and a single owl. Each animal is incredibly cute, appearing as if they’ve been taken straight from a children’s book, but a sense of unease permeates the painting once the viewer realizes that these animals do not belong together. In the real world, none of them should be in the same place at the same time as their natural habitats are different, they belong to different seasons, and some are diurnal while others are nocturnal.⁴ Barren trees populate a rather vivacious terrain that is dotted with blooming flowers. Though the sky is mostly blue, there is a patch of dark night; the rest of the calm, blue sky pours into the grassy land, eliminating all sense of perspective. This leads the viewer to wonder other

⁴ Thomas Lawson, “The Unbearable Lightness of Painting,” *MOCA Catalogue*, (2003): 15.

questions about perspective: why are some of the monkeys so small? Where is the horizon? Why does nothing appear proportional? The painting initially promises cuteness and simplicity, but quickly, deep trouble for interpretation is caused by the painting's chaotic nature.

This diverseness does not only pertain to the subject matter, though, as the materials that Owens used for this painting are quite diverse as well. The monkeys were painted with what seems like watercolor as they are inky shapes with blurred edges that appear fuzzy and welcoming; this effect is achieved by the use of acrylic on linen. The sky and land were also composed with acrylic washes — incredibly faint, light, and pastel. The trees appear as strange emulsions, made up of many different textures and shades of brown.⁵ Lastly, she utilized pink, yellow, and blue oil paint to populate the canvas with wildflowers and leaves through a technique known as *impasto*, creating dimensionality and texture through the living flora of the image. The trees, which are incredibly barren, structure the painting with their trunks and branches, separating its composition into many different panels. The space is open but also claustrophobic as it is separated into so many different sections. The animals glance at one another, except no two face one another; only the owl faces forward with a crazed look as one eye turns upwards and the other downwards.

During the first minute of looking at *Untitled*, the viewer notices a peaceful and pretty pastoral scene, looking at the different elements of the painting until noticing that something does not add up, thereby being pulled in deeper. In the minutes that follow, the viewer begins to notice the different subjects, styles, and materials used in the piece, so they stop for a moment, glancing at it all in a pure attempt to take it all in. They realize, then, that instead of appearing as

⁵ Thomas Lawson, "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting," *MOCA Catalogue*, (2003): 15.

a single, harmonious landscape, the painting appears to be knitted together from many different components. The painting insists on being looked at, desiring close attention and great care that can only be granted over time. As Thomas Lawson, another postmodern painter, has put it, “[Owens’ paintings] resist analysis.”⁶

What does it mean, though, for a painting to ‘resist analysis’? Owens does not imbue her work some preconceived meaning, so a viewer cannot confront it and try to decide what the artist means to convey through the work, thereby ‘resisting analysis.’ By dousing her work in lighthearted themes and pleasant colors, Owens does not push an agenda of deeper meaning in *Untitled* or the rest of her works.⁷ To understand Owens’ paintings, everything that the viewer needs is already in the painting and within themselves; her paintings reference nothing outside of these, creating an honest, down-to-earth experience. When I first encountered *Untitled*, I was pulled into a world that inspired hope and pleasantness, and it reawakened some corner of my mind that had not surfaced since I was in elementary school. I did not think about what Owens might have been saying through her work, and she would not have wanted me to do so anyways. Contrary to what Ofili said, Owens’ light touch is not an uncontrollable, direct result of her femininity; rather, she uses it quite methodically. The aesthetic style in which she chooses to paint her works creates captivating, charming first impressions. She uses just enough of that technique for the viewer to stay and continue wondering, and this is what ultimately defines her work.

The paintings of the first half of Owens’ career are all characterized by this distinctive, childish, and unencumbered style, and each painting is meant to be a different experience for every viewer, cultivated specifically so the viewer can autonomously decide their own

⁶ Thomas Lawson, “The Unbearable Lightness of Painting,” *MOCA Catalogue*, (2003): 17.

⁷ Foltz, Jill Erin, “Cute and Comfortable: The Rise of the Marginalized Aesthetic in Contemporary Art,” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Dallas, 2014): 39.

impression. In 1998, she completed a painting named *Untitled* that features a beehive with a total of ten bees buzzing around it. There is some vegetation behind and in front of the dome-shaped beehive. The hive is shaded in by blocks of browns, ochres, and oranges respectively from left to right, mimicking a gradient. These colors are reminiscent of the 1970s — an era known for its free and fun-loving spirit.⁸ Despite the natural yellow-and-black coloring of the bees, the hive is colored rather unrealistically, contributing to a world with a hybrid of characteristics, both natural and unnatural, that seems to have very little correlation with the physical world.⁹ Similar to her use of colors in *Untitled* (2002), Owens uses an unusual color palette to bring the viewer into the world of the painting — a world that only exists within the painting's frame and is unrealistically colored. This world is imaginary; it captivates the viewer as it splays itself across a six-foot-tall canvas that is filled with a cute and dainty image.

Similar to *Untitled* (2002), this painting utilizes cuteness and gentleness to pull the viewer in and uses another element to anchor the viewer as once again, elements of the work seem discordant. The subject matter here makes more sense than that of *Untitled* (2002): bees are buzzing around their hive in some patch of meadow. The scene seems coherent but upon closer analysis, one can see that Owens uses a plethora of various materials. The plants in the forefront can only be made out because they take up negative space; made of pure canvas, they are layers below the paint of the beehive and can mainly be seen because the hive is colored. Smooth globs of oil paint make up the panels of the hive, thick enough around some edges to cast shadows that act as defining lines between squares of bright and earthy colors. Lastly, the bees are made of oil paint and are raised the highest above the canvas. This effect was created by Owens squeezing

⁸ Thomas Lawson, "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting," *MOCA Catalogue*, (2003): 23.

⁹ Foltz, Jill Erin, "Cute and Comfortable: The Rise of the Marginalized Aesthetic in Contemporary Art," (PhD diss., University of Texas at Dallas, 2014): 27.

paint directly from the tube onto the canvas to create the different segments of the bees' bodies.¹⁰ She did this as she was inspired by a piece of embroidery that she saw at an estate sale and wanted to create an effect that was similar to that of embroidery.¹¹ Successfully, she made the extruded paint appear a bit like needlework.¹² Lawson has said that this piece of Owens has a "homespun, handcrafted feeling," explaining that the piece is quite in tune with embroidery, which is "women's work."¹³

Owens' *Untitled* (1998) gives off a warm feeling, but once again, it has little to do with being inspired by a style that is "traditionally" associated with women, as Ofili or Lawson would assert, and more to do with creating a welcoming environment that asks the viewer to experience the painting immediately and personally. When I first saw the painting, I noticed all the texture and dimensionality within it and wondered what I should take away from Owens' usage of paint. I found my answer but never Owens', which is exactly what Owens would have wanted. Through her work, she tells the viewer of a journey but refuses to direct them to a destination.¹⁴ Her work does not leave a trail that guides her viewers to some preconceived idea she's forth; instead, she imbues her paintings with just enough to force her viewers to form their own conclusions. Paintings such as *Untitled* (1998) are about something much more complex and human than a previously prepared idea that may be politically charged or traditionally postmodern, and the atmosphere of embroidery in this specific piece of work gently and warmly invites the viewer to decide what that may idea may be for themselves. For me, the bees felt rather industrial, representing perhaps the hive-minded nature of public opinion, but for the next

¹⁰ Christopher Knight. "Review: Laura Owens' New MOCA Show Grasps the Perpetual Power of Taboo." Los Angeles Times, November 16, 2018. www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-laura-owens-moca-20181116-story.html.

¹¹ Paul Schimel, "Plays Well With Others," *MOCA Catalogue*, (2003): 31.

¹² Thomas Lawson, "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting," *MOCA Catalogue*, (2003): 23.

¹³ Thomas Lawson, "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting," 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

person, the painting could have reminded them of a sweet and idyllic scene, like the corner of a meadow on a spring afternoon. Owens' free, cute, and diversified style is an invitation for the viewer to join the painting and fuse with it, and in doing so, create some greater experience between the two of them that ultimately serves the viewer.

What, then, can be said of how Laura Owens' gender actually influences her work? Concretely, her femininity has allowed her to experience motherhood, and this is perhaps the one of the few concrete influences of her gender on her work. She gives viewers a glimpse into this world of hers through *Untitled*, which was completed in 2008. Drawing from her own experience as a mother, *Untitled* gives glimpses into what a relationship between mother and child can look like by modelling her own relationship with her daughter.¹⁵ In *Untitled*, Owens painted a mother and her child; the mother's face is hardly visible and her eyes appear closed while the child sits in her arms. The child's expression is also difficult to discern, but she is quite active, reaching out with one hand to play with her mother's hair and using the other to close her mother's mouth.

Though Owens' uses her experience as a mother to inform this work of hers, what kind of experience of motherhood does it actually depict? To better understand this, I will compare it to *The Child's Bath* by Mary Cassatt, a painting that more traditionally showcases an experience of motherhood. Regarding subject matter, Cassatt's painting is similar as it portrays a mother-like figure interacting with a young child. Through painting the action of a mother bathing her child, Cassatt wishes to express a "moment that is special by not being special."¹⁶ The bodies in Cassatt's work are more rigid than those of Owens' as the child is held up firmly and protectively by the woman's left hand while her right hand meticulously washes the child's feet.

¹⁵ Owens, *Laura*, Edited by Scott Rothkopf (New Haven: Yale University Press, with Laura Owens, 2017), Exhibition catalogue.

¹⁶ Karen Hosack Janes, *Great Paintings*, (New York: Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2011): 179.

One of the child's hands holds onto the mother firmly, making all the grips painted in Cassatt's work seem firm but careful. For me, this seems to emphasize a mother's responsibility when it comes to taking care of her child. Cassatt's painting is of a mother's responsibility to take care of her children, perhaps experiencing satisfaction during the process. It conforms rather strictly to the imposed gender roles of the late 1800s, which is when Cassatt finished her work.

On the other hand, Owens, in *Untitled* (2008), depicts a moment that is lighter and freer. Both the expressions on the mother's and child's face cannot be made out, leaving them up for interpretation. The child's arms reach up and are extended straight out; they are open, as if reaching for the world before her. Lastly, the mother seems to be doing nothing in particular. She is just holding her child — an activity that anyone, not just a mother, would do. This moment of motherhood that Owens depicts is not as defined and specific as the one in *The Child's Bath*. In fact, her image is so general that anyone could replace the position of the mother; in this case specifically, it just happens to be taken up by a mother. The two are sharing a moment of freedom, bliss, or tenderness, or whatever else the viewer would like to call it. The mother is not doing a favor for her child, as society would expect of her.

Owens' painting presents a less traditional moment between mother and daughter that is more about earnest warmth, but this is not the only thing that is out of the "ordinary" in her painting. Take, next, the colors, materials, and techniques that were employed in both Owens' and Cassatt's work. Cassatt's painting is rather realistic; after all, she was an Impressionist artist whose work was still reflective, though not directly, of reality.¹⁷ Using oil paint to create rough strokes, Cassatt harshly outlined the bodies of the mother and child. The work is only slightly out

¹⁷ Achille Segard, *Un Pentre Des Enfants Et Des Mères, Mary Cassatt* (Paris: Ollendorff Publishing, 1913), 17.

of touch with the observable world as it still uses normal, expected colors but has a dreamy air created by Cassatt's brushstrokes.

Owens, though, creates, like in her painting *Untitled* (2002) and *Untitled* (1998), yet another world that is bathed in whimsy and imagination. The mother's skin is colored by so many distinct strokes of dark pinks and bright reds, that the painting almost looks animated. The woman's hair is not a single color either, boasting hues of grey, purple, and blue. The child has been painted a light, fleshy pink. Owens, unlike Cassatt using oil on canvas, has painted *Untitled* on linen with acrylic and oil, hence why her washes of color seem blurry at the edges and lustrous in more open portions, taking on a watercolor-like effect. She created a world, then, that is harsher than the one Cassatt created, even having left some of the raw linen unpainted so as to not create a white background that would have been too jarring. It is more unrealistic — based on something more intuitive than knowledgable as the mother seems to represent a red burst of warmth and her daughter, a lighter bundle of purity and joy. The light washes, unrealistic colors, and soft lines make Owens' painting appear like a figment of the imagination; it is a world that exists, like those of *Untitled* (2002) and *Untitled* (1998), only within the painting's frame. It is a world only for a passerby to look at and interpret, while Cassatt's painting depicts a scene that can be found almost anywhere in the real world as well. Owens' painting is rather nontraditional in how it depicts mother and child because of its fanciful qualities.

In Owens' *Untitled* (2008), there also appear washes of light brown and hues of blue in the background, making the viewer wonder: where exactly are this mother and child? The background is not entirely blue, but it's clear that the blue that is there is meant to represent the ocean. It's hard to come to any clear conclusion regarding whether the two are at the beach or

underwater, though, because the painting has no sense of perspective. Because of this lack of perspective and the colors used, it is clear that Owens is not trying to depict reality. On the other hand, Cassatt's painting is realistic when it comes to perspective and setting. The viewer can tell that the motherly figure and child are in a home. To indicate depth, Cassatt painted the faces so that they recede into space.¹⁸ The viewer is given an overhead angle, allowing them to peak into the private sphere of woman and possibly hinting at the notion that Cassatt's viewer may be someone who is not well informed about the daily life of women. This reflects, once more, the notion that Cassatt conforms to more "traditional" standards to depict what a mother's *responsibility* for her child may look like. Owens, though, employs a lack of perspective, bright colors, and unencumbered and open subjects to produce a painting that conveys the experience of woman and motherhood as something that is sentimentally felt and outside the realm of the real world as it oscillates between the imagination and reality.

Owens uses her understanding of being a mother to inform the initial portion of her painting's journey; the rest, once again, is up to the viewer to decide, interpret, and make meaning of. I took the painting as a tender representation of a moment between a mother and daughter that is showered in warmth — a moment that can be common in reality but feels special and otherworldly. For others, the painting can simply be pretty, and yet again, for others, it can showcase a sliver of what motherhood may feel like. Ultimately, Owens uses her womanhood to inspire an experience that she does not finish explaining, which is the same purpose powering her use of a light style and unserious subject matter. Danny Rolph, another contemporary painter, once said that Owens' work "dazzled and took [him] to a place without time and context, its

¹⁸ Achille Segard, *Un Peintre Des Enfants Et Des Mères, Mary Cassatt* (Paris: Ollendorff, 1913), 165.

varying narratives undermined and underpinned by an alternative narrative flow,”¹⁹ meaning that Owens is successfully able to create exquisite worlds, and she can only do so by employing her signature, light style.

Ultimately, Owens’ paintings don’t make sense in that they do not contain a packaged idea waiting to be unwrapped by the viewer. Owens once said, “I’ve always thought that, instead of making the day fit into your painting, you should make the painting fit into your life. A painting should fit into your life,”²⁰ and Owens has successfully created works that do just that. To accomplish this mission, Owens employs a style that is characterized by lightness and cuteness. Her paintings carry with them an air that is free, leaving little interpretation up to the viewer. Her style is methodical and meaningful, for only through the use of a mixture of techniques, nonsensical subject matter, and lack of perspective can Owens create worlds that are free for viewers to explore and experience, that invite viewers into embarking on an endearing experience of their own. Thus, her style has little to do with the fact that she is female; contrary to what her male contemporaries, such as Ofili and Lawson, have said, she uses lightness in her paintings to fashion whimsical worlds that allow viewers to experience intuitively, whether that be amongst a plethora of animals in a strange green land, between busy bees buzzing about their hive, or in an intimate moment uniting mother and child.

¹⁹ Danny Rolph, “Laura Owens: Paintings,” *Camden Arts Center* (2006): 18.

²⁰ Susan Morgan and Laura Owens, “A Thousand Words: Laura Owens Talks About Her New Work,” *Artforum* (1999): 131.

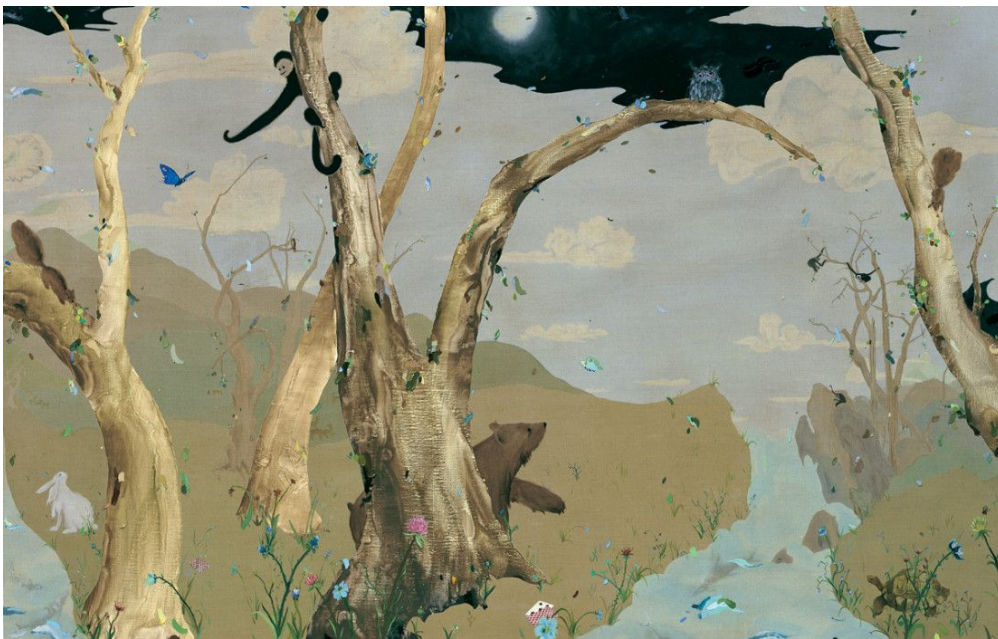
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Artworks



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 72 inches, Santa Monica, California.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2002, acrylic and oil on linen, 84 x 132 inches, Santa Monica, California.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2008, acrylic and oil on linen, 54 x 48 inches, Sadie Coles HQ, London, United Kingdom.



Mary Cassatt, *The Child's Bath*, 1893, oil on canvas, 39.5 x 26 inches, France.