



SAN FRANCISCO

Laura Owens

CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts // April 28–July 23

TROLLING ISN'T A WORD usually associated with feminist art. In fact, the act of trolling—posting inflammatory statements on the Internet to elicit outrage—is strongly associated with men. Yet Los Angeles–based painter Laura Owens has been gently trolling the male-dominated art world for almost 20 years, with works that smuggle content such as textile patterns, floral imagery and horse drawings into the discourse around contemporary painting and appropriation. At CCA Wattis, located in San Francisco's gentrifying South of Market neighborhood, Owens uses the tech industry's lingo and products as a springboard for critique in her exhibition "Ten Paintings."

At first glance, "Ten Paintings" looks like a singular artwork: a room covered with hand-printed wallpaper displaying a nonrepeating abstract digital composition. (The image is a pixelated bitmap of folded and creased paper.) The wallpaper design is interrupted by a printed grid of faux wooden beams perfectly aligned with the gallery rafters, and complicated by a series of

Laura Owens
Installation view of "Ten Paintings," 2016.

irregularly shaped panels installed on top of it that mimic—but don't quite match—the pattern

underneath. Owens's titular ten paintings are invisible, embedded under the wallpaper to be excavated (and sold) at the show's end. On closer inspection, one notices a handful of "Easter eggs" throughout the room, from childish drawings to screenshots from the Neko Atsume app to realistically Photoshopped advertisements. One 1950s-style ad hawks "Schmilk," a fictional food substitute parodying the ghoulishly named meal replacement Soylent (developed by San Francisco programmers). Several interventions reference California's devotion to New Age topics, from tarot to horoscopes. There are a few local phone numbers appended to ads, inviting viewers to text their questions to the installation. Cryptic answers emanate in real time from speakers arranged on the ceiling. Owens's precise reconstruction of such Bay Area countercultural artifacts as alternative weeklies and astrological newsletters affirms the culture sidelined in the tech industry's takeover of the Bay Area. It also aligns with her longstanding, feminist interest in what the press release calls "embarrassing" material.

Owens's sharp wit is evident throughout the show, and spam email is one of her thematic concerns. She created four artist books inspired by her unsuccessful attempts to purchase technologically engineered household products advertised through spam, like an electric cleaning tool called a "vibrascrape." They rest on a shelf underneath the reception desk, upon which sits a series of handcrafted ceramic emoji. Owens's press release continues the theme of trolling and spamming, weaving together a series of unsubstantiated and incendiary quotes about the Los Angeles art scene ("Q: What's the difference between Los Angeles and yogurt? A: Yogurt has a live culture").

In the back room, Owens installs her recent paintings alongside cross-stitch and embroidery by her grandmother. Presenting them in a single grid, she playfully levels the hierarchy between decoration and fine art, much as the rest of her show destabilizes differences between the real and the replica, the unique (painting) and the serial (wallpaper and emoji). The inclusion of handicraft in this show also alludes to the history of early computer programming as a feminine occupation, before it proved lucrative and was overtaken by men.

Owens's text hotline suggests that in this world of AI technology, it can be refreshing to place one's faith in speculative technologies. But when they respond too intelligently, it can still feel unnerving. Fatigued by the East Coast, I texted one painting: "Will I move to L.A.?" It responded: "Is it worth it?" —Wendy Vogel

LOS ANGELES

"Made in L.A."

Hammer Museum // June 12–August 28

ONE ENDURING IMAGE I've taken with me from the third edition of the "Made in L.A." biennial—and there are many—is of a young, bearded guy, shirtless on a table, happily conversing about sex and marriage with some other guys who are in the process of gluing Cheerios to his naked torso. This evocative scene comes from *Breakfast in Bed*, 2016, by Kenneth Tam, who advertised online for men to be filmed (for pay) in a structured series of male-bonding exercises both earnest and absurd. Everything happens within a bare-bones wood-paneled set. At one point, the comfortably average participants are asked to examine one another, to share some words of positive affirmation ("You have a long neck...I bet you could headbutt someone real good.") They open up about their hopes and dreams in confessional segments borrowed from reality television but lacking that medium's crushing schadenfreude. Gilberto, from Houston, Texas, shares his hobby (writing poetry in Spanish); another participant admits that he applied mainly for the money but also to impress an artsy girl.

Tam's *Breakfast in Bed* has some superficial similarities to, say, Laurel Nakadate's videos in which she courts strange men and engages them in offbeat activities (dancing to Britney Spears; drawing her while she vamps girlishly in pigtails and roller skates). Many people locate a certain unintentional cruelty in these interactions. Tam's attitude toward

Margaret Honda
Cases and reels for the 35 mm film *Color Correction*, 2015.

