

ARTFORUM

MARCH 2013 INTERNATIONAL

Interview: Sarah Graiwer, "Optical Artforum, February 2013"

HELEN MARTEN
THE CRISIS OF THE OBJECT
LAURA OWENS

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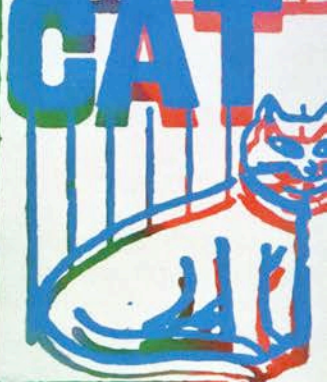
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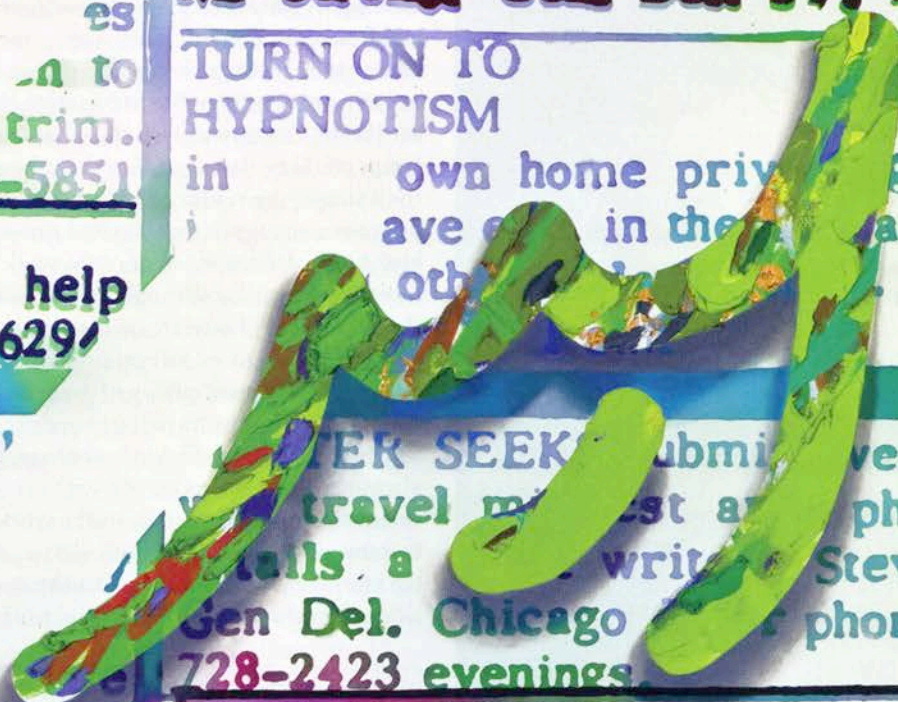
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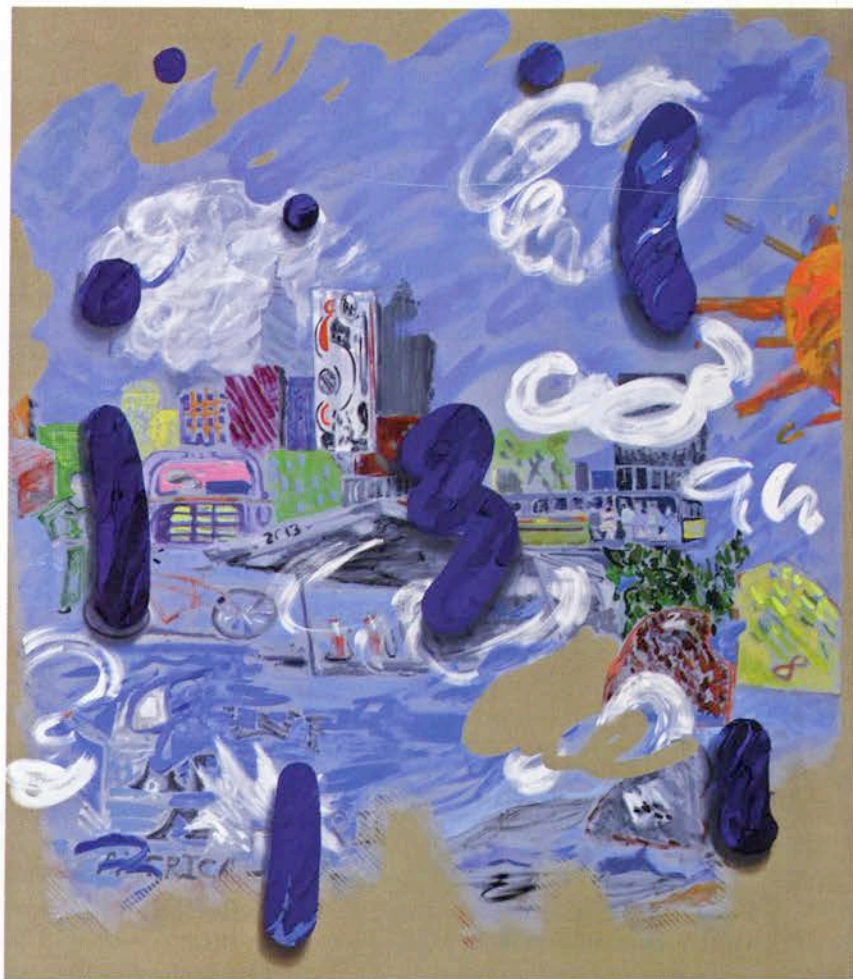
SARAH LEHRER-GRAIWER TALKS WITH LAURA OWENS

"THE EIGHTIES CALLED, They Want Their Painting Back": This was one of **LAURA OWENS's** nicknames for a recent work, whose acid neons and dragged filigrees certainly suggest a gleeful bout with MacPaint circa 1984. But then again, the '80s never looked quite like this. Over the past several years, Owens has been making pictures that extend her signature exploration of style and decor, but that appear more like layers of windows or screens—and have been executed at a newly expansive scale. They combine illusion and blankness, texts and rocks, depth and dead ends. Indeed, one seldom sees such a battery of techniques normally found in representational art—photorealistic relief, modeling, figures and grounds, contour, sfumato—in pictures that are undeniably abstract. Critic **SARAH LEHRER-GRAIWER** met with the artist at her new studio, exhibition, and performance space in Los Angeles, 356 S. Mission Rd., where twelve of these paintings debuted in January.

Opposite page: Laura Owens, *Untitled* (detail), 2013, oil, acrylic, and Flashe paint on canvas, 11' 5½" x 10'.

Below: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013, charcoal, resin, acrylic, and oil on linen, 11' 5½" x 10'.

Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013, oil, acrylic, and Flashe paint on linen, 11' 5½" x 10'.



SARAH LEHRER-GRAIWER: This is the first major painting show you've done in Los Angeles in about a decade. How much do you think of it as a single gesture versus twelve discrete paintings?

LAURA OWENS: I was asking myself to do both at the same time, knowing that they are at odds with each other. You have a situation now where exhibitions take precedence over studio practice, and a site holds more weight in discourse than portable works of art like easel paintings. Painting is still painting, but it exists in a post-studio world.

So it can't be a balance. It has to be a tension. And the question becomes, What do you do with that tension? In this particular iteration of me trying to figure that out, a lot of things migrate from one canvas to another, or the scale reflects in some ways the scale of the building. The twelve new paintings are hung closely enough that it's impossible to see only one at a time, but each rectangle still insists on its own completeness.

SLG: Does that tension between the stand-alone painting and the exhibition feel more acute now?

LO: Well, very early on, I went into spaces to make paintings in situ, scaled to a particular wall or measured to fit a space. At a certain point, I exhausted that strategy; it became too clever and too respondent. I wanted to make a discrete painting where everything happens *inside* the painting.

I think that realization came after a residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in 2000. For me, Gardner was the ultimate installation artist. Nothing in the museum is allowed to move, and every object or painting is looking at each other, bouncing you from one room to another. It was an overload, and I thought, "Could all that happen *within* one painting?" As a result, I made a painting that had a bear and playing cards and all these animals in it that shoot you around with their individual gazes. It was a single painting, but the multiplicity of marks and animals creates internal moments that talk to one another and gel into one whole thing. There is an idea of painting within a painting that runs throughout the history of art, whether it is a Matisse window painting, a Chinese scroll, or Baldessari's *A Painting That Is Its Own Documentation* [1966–68]. This is not only a formal device but also a way of including disparate pieces of paint, techniques, spaces, and concepts within one painting so that the work requires a participatory viewer. For me, it was a way of addressing the space within the painting not unlike the space of a room or an installation.

Then, around 2009, I somewhat aimlessly started a painting in my studio that immediately made me think, "Oh, no . . . it has to be five canvases," bringing me back again to thinking about what happens *between* paintings in an exhibition. And about a year

or two earlier, I had started making books. I don't think I was aware of this at the time, but the impulse for five-out-of-one came out of making books and thinking in terms of pages you could flip back and forth between, allowing memory to play a role in the viewing but also taking the pressure off of any one page to contain all the content. So I made five, but then I thought, "Oh, no, it needs to be seven." It ultimately turned into nine—a nine-panel blue painting with one canvas that is just blank, which I thought was really funny because I had anxiety dreams about the shippers picking up my paintings and the canvases being blank.

SLG: Swinging the pendulum back to single, discrete works (or even multipanel works) also seems polemical now, as though in opposition to recent trends in painting that return to older structuralist or Minimalist questions, evacuating as much as possible out of the painting to the point of asking, What is the minimum threshold of interest?

LO: I guess I'm not that interested in that. I don't know why you would still be making a painting when you start thinking in those terms, of what's the least amount necessary to do. For me, that would be the equivalent of gathering an entire orchestra to perform and only having the piccolo play one note for forty minutes, which is an overt gesture of refusal. Whereas painting *does things*, and why wouldn't you use all the things it does? If you want to make this type of gesture of refusal, people like Michael Asher did that and did it well. It doesn't relate to painting as much as it is a reaction to, or a critique of, the idea of painting.

SLG: Which is not really about taking pleasure in painting's material possibilities. Overt-refusal painting today seems to be more about looking smart.

LO: Most of the art schools I teach at do not include technical training—as though that would be really backward. There's this notion that you should either just know it or not do it. When I was in school, you wouldn't paint if you weren't interested in learning *how* to paint. If you made gestures of refusal with painting, it would have read as irony.

SLG: You've phrased this idea before as a problem of pressure: You see a glaring lack of pressure among your students, for instance, regarding what makes a painting or what painting requires.

LO: There's no pressure. Painting is like a prop, often literally so. People may not admit it, but it becomes a prop to have this *idea* of painting in an exhibition. There's no pressure that anything get thought about or resolved within that frame, it just becomes an index of "and-I-do-this-painting-thing-too."

SLG: Thinking about pressure in another sense, I wanted to ask about your decision to take on this vast new warehouse space in Boyle Heights, specifi-

"Painting *does things*, and why wouldn't you use all the things it does?"—Laura Owens

cally with the intention that it be both a studio and a place to exhibit.

LO: It comes out of thinking about how much context changes the situation and imbues meaning. I'm interested in experimenting with unfamiliar formats and entering unfamiliar territory. I wanted to try something different, outside a system of institutional parameters and thirty-day exhibitions.

For about four years, I wanted to make an installation of paintings in a site that I found on my own and on my own time line. First I looked at churches and theaters, spaces loaded with heavy connotations that would have prompted an obvious response, because they have distinctive architectural elements into which the paintings would fit. I decided not to go that route when I found 356 South Mission Road, which is much larger but also more versatile than what I originally imagined. It made me realize that it would be more of a challenge *not* to respond to the existing architecture, but just to make a painting show.

I didn't necessarily want to make such large-scale paintings, but the space calls for that. It would be too ironic to put tiny paintings in this big space. Sometimes you have to do the obvious thing. I also had elaborate ideas of floating paintings between pillars and making them architectural elements; I went through that entire thought process and decided it was too clever, too neat of a trick, and took the pressure off the painting itself. Just deal with making the paintings that are called for in the space: That's actually a harder problem to solve.

But the space also illuminated the possibility of continuing to collaborate with and invite other people to create and perform. In 1997, I had put together "The Eagle Rock Show," which was very much in the same spirit. Because there are versatile outdoor and interior areas, this new space allows me to restate in a larger way something I have been interested in doing for a long time, in terms of both painting and bringing people together in a new context.

SLG: So what began as an idea for a site-specific painting installation turned into an entirely new, open-ended, communal space.

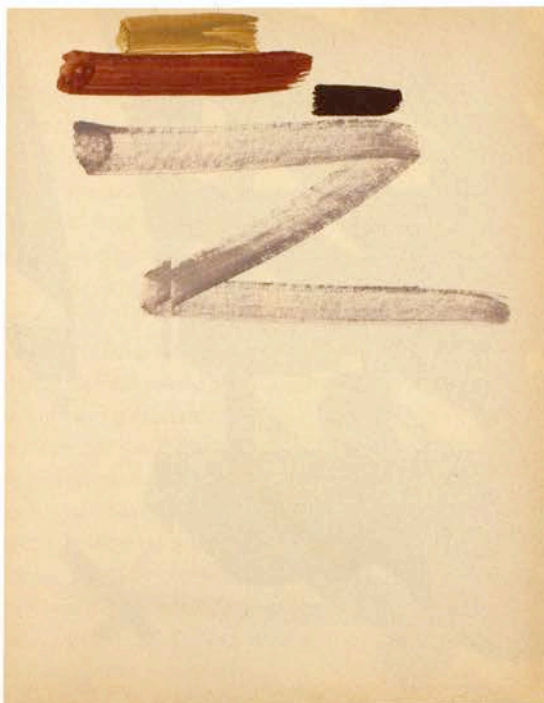


Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2011, nine paintings in oil, acrylic, Flashe paint, and mica flake on canvas, each 96 x 84".

Right: Cover and spread from Laura Owens's *Stem*, 2011, linen, thread, embroidery floss, colored pencil, watercolor, pencil, wintergreen transfer, acrylic, paper, closed 17 x 12 1/2 x 1/2". From the work *Untitled* (details), 2009-11, wooden table and twenty-one handmade books, 28 1/2 x 84 1/4 x 36 1/4".



Below: Cover and spread from Laura Owens's *Copper*, 2011, binder's board, fabric, paper, Flashe paint, PVA glue, closed 11 1/4 x 9 1/4 x 1 1/4". From the work *Untitled* (details), 2009-11, wooden table and twenty-one handmade books, 28 1/2 x 84 1/4 x 36 1/4".







Above: View of "12 Paintings by Laura Owens," 2013, 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles. From left: *Untitled*, 2013; *Untitled*, 2013; *Untitled*, 2013; *Untitled*, 2013. Photo: Joshua White.

Opposite page: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013, charcoal, pastel, acrylic, and oil on linen, 11' 5 1/2" x 10'.

"I wanted to try something different, outside a system of institutional parameters and thirty-day exhibitions."

—LO

LO: Yeah! Ooga Booga [a store specializing in books and multiples] has opened a new outpost in the front room, and we have events and screenings planned. This also opens the door to meeting somebody out in the world and inviting them to come to LA and do what they do here without the bureaucracy of a large institution.

SLG: You've also integrated more collaborative processes, like silk-screening, into the canvases themselves.

LO: It's about wanting to experiment in the studio. I often refer to myself as being in perpetual student mode, teaching myself to make the painting I want to make. The only reason I am using silk screen now is because a studio assistant who was good at it suggested it. And in the same way, after that door opened, I tried to do unconventional things with it, like taking a silk screen and pushing charcoal dust through it. How could we make that work? It requires spending a lot of time doing extra work beyond the canvas and valuing that as an important part of a studio practice.

The charcoal on canvas comes out of wanting to see a drawing on a ridiculously large scale. And for me the idea of charcoal, like watercolor, is interesting because it is one of those mediums traditionally lower than painting on the totem pole. I want to put all these mediums in the mix, as well as combine disparate ways of making marks in one painting, to see what happens spatially.

SLG: In many of these paintings, the space is shallow

but also densely layered, signaling the aesthetic of Photoshop but rendered on canvas to unfamiliar effect. What is the process of building these compositions?

LO: At least since I was at CalArts, I've always used painting software—like early kids' paint programs in the '90s—to have another way of making something and to be able to think about color really quickly. But I think what I've started to realize more recently is that the structure of Photoshop is linked to printmaking, and that opened the door to thinking about Photoshop as a natural, conceptual extension of printmaking, where each layer is just like another plate in etching or another screen in silk-screening. CMYK printing makes the connection really clear. Thinking about Photoshop in that context made it feel like a natural part of painting that shouldn't be avoided or, on the other hand, given too much meaning, because it just comes out of hundreds of years of printmaking, as the newest version of it.

The new works don't all start with the computer, though. For that painting there [above, fourth from left], I just stained the background with fluorescent acrylic and Flashe and then took a digital picture of it and worked on the file on the computer; I had a series of layers open with grids and newspaper scans and was drawing on top of the existing "underpainting."

SLG: It's as if you're demonstrating all the different techniques, whether digital or mechanical or handmade, with which one could convey gesture. Gesture is literally writ large, thrown into relief with illusion-



Left: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013, oil, acrylic, and Flashe paint on linen, 11' 5½" x 10'.

Opposite page: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013, oil, acrylic, and Flashe paint on canvas, 11' 5½" x 10'.

istic drop shadows, which are a main unifying visual element throughout these new paintings.

LO: Yeah—there's an entire range of ways I am making the drop shadows. They allude to layers, too: I kept saying to myself while I was working, "I need a painting I can paint on." For instance, the landscape after Matisse only has drop shadows on the internally depicted frame, in order to illustrate a breaking of that frame. But in another painting [opposite page], we used many different types of shadows, to see whether that would trip up your vision. Some shapes have soft, fuzzy shadows as if they're farther in front, while other shapes have sharp, tight shadows to insinuate that they are closer to the blue grid background. The pink shape, for instance, has a tighter shadow than the eyeball shape underneath it, which is funny and confusing and, most important, only possible in painting. We also played with color: Where the shadow falls on the blue grid at top is an extremely bright phthalo blue-green instead of a conventional gray. Then, in addition to painted drop shadows, some of the silk screens (grids, newspaper text) also have silk-screened shadows, and on top of all that, there are real physical shadows from the impasto to add to the confusion.

SLG: Is there a qualitative difference in the marks depending on where they originated, whether by hand or mouse?

LO: I have a tablet with a pen that I usually use, but I've also drawn with the mouse. And I drew the gesture shapes directly on the canvas. Some paintings, like the cat painting, began as pencil drawings on paper that I then projected large and traced with charcoal.

The layers and different methods of mark-making all allow and undergo a kind of leveling. I really like the fact that I could take a picture of a cityscape painting that was made by ten kids at an elementary school and then take a picture of a Matisse landscape painting and put them in the same show, appropriating imagery from different sources like putting different marks or mediums within one canvas.

It's a similar thing with the newsprint collage: In those classified ads from the '60s, every desire—the prisoner who wants contact, the people selling their boat, someone wanting to take pictures of nude women, and someone trying to find Terence McKenna—everything is leveled in the form of text. That is how we really experience things anyway, the way we see things.

SLG: You chart a very slippery continuum between what is a brushstroke, what is a gesture, and where both of those things, through a shift in scale, become shapes themselves.

LO: The oversize impastoed gesture marks are made up of large paint strokes and then given drop shadows.

"I started thinking about Photoshop as a natural, conceptual extension of printmaking, where each layer is just like another plate in etching or another screen in silk-screening."

—LO

They are overdetermined but also undeniably physical. I wanted to emphatically try to inhabit the gesture. The gesture is simultaneously the mark inside the painting, the act of painting, and the decision to rent the space and make the exhibition.

I had asked myself, in a depressed mood: Is it even possible for a woman artist to be the one who marks? At the same time, in 2013, does anyone at all have this ability, or is it an antiquated and sentimental idea? Isn't it interesting that a male orgasm has a DNA imprint that will replicate itself over and over again, reinforcing itself the way language or naming might, but the female orgasm has no use, no mark, no locatability? It can't even be located in time. There's no moment when ejaculate comes out, really. I want to think about how that can be the model for a new gesture. What is that gesture in art, or in painting? The DNA replicant reminds me of the signature, like Picasso's signature on the painting being comparable to sperm. That sounds really gendered, but it's not—I'm specifically locating production that's telegraphing itself, which feels very old-fashioned.

SLG: Instead of telegraphing signature, your focus keeps snapping back to the internal pressures within painting.

LO: This is such a generalization, but it feels like the East Coast and parts of Europe are still heavily invested in the narrative of the artist—who that artist





"In the classified ads from the '60s I use, every desire—everything—is leveled in the form of text. That is how we really experience things anyway, the way we see things."

—LO

Near right: Laura Owens, *Untitled (detail)*, 2011, fourteen paintings in acrylic, charcoal, clock motor, and collage on linen, each 24 x 24".

Far right: Laura Owens, *Untitled (detail)*, 2012, ten paintings in Flashe paint and yarn on linen, each 24 x 24".

Opposite page: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2012, oil, acrylic, Flashe paint, resin, collage, and pumice on canvas, 108 x 84 x 1 1/2".



is, the gestures that artist made. Maurizio Cattelan and Richard Prince are each creating narratives about who they are as artists, which makes the object secondary. Whereas someone like Charles Ray, for me, at least, is making an object first. This is perhaps a subtle difference. When an artist makes a gesture about "oh-and-I-made-a-painting," it fits more into that first paradigm of the artist's narrative. I'm not against it at all—it's interesting and really fascinating—but it's just not where I'm at right now.

SLG: Because it's so hard to just straight-up *make a painting*?

LO: Well, yeah, it seems pedestrian in some way. I mean, what's the universal signifier of art? I'm going to put my money on a painting. That's just a too pedestrian, too midwestern, democratic, everybody-can-do-it kind of thing. So there is this notion that artists must keep expanding their gestures into different spaces: discourse, theater, music, painting, you name it.

SLG: In other words, you are countering the popular tendency toward a "networked," sprawling, heterogeneous, self-narrativizing art practice by staking a renewed claim for attention to medium and materiality—even a new kind of medium specificity?

LO: Many of the artists I recognize as having an influence on me are interested in the actual experience of being with the objects in exhibition, which is different from cultivating a clever narrative around what gestures happened when. I'm more interested in having the experience of being in a certain location and seeing a certain show—existing in that space with the object. There can be discourse that follows from that, like you and I can talk about being at Regen Projects and seeing Charlie [Ray]'s car. But that's different

from, for example, Damien Hirst's spot paintings, which exist as discourse before anything.

SLG: Emphasizing the physical object in real space—**LO:** Is really considered very conservative.

SLG: But I think that's changed. What may have been considered conservative takes on a newly radical aspect, now that the virtual and digital are so aggressively dominant, to the point that experiencing painting solely as quick-click jpegs is thoroughly accepted as the norm. To insist on the importance of a physical interaction in space with an art object suddenly has the force of a challenging, transgressive demand.

And even beyond that, you're not only bringing attention to the personal agency involved in selecting a space and conceiving paintings for that space but heightening that experience by making the paintings there as well. Collapsing the studio onto the gallery-exhibition site strikes me as an exciting context most viewers don't get to experience often enough. Your decision to control the conditions of reception in this way also counters, or at least disturbs, the mindless routine of cyclical gallery shows and press releases.

LO: I was trying to make an invite for the opening of the space, and I didn't even know what to call it! When you try to make a more public version of what normally just happens among friends, that creates challenges. And that's kind of the crux of this experiment. How do I keep it really familiar to me, like something I've done before—when I would finish some paintings and invite fifty people by the studio—but take it just one little step further and invite everybody and anybody? I still want it to feel like you're stepping into a space that's not foreign to the making of these things. Mike Kelley did it. Jason Rhoades did it. It feels like a familiar thing to do in LA, don't you think?

At the same time, I like that every aspect of this project has been a total unknown. This impulse to make the space versatile and nondeterminant, where areas within the building can be activated in different ways, might invite different groups of people to have an experience. It's exciting to see what happens without predetermining or naming it as a particular kind of entity. That way it can fluidly turn into a kitchen or a workshop or a bookstore or a dance theater. If a karaoke party sounds fun, we can do that.

SLG: Do you think of the participants in this new site as being the audience? Are community and audience the same?

LO: I did an interview a long time ago with the filmmaker Chris Smith, and one of the questions I asked him, when he was working on his first film, *American Job* [1996], was what it meant for the producers of the film to be the audience for the film as well. There was this idea in Milwaukee, where he was filming, that you just do it—you make the film regardless of distribution because the main audience will be the producers themselves. I've been thinking about that for a long time.

I remember being asked in grad school about the political dimension of my work. I would answer that my idea was to propose a way of doing something that values a certain type of doing by the audience in turn. In other words, the best response to my paintings would be if someone went home and made a painting. That goes back to what we were talking about before, because when you privilege the artist's overarching narrative, you're saying he's *the* one, he's the one who makes, he's the one who owns the gesture. When everyone makes a painting, the gesture becomes more anonymous. □