

Laura Owens

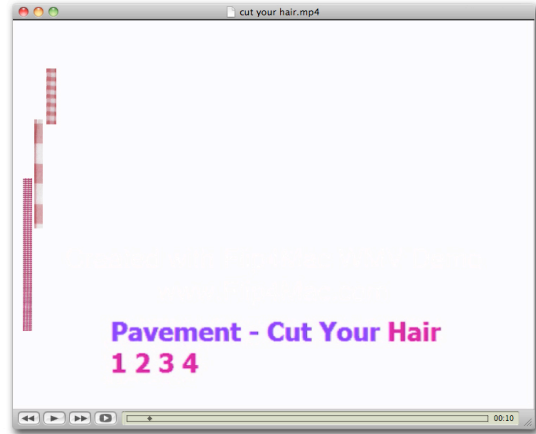
Pavement Karaoke / Alphabet

09 October – 17 November 2012

4 New Burlington Place London W1

Pavement Karaoke / Alphabet, an exhibition of new works by Laura Owens, comprises two new large and diverse bodies of work.

Upstairs, the words “Pavement Karaoke” span seven canvases. The letters are ‘cutouts’ of lines of small print taken from the classifieds of the *Berkeley Barb*, a countercultural newspaper in circulation in the 60s and 70s, screen printed onto the painting. The words fade in and out of view, obscured and camouflaged inside the dense undergrowth of marks that Owens has woven across the image plane.



The paintings are so overloaded and crowded with a cacophony of diverse voices that they strain under the weight of their desire to communicate by any means – by every possible means. Hatches, grids, chequered patterns, collaged gingham fabric, scattered lava rock, pools of translucent pink pigment, and thickly laid patches of extreme impasto – all pull the paintings to the limit. These are paintings taken to the brink of collapse, yet they hold together and achieve balance, weightlessness and urgency.

There is a tension not only between the layered forms of each painting but also between the canvases. Just as the letters of the title fall into a sequence, the canvases themselves – with their repeating and reduplicating patterns – reach out to one another for completion, like words in a chain of signification. There is ultimately an unresolved conflict between the autonomy of each bordered canvas and that of the sequence.

These works oscillate between impressions of flatness and depth, and of the microcosmic and macrocosmic. Austere grids are paired with gingham fabrics and hand-painted grids; large bits of pumice cast shadows, while other shadows are painted on; oversized scribbles are constituted by accumulations of dense brushwork.

The letters form the title of a karaoke party that Owens will host in her studio in the coming months: the plan for an underground event in Los Angeles became the underpainting for a series of works shown in London. As a non sequitur, *Pavement Karaoke* comes to reflect the openness and plurality of this series – its accommodation of disparate forms and its double-edged spirit of improvisation and meticulous calculation.

In the downstairs gallery is a group of thirty-three works that incorporate both embroidery and paint. Owens has drawn on the visual language of the embroidered alphabet sampler, continuing her long-time interest in crewel embroidery and textile work. Each canvas is a decorated letter of the alphabet. Some are graphically overt while others disappear. Seven of the paintings are abstractions, stand-ins for letters, emphasising the abstract nature of the project. Each work is on dyed linen, some coloured by hand and others commercially, in a duality of craft and painting that the works explore throughout.

In these works each painting is autonomous but still participates in a group behaviour. In this way the paintings are an absurdist version of the historical idea of a painter’s series, where the painter makes similar works that are only individuated by slight differences. Each work is whole, despite being a fragment.

Laura Owens (b. 1970, Euclid, Ohio) lives and works in Los Angeles. She studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and the California Institute of Arts. Recent solo exhibitions include a major installation of 92 paintings and 51 books of sketches at Art Unlimited, Art Basel (2012); exhibitions at Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany (2012); Bonnefontenmuseum, Maastricht, Netherlands (2007); Kunsthalle Zürich, Zürich, Switzerland (2006); and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, (2003) – an exhibition which travelled to Aspen Art Museum, Milwaukee Art Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami. Laura Owens’s paintings have been included in numerous significant shows, such as *Painting Between the Lines*, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco (2011); *Ordinary Madness*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (PA), USA (2010); and the 2004 Whitney Biennial. A comprehensive catalogue of her work was published in conjunction with the Kunsthalle Zürich show by JRP Ringier, Zürich, in 2006; and a catalogue, *CLOCKS*, was produced on the occasion of the Art Unlimited installation, published by KARMA, in 2012.

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