



Untitled, 2002

Monkey Grammarian

by Linda Norden

*HANUMAN, HANUMAT, HANUMAT . . . Hanuman leaped from India to Ceylon in one bound; tore up trees, carried away the Himalayas, seized the clouds and performed many other wonderful exploits...Among his other accomplishments, Hanuman was a grammarian. . . .*¹

John Dowson, quoted in Octavio Paz, *The Monkey Grammarian*

I have always been stunned by the way my eyes move across the surface of a work by Jeff Koons without ever finding a point to stop. . . . There was [is] nothing for your eye to hang on to, no mole or misaligned tooth. It was like passing through a visual cloud of perfume. I kept thinking how hard it is to erase all the details, for no one part of the whole to be odd or noticed.

Laura Owens²

I can start it anywhere . . .

Laura Owens



Untitled, 2014

I.

First point of entry: Laura Owens is a Hanuman. She thinks in leaps and works in visible increments, often as if by example.

Who but Owens, for example, would read Jeff Koons's hyper-real surfaces as akin to those of a perfect male specimen, transmuting the optical experience of an eye roving over hard-polished aluminum or buff skin into an encounter with a vaporous "visual cloud of perfume?" And who but Owens would, or could, invoke the laboriously constructed, painted canvases of Paul Cézanne contra those shinier, but equally labored, metallic Koonsian surfaces. This is precisely what she goes on to do after conflating male skin with polish and perfume. The implicit equation of Koons's erasures of hand and evidence with the transubstantiation of flesh into visible scent, throws at least one deep feeling about what Owens values in the painting of painting into sharp relief. Here's what she offers by way of counter, via Cézanne:

. . . [Koons's] nanoscale of decision making reminds me of Cézanne: the specificity and quality in his deliberation, the movement of his thoughts mirroring the eye focusing and refocusing, allowing many different paintings to exist within one painting. The heterogeneous space that results unfolds when we pay attention as closely and for as long

as Cézanne did. There is a slowness to the paintings that allows us to see the intentionality in each brushstroke, the attentiveness to each decision.”³

Owens, as both critical thinker and artist, is a “monkey grammarian.” I’m borrowing here from the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, whose mid-1970s prose poem of that title enlisted Hanuman—the ninth-generation, red-faced “*gramma* of language” distinguished by his “dynamism and endless production of phonetic and semantic creations”—in search of something more spiritual than anything I’d attribute to Owens. But her unpredictable stylistic and formal leaps, are a big part of the often baffling charm of her art.⁴ Leaps, it should be added, are not erasures: For all their varied “starts” and construction, Owens’s paintings, unlike Koons’s surfaces, consistently reveal their constituent deliberations, and that quality of attention helps to explain the respect her art commands, as does her acute, but ever sensitive, critical insight into the work of her fellow artists, both living and dead. It’s telling that what Owens singles out in Cézanne are the brushstrokes he contrived by way of palpable, incremental segue and insistent slowing down of the eye’s passage across a landscape, especially its horizon. Her words on Cézanne’s painting could easily be said of her own. That she can also account so pointedly for the affective impact of Koons’s most celebrated sculpture—for the mix of narcissism and willed generosity of the discreetly indiscreet objects of desire he contrives and for his insistence on making whatever he makes *perfectly*—owes something, I think, to her comparable habit of contriving complex problems no one asked her to solve, and then solving them as ingeniously as she does. Koons and Owens also share a surprising, even counterintuitive, emotional investment in their work. Owens’s dismay at Koons’s literal smoothness, however, points to something darker and more restless. Her art baffles me almost as much as Koons’s seems to baffle her, but the mix of confidence and angst she makes evident are decidedly her own.



Untitled, 2014 (detail)

I am hardly alone in thinking that Laura Owens’s *Untitled* (2014; pl. 153 and left), for example—her submission to the 2014 Whitney Biennial—is a tour de force, and a highly complex tour de force at that. Even within Owens’s ever-self-challenging oeuvre, the Whitney painting counts as a leap. From the minute you start looking—and you have to start by looking, because as always with Owens, the “untitled” title gives you nothing to wield in advance of that looking—you’re caught up in the riddles and ride Owens conducts around her multiplications of representations and material fragments and meanings. You could begin by being impressed by the savvy *trompe l’oeil* layering of physically attached elements on what looks like a skewed stack of school-room posters, ripped in places to reveal details of the almost identical poster below, “sized 3 percent larger,” the label notes. This carefully rendered optical trickery is compounded by the attachment of “real” and painted

stuffs: three-dimensional wood trellis fragments that cut through the painting’s screen-printed strata, and thick blobs of paint isolated as shape, whose elegant cubistic elisions confound the “real” cast shadows with Owens’s schematically painted versions of the same. Or you could begin by reading the text, also layered and fragmented and multiply scaled, but with more aggressively legible semantic intent: “When you come to the end of your rope, make a knot, and hang on,” the “hang on” repeating, as if in oral/aural chorus to the pictorial multiplications. The prominence of words here, largely writ and central, was something newish for Owens at the time. But for a practiced Owens viewer, the appropriated “inspirational message poster” text the painting trumpets is simply evidence of the care with which she repurposes and deploys any signifying image (and now, verbal message too)⁵ in her paintings. The words Owens repeats here are both typographically distinct and precise in their rendering, and dramatically associative, imagistically. But in good High Analytic Cubist fashion, Owens makes a case for the verbal passage as both necessary and insufficient, in and of itself, as representation of the sentiment the words convey. The fact that the painting also offers up a myriad of renderings of rope, ends, hanging, and “hanging on,” not to mention its physical layering and scale shifts, only reinforces the singular associative capacity of the words as words—and their limits. The density of this semantic layering, the three-dimensional construction of the painting, and above all, its monolithic status were as new for Owens as the prominence of the text.

As if to compensate for Owens’s refusal to title her works, the museum label went to great lengths to offer up information, detailing the painting’s contents much the way manufacturers dutifully track ingredients in processed food:

Ink, silkscreen ink, vinyl paint, oil, pastel, paper, wood, solvent transfers, stickers, handmade paper, wood, solvent transfers, stickers, thread, board and glue on linen and polyester . . .

The list curiously compounded the sense of ambition evident in the finished painting, as did a longer, interpretive label beneath the material list of contents that went on to call attention to the novelty of the painting’s more abstract sources and construction and to comment on their effects: “Among the unsettling results of this separation [of layers],” the text eloquently explains, “are the fractured face of the boy [pictured in the appropriated poster] and the jumbled text near the bottom, which emphatically reiterates the words ‘and hang.’” The label also explains something one could not possibly glean from the painting itself:

As a final gesture, Owens has hung behind this painting three other paintings and a book, each decreasing in size much like a Russian nesting doll. Depending on the context in which the work is shown, the smaller elements may

remain hidden, as they are here, or displayed individually, to form a small exhibition.

Owens's Whitney entry struck me as *sui generis*, less a work that reaffirmed or expanded painting's possible manifestations than an ingenious construction, in this case, a single work devised to function as several: Owens's *Boîte en Valise*, a three-dimensional container and orchestration of readings that both expand and loop. Owens has often voiced her predilection for conceptualizing paintings in multiple iterations and for thinking in terms of exhibitions to "take the pressure off any one painting"; the Whitney painting offered a breakthrough of sorts from the multi-painting paintings she'd favored in the years leading up to it.

As it happens, that painting was in part a solution to a problem imposed externally. Invited by artist/curator Michelle Grabner to contribute a single work to a sort of exhibition-within-the-exhibition of Grabner's larger Biennial contribution, featuring a number of female artists—Amy Sillman, Donna Nelson, Louise Fishman, Jacqueline Humphries, to name a few—for whom painting continued to recommend itself as medium, Owens, like the others, was limited to one work. The challenge was to make a single painting that might embody the various spaces and the propositional stance she had long achieved through multiple paintings and installation, or exhibition.

The Biennial invitation came on the heels of an important year for Owens, in which, among other things, she set out to find and develop a studio and social space in her hometown Los Angeles, a physical space which, in the spirit of her untitled paintings, she named after the building's street address: 356 S. Mission Road. Owens opened 356 S. Mission with a new multi-part work, an opus of sorts, paradoxically dubbed *12 Paintings*, because each of its constituent *Untitled* canvases was itself a complete work. In this sense, *12 Paintings* served as a precursor to the Whitney's physically layered mono-construction, its inverse: an exhibition as painting, or a painting as exhibition. In a conversation with the artist and critic Fabian Stech, published soon after the completion of *12 Paintings*, Owens explains some of the thinking behind the challenge she set for herself, even before the Whitney:

When the combination of the paintings and the site generates meaning, that takes the pressure off the individual painting. So individual paintings do not have to rise to the occasion. The paintings do not have an individual gestalt effect, as a finished historical and autonomous object would. I've been working in that way for a while . . . Because the piece is located in the choices between the paintings, it allows for an undetermined growth of the size of the work. As many ways as I organize and present them, it will always flesh out new meanings and associations. It's an alternative to the idea of the whole. To the gestalt. Now picking this

*space [356 S. Mission Road], I feel that I want to put the pressure back on each individual painting and at the same time have it speak clearly as one thing in the exhibition. Can I do both? That's what I'm trying to do.*⁶

The 356 S. Mission paintings and the Whitney submission (along with two related constructed paintings) are only some of the more recent instances of Owens's experiments with the borrowed and cannibalized syntaxes of both recognizable painterly styles, and any other two-dimensional stylistic vocabularies and procedures she finds usable, as well as an ever-expanding alphabet of images from her own pictorial repertoire, e.g. those "inspirational" posters, or the Hallmark and dime-store greeting cards, such as from which such things as her signature monkeys and shorthand, decorative landscape details must have come, early on.⁷ Owens has been doing what she does so long and so well that it's easy to overlook the extent to which her felicitous mixing and matching and trying on for size of seemingly incompatible painterly and non-painterly vocabularies and procedures expands and upends ideas of what a painting can be and what it might be doing. Along lines that compare to contemporaries such as Albert Oehlen or Charlene von Heyl, Owens moves freely between imagery, marks, and structural approaches that read as abstract and as representational; but unlike many of her contemporaries, the problems she prefers do not seem to be rooted in exploring painterly abstraction and representation *per se*. Painting, for Owens, serves as the ultimate readymade, "this immediate container," the conspicuous bracketing that affirms her project as "Art"—"It is art—you don't have to make it art."⁸ Beyond any isolated investigation or experiment, painting makes clear the domain within which Owens wants to pose her questions and formulate her propositions. That said, she can start it anywhere.⁹



Untitled, 2003

Against the tour-de-force breakthrough of Owens's solution to the one-painting problem set by Grabner, the knowledge of works hidden behind the visible construction was oddly, if only mildly, disconcerting. Its information risked reducing her dimensional rebus to a Trojan Horse, of creating a sense of coyness, or of a withholding not unlike what Owens had decried in Koons's gleaming surfaces. Owens has had strong critical reception from the get-go; and yet in almost equal measure, the mix of high-order conceptualization with playful defiance in her obsessively exacting, choreographed pictures has given any number of critics pause over the years, myself included, primarily because the resultant imagery can seem not just enigmatic, but something closer to sentimental, often embarrassingly so. (The Cologne bad boy painters to whom her work is often compared, might have felt compelled to paint themselves and their shit-stained underwear early on; Owens gave herself permission to paint clouds limned in girly curves and landscapes directed by bespectacled monkeys.) That this defiance is indeed truly playful, and as often as not couched in kitschy figures and

flourishes, only makes it harder to negotiate. Less frequently acknowledged, and in marked contrast to the “smoothness” Owens takes issue with in Koons, is the extent to which she incorporates the critical apparatus of her paintings within them. For all their expansive imagination—and Owens is startlingly imaginative—her paintings retain the terms of their making.¹⁰ Her insistence on not titling her works, to my mind, only punctuates this fact, as do the versions and layerings of a recognizable image or visual trope, and multi-part paintings, none of which is complete in itself. Equally important, and like most of those Cologne painters, Owens has been as intent on directing and shaping the conversation she seeks as an artist as she has in making painting her *métier* and arena. Which leads to a second point of entry.

2.

When Owens first began thinking about this monograph, she was inspired by *Je Suis Le Cahier: The Sketchbooks of Picasso*, a catalogue compiled some thirteen years after the artist’s death and after his sketchbooks, and their promise of untrowelled source material, were made available.¹¹ The link had less to do with Picasso than with the type of writing that book assembled: a gathering of focused investigations based on new research by scholars and artists with longstanding interest in the work of an artist already much discussed. Rosalind Krauss, to name just one, wrote on a sketchbook dedicated to the year 1926 in the life of the artist; Gert Schiff wrote on a sketchbook dedicated to Picasso’s paintings on “[The Rape of] The Sabines.” The idea was to jettison the overarching interpretations in favor of a zoom-in on highly specific sources or context. What Owens hoped would be achieved in the current book, was something similarly investigative and focused. My response to these stated parameters has been almost perversely other: for all my interest in particularizing Owens’s hugely varied output, I had a different inquiry, or essay, in mind. I was stuck, narrowly, on revisiting in detail a few earlyish works I’d responded to intensely, but uncertainly, at the time I saw them, and in somehow reconciling my qualified delight in Owens’s carefully controlled play with pictorial vocabulary and sentiment so strong in her late 1990s/early 2000s paintings with her ever-impressive experiments with semiotics, technics, space and scale—and now structure. The immediate prompt here was the very different order of response Owens’s then-new Whitney Biennial submission provoked from those earlier paintings. I wanted to think more structurally about aesthetic relationships within and between Owens’s individual paintings and larger projects, which, however disparate, seemed curiously consistent. I wanted to talk about an even more disparate array of tangential topics by way of analogue, as opposed to source, and above all, to jettison the logjam of defensive critical writing on painting that had turned me off for years to thinking about recent painting in any detail. I was inspired,



Albert Oehlen, *Untitled*, 1990. Oil on canvas. 107 x 84.2 inches

toward this end, by a very different essay than those found in *Je Suis Le Cahiers*: Diederich Diederichsen’s “descriptively” titled writing on his painter friend and cohort Albert Oehlen, “Triumphs, Setbacks, Rear Exits, and Cease Fires: Some Aesthetic Issues Concerning Albert Oehlen, and Some Architectural and Musical Comparisons.”¹²

The essay, written in 1995 and published as part of an exhibition catalogue by the Wexner Center for the Arts featuring both Oehlen and the photographer Christopher Williams, pointedly sidesteps the vehement exchanges around painting on both sides of the Atlantic in the decade leading up to 1995, to which Oehlen contributed significantly. “I’ve rarely had as much fun,” Diederichsen wrote by way of opening, “talking about any artwork as I’ve had with . . .” and he proceeds to list five non-art “works” conspicuous, at least initially, for their left-field unrelatedness and mix of grandiosity and modesty, followed by a caveat. The list was comprised of the Great Mosque in Cordoba, Spain; John Ford’s film, *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964); downtown Los Angeles; Archie Shepp’s recording of “A Portrait of Robert Thompson (as a young man)” on the LP *Mama Too Tight*; or the CD *Lysol* by the Melvins [*sic*]; the caveat suggested that “Albert Oehlen’s new paintings and Dan Covay’s song, ‘I Was Checking Out, She Was Checking In,’ take matters a step further.”

The “step further” that Diederichsen goes on to elaborate on his extended sequence of non-art comparisons is the “conception of an aesthetic at work” in Oehlen’s recent paintings as paintings and of the “scale relationships, oppositions, and interconnections that are the basic, or even the determining, issues undergirding his work.” But the key, for both Diederichsen at the time, and to my interest in his essay now, was his decision to work from the finished paintings and not from Oehlen’s stated intentions or sources, and to use the aesthetic relationships gleaned from Oehlen’s then-new paintings to analyze his “non-art” examples—architecture, film, music, Los Angeles. Diederichsen’s thesis, that “[i]n all of these examples the parts don’t act like separate pieces; neither do they form an additive, unified whole, nor establish relations based either on total opposition or subordination of one to the other,” has become a truism of sorts over the twenty years since he wrote: the claim of “heterogeneity” is routinely made now by any number of painters, Owens included.¹³ At the time, however, it was tonic to read his unapologetic appreciation and close reading of Oehlen’s painting, even if it still served as a way to justify the value of those paintings to a readership much skeptical of the value of painting qua painting:

. . . [a] section of Oehlen’s built-up surface, or a bizarre, primary-colored form, a pattern, a partial figure, all appear as so many equal parts, which might offer a kind of critical litmus test between those for whom the paintings become informationally overloaded, when in fact they are simply

unhierarchical, and those for whom the viewing experience becomes “pleasant,” precisely because they have known distinctiveness only within triumphs and domination of one part over another.

This is the crux of Diederichsen’s argument, his conclusion. Yet it is the use to which he puts that conclusion—his inversion of the more typical critical habit of calling upon non-art sources to legitimate painting by utilizing, instead, an aesthetic insight gleaned from Oehlen’s painting to rethink some of the more problematic, complex, and hierarchical aesthetics of his comparative material—that makes this essay so singular. Oehlen’s painting here offered a useful paradigm, not for painting, but for a broader cultural perception, and this perception was best gleaned by observing the internal relationships of a given painting. “After many years of trying to clear away misconceptions about the nature of painting through his work,” said Diederichsen, “Oehlen reached the point of being able to simply demonstrate his position without having to mount a full frontal assault. The decisions he made in his painting no longer required external justifications . . . whether they improved our perception or not.”

And yet in Owens’s case, the formal and structural “leaps” she regularly embarks upon within her painting, and the heterogeneity she claims for those paintings, continue to be inextricably bound up with her enterprising, energetic engagement of what’s around her, which is something quite distinct from a discourse dedicated to the justification of painting. Her project as painter is crucially augmented not only through her voracious appetite for all sorts of art and non-art sources, but through ongoing exploratory interviews/conversations and experimental curatorial collaborations, and the social, intellectual, and performative exchanges that a place like 356 S. Mission seems concertedly designed to inspire. The specific case I want to make for Owens’s painting is not simply for the fact of her own alternately layered and pried-apart formal and semiotic iterations; it’s for the interdependency of the painted and real spaces she opens up in order to articulate her versions of an observation or insight; the variety of vocabularies and procedures she enlists toward this end; and her capacity to both convey and contain not expression, but sentiment.¹⁴

Amongst the many recurrent threads of info offered up by Owens’s plentiful interviews, for example, I was struck by her commenting, more than once, that despite her early predisposition to painting, at The Rhode island School of Design (RISD), where she pursued her undergraduate art degree, she gravitated toward the sculpture department, “because the conversation was better,” whereas at CalArts, where she relocated for her graduate degree, she reverted to painting because “the problems” she could tackle within it “were harder.” Like so many others drawn to painting after Abstract Expressionism, Owens has made her domain

the “how” much more than the “what,” of the practice she calls painting. The quantity and quality of conversation and social engagement she seems to seek and has sought for most of her life as an artist, as well as her attraction to hard problems, suggests an urgent interest in something outside the painting. Owens’s critical distinction between the smoothly perfect surfaces that manifest Koons’s a priori, “nanoscale of decision making” and the decisions made visible in Cézanne’s obsessively attended, but transparently rendered *passages*, point, conversely, to her expectations of the work itself. What’s at stake in this distinction—at least for the critic in Owens—is a certain transparency of means and observable residue, the presence, versus the erasure, of both thinking and making.

3.

My critical thinking about Owens’s work is earlier stage than Diederichsen’s on Oehlen’s and still very exploratory: it goes back to the late 1990s and to several shows I saw at the time that seemed to set out a very deliberate, highly personal, pictorial vocabulary along lines I wanted to compare at first not to contemporaneous painters, but to an earlier generation—to Cy Twombly and the later painting of Philip Guston—save that Owens’s 1990s paintings were at once methodical and unapologetically pretty, a combination I found hard to figure, then. Twombly, for example, beginning in the late 1950s, began to generate a private alphabet of recurrent “signs,” often mistaken for graffiti because of their intentionally shaky or transgressive stylistic appearance and content. Many of these configurations show up first in isolation, often as the visual correlative of an homage or reconsideration of a mythological moment. Variations on a faint penciled circle with the almost illegible word “pool” written inside, say, rubbed with a barely visible pale blue and rimmed with more aggressively brush or trees, appears in several early eroticized homages to Poussin; a burst of androgynous penis/breasts is initially



Cy Twombly, *The Italians*, January 1961. Oil, pencil, and crayon on canvas. 78.5 x 110 inches

what's drawn in paintings and drawings called *Birth of Venus*, from 1960. In more complex and ambitious paintings, such as MoMA's 1961 *The Italians* (pg. 213), these images recur as figures or signs amidst many similarly generated others, taking on new associative implications in the mix. Guston painted a series of single objects in 1967 that served as turning point—from his mid-career expressive abstractions to his often caustically expressive figured paintings—as well as a lexicon of sorts, from which those later figurative paintings were often built.¹⁵

As with these earlier painters, certain painterly configurations of Owens's recur: a lily pad shape; a circle drawn over with perpendicular or diagonal grid; dimensional paint hovering somewhere between smear, blob, and such shapes as petals or insect wings; schematic, greeting card mountains and clouds and swathes of sea; a hive shape and so many bees; or the swarm that becomes a spindly dispersal of nothing but numbers, painted forward and then back in mirroring paintings. Owens alternately filled a canvas with a single image and deployed enlarged segments or reduced iterations of the image, almost as an ideogram or visual phoneme. Like Twombly, she used paint both as deposits of raw matter and as pigment, to color a form. Like Guston, she calibrated the shift between a shape and a picture so that it was impossible to see either independent of the other. A domino stack of layered painted rectangles, to name just one of these, and a receding cityscape of buildings (as in *Untitled*, 1997, pl. 134; or a sketch for the painting, with brushstrokes for windows on a few of the rectangles) reminds of Guston's pink rectangular ovoids, painted with dashes of black, alternately used to render a book and a building façade. Elsewhere, Owens overlays thinly drawn vertical and horizontal lines onto a watery blue expanse that oscillates between gauzy grid and the mesh of a window screen (*Untitled*, 1991, pl. 142). In Owens's case, the configurations also took on an affect that felt distinctly, willfully not just child-like, as Twombly's and Guston's did, but feminine. Her re-imaginings of conventionally rectilinear devices, such as the grid, with soft or curved or slack lines also reminded at the time of Eva Hesse's mid-1960s epiphany on discovering all that she could unleash, expressively, by pushing a slack piece of rope through a metal grid and letting it dangle. Her penchant for pretty, however—very distinct from Hesse's tougher abject affect—was harder for me to process at the time. I was much taken with the range of her pictorial investigating and effects: paintings that played with illusionistic shadows and depth of field; paintings that rendered everything within them with the flat opacity of scenery or commercial printing; and the often counterintuitive interplay with which she mixed and matched, or mismatched, these effects. I was impressed, too, by the “cover” Owens took behind what often felt like illustration; the way she seemed to smuggle her very post-painterly send-ups of conceptually sophisticated studio techniques: old-school things like



Philip Guston, *City*, 1968. Synthetic polymer paint on board. 20 x 30 inches

shadows and cropping, but also modernist, reflexive clichés, like drips or paintings within paintings—onto and into deceptively simple, coherent pictures.¹⁶

Owens's consistent preoccupation with space, and the literalness, and localness, with which she made it both subject and device, within and between her paintings, has been much more frequently addressed than her permutations of pictorial vocabulary.¹⁷ Early on, the variety of implausibly composed paintings of gallery walls and floors and halls and the pictures often hung on them seemed to me, at first, to make candid, bad photographs their source. But again, what impressed here was the way she upended that possibility by intentionally conflating and confounding modes of rendering, pushing long views down hallways or close-ups of the edges of painted paintings to the far sides of her canvas; pitting the steep perspective of an empty floor against a painted wall of painted paintings (pls. 3 and 44–45). And as often as not, she mixed things up further by building real space between canvases. I liked the way she worked from simple to complicated, as if assigning herself ever-harder problems; I liked the way she oscillated, in children's book fashion, from the rooms she seemed to occupy to the convoluted spaces the act of picture-making allowed her to project; and I liked the way she interpolated and contrasted the spaces developed within the paintings through her equal attention to the physical spaces between them, and within which her paintings were installed. It was the sense of problem solving these early paintings proposed that incited my first inkling that Owens was attempting something other than painting in the service of painting.

A show during Owens's last year at RISD in 1992 offers an unexpected precursor for much of the above for her enterprising habit of setting and solving problems and infatuation with physical, functional, and social spaces, as well as the more conceptually and optically confounding spaces painting and other sorts of image and pictorial means make possible. As if to literalize an abstract decision—in this case, a major in painting, but with a preference for the sculpture major's problems—Owens opted not to exhibit paintings on walls, but to render the walls, outlets, pipes, and sundry architectural details of the gallery a sort of dimensional walk-in painting.¹⁸ She painted the walls a matte pink, while some of the remnants and conduits were painted a gloss pink. In the corner of the gallery, Owens taped and painted over what appears to be a doorstop, which faced off against a rectangular outlet box whose sockets she also covered with contact paper, the household product used to line kitchen drawers (pl. 133). The two generally overlooked functional protrusions register as tiny sculptural objects, sited well below the normal “hanging line” of a gallery wall. They also render the wall itself a kind of relief painting or sculpture.¹⁹ The unsettling scale shifts, like the pairing of related objects around a corner, point to painting and installation strategies to come. The

RISD gallery reads as both artwork and decorated interior: at once a real room and what, in retrospect, comes across as a model for a virtually projected space.

The paintings Owens exhibited in the years shortly after her graduate work at CalArts, on the other hand, suggested that she was already working both from and against a powerful aesthetic, opting less for the broad stylistic shifts from painting to painting and between abstraction and representation identified with Gerhard Richter, than for the operational, syntactical permutations I wanted to identify at the time with the slightly earlier generation American artists Twombly and Guston, or for that matter, Rauschenberg, Warhol, and Johns. From very early on, that is, Owens appeared to be building an ever-expanding pictorial vocabulary, regularly enlarged by the introduction of new source material and procedures, in which recognizable images and effects are continually manipulated to alter their meaning and affect. Owens's pictorial borrowings and distortions, however, unlike those mid-twentieth-century artists, were subject to the more fugitive and exponentially larger cache of digital imagery and effects first available during the decade in which she began painting. My interest in the analytic, aesthetic vocabulary building of Owens's early work is what instigated my enthusiasm for her conspicuously ambitious endeavor, but it was only a few years later that I got caught up in the more confounding sentiment she seemed to wield with such deftness.



Untitled, 2003 (detail)

This may account for why I'm still so delighted and thrown by a painting as seemingly off-sides and iffy as Owens's *Untitled* (2003; pl. 52)—a painting of a girl on a horse that on first blush looks an awful lot like a children's book illustration, if a very good one—but I find this painting endlessly enchanting and absorbing, an impression I had from the first time I saw it, the same year it was painted. The painting features a contortedly ecstatic, or perhaps simply open—as in receiving—girl, lying legs and long braids akimbo, arms flung wide, feet and toes flexed, on her back on the back of a horse running primly across a single-laned, two-way country road, under a strangely roiled and luminous night sky. For starters, I like that I could rewrite that description entirely differently to talk about the very same image and painting and it would still register as accurate.²⁰ As with the Whitney painting's far more elaborately and dimensionally constructed surface—as with pretty much any Owens—the longer you look, the stranger the proportions and positions of the identifiable figures and space become, and the less determinable the status of the marks that might be of tree or sky, of representation or fantasy. Owens's paintings do not resolve on further contemplation: At no point does an animating or edifying story or explanation threaten to squelch the oddity of the picture painted, nor do the elements comprising a given painting gain independent meaning.

What persists is a growing sense of inscrutable, underlying, carefully contained emotion, or sentiment, and a growing realization that the complex mosaic of Owens's surfaces are tectonic and never fully settled. Owens's paintings, true to their 1980s Pictures Generation roots, may appropriate readymade images, or gestures, or effects that are recognizable and found, but every inch of a given painting is thoroughly reconceived and built.

Owens has said more than once that the painting, her painting, has to “activate” the space it's in and not sit passively on the wall, that it has to motivate and act *on* the viewer who is in the space and not simply offer up the proverbial “window” into some illusionistically or geometrically or pictorially rationalized “other.”²¹ Even at their most wildly fantastic or seemingly goofy, the paintings return our gaze, as it were, deflecting any easy escape or empty-headed pleasure. But as Diederichsen claimed for Oehlen, much of what Owens's painting “activates”—from the complex range of emotions pictured, to the anxiety induced by their evident, but precarious control, to a heady sense of their intellectual accomplishment—has to do with what she marshals *within* each of her paintings and through their installation.

The Whitney painting, like many of Owens's more complex, uncanny landscapes, certainly invites the sort of entry I'm describing; the identification, scale and relationships between figures and the spaces they occupy defy the logic of illusionistic and three-dimensional space alike. But even at their early stage the simplest Owens's paintings, and their presentation, were never available all at once. You have to continually re-set, like an auto-focus camera, to get your bearings, and it's by no means a given that what you'll glean or how your eye is made to move around a given surface—and now, surfaces, plural—adds up to a picture, even if its apparent kid-like, stylistic dumbness or aspiration to landscape, still life, needlepoint, and other familiar renderings might incite that expectation. There's a certain wager or magic at play in looking at Owens's world, so to speak, not unlike the commitment demanded of a medium more time-based—a story, or video game or film—or a machine whose parts one takes on faith as integral to the operations it performs. This is the opposite of gestalt: having entered an Owens painting, you're subject to the rules of the elaborated space she contrives and its inhabitants or contents—subject, that is, to the problems she sets for herself and the visible shifts between shapes that count as evidence.

4.

Evidence of how Owens's ongoing, live exchanges factor into her paintings and their conceptualization is obviously a lot harder to track. But it's as interesting to follow what she's



Installation view, Sturtevant, *Finite / Infinite*, 356 S. Mission Road, Los Angeles, 2013

made of 356 S. Mission as it is to analyze a given painting, if only because it gives real insight into such things as her keen sense of location and place as inhabited space, and of the range of “traces” people, not just painters, leave. Owens’s concerned awareness that she had not exhibited for over ten years in her hometown city—years in which her critical and international stature had grown considerably—was as much a factor in the search for what became 356 S. Mission, as her ongoing desire to provoke and participate in charged conversation. It has since become a kind of expanded studio, home base, and programmed arena, not only for her own work, but for much, much else—an aggressively multi-faceted, “real” social space in an emphatically, pervasively virtual moment. But the search for 356 S. Mission also hitches up to Owens’s parallel interest in the dynamics of Los Angeles as place, space, and mindset.

One recent manifestation of this—an exhibition she co-curated with the artist Peter Harkawik at both 356 S. Mission and two New York venues, including her New York City gallery Gavin Brown—featured a trippy black-and-white tabloid publication (each spread of which was designed by a different artist) that seemed, at least initially, to flaunt and flout a few East Coast stereotypes of the City of Angels: A double-page spread of silly porn shots by Max Maslansky symmetrically arrayed in tidy vertical columns around four circular targets, rimmed in stars, was captioned “The stoic universe with its finite system of stars surrounded by an infinite void.” A second spread featured a full-page illustrated menu—a plate of Fajitas de Pollo, de Cameron o Mixta, between a sliver of a plate of Aguachile and Pescado—created by Jedediah Caesar. The following spread, by Joshua Callaghan, is a vertically laid out scrapbook of pasted newspaper clips, ranging from goofy, banal, or absurd to pathetic headlines: “Dog Survives 4 Weeks in Pit”; “City Zoo Reunites Two Aging Elephants”; “Women Recant, Freeing Man after 20 Years”; “Right Whale Untangled and Freed,” etc (below). Together, these pages staked out the affective locus of the exhibition they accompanied more or less precisely.



Joshua Callaghan, pages in *Made in Space*, published by Venus Over Manhattan and Gavin Brown’s enterprise, New York, 2013



Made in Space, published by Venus Over Manhattan and Gavin Brown’s enterprise, New York, 2013

But the tabloid’s primary face-off ran deeper, pitting a reprint of art critic and poet Peter Schjeldahl’s caustic, yet plaintive, rail against Los Angeles—“L.A. Demystified! Art and Life in the Eternal Present”—opposite the curators’ collaborative essay, titled “Made in Space.” Schjeldahl’s 1981 review was written for New York’s *Village Voice*, but datelined Los Angeles, where Schjeldahl had spent some time accompanying his actress wife. Owens’s and Harkawik’s essay was in fact an elaborated list of thirteen seemingly unrelated observations, laid out opposite another arty page with three quintessentially L.A. images: black and white snapshots of a road along an empty patch of desert with an implausibly hovering cloud; a blurred trail of head-and taillights mottling a night sky and confounding any spatial reading; and an abject tabletop still life comprising a petrie dish, with a small mass of abject white stuff in its center and a paper invoice.

The images and text feel a bit insider, but there’s content here as well as attitude and differences voiced that go beyond a stereotyped stand-off. Two pop-out passages from Schjeldahl’s text bemoaning the domination of Hollywood and the lack of any civic or psychic center to L.A. sound familiar: “This is what they don’t get about art, that it’s the opposite of the movies,” and “This is never going to be a real art center unless, in the process, it ceases to be L.A.” Owens and Harkawik are at once more specific and more oblique, and the writing begins to make more sense of the tabloid’s photo-montages:

1. *“Someone drank tea. Someone felt that a specific kind of taco eaten at a particular geographic location was like a drug. The spices generated a certain kind of energy, or perhaps, muscle memory. It was 2012.”*

Other entries turn to thoughts, and, in turn, what thoughts turn into: “. . . mixed with gasoline, to Orange County, a web without a spider . . . the comingling of purposefulness and aimlessness.” Schjeldahl is quoted again, this time for “damning the city to a future of irrelevance,” and explaining its “wishfulness as the effect of a life that enforces independence to the point of autism.” There are mentions of food, food dye, the suspension of disbelief, and the observation that we will eat and we will shit, which in turn finds its way to some comments on too many colors yielding muddy paint. And then: “A person discovered a pile of feces directly in the middle of a woman’s Size 10 red pumps,” we are told. “The distance between the shoes and the feces, which looked very much like a chocolate-dipped frozen yogurt dessert, or a dog chew, indicated that the person could have been squatting and defecating.” The detailed entry ends with a declaration, “Every transaction leaves a remainder,” an observation that would seem to have special resonance for a painter. Many of the comments allude to loneliness, not the willful independence Schjeldahl presumed. Clues with unexplained consequence conclude with unsettling bits of decontextualized narrative: “Two

friends, both architects” driving to Brentwood in 1994 get out of their car to run along OJ Simpson’s Bronco, “hoping to catch a glimpse of reality in progress and joining thousands of people on the streets and overpasses in communal euphoria,” while “Two curators drive by a flip flop in the road,” a seemingly insignificant event that “was mutually lauded for its demonstrative effect.” “It was 2013,” the curators add, making the reference self-referential, as 2013 was also the year Harkawik and Owens organized their exhibition and compiled their essay-as-list.

This glorified list, in all its indulgence of that easiest of writerly assemblages, is also chock-full of vivid images of the “remainders” of human “transactions.” The writing seems calculatedly flat in affect, even as the content and cumulative impact of the text is emotionally loaded, and charged, much like that of the deceptively measured “message” text, repeated and contained within Owens’s Whitney painting. (Owens’s painting—not just at the Whitney, but throughout—owes a lot, in fact, to the muscle memory and demonstrative effect she and Harkawik elicit here.) There’s a quality of attention in the gathering of incidents that Owens and Harkawik list, a quality of attention contingent on the mediation of wheels on pavement and the mobile perspective of the road so core to L.A. life.

Against the proto-typical yearning for a center that Schjeldahl invokes, Owens and Harkawik’s heightened Angelino receptivity to the residues and people glimpsed from the road, and to the inexplicable chases and flip-flops that mark them, offer up a complex of images and actions rife with information and charged with sentiment often lost to a traveler intent only on a destination. Owens seems to glean much from the peripheral vision honed from the routine car travel that living in Los Angeles requires and the kinesthetic reception it encourages. Structuring something social, on the other hand, is that much harder in L.A., where the lengths to which she has consistently gone to incite live exchange borders on a mission.

5.

“The painting of distinctions,” Diederichsen says at the end of his Oehlen essay, “(not understood as having metaphorical or allegorical relation to anything in the world) represents the representability and attainability of power relations beyond those which exist and can be identified. This allows one to imagine other relations, to deal with existing ones differently The creation can also be enjoyed in a different way, by opening up possibilities, neither as commentary nor as reflection, but fictionally, using a vocabulary specifically derived from conflict. One emerges unharmed, and lands better equipped back in the social world. To get there, though, one has to go through something that contains as much of the world as possible,

but is itself clearly a treatment, which one can never encounter again. The more distinctions appear as art, the stronger the user becomes in dealing with everything else.”²²

The active exchanges Owens oversees between what she orchestrates in and out of her painting—as in the thirteen charged observations of life in her city that refuse to add up, compiled with Harkawik, or in the ninety-two paintings made for a show at Art Unlimited in Basel the same year, none of which do singly all that they do together, but each of which can stand alone, and all of which reveal the details of their making (pg. 59), to name only two recent ventures—may “take the pressure off any one painting.” They also share “the specificity and quality” Owens praises in Cézanne’s visible deliberation, “the movement of his thoughts mirroring the eye focusing and refocusing, allowing many different paintings to exist within one painting.” In this, they operate as well like the “treatments” Diederichsen recommends, rife with “distinctions that appear as art.”

In a recent *New Yorker* review of a small Oehlen retrospective organized by New York’s New Museum, Schjeldahl, writing very differently from his earlier Los Angeles diatribe, reads Oehlen’s post-millennial painting a good deal more formally, praising his ability to exploit the energy, acute attunedness to color, Action Painting he, Oehlen, found so fascinating in de Kooning, as “reaction painting,” a “histrionic mode of pictorial rhetoric, superficially imitative of de Kooning, that “fights back toward the Master’s rigorous originality.” Schjeldahl is, of course, a very different critic from Diederichsen, but his further comments on Oehlen’s very painterly painting reveal an equally strong appreciation for an overlap between that painting and a more worldly, everyday angst: “Oehlen’s process,” he says, “has evinced endless sorts of borderline-desperate improvisation—until a painting isn’t finished, exactly, but somehow beyond further aid.” And he quotes Oehlen, adding, “People don’t realize that when you are working on a painting, every day you are seeing something awful.” Owens, I think, is similarly aware of the daily confrontation “working on painting” imposes, and yet her response seems less bound up in action and reaction than in a determined construction of complex analogues. And her commitment to working in and out of her painting persists. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Owens’s latest paintings from two recent shows: at Capitain Petzel in Berlin (pgs. 98–99) and Secession in Vienna (pgs. 170 and 222–23). As in the Whitney painting and several of the paintings within the group exhibited in 2012 at 356 S. Mission Road, Owens treats the introduction of text as a discrete entity, at once formally distinct and equivalent to each of the other, more abstract entities and treatments she plays against it. Her complex layering of multiple formal effects and meanings tugs, in these more recent paintings, against dated material and more historically specific contents.

The brochure for the Secession paintings gives the following detailed information on Owens's paintings:

After working for several years with vintage newspapers from the 1960s such as The Berkeley Barb and The Los Angeles Times, Owens serendipitously found a set of newspaper stereotype plates that had been repurposed as flashing beneath the shingles siding her Echo Park home. These paper negatives came from editions of The Los Angeles Times printed over a one-month period in 1942—the year the house was built. Owens was struck by the juxtaposition of world events in the months after Pearl Harbor alongside fait divers from a bygone era in her own neighbourhood. To begin working with these images, she had letterpress prints made from rubber casts of the original negative plates.

The new series of large-scale oil paintings that will be shown in Secession started with scans of the reprinted newspaper plates that were edited in Photoshop before being screen-printed on canvas. Owens began to work with compounded images of time following an exhibition at Captain Petzel, Berlin, that included a short story spread across five freestanding, double-sided paintings with an ending that continued on a separate still life painted in the style of her own earlier work. For these new works, she has digitally manipulated the original World War 2-era Los Angeles Times to include both recent news and advertising from contemporary publications and websites alongside even older content dating as far back as the 1890s. While some fragments contain clear references to a specific era, others are not so easy to place historically. At a glance, the



Installation views, Secession, Vienna, 2015

sources within any given painting never cohere into a clear chronology of then and now.

The paintings place these digitally edited newspaper pages ambiguously between the foreground and background of an unstable pictorial space. Trompe l'oeil shadows fall under the real shadows cast by thick impasto and digital brushstrokes float on the surface alongside actual oil, acrylic, and Flashe paint. These shifting spatial cues further complicate the displacements of old and new across the image. Owens has also often placed her paintings in dialogue with the architecture of the exhibition space. For the exhibition at the Secession, the paintings hanging on the wall represent individual pages but comprise a constructed idea of the newspaper as a whole. Textures, colors and images repeat and continue from painting to



Untitled, 2015

painting just as the front page article of a newspaper might continue on page 6.

What the Vienna announcement does not say explicitly is that these newspaper facsimiles take on additional implications for the intersection of their 1942 American dateline and the location of the Secession in then Nazi-occupied territory. The marvel is the extent to which Owens enacts through her painterly strategies the uncertain locus of any and all processed information—historical, material, abstract, or social—in our digitally underwritten age.

And yet, as if to challenge, or perhaps just give ballast to her own virtuosic efforts as an artist, Owens continues to pursue her parallel community-based social spaces. Word has it that Owens will be setting up a space modeled on 356 S. Mission Road in her Ohio hometown, not far from Cleveland, to coincide with the 2016 Republican convention scheduled to be held there. The Monkey Grammarian leaps in and out of painting, ever surprising, ever confounding. Or, to paraphrase Octavio Paz once more, Owens is indeed *a monkey, a grammar of the language—in her case, of painting—of its dynamism and its endless production of phonetic and semantic creations . . . an Aristotelian animal who copies from [culture], but at the same time, the semantic bomb-seed, buried in the subsoil, who will never turn into the plant its sower anticipates . . .*²³

Notes

1. Octavio Paz, *The Monkey Grammarian* (Madrid: Editorial Seix Barral, S.A., 1974; Arcade Publishing, Inc., New York, Little, Brown & Company/Seaver Books, 1990).
2. “Laura Owens on Jeff Koons,” *Artforum* (September 2014): 319.
3. Ibid.
4. Paz, 131.
5. Meaning, that any words introduced into Owens’s paintings are also images, as much informed, and as instrumentally affective, for their design and context and imagistic allusions, as for their inherently verbal content.
6. “Laura Owens in conversation with Fabian Stech,” *ANNUAL Magazine* (November 2012): 218.
7. “There was a time, early on, when I’d go to the Hallmark gift store in Norwalk, Ohio (her childhood hometown), which had about 15,000 people and a J.C. Penney, but no movie theater. The poster in the Whitney painting, a 1976 Argus Poster by Sharon Ryan, came from the gift store. Prior to this, I was interested in children’s illustrated books.” Conversation with the artist, March 2014.
8. Conversation with the artist, March 2014. “That also makes it a problem,” Owens added, “because painting is the [benchmark] signifier of all the things people hate about the art world, of the way things are made to take on value, indiscriminately. It has this huge potential to change consciousness, but symbolically, it’s a problem.” She went on to liken what she likes about painting to its literalism, or “dumb poetry.”
9. This is perhaps a bit too abstractly or broadly stated, but I want to suggest that while Owens is routinely linked to a post-Pictures generation reliance on appropriated imagery and procedures, she is also routinely assigned to painting. As I have noted already, I see her thinking as an artist, as I have noted already, as one of problem solving and not the sort of problem solving instigated within a medium, but willfully responsive to current circumstance and location. Like most artists born after 1970, Owens has internalized such post-medium rhetorical formulations as Nauman’s instigating question, “How to proceed?” . . . to which his answer could only be “whatever works.” Her work is productively informed and bracketed by painting, but never inherently *in defense of* painting. Artists Owens often mentions as important to her include three who’ve made similarly formally inventive investigations and experiment: Charles Ray, Mary Heilmann, and Richard Tuttle. Conversation with the artist, March 2014. See also: “Laura Owens in conversation with Fabian Stech,” 217–19.
10. “I don’t think you need much prior information,” Owens has said. It’s interesting to know the background of the work, but usually not necessary. “Laura Owens in conversation with Fabian Stech,” 219. As I hope to further elaborate in this essay, what I mean by Owens incorporating the terms of her paintings within them hinges on their not requiring any prior knowledge, even if knowledge of sources might add, as of their subjects or procedures as well as the multifarious ways Owens’s, along the lines for which she praised Cézanne, makes her procedures evident

through a variety of means e.g. through: repetition of imagery and tropes, and a kind of visual multiple-entendre; disorienting scale shifts and perspectives; distortions and caricature of common pictorial devices, like the grid or the gaze or perspectival and planar spatial recession; and through a carefully calibrated mix of earnest representation and cartoon commentary or gloss on a subject within one and the same work, which allow for a mix of critical distancing and vulnerability distinct from either irony or ambivalence, something more effectively conveyed in comedy and live action performance or theater or literature than in most painting.

11. Arnold Glimcher and Marc Glimcher, eds., *Je Suis Le Cahier: The Sketchbooks of Picasso* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).
12. Diederich Diederichsen, “Triumphs, Setbacks, Rear Exits, and Cease Fires: Some Aesthetic Issues Concerning Albert Oehlen, and Some Architectural and Musical Comparisons,” in Catherine Gudis, ed., *Oehlen/Williams 95* (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1995). The catalogue featured essays by Stephen Melville, Thomas Crow, Timothy Martin, Friedrich Petzel, as well as Diederichsen. The show, and perhaps the catalogue even more, was a real watershed account of late 1980s into 1990s dialogues involved with reading painting in the context of postwar Conceptual Art, conversations, that, even at the time, felt unnecessarily defensive to me.
13. See, for example, the description given to Owens’s *Untitled* (2013; pl. 110), which is one of the works in *12 Paintings* originally made for 356 S. Mission, in Laura Hauptman’s recent Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*. It says in part: “Heterogeneity is attributed to the very temporally and culturally specific art of sampling. Laura Owens’s most recent large-scale paintings are also examples of the aesthetic of sampling. She has said that the possibility of using many styles, techniques, and motifs simultaneously ‘gives you more chance to level these hierarchies and talk about heterogeneity.’ Her combination of hand-drawn or painted lines with silkscreen and collage bring together a veritable community of motifs and languages from a wide variety of sources.”
14. When I mentioned Diederichsen’s essay to Owens in one of our conversations for this essay, she was particularly excited, for example, by his radical reading of the complicated introspective reflection John Ford incorporated in his later Westerns such as *Cheyenne Autumn*. For Diederichsen, Ford managed to bracket a conventionally unapologetic studio Western with a more conflicted sub-narrative and the introduction of characters sympathetic to and amongst the Native Americans typically portrayed as types. Even more maverick is Diederichsen’s reading of the anomalous intervention made by the conquering Spanish king, Philip the Great, when in lieu of razing the magnificent arcaded mosque central to the city of Cordoba, he literally inserted an iconic western cathedral, leaving most of the mosque to serve as something between moat and mall, encircling the dominating, but mostly peaceful cathedral. Owens seems ever-hungry for this order of aesthetic construction and analysis.
15. See, for example, Harry Cooper, *Philip Guston: A New Alphabet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 2000).
16. These are all much easier to track circa 2015, in the thumbnails Owens has assembled on the artist’s website.
17. Scott Rothkopf makes Owens’s preoccupation with pictorially complex and literal spaces his subject in a conversation with Owens, “Laura Owens in conversation with Scott Rothkopf,” but Owens’s “consistent mining of space” comes up in Gloria Sutton’s essay for the same retrospective, “Shifting Figures Moving Grounds,” and in several of the interviews there, as well as any number of subsequent essays and interviews. *Laura Owens* (Zurich: JRP/Ringer and Kunsthalle Zürich, 2006).
18. Conversation with the artist, March 2014.
19. Owens has also said the outlet holes on the plugs suggested the monkey faces she went on to use to such subversive effect in her 2000 to 2003 landscapes, the primate’s gazes directing ours around Owens’s Asian-flavored fairylands.
20. The painting, when I first saw it, brought to mind Titian’s *The Rape of Europa* (1560–62), an icon within the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. In fact, the inexplicable meta-stable pose of Owens’s pigtailed girl is almost identical to Titian’s Europa, though like Jupiter (here a bull), on whom she’s lying, Europa is painted at an angle, and at the far side of the water she’s been carried across. Owens ingeniously levels out the horse, the girl, and the emotion, appropriating a mythological male fantasy that’s also been read as a rape fantasy for something far more benign, if not innocent. Owens carries over the intensity of the emotion, reinforcing it, as Titian did, in the agitated painting of the sky. (Titian’s rape takes place in full daylight, under a blustery blue sky, filled with the almost hokey—given the context—image of Vesuvius, or a volcanic mountain, as well as a pair of putti; Owens’s seems to play out the dark implications of the myth in her weirdly gothic inky black sky, which lightens toward the horizon in a formation that almost resembles Titian’s volcanic mountain.
21. Stech’s conversation with Owens, again, offers an especially detailed elaboration of the artist’s thinking here:
Stech: You once said that you want to be with your painted pictures. What did you mean?
I understood that a painting is, in a way, like a person.
Owens: I think it’s a quality that I attribute to what a painting can do and what a painting should do. It’s complicated, but I feel that painting has to penetrate the viewer and should not allow the viewer to penetrate it. That’s important to me, and perhaps I’m assigning an anthropomorphic quality to the painting, if I’m saying it’s like a person; however, it can’t be a passive object which you look into, like a window. It’s completely uninteresting to me. I think you could possibly use the idea “window” in paintings because it’s a historical idea that you can play around with, but it’s not interesting to me for paintings to be windows into a passive other world. There are other things that are important as well, like the discourse around the painting, painting as an ethic, or the way the painting is making space. But the painting has to activate the space it’s in, and not let itself passively fall back into the wall. It has to motivate and act on the viewer who is in the space. . . .
22. Diederichsen, 117.
23. Paz, 131.