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Mountains and Earthquakes:
Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne and the Paintings of Laura Owens

A Thesis Presented

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Given all of the possibilities in new technologies available to artists today, what motivates an artist to pick up an ancient medium like painting? Painting sustains an ever-changing mysterious life that reaches down and pulls an image from a primordial experience. The world of culture receives that image functioning like a mirror, reflecting what would remain invisible without the artist. Painters have approached this challenge throughout history while historians and philosophers have attempted to analyze the process. Throughout his lifelong commitment to the study of phenomenology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty returned to the artist Paul Cézanne as an example to ground his metaphysics of painting. The mountain Cézanne painted multiple times serves as a rich metaphor for modernism fluctuating and fragmented as it challenges scientific understanding and blurs together with the sky, clouds, and trees in his paintings. And yet, it is also a stable point of reference, which Cézanne returns to time and time again. The mountain stands in stark contrast when compared to an earthquake that follows the cataclysm of modernism. The paintings of the contemporary artist Laura Owens provide that disjunction in post-modernism, thus demonstrating a shift in modern subjectivity where the circuit that once connected Cézanne and his canvas to his world is ruptured. Owens' paintings do not dwell in the catastrophe; instead they take the displaced subjectivity and flourish, as would nature itself over the ruins of a lost culture.

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Main Texts on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne:

- FB* Deleuze, Gilles. *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*, (*Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation*, 1981) tr. by Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
- CD* Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Cézanne's Doubt" (1945), in *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson and Michael Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 59 - 75.
- ILVS* Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (1952), in *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson and Michael Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 76 – 120.
- EM* Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Eye and Mind" (1961), in *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson and Michael Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 121 – 49.
- PhP* Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception* (Phénoménologie de la perception, 1945), trans. Collin Smith, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.
- CM* Silverman, Hugh J. "Cézanne's Mirror" (1982), in *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson and Michael Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 262 – 277.

Introduction

What motivates an artist like Paul Cézanne to paint the same mountain over and over again? He first painted Montagne Sainte-Victoire (Figure: 1) in 1870 and returned to the mountain through the 1880s completing over sixty paintings. The mountain is an unmoving mass that Cézanne approaches with the goal of showing an “emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes.”(CD, 64 – 65) Unable to express his perception of the mountain in words, Cézanne makes paintings instead. Conversely, the paintings by contemporary artist Laura Owens reference fragments of an art history that has been broken apart after the catastrophe of modernism. The farcical pictorial world in Owens’ paintings is a refreshing and peaceful harmony that overgrows and envelops the ruins of art history and culture. Owens’s paintings thrive in an innocence that abandons the artist and the world for a self-referential autonomy, which undermines efforts to locate meaning among the cultural debris. Cézanne is innocent in his own subjective connection to the world he stands before. In the Owens paintings, both the subjectivity and objectivity exist solely in the painting; the artist and world are sacrificed for the freedom of the individual artwork. The relationship to the world is then lost in the work of the contemporary painter; however, a sober awareness is gained for an artist like Owens. The following pages will compare the process of expression in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Cézanne with Laura Owens’ practice of painting.

Cézanne was written about by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in multiple texts; most notably in the essay titled, “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1945). The first section of the following

paper will review this and other works by Merleau-Ponty that articulate a metaphysics of painting. Through his example of Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty guides painters through an understanding of reflexivity in their subjectivity as it relates in a circuit between the world, the artist, and the canvas. However, as it will be shown in the second section, Merleau-Ponty leads painters to the well of primordial inspiration and then abandons them in the innocence by releasing them from responsibility. When an artwork enters the world, the meaning is no longer in the control of the artist; it is no longer innocent. Merleau-Ponty places emphasis on painting that is created through a connection to the perceptual field experience that precedes judgment. The abandonment occurs when the painter accesses this perceptual field, he or she simultaneously denies access to judgments of the artwork itself.

The third section will turn to the contemporary paintings of Laura Owens, which teeter on a less sturdy ground in an unreliable and uncertain existence generated out of a studio that lies on the San Andreas fault in California. Owens paintings are pastoral images of animals living in harmony, appearing to be liberated from weighty meaning or narrative in an unironic manner, resistant to analysis or insight into the position of the artist. But what does all of this sugarcoating disguise?¹ There is a temptation to read irony into the work because the images are so idyllic there must be something more subversive to them. Thomas Lawson explains, “Owens’ resistance is to a specific form of language, one she feels to be entrapping. She works against interpretation and for privileging of the visual, and especially of the visual as manifest in the painted mark.” (Lawson) This third section will consider the freedom Merleau-Ponty writes about in

¹ Lawson, Thomas. “The Unbearable Lightness of Painting”, *Laura Owens*, exh. cat. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 2003, p 20. Henceforth cited as *Lawson*.

“Cézanne’s Doubt” as it relates to the subjectivity of the artist by looking at Laura Owens’ paintings. While there is a century between the two artists there are interwoven similarities found in the process of painting. The motivation of the artist is a key theme that will carry through all chapters of this paper. Mereau-Ponty is interested in the process Cézanne engages in to arrive at a firsthand relationship with nature from which his paintings derive. However, how does this firsthand relationship relate to a painter like Laura Owens who removes herself from the equation?

I. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 61)

Before moving too quickly into the challenges faced by contemporary painters, one should turn to the contributions Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers in the search for a greater understanding of this complicated medium. Following in the direction of the German philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty was a French phenomenologist who taught child psychology at the Sorbonne and then was elected the Chair of Philosophy at the College de France. During his studies in Paris, Merleau-Ponty was acquainted with Jean-Paul Sartre with whom he and Simone de Beauvoir founded the political journal “Les Temps Modernes” in 1945. In that same pivotal year Merleau-Ponty published both the essay, “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1945) and his magnum opus, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). One of his final essays, “Eye and Mind,” (1961) published a few months before his untimely death in 1961, marks the end of a career that investigated the metaphysics of painting. These three texts will provide the primary resources for the next few pages, not only summarizing Merleau-Ponty’s work, but also serving as a strong foundation for approaching contemporary painting.

In the Preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states that phenomenology is the study of essences. He continues to write that phenomenology is, “a philosophy which puts essence back into existence,” and the practice of phenomenology arrives at an “understanding of man and the world from’facticity’”. (*PhP*, vii) For Merleau-Ponty, direct contact of a living body interacting with the world is a fundamental experience that shapes much of his thought. From this foundation,

most of Merleau-Ponty's principles directly counter the dominant theories of the 17th century philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650). Merleau-Ponty demonstrates a gap in Cartesian metaphysics by presenting problems that are also addressed in painting. For example, vision is a sense that painting relies on; however, Merleau-Ponty does not divide the senses into separate features because they are all interwoven in the perceptual field. The ability to see and be seen, as we will investigate, does not fit into the rigid Cartesian system, which is too mechanical to consider the possibility of interfusing the subject/object duality. In both vision, and in touch exists the ability for a person to touch and simultaneously be touched or to see and be seen. This reflexivity has no relevance in the Cartesian system; however, it is a primary concern of the painter. Merleau-Ponty writes:

...distinctions between touch and sight are unknown in primordial perception. It is only as a result of a science of the human body that we finally learn to distinguish between our senses. The lived object is not rediscovered or constructed on the basis of the contributions of the senses; rather, it presents itself to us from the start as the center from which these contributions radiate. (*CD*, 65)

Perception precedes all judgments, analysis, categorization, and even naming; therefore, it is not 'precisely' related to a 'clearly perceived world' although it is undeniably in the real world. Merleau-Ponty articulates this phenomenon of perception in the following statement: "My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world." (*PhP*, xi) Distinguishing between sensations in the perceptual world and something unconscious he continues, "yet which I

nevertheless immediately 'place' in the world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams." (*PhP*, xi) Merleau-Ponty is drawing a distinction between the innocence within the perceptual field and simultaneous understanding.

Merleau-Ponty writes that the concept of the real, "has to be described, not constructed or formed." For a painter, perception is not pinned down by *recognition* or *representation* because it is a firsthand event. The *re* for Merleau-Ponty does not exist in the primordial field of perception. This direct contact with the real world is experienced through the glances and gestures of an artist and not in the rationalization of a scientist. Merleau-Ponty writes in the introduction to *Phenomenology of Perception*, "we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is second-order expression." (*PhP*, ix) The artist is not like the scientist who sees the world from a physical-optical outside position, from above looking down. Merleau-Ponty writes, "it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration of coming-to-itself of the visible." (*PhP*, ix) The painter sees form unfold and transform in front of him and it is at this point that the observations of a scientist are limited. The relationship between objects for the scientist establishes a point of reference; however; "ultimately the painting relates to nothing at all among experienced things... it is a spectacle of something only by being a 'spectacle of nothing,' by breaking the 'skin of things' to show how the things become things, how the world becomes world." (*EM*, 141)

Sustaining a thing in a medium completely contradicts what Painting is all about because a Painting is an experience not a static and unmoving object. Painting has a reflexive quality vibrating between artist, canvas and the world. Simply defining an

experience in words is limited, restrictive, and controlled; not revealing more than a description of an event. Cézanne, who is a reoccurring example in Merleau-Ponty's writings, did attempt to capture perception, not in the "stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear." (*CD*, 63) Instead, Merleau-Ponty writes, Cézanne, wanted to "depict matter as it takes form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization." (*CD*, 63-4) Cézanne's goal in painting was similar to what contemporaries of Merleau-Ponty in the field of psychology formulated as a "lived perspective" or more simply stated, "that which we actually perceive." (*CD*, 64) A lived perspective is contrary to a segmented, outlined, geometric, or photographic depiction. Things do not have outlines, as Merleau-Ponty writes the, "perspectival distortions are no longer visible" all of which contribute to the "impression of emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes. In the same way, the contour of an object conceived as a line encircling the object belongs not to the visible world but to geometry." (*CD*, 64-5) The paintings by Cézanne do not conform to a geometric order. He was famous for the introduction 'passage,' where forms would flow together without borders or outlines.

A technique does no more than illustrate a lived experience and it does not reach the depth of the painter's understanding. Meaning is overlooked by scientific, categorical, homogeneous and quantitative methods because it is not found in an object as if it were an element on the periodic table. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty looks to a "primordial historicity" for the meaning that is carried through the medium as, "others who haunt me and whom I haunt". (*EM*, 122-3) He describes art and especially painting as drawing upon the "fabric of brute meaning" which "operationalism would prefer to

ignore.” (*EM*, 123) This operationalism or scientific thinking is focused on the object-in-general which Merleau-Ponty describes as having a limited point of view. The artist’s perspective, on the other hand, reveals these ghosts and sustains their presence in a medium to be publicly exhibited. Unfortunately, the ephemeral qualities of ghosts are shared in the subjectivity of an artwork. Painting, as in most traditions, does not offer a verifiable meaning that would be trusted in the objectivity of the scientific method.

Parallel to the painter’s vocational language, Merleau-Ponty describes this meaning haunted in things as a “prolongation ... incrustated in its flesh.” (*EM*, 125) The term ‘flesh’ is rich in its layers of raw material in the world including the overlapping histories of the individual artist, the world, the viewer, and the artwork itself. For example, a painting is seen as material made up of the world and simultaneously the see-er’s body is made up of that same stuff. At this point, he writes, “a kind of crossover occurs, when the spark of the sensing/sensible is lit.” (*EM*, 125) This problem for painting eliminates a dualism that at a quick glance seems to be apparent in Merleau-Ponty’s frequent use of pairs. However, the blurring of subject and object unites embodied faculties, allowing the artist/audience to experience a work of art by feeling with the mind and thinking with the senses.² The sensitivity of the thinking senses has gained a new foothold in contemporary art after the conceptualism and irony that dominated new painting throughout the 1980’s.³ In contrast, the artist Laura

² In 2007 the 52nd Venice Biennale was titled “Think With the Senses Feel With the Mind: Art in the Present Tense,” directed by Robert Storr.

³ Artists like Jeff Koons (1955 -), who made large pornographic photographs of himself, symbolize the ‘ironic’ in what was considered high art in the 1980s.

Owens who will be the focus of the following pages stated, “painting is as much about feeling as looking.”⁴

Merleau-Ponty helps us to reveal how painters connect with phenomena that no microscope could identify. Advancements in technology do not make art more successful and art is not determined by the innovation of the medium. An artist who uses a traditional medium to create something new depends on the ability to see through the particulars of taste, passing trends or a style and to present a truth about their world. It is within the elementary limits of the painting tradition that the greatest possibilities exist for an artist’s exploration and rediscovery of the world that was always there.

⁴ Sutton, Gloria. “Shifting Figures Moving Ground”, *Laura Owens*, exh. cat., ed. John Hutchinson, (Kunsthalle Zürich; JRP/Ringier: Zürich, 2006) p. 139.

Paul Cézanne (1839 – 1906)

Through his life's work in phenomenology and writing on painting, Merleau-Ponty consistently cites Paul Cézanne as an example for his metaphysics of painting. Merleau-Ponty draws upon Cézanne's work to demonstrate how an artist connects to the world and breaks through the prejudices of our experiences. The direction Merleau-Ponty sets up offers guidance and encouragement for other artists to step away from the support of their education and influences. Opposed to the artists who find financial success in identifying current trends or simply contributing to a style, Merleau-Ponty points to an artist's freedom as a measure of the potential for success. In "Cézanne's Doubt" (1945) Merleau-Ponty describes Cézanne's challenges to find freedom in his own isolation. Cézanne separated himself from the Impressionists and sought out a reclusive life. His isolation was also from his influences and his education where he sought out a new way of depicting his impression or his experience in the world. However, he was moving forward without a map, throwing out all guides and references, which became a handicap and greater challenge to overcome:

His painting was paradoxical: he was pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface, with no other guide than the immediate impressions of nature, without following the contours, with no outline to enclose the color, with no perspectival or pictorial arrangements. This is what [Emile] Bernard called Cézanne's suicide: aiming for reality while denying himself the means to attain it. (*CD*, 63)

However, it was not the abandonment of technique or isolation that gave Cézanne his freedom; it was his striving to connect to a primordial world. In doing so, it was his ability to let go of all restrictions that lead to his success. The problem for Cézanne was that he was not aware of his accomplishments. Merleau-Ponty points out that we never see our own freedom face to face. The challenge for a painter like Cézanne is to find a connection to both the ‘brute meaning’ of the earth and simultaneously hold a mirror that reflects the world back on itself. But, if you stand too close to the mirror, you cannot see your reflection. The materials of the earth do not change; however, different cultures at different times do change and it is up to the artist to respond to fluctuations in their own contemporary world, to see what is in the mirror.

We look to artists to reveal different cultures and points of view, to demonstrate the depth of human sensitivity and to reveal aspects of the world around us that might not be apparent in everyday life. In many ways, the artist has the same role as a scientist in pursuing an experiment with a goal of learning more about the world. The challenge for the artist is to show seeing through the visual arts in a way that the linguistic counterpart cannot convince the importance of the experienced sensation through the arguments of a scientific method.

A person could walk by the same building everyday and not notice the elements of its design. Then, one day when a chance storm forces the passerby to seek shelter, would the intricate mosaics, sculpted friezes and gilded cornices become noticed, appreciated and hold meaning. Invisibility and visibility become very strong reoccurring themes in many of Merleau-Ponty’s texts. For example, a comparison is made in, “Cézanne’s Mirror Stage,” by Hugh Silverman between Cézanne’s self-

portraits and Jacques Lacan's notion of a child's psychological development. Silverman writes, "visibility arises out of the conjuncture of the visible and the invisible, out of making visible of what is invisible to everyday seeing." (CM, 266) The painter has a sensitivity to see a thing, which is unimportant to a scientific perspective, but nevertheless brought into the visibility through painting. Silverman writes, "the painter thinks in paint – utilizing but transforming the activity of the scientist. The painter interrogates with his or her gaze – employing the activity of the philosopher but charging it with the sensuous." (CM, 270) In this combination of sensitivities and thought, a painting is given a, "lining of invisibility in the strict sense, which makes present a certain absence." (EM, 147)

There is a powerful ability in art to reveal for the world what it already sees, but somehow cannot recognize. A famous example of this is the function of the play within a play in Act III scene ii of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In this scene of the play Hamlet has players act out a crime that resembles the murder of his father. The goal is to observe the reaction of the accused uncle Claudius to confirm his guilt. As with all art, the intention of the artists and the outcome or the reaction from the audience is outside of the control of the artist or in this case Hamlet. While Hamlet believes the reaction from Claudius is a sure sign of guilt, it is in reality his subjective reading of a reaction he wanted to see.

Ultimately the thing that has been fixed on to the canvas soon leaves the hands of the artist and the painting takes on its own role. The artist can hope for a reaction that is similar to the original experience; although, every experience will change with every individual viewer. Experiencing the visible painting can conjure a feeling of someone

who once stood in front of the same canvas. However, the experience is only a ghost and the real experience; the control is given over to the viewer. In a painting by Cézanne of Mont Sainte-Victoire there exists a circuit between the painter, the mountain, the canvas and the viewer. This circuit is not fixed and as we will see any element can become bypassed. In the last section of this paper, Laura Owens will be an example of the subjective shift, displacing the artist and giving a greater presence to the visibility of the painting itself.

When questioning why Cézanne kept returning to Mont Sainte-Victoire, Merleau-Ponty was less concerned with the individual painting and more interested in the activity of painting that kept the attention of the artist on the same object. There is a great difference existing between the artist and the scientific investigation of things and objects. Scientific theories are replaced and in most cases forgotten and artworks are preserved and placed into a museum. However, Merleau-Ponty does not suggest that the longevity of a specific artwork makes it significant to a time and place. The meaning is in the experience and perhaps Merleau-Ponty's interest in Cézanne was his ability to pull meaning from his experience.

So, why did Cézanne keep returning to paint Mont Sainte-Victoire? Did he learn something new about the mountain each time? Is there something that the viewer can deduce from seeing one after another example of these paintings? Are the first paintings he completed of the mountain less informed than the succeeding ones? For the painter there will always be new answers to these questions, "always by looking more deeply into *how it came about* that we make and will go on making new representations of it." (EM, 139) For every artist there will be different colors and

techniques used to reach a desired end, before a painting is completed. As with an abandonment of biographical facts, influences, and education, the theory of Merleau-Ponty points to one aspect of the artist's process that is an ongoing process. It is a force that leads Cézanne back to the mountain, a striving that is in him, drawing him to the mountain, compelling him to release the meaning. He might have a goal when choosing different angles, times of day or seasons, but something comes before that goal. This striving connects us to nature, a vital function elaborated, propelling, and animating the painter.

In the evolution of his process, "Cézanne wished to return to the object without abandoning the impressionist aesthetic which takes nature as its model." (*CD*, 62) Their interests in the color, line and texture limited the Impressionists. Cézanne wanted more than just surface and light. He broke from linear perspective and was, "abandoning himself to the chaos of sensation." (*CD*, 63) Merleau-Ponty cites the artist Emile Bernard, a friend of Cézanne, who criticized the painter's ignorance for, "seeking to avoid the ready-made alternatives." (*CD*, 63) Cézanne tells Bernard of his ambition to develop an optics, a logical vision, that bridges art and nature: "I want to make them the same.' Art is a personal appreciation, which I embody in sensations and which I ask the understanding to organize into a painting." (*CD*, 63) Merleau-Ponty warns that Cézanne's attempt at a formula puts, "too much emphasis on the ordinary notions of "sensitivity" or "sensation" and "understanding" – which is why Cézanne could not convince by his arguments and preferred to paint instead." (*CD*, 63)

Merleau-Ponty's observations of the painters process concludes that instead, "he makes a basic distinction not between 'the senses' and 'the understanding' but rather

between the spontaneous organization of the things we perceive and the human organization of ideas and sciences.” (CD, 64) Merleau-Ponty’s reason for choosing this artist becomes clear: “Cézanne wanted to paint this primordial world.” (CD, 63) Cézanne was interested in the origins of things that appear before us, ”he wanted to put intelligence, ideas, sciences, perspective, and tradition back in touch with the world of nature which they were intended to comprehend. He wished, as he said, to confront the sciences with nature ‘from which they came.’ (CD, 64) However, his desire to bring the scientific language to his direct experiences in painting back to the world became his irreconcilable Angst.

Cézanne’s ambitions are demonstrated by his continued return to the mountain. He had work to do as Merleau-Ponty writes,

...each brushstroke must satisfy an infinite number of conditions. Cézanne sometimes pondered hours at a time before putting down a certain stroke, for, as Bernard said, each stroke must ‘contain the air, the light, the object, the composition, the character, the outline and the style.’ Expressing what *exists* is an endless task.” (CD, 65-6)

He needed to be out in nature to experience the mountain because, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “the painter who conceptualizes and seeks expression first misses the mystery.” (CD 65-6) The mystery is found in the artist’s perception and his firsthand connection to the world.

Expression

In the sixth chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* titled “The Body as Expression and Speech,” Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between a *firsthand* and a *secondhand* way of speaking. In “Cézanne’s Doubt,” Merleau-Ponty articulates this concept when he writes, “speaking “second hand” is what is generally meant by culture.” And he continues to explain that Cézanne

...is not satisfied to be a cultured animal but takes up culture from its inception and found it anew: he speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before. What he expresses cannot, therefore, be the translation of a clearly defined thought, since such clear thoughts are those that have already been said within ourselves or by others. (CD, 69)

With this statement Merleau-Ponty establishes the great challenge for artists in expression. In a communicable language, words become mere symbols like placeholders for meaning and speech becomes secondhand by losing a primary connection to its origin in the world. However, there must be a shared experience of something ‘already said’ that can facilitate a receptive cycle. Merleau-Ponty writes, “speech occurs in a circuit of third person phenomena.” (*PhP*, 203) Therefore, the responsibility of the artist is to be skeptical and mistrust speech as it exists in the realm of rational thought using preexisting conditions to direct meaning. “Speech is not the ‘sign’ of thought,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “if by this we understand a phenomenon which heralds another as smoke betrays fire.” (*PhP*, 211) The challenge for an artist is

to create an authentic artwork that originates before reflection and rationalization. However, this relies on an artist's ability to recognize what is taken for granted in the world from a primordial perception in order to bring it to language.

Expression is this firsthand aspect of language that comes to us from perception and does not get caught-up in secondhand rationalization. Firsthand expression occurs in an overlap of the speaking body interwoven with the world and not merely referencing it, as in common speech. Merleau-Ponty gives the example of an orator who does not, "think before speaking nor even while speaking; his speech is his thought." (*PhP*, 209) The orator draws from all his experience and speaks without a script just as the audience does not have an expectation to be fulfilled. For Merleau-Ponty the thought process and expression are interwoven, which the following passage summarizes the by pointing to the significance of meaning in firsthand expression:

Our view of man will remain superficial so long as we fail to go back to that origin, so long as we fail to find, beneath the chatter of words, the primordial silence, and as long as we do not describe the action which breaks this silence. The spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning a world. (*PhP*, 215)

Firsthand experience is the place where an artist's connection to the world begins, where expression originates. Secondhand language is where we can understand through signs where to look for a meaning. The real investigation must begin with the artist:

... 'Conception' cannot precede 'execution.' Before expression, there is nothing but a vague fever, and only the work itself, completed and understood, will prove that there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be found there. Because he has returned to the source of silent and solitary experience on which culture and the exchange of ideas have been built in

order to take cognizance of it, the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout, whether it can detach itself from the flow of individual life in which it was born and give the independent existence of an identifiable *meaning* to the future of that same individual life, or the monad coexisting with it, or open the community of future monads. The meaning of what the artist is going to say *does not exist* anywhere – not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life. It summons one away from the already constituted reason in which “cultured men” are content to shut themselves, toward reason which would embrace its own origins. (CD, 69)

One of the key aspects of the shared existential philosophy was a merger a blending of the subject and object. Most of Merleau-Ponty’s work is a constant fight against this traditional separation that so many metaphysical theories have been built upon. Merleau-Ponty worked this from many angles including optics, psychology, history, and even a distinction between seeing and being seen. Merleau-Ponty worked with many dualities that could easily be seen as a distancing between polarities when on the contrary he actually proves how polarities work together to define the whole.

By blending the subject and object Merleau-Ponty does not want to elevate the individual creating a hero or identifying an artistic genius? In “Cézanne’s Doubt” he did not want to elevate anything specific that would contradict his metaphysics. There are skills some might have that others do not possess beyond a facility with the medium; however, it is more to do with an individual’s motivation. There must be a striving as opposed to passivity; there must be the ability to pay close attention to the world around and there must be the desire to express.

In Merleau-Ponty there are many dualities that he works through with the goal of showing both sides of a coin in order that we see the whole coin. His dualities soften the difference in the blending. However, the result can be somewhat confusing. He is

asking the artist to be aware of a broad range of experiences and at the same time not be self-conscious hindering an internalization of learned methods. The development of a skill must be recalled in an expressive act, but this is a selective memory limited to a procedural or implicit memory. The painter must call on his or her implicit memory when expressing the world before him/her on canvas like the piano player who strikes keys without a conscious thought. Explicit memory, on the other hand, is declarative requiring language and a more scientific thought process. Merleau-Ponty does not completely oppose explicit memory, as it is incorporated into the broader experiential field, which will become paramount in understanding Laura Owens' paintings.

II. Innocence

Merleau-Ponty's metaphysics of painting relies on innocence. The artist who reaches a connection to the primordial world, "draws upon this fabric of brute meaning which operationalism would prefer to ignore. Art and only art does so in full innocence." (*EM*, 123) Innocence offers the artist a freedom from the second hand judgments that might otherwise influence a decision or weigh down the meanings unearthed with latent and manifest content. Instead, the artist enters this primordial world with the curious energy of a child at play and youthful exuberance of first-time lovers. Painting can bring such an extraordinary lightness to the artist without ever straying from the medium's ancient origin, maintaining its integrity in the company of ever changing technologies in photography, video and sculpture.

The writer and philosopher whom we look to for, "opinions and advice" stands in stark contrast to the painter. (*EM*, 123) From those who write, "we want them to take a stand; they cannot waive the responsibilities of humans who speak." (*EM*, 123) However, in Merleau-Ponty's metaphysics of painting the artist, like a child, does not become a mentor to turn to for advice. The child is not given responsibility and is left to play. Although there is occasion, for example in Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale, "The Emperor's New Clothes" (1837), when the child speaks, something overlooked is revealed.

Merleau-Ponty holds the position of innocence in high regard in his philosophy; after all, he taught child psychology. A writer and philosopher himself, Merleau-Ponty

understands the limitations and the expectations of speaking in a language with its hidden meaning under every word. He writes, “only the artist is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees. For the painter, we might say, the watchwords of knowledge and action lose their meaning and force.” (*EM*, 123) However, this has a bittersweet end for an artist like Cézanne who wants to articulate his understanding in scientific terms. He is after all approaching the mountain with the rigor, interrogating the mountain with every aspect of his gaze. This conflict is perhaps what draws Merleau-Ponty to Cézanne throughout his career.

What then happens when the meaning revealed through the painter’s experience then loses force? Freedom is gained in the primordial world and it is simultaneously restricted by attempts to be communicated in a common language. Cézanne relied on the, “approval of others” to gage his own success to determine, “the proof of his worth.” (*CD*, 75) Merleau-Ponty writes, “that is why he questioned the picture emerging beneath his hand, why he hung on the glances other people directed toward his canvas.” (*CD*, 75) For the artist who is not able to step far enough back from the mirror there is no chance to see the image being reflected.

Innocence is the very reason we turn to artists for insight into the new. The artist has that ability to see something, like the child who sees the naked emperor, that the scientist is not able to recognize. The painter is able to do this and is given the freedom to create a new vocabulary and grammar to reach this end. Merleau-Ponty writes, “this ever-recreated opening in the plentitude of being is what conditions the child’s first use of speech and the language of the writer, as does the construction of the word and that

of concepts.” (*PhP*, 229) Cézanne did this when he parted with outlines, linear perspective and allowed the mountain to merge with the clouds.

Innocence frees what has detached the artist’s life, emotions, and other sources of pain and anguish from the activity and process of painting. However, Merleau-Ponty writes, “these qualities cannot create a work of art without the expressive act, and they have no bearing on the difficulties or virtues of that act. Cézanne’s difficulties are those of the first world.” (*CD*, 69) Cézanne’s difficulties of the first world draw him back to the mountain where he finds his freedom. Merleau-Ponty warns us against reading into the artist’s life with the twenty-twenty of hindsight to identify where Cézanne’s expression originated. He writes, “if Cézanne’s life seems to us to carry the seeds of his work within it, it is because we get to know his work first and see the circumstances of his life through it, charging them with a meaning borrowed from that work.” (*CD*, 70) Ultimately, the painting is the object before us in the gallery, not the artist, although the presence of the artist can be felt.

While Cézanne had the desire to express his ideas, what makes a painting successful is the ability to, “awaken the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others. If a work is successful, it has the strange power of being self-teaching.” (*CD*, 70) While the ideas in philosophy or science can be articulated, formulated and regenerated, the unique work of an artist has a mysterious ability to enter consciousness as Merleau-Ponty writes:

The painter can do more than construct an image; he must wait for this image to come to life in other people. When it does, the work of art will unite these separate lives; it no longer exists in only one of themnor will it exist only in space as a colored piece of canvas. It will dwell

undivided in several minds, with a claim on every possible mind like a perennial acquisition. (*CD*, 70)

Here is the paradox of innocence. How can the innocent painter enlighten to a degree that the painter's opinions and observations would be trusted? Merleau-Ponty does not mention trust at all. We trust science because of its factual consistency, but what about a painting? What does this image do when it dwells 'undivided in several minds?' Is it enough for an image to simply exist in consciousness? In the twentieth-century, we have seen the dangers of propagandized political images uniting separate lives. The work of the political strategists and media consultants has become a craft much like that of the artist. But, we are getting very far from innocence.

Abandonment

The artist who dwells in the firsthand world of primordial experiences only fuels a modern myth that is unfortunately supported by Merleau-Ponty in this paradox of innocence. The myth is of a typical modernist painter who stumbles into his studio in a drunken stupor after an evening of bar room brawls and debauchery. Throwing some paint onto an empty canvas in an Angst-driven gesture the painter wakes up the next morning having no recollection of the prior night except for the remaining memento: a masterpiece. Mysteriously, the painting is the only trace of this transfiguration. Never questioning the act, the artist moves on to the next painting allowing for the critic like an archeologist to dig through layers of psychological rubble.

Merleau-Ponty writes, “indeed we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.” (*EM*, 123) The scientific mind; however, is called upon to evaluate the masterpiece rendered by the unwitting artist. The philosopher, psychologist and critic re-trace every step of the artist’s decadent journey to the pub and back seeking to discover and deconstruct the latent meaning revealed in the process of transformation. And, in the shadows stands the artist dumfounded by the writer who explains the method of operation and the depth of meaning. The artist, like a child, is unable to understand or possibly have the facility to contest the assessment.

In “Cézanne’s Doubt, Merleau-Ponty turns away from Cézanne for a moment to investigate Leonardo daVinci. Merleau-Ponty quotes Paul Valéry who describes

DaVinci as an ‘intellectual power’ and a ‘man of the mind.’ Here we can already see a sharp similarity to Cézanne who was interested in creating an *optics* or a logical system. DaVinci was famous for being an artist, a scientist, and an inventor. Through the filter of Sigmund Freud’s “Leonardo daVinci: A Study in Psychosexuality” (1910), Merleau-Ponty looks to childhood detachment from the artist’s mother. Merleau-Ponty writes that daVinci was, “the illegitimate son of a rich notary,” continuing, “Leonardo spent the first four years of his life with his mother, ...he was without a father, and he got to know the world in the sole company of that unhappy mother who seemed to have miraculously created him.” (CD, 73) Having formed a “fundamental attachment” to his mother Leonardo experienced a shift from this maternal nurturing to a paternal authority when, “he was recalled to his father’s home.” Exhausting all of his resources of love and maintaining a thirst for life Merleau-Ponty writes that Leonardo:

...he had no other choice but to use it in the investigation and knowledge of the world, and, since he himself had been ‘*detached*,’ he had become an intellectual power, that man who was all mind, that stranger among men. Indifferent, incapable of any strong indignation, love or hate, he left his paintings unfinished to devote his time to bizarre experiments...(CD, 73)

Through his detachment from sensitivity of his early years Merleau-Ponty proposes that daVinci himself is prone to abandonment as represented by his numerous unfinished paintings. Leonardo was more interested in pursuing, “the spirit of investigation was a way for him to escape from life,” which is not too different from Cézanne; nevertheless unfulfilled. (CD, 73) Merleau-Ponty writes, “he left his work unfinished, just as his father had abandoned him. He paid no heed to authority and trusted only nature and his own judgment.” (CD, 74)

In the duality of innocence and the intellect Merleau-Ponty has established is bridged by, “that pure power of examination, that solitude, that curiosity – which are the essence of mind – only developed in daVinci in relation to his personal history.” (CD, 74) However, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, “at the height of his freedom he was, *in that very freedom*, the child he had been; he was free on one side because bound on the other.” (CD, 74) Even for daVinci it was not possible to straddle both sides of the coin, “there can be no consciousness that is not sustained by its primordial involvement in life and by the manner of this involvement.” (CD, 74)

While Merleau-Ponty discounts Freud for many gaps in his analysis of daVinci and he is not interested in the meaning psychologists might derive from an artist’s life Merleau-Ponty ultimately turns to psychoanalysis, which provides insight into the motivation of the artist. Merleau-Ponty writes, “unlike the natural sciences, psychoanalysis was not meant to give us necessary relationships of cause and effect but to point to motivational relationships which are in principle possible.” (CD, 74-5) Seeking the motivation of an artist can tell us more about the artist than any detail of the artist’s life. Motivation gives us insight as to why Cézanne kept returning to the mountain. Merleau-Ponty writes, “psychoanalysis does not make freedom impossible; it teaches us to think of this freedom concretely, as a creative revival of ourselves, always in retrospect, faithful to ourselves. (CD, 75) In the next section we will look at the innocence and intellect of a contemporary artist who breaks with the duality by removing herself from the equation.

III. Laura Owens (b. 1970 -)

The contemporary art gallery is a white cube, evenly lit, with high ceilings and polished wood or concrete floors. This is a Chelsea standard. It is a place where artists can enter with their artwork as if the gallery in-itself is an empty canvas. The white walls of the gallery have become the starting point from which an artwork emerges. The paintings by Laura Owens tend to reinforce this relationship twofold; first by the pale use of color and second by the scale of the canvases that sometimes touch the floor and ceiling.

The untitled diptych from 1999 (Figure: 2) of two Southwest Asian apes is an example of how Owens uses the gallery as an integral part of her work. The paintings were first exhibited at Sadie Coles HQ in London where the artist stretched two canvases measuring 122 inches fitting the exact height of the space. The canvases are pushed into each corner of the gallery engaging the architecture, which becomes a frame touching three sides with the adjacent wall, ceiling and floor. The fourth sides of the two canvases face each other as do the apes depicted on the canvas. The wall becomes the central figure caught in the tension between the two canvases and the two subjects.

The centrality of the wall is a significant feature of the artwork, reminiscent of the stripe in a Barnett Newman zip painting from the 1950's. The wall becomes the negative space, the canvas is the middle ground, and the apes are in the foreground. Or, one could say the canvas is a deep background, the figure is in the middle ground and

the wall advances into the foreground? Nevertheless, the large empty spaces revealing the raw canvas contribute to the pale pallet that makes it difficult to discern the painting from the wall, foreground from the background. This harkens back to the Color Field tradition in scale, technique, contrast, color, and minimal compositions via Ellsworth Kelly, Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler.

It is not surprising that Laura Owens is interested in the architecture and space having begun her education by studying Installation Art at the Rhode Island School of Design. She has always maintained an interest in three-dimensional art, which is apparent from the example above utilizing the gallery itself to complete her work. In many ways there are phenomenological cues apparent in “how you, your body walks past and between paintings.”¹ At a point in her education when she decided to return to painting she states that she always had, “the intention of trying to make the paintings do what I thought only installation art could do.”² However, we do not turn to the artwork of Laura Owens to identify her as a contemporary artist practicing phenomenology. While a tribute should be paid to Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty for the philosophical work that surely impacted the direction of art in the twentieth-century, the focus here is to investigate the heterogeneous paintings and the process of Laura Owens as they compare to Paul Cézanne’s steady and consistent practice.

Painting, as it exists on the gallery wall, is often the focus in a phenomenological text about the medium. The experience of the audience becomes a measure in response

¹ Morgan, Susan. “A Thousand Words: Laura Owens Talks About Her New Work,” *Artforum*, New York, vol. 37, no. 10, Summer, 1999, p. 130–131.

² Sutton, Gloria. “Shifting Figures Moving Ground”, *Laura Owens*, exh. cat., ed. John Hutchinson, Kunsthalle Zürich; JRP/Ringier: Zürich, 2006, p. 137. Henceforth cited as *Sutton*.

to the product of a creative process. By moving the focus to the artist's experience in the process of painting we can gain a new point of view when considering the motivation of the artist. Specifically, through a consideration of the artist's experience, education and influences the following pages will challenge an aspect of Merleau-Ponty's theory of painting. First, we will look at the relationship between the artist's intention and the loss of control after an artwork enters the world. Secondly, by switching from an observational mode of production to a studio-based or post-studio based process the artist has a different stimulus in the field of perception.³ The question to be answered is how this shift affects both the freedom of the artist and the artwork through this change in production.

There is an openness in the exhibition space of a typical gallery, not limited by the distractions of furniture, architectural ornaments, curtains, and even signage. The artwork of Laura Owens contributes to this openness with canvases that are compositionally open with figures falling off of the edges of the canvas, unconstrained by the limits of the frame. Her work is never titled, which leaves the narrative open for the interpretation of the viewer. Owens leaves large empty spaces on the canvas that resonates with atmosphere of the gallery. The large flat areas of canvas lie parallel to the gallery wall, reinforcing the flatness of the canvas itself. However, this is not the same flatness of early modernist painters like Édouard Manet and Paul Cézanne,

³ Post-studio art gained momentum in the early 1990's with the rise of installation art. The artist Felix Gonzales-Torres (1957 – 96) is most often connected with this term. A post-studio artwork does not rely on a traditional studio space or tools for an artwork to be created or assembled; however, the artwork does rely on a gallery space to be exhibited. An example would be the *Untitled (Placebo)* 1991 by Gonzales-Torres, where a gallery floor was evenly covered in a large rectangle with thousands of store bought candies in shiny silver wrappers.

Owens' work is more similar to Chinese painting creating a deep layered space with simple shifts in scale, tone and value. Owens like the Chinese painters does not engage in the complicated system of linear perspective. Flowing rivers and tree branches carry the eye across one of Owens' paintings as it would have in a Chinese painting but also evoking memories of the clouds in a painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696 – 1770).

Flatness of the surface, spatial illusion, and rejection of linear perspective are significant elements in understanding the artwork of Laura Owens. As she states, "I watch TV everyday and use the computer almost everyday. All this enriches and tests my literacy in two dimensional culture."⁴ Contemporary visual culture adds to an encyclopedic range of references that Owens draws from. However, it is a flat, dull and unvaried use of color, tone, and value that has a greater effect than her references in contributing to the overall feeling a first impression of the artwork provides. The influence of this visual culture might resonate in the canvas it does not link the subjectivity of the artist to the painting. The flatness of media is a shared experience and not unique to the artist. While it is difficult to locate a narrative or find a connection between Owens, the varied references, and the sensation that is communicated through the paintings resonating with harmonious intentionality and spontaneity that entices the viewer to look closer. In the visual vocabulary created, Owens' paintings simultaneously reveal and exploit the trickery of illusionism by placing added emphasis on the flatness of the canvas and the wall on which it hangs.

⁴ Bell, Kirsty. "It's Just Painting," ed. Ingvild Goetz, Rainald Schumacher, *The Mystery of Painting*, exh. cat. Sammlung Goetz, Munich; Kunstverlag Ingvild Goetz, Munich, 2001, p. 154. Henceforth cited as *Bell*.

While the paintings are primarily flat, the painted marks are applied in a rich and diverse variety of methods, techniques and approaches. Sometimes the paint is daubed on straight out of the tube, like cake frosting. In some areas there are washes or stains and in others airbrushed fuzzy edged spots contrast other more rigid masked off edges. It is apparent in her ability to draw from a vast range of sources that her work is informed by an active investigation of other artists from different times and places. Connecting both the architecturally based origins of Owens' artwork, the apparent emphasis on the flatness of the canvas, and the disregard of linear perspective cannot be stated without acknowledging a strong concern for Phenomenology. In *The Mystery of Painting*, Kristy Bell writes, "The phenomenological experience of viewing the paintings in their architectural setting is intrinsic to the work, in terms of both composition and narrative sense, producing a cohesion of art, architecture and audience." (Bell, 156)

In 1995 Laura Owens began to make painting with the gallery in-itself as the subject. (Figures: 3, 5) The gallery itself became the subject of her painting. The concern is not only for the architectural structure of the gallery but also the architecture of the painting itself painting an image of the reverse side of the canvas in a series that lasted about six years 1996 - 2002. These paintings of stretchers support a reference of the canvas itself.

Galleries are spaces that have more than just the architecture contributing to the artwork. In this environment the artwork interacts with other artwork. The audience becomes caught in a tension between interactions of objects. At the Isabella Stewart Gardiner Museum in Boston where Owens visited for an extended residency, she writes, "there were constantly gazes between portraits or sculptures. Then a sculpture will look

across a courtyard to look at another sculpture sending you to another work.”⁵ The autonomy of the art objects in her observation somehow push the artist, viewer, and the world of the artwork out of the dialog. Unlike the *plein aire* paintings of Cézanne where the viewer feels as if he or she is standing in the same proximity to the canvas as the artist, the paintings of Owens makes the viewer feel as if the connection between other works is broken by their presence. Owens makes a point to travel to a location for the installation (i.e. Interleith Haus Edinburgh) to assure the relationship of the paintings to the architecture is amiable.

However, with every good example, there is a failure. In 1998, Owens set the challenge for herself to install three exhibitions, each in a different city, simultaneously depicting phases of the sun: sunrise in New York, midday in Chicago and in sunset in Los Angeles. The subject of the paintings reflected her interest in the saccharine cliché and overly romanticized images. Owens states, “this seemed like the hardest painting to make or maybe the most embarrassing, probably because it is such a cliché or because there are so many bad romantic paintings of sunsets. For me, it was the challenge of making the work, of making it interesting.” (Sutton) While each painting could only be viewed individually, the knowledge of the relationship between all three works required the audience to imagine the other galleries and the other paintings. Unfortunately, from a phenomenological point of view this conceptual project falls short of the connection to the work itself. While it was an interesting project to review in an art magazine, the

⁵ Kaplan, Cheryl. “Freundliche Platzhalter: Ein Gespräch mit Laura Owens / Friendly Place-Holders: Conversation with Laura Owens”, *db artmag*, August, 2005. 10 Dec. 2008. < <http://www.db-artmag.de/2005/8/e/1/396.php> >.

artist's conceptual motivation fell short of communicating that intention through the paintings.

From a phenomenological point of view it is not possible to experience a painting that you cannot stand before. The phases of the sun project does reveal the other strengths of Owens' conceptual process. Most of her other work seems to have, if any conceptualism at all, an anti-conceptual approach. It is important to show, as in the sunset paintings, that she is interested in conceptual approaches but not in a didactic sense of the term. Owens' failure in her conceptual attempted directly relates to the challenges faced by Cézanne and daVinci: the conceptual does not provide insight into the sensuous.

Her work is not meant to depict the natural world. The paintings by Owens equalize everything in the world as being the same plane of perception as stated by the artist, "it is about noticing things that interest you; and that definitely happens with the natural world as well."⁶ However, her work teeters on what Merleau-Ponty applauds Cézanne for in his ability to draw from the "brute meaning" of the world, Owens includes everything within her perceptual field as being fair game. We could go as far as saying that for an artist who spends so much time looking at art in galleries and museums that her art derives from art vs. art that derives from nature. The meaning takes a different charge for the two artists from two different worlds. All painters are faced with a similar problem of ends and means; what to do and how best to do it.

⁶ Kushner, Rachel. "Interview with Laura Owens," *The Believer*, May 2003. 10 Dec. 2008. <http://www.believermag.com/issues/200305/?read=interview_owens>. Henceforth cited as *Kushner*.

The approach, references and influence Owens brings to her paintings are rich and varied and as Paul Schimmel writes in an exhibition catalog of her work, “She paints on a slippery slope between abstraction and representation, conceptualism and process, folk art and classical tradition. Between these polarities, Owens has found language that questions the nature of painting while embracing its multifarious manifestations.”⁷ Through her artwork, Laura Owens takes a democratic approach where she does not create hierarchies among the media she chooses, or the references, and her various influences. In a multitude of resources that are available to her she is committed to, “learning from the overlooked,” which encourages in her practice that, painting can be pluralist rather than parochial.” (Sutton, 139) This is what the exhibition catalog author writes is an “ethics of cultural production.” (Sutton, 139) Her work draws from a nature that is not like the mountain Cézanne painted. Instead Owens includes all of the culture that is around her, paintings pictures that are not ‘of’ the world but pictures that are ‘about’ the world. As we will see, ‘what’ Laura Owens paints and ‘how’ she paints are two inextricably linked aspects of her process. Ultimately the painting communicates beyond the control of the artist; however, it is up to the artists to free the painting from clichés. Gilles Deleuze writes in his book about Francis Bacon, “the painter does not have to cover a blank surface but rather would have to empty it out, clear it, clean it.” (*FB*, 71) Given the techniques, references, and influences in Laura Owen’s paintings the cleaning is very selective

As we have seen Laura Owens utilizes a variety of approaches and applications of paint that extend beyond the canvas into the architecture of the gallery. Similarly, the

⁷ Schimmel, Paul. “Plays Well with Others,” *Laura Owens*, exh. cat. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2003, p. 39. Henceforth cited as *Schimmel*.

reference of her paintings draws on a deep well of art historical influences. One could recognize ripples from 18th century embroidery, Chinese landscape painting, Japanese prints, Op Art, folk art and fairytale illustrations (Figure: 8). The artists that appear to be applauded in her art include: Florine Settheimer, Henri Rousseau, Grandma Moses, Horace Pippin, Edward Hicks, Helen Frankenthaler, and Morris Louis. More contemporary artists include: Mary Heilman, Alex Katz, David Hockney, Jonathan Lasker, David Reed and Monique Prieto. If this seems like a laundry list; it is, but often times her work seems to demand footnotes to give credit to these painters who came before.

Her multiple references become more than an apparent source of inspiration. In 1995 Owens shifts from non-objective and abstract painting to, more figurative representations. As mentioned earlier she was interested in the paintings architecture by literally painting images of the stretcher. However, it was the paintings of galleries that bridged her experience with architectural space with painting. She writes, “I started that just because I tried to paint from the things that I was doing, and one of the things I was doing was going to museums a lot. And that was a favorite place to hang out and look at things.”⁸

For example, one of her earlier works from 1995 (Figure: 3) is an image of an interior gallery space in which people around her executed the individual salon style paintings at that time. “She acknowledges it as the foundation for her conceptual strategy, which counters traditional ideas of the painter’s heroic isolation with collaboration.” (Schimmel, 34) As a strategy Owens is taking herself out of the

⁸ Owens, Laura. “Laura Owens in Conversation with Elizabeth Peyton”, *Laura Owens*, exh. cat., ed. John Hutchinson, Kunsthalle Zürich; JRP/Rinigier: Zürich, 2006, p. 161.

paintings by deferring to this collaborative plurality. As a subject of her own work, Owens removes herself, the painting in turn is left behind for the audience to see, not the artist. Owens engages her peers and family members to collaborate with her in both her paintings and in the gallery spaces. The 1995 painting (Figure: 3) is a significant turn in her career and it is also a personal investment to bring people that are close to her into a painting. Perhaps the personal connection is the reason she has never parted with this painting.

She has also collaborated with other artists in gallery projects including: “the Happy Show” in 1994 with Monique Prieto, The Eagle Rock Show in 1997 that took place in her studio, “Heaven and Hell” in 1999 in collaboration with Scott Reeder, and “Cave Painting” in 2002 with Peter Doig and Chris Ofili, to name a few. What this points to is an attitude Owens adopts regarding art and artists that is anti-heroic, not exclusive and not isolated. Overall, we will see that there is a very strong democratic and leveling political position that is apparent in her decisions both compositionally in the design of her paintings and organizationally in her interactions with her local community. As we have seen in the fluidity of her movement between materials, influences and techniques she carries this spirit of collaboration to parallel her community-based activism.

In a catalog of work by Laura Owens the author writes, “Owens’ allusion to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome indicates her approval of non-proprietary, non-heirachizing forms of attention, of an attitude toward multiplicity that sees it as the fundamental aiming principle of an art that could offer resistance to contemporary

forms of social control.”⁹ It is worth noting that this statement was quoted in a very slick \$95 exhibition catalog. Nevertheless, the author points out that Owens is intentionally mixing a variety of ‘wrong’ art traditions; non-western, non-urban and ethnically diverse. The author continues to propose that this is not just another “postmodern bricolage, where the experience of the of difference is replaced by the comodifying of cultures,” instead she writes Owens’ intention is pointing to an, “equal availability of consumption.” (Mengham)

Her early paintings of galleries, complete with collaborations, is an early attempt to bring a diverse range of voices into the harmonic space of one painting. As we move through Owens’ career she will meet similar ends by means that are not as literal. After the gallery paintings (Figures: 3, 4, 5) she moves through some other experiments with cityscapes (Figure: 6), landscapes (Figures: 7, 8) and abstract designs (Figures: 9, 10) before beginning her first animal paintings in 1999 (Figure: 2, 11, 12). The animals, similar to the collaborations, are benevolent arrangements of figures whose presence does not compete with each other for attention. The animals cohabit in her artwork without conflict, in a well designed, pastoral balance, and shared space.

The animals in her work include bears, monkeys, owls, rabbits, squirrels, tortoises, fish, deer, and insects like butterflies, bees, and spiders. Together these animals create a Garden of Eden like paradise where all animals live together in harmony. This is very much a pastoral environment where there is a movement to restore a much desired sense of community without exclusivity or privilege. The paintings want to be read like a fairytale rich with metaphors; however, these paintings are set up against interpretation

⁹ Mengham, Rod “Agitpop”, *Laura Owens*, exh. cat., ed. John Hutchinson, Kunsthalle Zürich; JRP/Ringier: Zürich, 2006, p. 25. Henceforth cited as *Mengham*.

as if the playfulness they project is laughing at all attempts at being understood. The choice of animals in Owens' paintings evokes a storybook landscape where a narrative is sewn together; however, plot is unidentifiable. Instead, Owens' draws on this storytelling tradition that originated in an oral culture where the embellishments are open and left to interpretation.

Her work lies between decorations and abstraction with a blurring of figure/figural. Decoration was embraced by early modernists, then rejected by Abstract Expressionism and again embraced by Pattern & Decoration artists in the late 1970s. In an essay on Laura Owens in the *Mystery of Painting*, Kristy Bell presents the possibility that Owens' modernist influence is, "through this window of the ornamental rather than the grand....nonobjective." (Bell, 155) The introduction of the decorative does evoke a few other considerations in Owens' interest in the underrepresented artists throughout history.

The decorative tradition derives from what has historically been 'women's work' that is consistent with Owens' interest in embracing the overlooked artists. Use of decorative elements also adds a shifting point of view where figures, landscapes and abstract gestures intermingle through formal means. In this way her art moves beyond a simple representation and moves into a playful blurring between anonymous artisan and fine artist. The material and approach are shared with the first and the audience for her work is the latter.

When Merleau-Ponty wrote about Cézanne he first dismissed the biographical, geographic, psychological and physical factors that might have contributed to an understanding of the artist. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that all of these factors will

have some influence on the artist, and yet none should be a factor in understanding the art because all of these details are second hand. Merleau-Ponty is interested in the process Cézanne engages in to arrive at a firsthand relationship with nature from which his paintings derive. However, how does this firsthand relationship relate to the painter who works exclusively in a studio?

Laura Owens is an artist who works in the studio and while images of animals, trees, and nature are in the paintings, they are generated from references and not from direct observation like Cézanne's Mountain. Owens begins with weeks of planning before she begins a painting. She says, "Often I feel I'm teaching myself how I'm going to paint the painting; I'm really figuring out which paint is going to go down first, and how thin or thick to make the paint."¹⁰ In many ways what separates Owens from Cézanne is this part of the process, before the first mark is made on the canvas. For Cézanne the process is unique to the specific moment, time of day, season, and weather, which all greatly impact the finished work. Owens, on the other hand states, "When I'm making stuff that's big, I've found that things don't work out if it looks really labored over, it just doesn't feel very good. So it's better if I have it figured out in advance." (Owens) Owens indicates that she figures out about eighty percent of the painting in advance creating a relationship to the process that contrasts a modern painter like Cézanne.

Each of Owens' painting are still subject to chance and spontaneity, or what she would call, "an unexpected decision." (Sutton, 143) There are cards in the 'bear' painting (Figure: 12) that seem like a random thought that stuck to the canvas. Owens'

¹⁰ Owens, Laura. "Laura Owens in Conversation with Alex Katz", *Laura Owens*, exh. cat., ed. John Hutchinson, Kunsthalle Zürich; JRP/Rinigier: Zürich, 2006, p.157. Henceforth cited as *Owens*.

process and her paintings are both a literal representation of probability and a chance occurrence that are stuck to the canvas. Sometimes she can misplace part of the original image she had in mind, “like when you tell your dream in words, you lose track of it.”¹¹ Owens’ retelling is not much different than Cézanne going to the mountain and setting up an easel and canvas, always knowing he will make a painting. Yes, for Cézanne the mountain will reveal itself as the process unfolds and for Owens it is more a process of removal. Her removal ultimately will remove the artist from the painting, unlike Cézanne.

For Owens the process begins with drawings and collages of images that might then be scanned and manipulated with Photoshop in an exploration of scale and color. The drawings are covered with numbers corresponding to her homemade color chart. Sometimes, drawings are enlarged to a full-scale cartoon that could be applied directly to the canvas. Before beginning to paint, she will experiment with the color combinations and applications of the paint on study canvases. She is looking for a reliable foundation to stand on before beginning; however, all of this construction is, “a trick of the brain to make you think it’s failsafe,” however, she continues, “It also wears you out.” (Ferguson, 60) Ultimately, Owens seeks confidence in herself before beginning a painting. Inevitably, she has, “a whole month of freaking out, but also getting excited.” (Ferguson, 60) This is a necessary swelling, a build up before the expression.

There is a ritual Owens has adopted after years of experience in her working process. In art school they teach you to struggle through the process, she remembers; “the idea of

¹¹ Ferguson, Russel. “Laura Owens Paints a Picture / Laura Owens malt ein Bild,” *Parkett*, Zürich /New York/Frankfurt, no. 65, p. 62. Henceforth cited as *Ferguson*.

struggling through the process was not as interesting as doing tests and executing the painting after I figured out all of the elements and how they were going to work together.” (Kushner) The process that Owens is describing is very different than the example of Cezanne who jumps into a canvas by responding to the same mountain in a new way each day. The approach Owens takes is more in line with the Renaissance and Baroque painters who worked through sketches and studies primarily in a studio environment. Similarly, Owens does not use a white canvas; instead she paints on a dark brown linen working dark to light, which is a technique she shares with the old masters. Owens studio experiments become the plans and designs for most of the composition and color combinations before she even touches the canvas.

Owens works alone in her studio, with the exception of the occasional assistant who might stretch a canvas or apply masking tape to the painting blocking a figure from the ground. In this isolation, Owens finds her subjective voice and can hear, “the synapse of connections happening.”(Kushner) However, there is not a moment where she stands back and says, “oh, here’s an emotionally charged painting,” she reveals in an interview with Rachel Kushner. The painting reveals itself to her slowly as it develops through her drawings and studies before even touching the canvas. Once Owens begins to paint on the canvas, she is constantly referring back to the sketches.

In Owens’ studio hangs a handwritten sign that says ‘make stuff.’ There are two things she is making; first is a painting, and second is the creation of a pictorial world. For her paintings to be successful, Ferguson writes, a certain harmony is achieved that encompass both elements, a picture of a better world and a well composed painting. The coherence of these two elements also points to her ability to move between a

firsthand and secondhand language. The pictorial world derives from her experience and the deep resources of art historical reference creating a peaceful kingdom where, “all nature co-exists in idyllic harmony”. (Ferguson) The design of the painting is a firsthand response that brings all elements together in a well-composed and complex arrangement of raw materials and art historical references, which function as yet another medium. Ferguson writes, “there is a constant back and forth between creation of a pictorial world and the act of painting itself.” (Ferguson) It is in her ability to move between the invented world expressed and the critical world suppressed pulling together references that brings coherence to each painting.

Before painting Laura Owens prepares large amounts of paint loaded in dozens of large tinfoil lasagna trays that serve as her palettes. She describes this part of the pre-painting process as, “revving your engine your engines, getting psyched up.” (Ferguson) When she builds up enough confidence, when her raw materials are prepared, techniques are all worked out in advance, colors are determined, and sketches are at the ready, she then begins to paint. At this point, she enters a zone where, “‘good’ or ‘bad’ doesn’t make sense.” (Ferguson) We can hear the echoes of Merleau-Ponty in this statement, where Owens’ perception is acute and disconnected from secondhand language and judgments. Rachel Ferguson points out that this is a very different place where the process is not the struggle her teachers warned of but it, “serves to imbue her with a spirit of strategic calm.” (Ferguson) Ferguson draws a comparison between this calm approach and the process of the studio based Abstract Expressionists whom Harold Rosenberg celebrated for entering ‘an arena in which to act.’ This action in the studio was a popular approach that came with it an overwhelming and often criticized

masculine virility where inspiration was found not in a response to nature but in the, 'painter's muscle.' While there are interests in 'women's work' and the decorative arts, apparent in the work of Laura Owens, her calm approach is a more effective difference drawn between her and her predecessors.

The composition of the painting, the design, the color and the raw canvas itself exist before the painting begins and they are arrived at in a sober conscious state that is in this second hand place of culture and art history. However, the artist has described a need to build up supports in the studio as if she did not trust herself when stepping forward onto uncertain terrain. Here is a pivotal difference from Cézanne, where Owens articulates a direction before a painting begins, as opposed to the challenge Cézanne had was to find the language, after the process. For Cézanne this clarification is one of the factors that drove him back to the mountain, to sustain and better describe what he understood in paint. For Owens, the ground is not as stable and there is no given, no mountain to rely on.

Earthquakes

Laura Owens' studio is in Eagle Rock, California, sitting directly on the San Andres fault. Unlike the stability of Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire, Owens' unstable ground above a fragile fault line draws a comparison between the modern divisions of the rock and the crumbling late-modern shards embodied in that fragmented history and culture. Furthermore, when Owens points to nature it is a very self-conscious nature where that appears to be overgrown the ruin of cultural history.

Paul Schimmel points to a reluctance Owens has to "lay claim to a fixed position."¹² He compares this to a youthful or immature characteristic one could find in a student's work. However, this resistance to settle is somehow a defense against the pending earthquake. A consistent representation is, as Schimmel writes, "an integral aspect of Owen's methodology." (Schimmel) He continues, "her eclecticism might have been taken as a symptom of indecision – the product of a wandering mind or lack of discipline." (Schimmel) Schimmel compares the approach to that of a dilettante who dabbles in the archives of art history without making a commitment or holding a stylistic position. In many ways this is true, but what motivates this instability? Is it the anticipation of an earth-moving quake? Is her defensive strategy to remain light, floating on the surface and not to get dragged down or crushed?

¹² Schimmel, Paul. "Plays Well with Others," *Laura Owens*, exh. cat. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2003, p. 33. Henceforth cited as *Schimmel*.

Gloria Sutton concurs with Schimmel in a similar sentiment when he writes, “even more remarkable is that the paradigms of “de-skilling” and “formal-humor” have been responsible for an almost willful non-seeing of some of the most salient features of Owen’s prolific practice.”¹³ He continues by pointing to her, “compositional cohesiveness” combined with an, “insistence on the process” and a ability to draw from a, “seemingly endless arsenal of art-historical references.” (Sutton) All of the above is woven together without ever looking academic or inhibited.

In 1994 the Northridge Earthquake caused such a significant disturbance at CalArts where Owens was studying that her studio had to be moved to Lockheed’s industry park. In reaction to, first the shock of the tremor, and the second the shock of the move a direct response to the irony of art students at an arms factory Owens co-organized the “Happy Show” with Monique Prieto. It was also at this time that Owens made a significant change from abstraction to figural painting. She said, “It was a wakeup call. I realized it doesn’t matter what you do – you can do anything you want.”¹⁴ The vulnerability of the pending earthquake propels Owens into a connection with the moment and a realization of need to produce artwork that was not ponderous, slow moving and labored.

The motivation to produce in the light of a potential catastrophe translates into the vitality of her process. In an interview for an exhibition catalog the artist Alex Katz comments, “you can’t get a fluid performance if you’re laboring. I have the same thing;

¹³ Sutton, Gloria. “Shifting Figures Moving Ground”, *Laura Owens*, exh. cat., ed. John Hutchinson, Kunsthalle Zürich; JRP/Ringier: Zürich, 2006, p. 143. Henceforth cited as *Sutton*.

¹⁴ Bell, Kirsty. “It’s Just Painting,” ed. Ingvild Goetz, Rainald Schumacher, *The Mystery of Painting*, exh. cat. Sammlung Goetz, Munich; Kunstverlag Ingvild Goetz, Munich 2001, p. 153. Henceforth cited as *Bell*.

I don't like to belabor work."¹⁵ Owens shares the sentiment of the approach in responding, "Often I want to create the feeling of something that you do kind of quick and small, but make it on a larger scale." (Owens) The process should lend an "appearance of landing by accident on the canvas," Owens states. (Bell, 159) Speed is appreciated in a volatile environment. Painting quickly in this high-speed manner is important for the appearance of a directness that reinforces paintings are faster than thought.

In addition to fast painting, a contradictory and yet similar 'laid back' attitude is revealed in the artist's approach that resonates in the paintings. In this context, Laura Owens writes in her essay "A Thousand Words: Laura Owens Talks About Her New Work" published in *ArtForum* (1999) that the painter Mary Heilmann had a "profound impact" on her.¹⁶ They met a few times when Owens was still a graduate student at CalArts and still continue a dialog. Owens writes about Heilmann, "although she's extremely serious about what she's doing, she has a very casual approach to making painting." (Morgan) Conversely, in a conversation with the artists Mary Heilmann points out two things that are important about her approach to painting, which are, "a carefree relationship to the idea of subject matter and a concern for the intricacy of arrangement." (Morgan)

The casual approach combined with a high-speed appearance present two conflicting aspects of Owens' paintings, which animates the artwork in a dynamic tension. In

¹⁵ Owens, Laura. "Laura Owens in Conversation with Alex Katz", *Laura Owens*, exh. cat., ed. John Hutchinson, Kunsthalle Zürich; JRP/Ringier: Zürich, p. 157 - 159, 2006, p. 157. Henceforth cited as *Owens*.

¹⁶ Morgan, Susan. "A Thousand Words: Laura Owens Talks About Her New Work," *Artforum*, New York, vol. 37, no. 10, Summer, p. 130-131, 1999. Henceforth cited as *Morgan*.

many ways her work seems strategically organized and in other moments it appears to be completely spontaneous. The decisions vary as much as each individual painting, which presents an interesting question for comparison. Owens writes, “Comparing and contrasting the work raises the issue of quality “which one is best? That idea of quality, the success of a particular painting, has a way of falling apart. When the same work is placed in a different context, it may appear to fail; but while something is falling apart, something else is succeeding.” (Morgan) Many of the decisions Owens’ makes while painting are formal. The challenge she is faced with reflects, “making something work that’s not right in painting”¹⁷ Making the painting right could be choosing the best color or figuring out, “how many animals can you fit in a painting.” (Kaplan) For Owens they are the same means to an end, as she states, “its using formal means to rebel, working through it until something evolves from a cliché.” (Kaplan)

For example in a catalog for her exhibition at the Kunsthalle Zürich, Rod Mengham writes it is impossible to focus on one dominant feature of her work because the “discriminating elements are pre-empted by the use of abstract forms.”¹⁸ For Cézanne the question was how to directly relate a part of the design and the choice of color to the world he stood before. His decisions caused a break with the Impressionists and a style change; however, Owens uses style as much as a raw material or a choice to include a bear or a monkey. She employs an array of approaches and a range of styles in her work often within a single work. All together the medium, reference and approach

¹⁷ Kaplan, Cheryl. “Freundliche Platzhalter: Ein Gespräch mit Laura Owens / Friendly Place-Holders: Conversation with Laura Owens”, *db artmag*, August. 2005. 10 Dec. 2008. < <http://www.db-artmag.de/2005/8/e/1/396.php> >. Henceforth cited as *Kaplan*.

¹⁸ Mengham, Rod “Agitpop”, *Laura Owens*, exh. cat., ed. John Hutchinson, Kunsthalle Zürich; JRP/Ringier: Zürich, 2006, p. 27.

neutralize each other. Owens states, “ I think a lot of artists use painting to point out a reference, a quote, an anecdote, or an idea – and that reference becomes more interesting than the work. I’d much rather have a reference generate a painting.” (Morgan)

Removing the cliché from the canvas before one begins to paint is no small task. Gilles Deleuze writes that the painter, “does not paint in order to reproduce on the canvas an object functioning as a model; he paints on images that are already there, in order to produce a canvas whose functioning will reverse the relation between model and copy.” (*FB*, 71) Owens tackles this challenge head on. She acknowledges, “the weight of art history is what gets you. It brings in that crusty stodgy feeling – when you look at a work of art and you feel that the person hasn’t stepped outside hasn’t looked in other wings of the Met, hasn’t gone to the Museum of Natural History.”¹⁹ The historical record of art history becomes the raw material in Owens’ work, an element not unlike the paint or the canvas. The challenge is to use these the images that are already there and somehow bring in new life to the familiar ad overlooked.

Owens develops her “own personal cannon of art history” selecting subjects and techniques that she believes is important.²⁰ Her interests are in how culture has moved in a more democratic, pluralistic direction writing, “you now find a lot of people who are looking outside of the mainstream of the history of art for their mentors.” (Kushner) In articulating her interest in mentors she sets up an oposition to the less accessible

¹⁹ Thomson, Mungo. “From My Junkyard to Yours / Von meinem Schrotthaufen zu deinem eigenen,” *Parkett*, Zürich / New York / Frankfurt, no. 65, 2002, p. 85. Henceforth cited as *Kushner*.

²⁰ Kushner, Rachel. “Interview with Laura Owens,” *The Believer*, May 2003. 10 Dec. 2008. <http://www.believermag.com/issues/200305/?read=interview_owens>.

heroes. Owens is cautious not to allow artists who came before her to become heroes, creating a level art historical plane. She writes, “if you have heroes, and they’re way way above you, it usually means you have to have some people that are inferior to you. I feel like I am constantly looking at everyone I meet and trying to see them in an equal way, with equal standing to me.” (Kushner) For example, she continues to say that, “Van Gogh is not a heroic, untouchable, inhuman god,” but he was just a man with challenges in his life and art that are not too different from many other artists. (Kushner) This leveling also opens up the possibilities to break down the clichés and move more freely between what has been called high and low art. Through the mixing of motifs, styles, ethnic and geographical diversity Owens’s canvases become a heterogeneous.

Owens leans more toward an appreciation of artists who are in many ways anonymous. She is attracted to both the “extraordinary skill” and the “lack of ego or identifiable “I” from which the work emanates. (Schimmel, 30) For example, this can be seen in her affinity for the decorative arts, printmaking, textile design, Chinese and Japanese landscape painting. Paul Schimmel points out that Owens’ pluralistic approach combined with the resistance to the dominate ego confronts Paintings most basic conditions: solitude, singularity and subject. (Schimmel, 37)

Schimmel continues to compare the naïve quality of Owens’ “cartoon-like doodles” when enlarged to the scale of her paintings “belies the heroicism” that is so often associated with the grandeur of the scale she has chosen to work. In addition, he points to Owens’ ambition to “take on the entire range of genres,” which is ironic considering the simplicity of the compositions. (Schimmel, 39) In a virtuous naïveté, Owens manages to sidestep any hint of the heroic painterly gesture, and all too common

signature painting style. There is not one element of her paintings that are definitively hers; therefore, she removes herself as the subjective creator and turns much of the responsibility regarding the paintings over to the audience. In the context of heroic painting, this gesture to remove oneself from the paintings on the surface might appear light, but it reaches down to the core of many problems modern Painting has been trying to resolve. The following statement illuminates that problem:

Painting is widely perceived as one of the purest expressions of the ego, largely because it is not reliant on collaborative structures to exist. For Owens, collaboration as manifested in her work with other artists and her borrowing from history of art is at the root of very different practice – one that involves uncertainty and the freedom that comes letting go of the “I”. (Schimmel, 37)

Freedom is recognizable in the playfulness of the animals in a peaceful Garden of Eden like environment illustrated in her paintings. Animals in nature interact in a coexistence that is free that is not burdened by history. Freedom is apparent in the paintings by Laura Owens beginning with the openness of the composition to the collaborative receptiveness which allows that releases the paintings from the artist’s own perspectival viewpoint.

Freedom

A painting can offer up any number of options for meaning.

- Laura Owens, *A Thousand Words*

Painting should open laterally without hierarchies or heroes. Owens does this through an inclusion of various media, applications and resources. Paul Schimmel relates her collaborative efforts to the Pre-Raphaelites and the Bloomsbury group, “who assemble around a set of common ideals as well as social relationships, and her collaborations position the “I” of painting with a collective “we.”¹ Collaboration goes beyond the literal inclusion of other artists into her process but there is also a unique collaborative existence among figures in her paintings. For example, none of the animals dominate each other or nature as it could be seen in (Figure: 12) which is a large painting where a bear is partially hidden by a tree trunk. In her own words, Owens comments, “none of the animals dominate or become the protagonist in the story. They equal out.”²

However, freedom does not only exist only on the surface of the canvas, although this is the focus of our investigation. Owens is also released from a controlled process and the shackles of her education and influences much like Cézanne when he stood in

¹ Schimmel, Paul. “Plays Well with Others,” *Laura Owens*, exh. cat. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2003, p. 37.

² Kaplan, Cheryl. “Freundliche Platzhalter: Ein Gespräch mit Laura Owens / Friendly Place-Holders: Conversation with Laura Owens”, *db artmag*, August. 2005. 10 Dec. 2008. < <http://www.db-artmag.de/2005/8/e/1/396.php> >.

between the mountain and the canvas. Owens comments, “I feel like there is a personal freedom for me where art-making happens. There’s no inner emotional state that I could compare it to; it’s a space that has its own properties, and they don’t have to do with happy or sad or any of that.”³ In her studio, in her seclusion the artwork is born and to bring life to this object the artist relies on freedom. Owens states, “my work gets created in this space if freedom, and that’s why a lot of it has to do with experimentation. (Kushner) The experiment allows the artist to break from a tradition and discover something that could not be anticipated by cognitive means alone. Merleau-Ponty states it directly in “Cézanne’s Doubt,” The painter who conceptualizes and seeks expression first misses the mystery...” (CD, 66)

Sometimes in painting respect is given to those who take a position of independent individuality. The individual has a force in the world, not only to shared force in the world, but a force into the world. Democratic method is to find the majority opinion, which for art can be dangerous as defined by taste. Painting itself is democratic in that all artists through time have had the same means at their disposal. Owens is very aware and satisfied with her own position in the grand tradition of painting, “whatever one chooses to do to any particular painting will to some extent be done to painting in general.”⁴ There are key artists who have made enlightening decisions, which opens us to see the medium from a broader point of view. Without raising more heroes, it is apparent, for example, the influence Cézanne had on twentieth-century artists,

³ Kushner, Rachel. “Interview with Laura Owens,” *The Believer*, May 2003. 10 Dec. 2008. <http://www.believermag.com/issues/200305/?read=interview_owens>.

Henceforth cited as *Kushner*.

⁴ Tumlr, Jan. “Gentle Purpose,” *New Art Examiner*, Chicago, May, 1999, p. 43.

especially Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. The freeing collaborative approach Owens has adopted will have a similar impact on the medium.

IV. Conclusion

In the catalog for an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (2003) Paul Schimmel summarizes Laura Owens' paintings by stating, "here is an art predicated on a balancing intuition and intellect, encouraging multiple voices, and leveling hierarchies. It is an art imbued with desire to move easily and at will across high and low, east and west, personal and social."¹ By bringing multiple artists into her paintings through collaborative efforts with other living artists and with historical references Owens has taken the spotlight off of herself. How can a psychologist or art historian dig for meaning if the paintings do not have one history or one ego. How does one interpret a grand cathedral that was made by so many craftsmen?

In the preface of another exhibition catalog for the Kunsthalle Zürich Beatrix Ruff writes, "the all embracing simultaneity and co-existing emplacement of all styles, techniques and motifs in Laura Owens pictures generate a matter of fact laid back collective creativity, which she as an individual can use and that for her painting signifies a liberation from representation from gesture of historical reference."² One of the issues that existential philosophy promoted was a freedom that transcends any current situation, a freedom from the details of one's place or time that they are born into, he even allows for a freedom from the shackles of a physical disability. This is a

¹ Schimmel, Paul. "Plays Well with Others," *Laura Owens*, exh. cat. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2003, p. 29.

² Ruf, Beatrix. "Preface", *Laura Owens*, exh. cat., ed. John Hutchinson, (Kunsthalle Zürich; JRP/Ringier: Zürich, 2006) p. 23.

notion in philosophy that is very welcomed as an extension from Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900). The idea was picked up in by the artist Joseph Beuys (1921 – 1986), who said, ‘everyone is an artist.’ This often misinterpreted statement, basically means that every choice made in every action taken in life should be considered as a creative act. The creative act is not to be confused with choices as superficial as the paint that lays on the surface of the canvas that appeals to the pleasures of our eyes in a retinal flicker. Choices made in art should be sustainable, ongoing and self-teaching contributions to a collaborative effort in the public sphere. As the choices in art gain momentum and reflect back on culture art will become adjacent with ethics. It is encouraging to see artists like Laura Owens who have braved the tremors and still speaks through a medium and not in words, having the power to renew life in the world with this isolated silent medium.

Figures



Figure 1: Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1902-4, oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 36 3/16 inches.



Figure 2: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1999, acrylic and ink on canvas, 2 parts, each 122 x 60 inches, LO 136, Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise.



Figure 3: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1995, oil, acrylic, enamel, marker and ink on canvas, 72 1/2 x 84 1/4 inches, LO 95 017, Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise.



Figure 4: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1996, Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 96 inches, LO 002, Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise.



Figure 5: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1997, oil and acrylic on canvas, 96 x 120 inches, LO 030, Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise.



Figure 6: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1997, oil and acrylic on canvas, 49 3/4 x 45 1/2 inches, LO 033, Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise.



Figure 7: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2000, acrylic and oil on canvas, 9'2" x 11' LO 166, Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise.



Figure 8: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1999, acrylic and oil on canvas, 150 x 66 inches, LO 109, Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise.



Figure 9: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1998, acrylic and pen on canvas, 12' x 7' LO 078, Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise.



Figure 10: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1998, mixed media on canvas, 46 x 50 inches, LO 087, Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise.



Figure 11: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2001, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 106 x 67 1/2 inches, LO 192, Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise.



Figure 12: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2002, oil and acrylic on linen, 84 x 132 inches, LO 207, Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's enterprise.

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