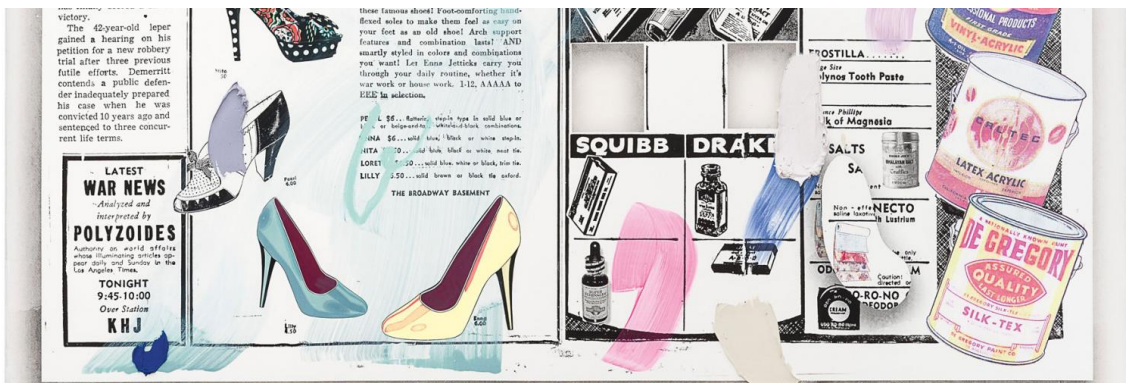


Laura Owens Paints What She Wants and Takes Pleasure in Doing It

[frieze.com/article/laura-owens-rerun-2021-review](https://www.frieze.com/article/laura-owens-rerun-2021-review)



Deploying local teens as part of its curatorial team, the exhibition ‘Laura Owens: Rerun’, at the Cleveland Museum of Art’s (CMA) contemporary-art outpost, Transformer Station, suggests that Owens and her teenage interlocutors – Jamal Carter, Xyhair Davis, Skylar Fleming, Yomi Gonzalez, Joseph Hlavac, Agatha Mathoslah, Arica McKinney, Maya Peroune and Deonta Steele (members of CMA’s arts mastery programme, Currently Under Curation) – were a sympathetic pairing. Owens, who draws from colouring-book pages and deploys paint with exhilarating freedom, has borrowed from and alluded to the spirit of childhood artmaking in her paintings for several years. As such, ‘Rerun’ has recruited possibly the most fitting local experts to interpret Owens’s *oeuvre*: adolescents for whom the memory and material culture of childhood is not a matter of decades ago but mere months.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1995, acrylic, oil, enamel, marker, and ink on canvas, 183 × 214 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne; photography: Douglas M. Parker Studio

‘Rerun’ surveys Owens’s professional practice from the 1990s to the present, highlighting earlier pieces such as *Untitled* (1995) – a tongue-in-cheek painting of a gallery, its far wall crammed with tinnily sketched paintings above a vast and foreshortened panelled floor – and her more recent *Untitled* (2016), a large-scale work incorporating thick swabs of paint and screen-printed details of embroidery and children’s illustration. Owens also incorporates her own, never-before-presented, high-school artworks throughout the show. From the innocent naïveté of a ponytailed tennis player to a groovy palimpsest of numbers and letters rendered in marker pen (both *Untitled*, 1987), it’s an honest move that renders this already-relatable artist all the more approachable and real.

The exhibition is split between the two wings of Transformer Station. In the first, larger gallery, paintings by Owens are displayed alongside a precise selection of objects from the museum’s education art collection: a miscellanea of items distinct from the institution’s permanent collection designed to circulate within Cleveland-area schools. Selected from more than 10,000 options, this tiny sampling hints at the editorial interests of Owens and her curatorial team. Blocks for fabric printing, Mexican ceramic tiles, a cross-stitch embroidery sampler and two ceramic vessels shaped like a parrot and a frog, respectively,

are united not only by their role in the education collection but also their historically disenfranchised status as objects of museological value. Much like Owens's paintings, these finds point to themes of decoration and craft as well as the gender issues these aesthetic impulses reflect on, including démodé notions of female domesticity and the creative innovations of women artists. Ultimately, they furnish touchstones for understanding Owens without recourse to a Eurocentric, male-dominated history of painting.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2015, acrylic, oil, Flashe, and screenprinting ink on linen, 274 × 213 cm.
 Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg. Courtesy: the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne; photography: Jorit Aust

If the first gallery adheres to typical modernist conventions of exhibition design (i.e. white walls backgrounding evenly spaced, autonomously presented objects), the second gallery dissolves such divisions and aforementioned hierarchies by mixing the elements presented separately into a glorious synthesis of colour, pattern and appropriated imagery united by the handmade wallpaper of *Untitled* (2021) crafted specifically for the show.

Here, thanks to Owens's unique blend of digital and analogue imaging and printing technologies, the animal vessels attributed to the Chimu and Moche peoples of the pre-colonial Andes break free of their plexiglass display cases, enlarged and duplicated, so as to spontaneously intermingle with other local and global references (including clippings from Cleveland's *Lakewood Ledger* newspaper, cacti and parrots from the Mexican tiles, and thumbnails of paintings by Vincent van Gogh) against a lilac surround.

Committedly rejecting the normalizing effects of conventional wisdom, Owens's art embodies her own radically independent taste. She paints and assembles exactly what she likes and takes enormous pleasure in doing so.

'Laura Owens: Rerun' is on view at Transformer Station, Cleveland, through 30 May 2021.

Main image: Laura Owens, Untitled (detail), 2015, acrylic, oil, Flasha, and screenprinting ink on linen, 274 x 213 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Galerie Gieseler, Cologne, photography: Jörn Alts.