

On Laura Owens on *Laura Owens*

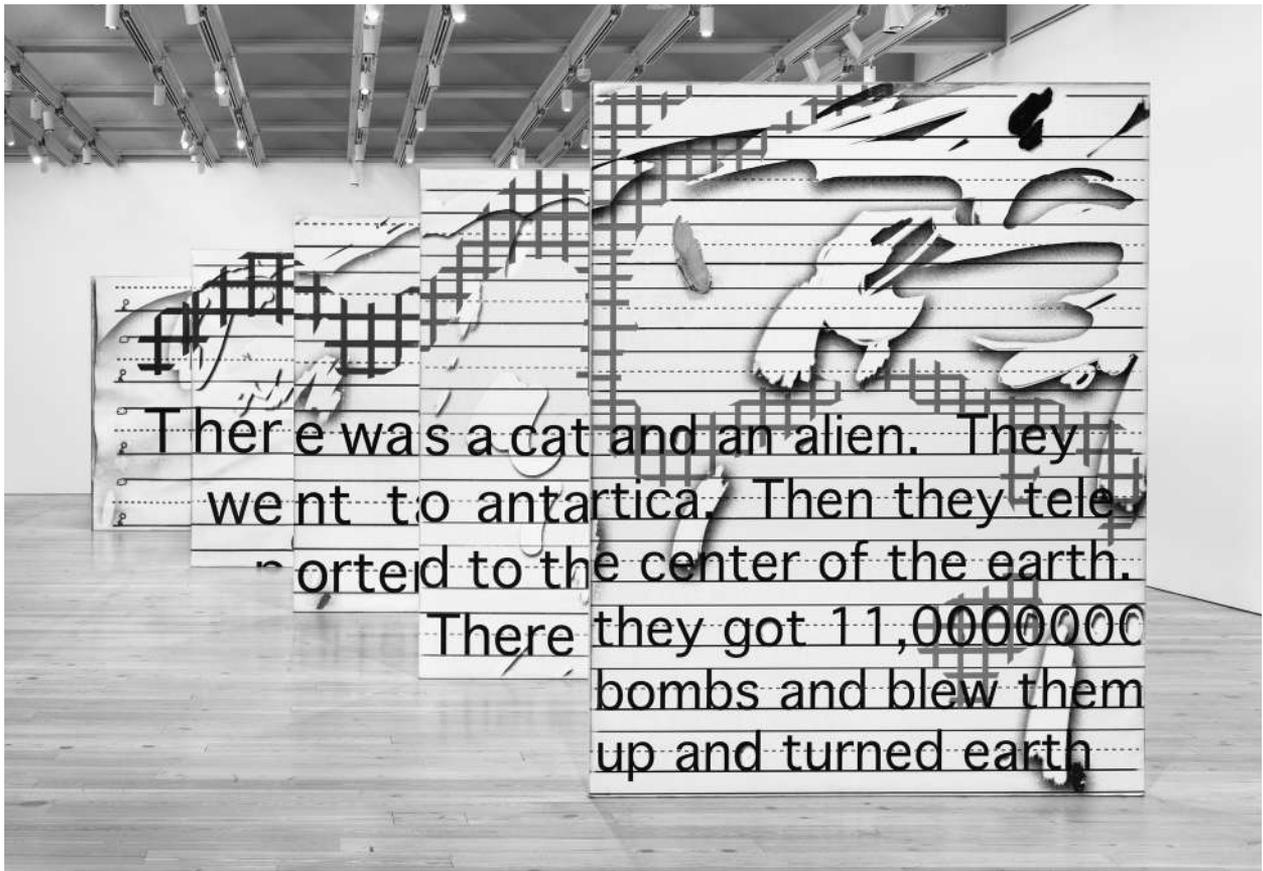
The first plate in the catalog for *Laura Owens* at the Whitney Museum shows a newspaper clipping from 1985, when Owens was a junior in high school. In the yellowed halftone image, the young artist holds up a poster of her winning drawing for a charity contest. “Support our children,” it reads, and below, “Take Responsibility for the Future.” The final plate in the catalogue isn’t a Laura Owens artwork at all, but a photograph of a note handwritten on an unlined page: “Questions the book should answer,” goes the heading—“the book” meaning this book in your hands. “The goal is for this to be more than catalogue / more than artbook? [sic].” It is. A book that begins with precocious juvenilia and ends with its own design; and in between are over 600 pages of artwork, ephemera, and professional texts. Owens’ catalog succeeds in both particularizing the structures undergirding art and in *being* a beautiful example of the same.

As the final plate notes, every artwork is an act of self-branding. But the Owens catalog is also calibrated *not* to fall, as such a project easily could, into self-indulgence—this because the artist takes care to mark the vulnerability of her project. It is a big, thick book, for instance, but flops around in its soft cover—an uncoated cover that bears one of thousands of unique designs (no two alike!) painstakingly silkscreened by Owens’ studio. There are disappointments: among the pages is a rejection letter for a teaching job. The catalog

also accounts for some of its own struggles. Late in the volume is an Instagram post from the exhibition’s curator, Scott Rothkopf, showing Owens in her studio with the famous L.A. food critic Jonathan Gold. The image hovers over an email from Rothkopf to Gold asking him to write an essay for the catalog. As Rothkopf laments in an inset text, he never did.

The typical retrospective catalog seems to return inevitably, despite some dips and twists, to the sealed narrative of stylistic/artistic development. Plate five follows plate four, one artwork follows another, up to the latest—as if artworks are all there is to art. Call it hotdog art: turgid, slick, and celebratory. Like a Koons balloon dog, pure of form, perfectly made, obviously synthetic—yet the object withholds/obscures any hint as to how it came about. The Laura Owens catalog is something else. It is a granular, varied, uneven book; it is meaty and satisfying, spiced, subtle, and complex, flecked with gristle. The skin is organic and translucent, and you have some idea of what’s inside; call it sausage art. You can get the recipe, but then you might not want to eat it, let alone make it yourself.

It’s like John Baldessari said: going to an art fair is like watching your parents have sex. Owens, though, doesn’t dwell too much on the primal scene but instead “frames” it—that is, attacks the art fair booth like she would any other space. One exchange in the catalog, sketched both in letters and an inset text, describes Owens’ contribution to a certain edition of Art Basel. She made a single painting to match the exact dimensions of the booth’s back wall. Just one painting. Her dealer Gavin Brown was miffed, since the price of the painting (around \$15,000) was just about exactly the price of the booth, and so how’s the gallery supposed to make any money? We imagine, as Owens describes, the artist sobbing on the convention hall steps as the moneyed flow of dealers and collectors parts around her. On the other hand, this conflict was no



accident. We knew that showing the art world a full-scale picture of itself would break some kind of etiquette and put many things at risk, not least, the artist's own plausible naiveté: once you make a painting of the primal scene, you can't pretend you don't know.

This way of probing and activating parts of the gallery/museum mechanism, simply by representing them—or, in the style of some kind of Midwestern public access show, throwing to a reporter who is really just in another corner of the studio—is as resourceful as it is charming. On one occasion described in the catalog, Owens produced a diptych where one half of the pair hung in the gallery office (the boudoir, even...), indicating art's transactional back end. Moves like this recall Michael Asher (whose influence and post-studio critique are invoked several times in the book)—the difference being that Owens' paintings not only leverage the institution's infrastructure against itself, but

offer an internal, compositional pleasure all their own. She (playfully) provokes the institution through its most classical unit, the painting. Her formalism is what pierces the casing and lets out the steam.

It's odd to privilege, as Owens' catalog does, the more wonkish, banal aspects of art making. Inventories, loan agreements, and condition reports might be interesting and/or insiderly—but they are also an example of how much this catalog, and Owens' project in general, shares with the more austere critiques of the '60s and '70s. Pieces by Christopher D'Arcangelo and Peter Nadin come to mind, such as 1978's *30 Days Work*, which comprised exactly the labor and material the two had spent building out a gallery. It was partially claiming art-adjacent labor as Art proper that made D'Arcangelo and Nadin's project radical. It was also their frank admission that art, even a post-studio or conceptual practice, requires material support—their day job was to

Laura Owens, *Untitled (2015)* (installation view). Acrylic, oil, and vinyl paint on linen, with powder-coated aluminum strainer; five panels, 108 × 84 inches. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy Captain Petzel, Berlin. Photo: Ron Amstutz.



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Laura Owens at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, November 10, 2017–February 4, 2018 (installation view).
Photo: Ron Amstutz.

renovate industrial buildings into lofts for other artists, a cold fact offered with warm rapport.¹

As institutional critique, the Owens catalog is tactful and unsystematic. It is not anything near a complete representation of the artist's archive; yet what it does do, at its most naked, is sample the particular economy of Owens' practice at various points in her career. For instance, in 1995, freshly MFA'd, she found a live/work storefront in Eagle Rock for \$300 a month, which allowed her to sustain herself and keep making work with just babysitting gigs and a part-time book store job. Flash forward to 2012 and then to the present: the catalog includes accounts from the people she now employs (if not exactly their salaries), both at her studio and at 356 Mission Rd., the Los Angeles kunsthalle that she co-runs. Photos show people stretched across the gigantic canvases that would become the exhibition *12 Paintings*, making Owens' work. We can see which parts are stenciled, which taped off or silkscreened: hints of process, clues about the scale of her workshop.

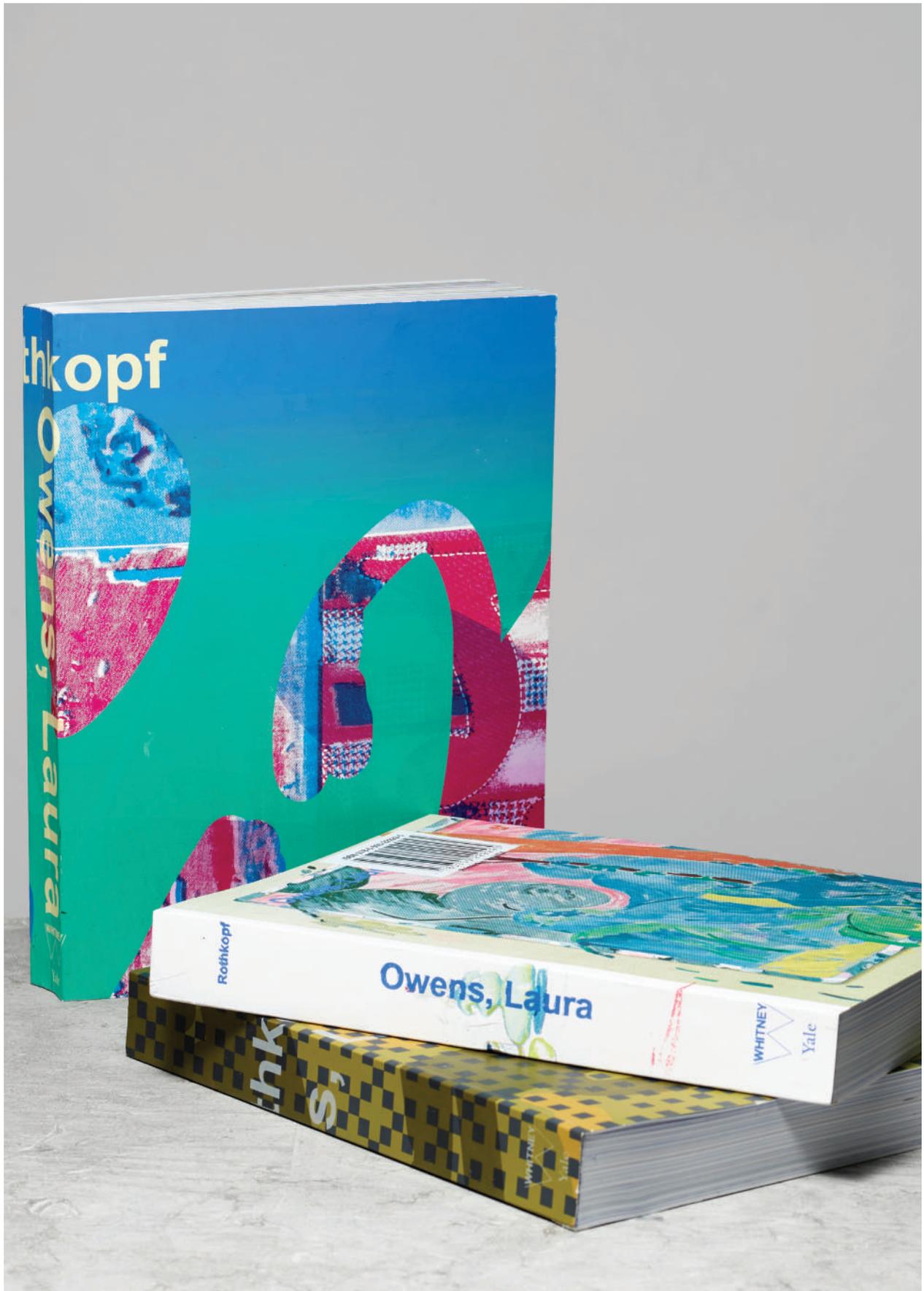
Elsewhere Owens includes diagrams and instructions, such as for the motors for her working "clock paintings," or exploded views of stretchers, walls, and electronics. In one case, a rendering of a nested set of four canvases and one book that were shown in the 2014 Whitney Biennial reveals the whole group, where only the largest was visible (or even acknowledged) in the exhibition. It's a glimpse at the back end of the artistic process, as well as a nod to her persistent "inside" jokes; and while Owens never gives a complete rundown of the economics of her practice, she also never lets us forget how essential this mundane, structural stuff is to her splashy surfaces. The number of notebook and sketchbook pages is balanced by an equal number of faxes and notes asking her grad school mentor for more financial aid or asking her gallerists for money.

1. "This is how much I make from various magazines: I make \$300 every two months from my *LEAP* column. I make \$100 per 400-word review or \$1,200 for a feature for *Modern Painters*, which is paid about six months after I turn in my final draft (they

The book's chronology corresponds to growth, but not necessarily satisfaction. Even latter entries reveal a degree of self-doubt and self-analysis that we might find familiar...the sense that, success aside, Owens should be doing better, faster, more. Such inclusions paint a clearer picture of how art gets made than a photo of the artist in her studio putting brush to canvas—although there are a few of those too. Among all the ways the Laura Owens catalog addresses the reader, it composes a letter to the young artist. Dear young artist, don't give up; this is how you make sausage.

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are currently six weeks behind on my fall payment, with which I was expecting to pay my rent). I make \$300 for a 550-word review for *Art Agenda*, which is paid within three weeks. I make 14 cents per word, maximum \$180, when I write for *Rhizome*. I make €200 for *Kaleidoscope* features, which are paid basically never. I make €400 for features and about €150 for reviews from *Spike*, who graciously remind me to invoice them when I haven't. I make £120 from writing reviews for *frieze*. I make \$300–\$2,500 for catalog essays, hopefully paid within a month. I actually don't know how much I'm going to make for writing this piece." Karen Archey, "Hack Life," *Art Papers*, November/December 2013, <https://karen-archey-u89x.squarespace.com/s/Archey-p26-28-1.pdf>.



Laura Owens catalogue
(2017). Image courtesy of the
Whitney Museum of
American Art.