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The Story of O: Gesture in the Work of Laura Owens

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... the eyes receive each others' reflections and impress from there little images as in mirrors. Such an emanation of beauty, flowing down through them into the soul, is a kind of copulation at a distance. —Achilles Tatius

We could begin with a mark: modest and momentary, one in a procession that seems to extend backward into the canvases indefinitely. Like ripples on water, each mirrors the last, sliding easily between media: pixels merge into brushstrokes, gooey expanses terminate in hard edges, screen prints transition into gesso. A scribble made with a stylus and tablet is projected onto a canvas, where it is traced by hand, taped out and filled in with still more. Those that avoid the projector's lens experience similarly varied changes of state, some are exported as stencils by a vinyl plotter that are then rubbed with charcoal, yielding soft silvery black forms where hard pixels had previously sat, others are burnt into silkscreens or layered heavily with impasto. Some might be photographed again, and set off on still another sequence of transformations. During each phase a material shift takes place, movements of the hand find their way into the digital or industrial sphere, only to have that trajectory reversed, a single slight movement of the hand rendered and re-rendered through an array of indexical media, inscribed, cut out, piled up or covered over, each layering a weaving together of disparate means. And while we suspect that all this has transpired, that nothing here is simply what it appears to be, the works are never explicit about what took place; we simply sense the transformations that lay behind the surface. Each discernable mark offers a fixed point between an expanse of manifestations, from which the possibility for an infinite number of other becomings extend. The phenomenological immediacy of the work draws these layers forward; we see marks inside or, more precisely, through other marks. Swooshing forms are silhouetted, knocked out, and filled in by what lies beneath them, a sequence of stenciling that reaches into the analog and digital in equal measure, inflecting the former's concreteness with the latter's buoyancy, projecting false depths and plastic thinness, as various moments of the painting's making are laid bare and pressed up against the picture plane.

This cadence extends throughout the paintings, marks bounding from canvas to canvas, recalling how the words "Pavement Karaoke" or rather, "P-A-V-E-M-E-N-T-K-A-R-A-O-K-E" could be read across seven comparably massive canvases exhibited just a few months earlier in a pristine gallery space in London's Soho neighborhood. Those too were crisscrossed with swooshes and grids, bearing similar passages of thinness interspersed with patches of viscous materiality. Here, a world away in a lightly renovated warehouse in Los Angeles' grimy downtown, we have a similar sensation of reading across the works, despite the absence of a phrase to drag us along their surfaces. Instead, the repeating gestures are what is read, our eyes following a cadence of blips and geometries into and out of the canvases. Some of the accumulations of paint achieve a

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gelatinous protuberance that appears both cartoonish and bodily. Others recall one of J. M. W. Turner's renderings of the sun as a cake of white bulging off the canvas, but these paintings offer much weightier passages, almost bowing under the heft of their material. In some of the canvases, the colorful blobs appear as if they were forced up through the playful imagery that sits lightly on their surfaces, while in others the masses appear as though they were plopped on top of the canvas like a noxious garnish. In more than one painting, the goop seems to dangle precariously, as if it could find its way to the floor or onto a viewer's head if it were disturbed by a passing breeze. But this unruliness never seems out of control, the blobs are rigid, if appearing unstable, their placement precise despite allusions to off-handedness, and they never engulf the canvas as they do in the gravy paintings of Larry Poons or Susan Rothenberg. Rather, they are contained in perfectly rounded shapes, as crisp and hard as their contents are not.

But we should take a step back to where we first saw the paintings, because this is where one always begins, at a distance, and from there we have the unmistakable sense that the paintings are simply enlargements. Like the absent-minded drawings of a child giant, the pictures appear loose and monumental, breezy renderings of sail boats, cats, flowers and so on, left to tower over viewers, sometimes with massive newspaper personal ads serving as a partial ground in another nod to the spaces of domestic life. Rather than the familiarly brutish scale of Richard Serra's dwarfing steel curves, we are left with a more novel, playfully liberated sensation of smallness. Up close what seemed simply oversized transforms into the phenomenological oddity of multiple scales compressed together. We notice an individual touch executed at varied proportions, each at a remove, none betraying a handmade authenticity. None of the marks seem to have preceded the others; there is no hierarchy that is apparent from their treatment. That is to say, these paintings deny us a point of reference by which a mark might be evaluated. When confronted by deformations of scale, we usually have our bodies to rely on for proportion, but here our bodies seem out of synch, gestures of the hand appearing in a range of scales, none of which seem as intuitive or as loose as their shape would lead us to believe.

Just as scale refuses to resolve neatly, the question of what constitutes an authentic or originary mark provides us with little to go on, for no mark seems to wholly precede or produce any other. The canvases are no more a play of original and copy than they are simply a game of the small made large. Instead, all of these oppositions are intertwined and confused. The tone of painterly improvisation, what some call "hand," is filtered through and imbedded within the digital and the industrial; who made the marks on the canvas is unclear and simultaneously irrelevant. Here, authorship is a far more complicated proposition than simply being a question of the originator of the mark, while not being locatable in one particular moment or passage within the paintings, it also seems to be everywhere present, diffused evenly through strata of disparate media. In this sense, the authorial mark causes the various materials and processes to flow together, reverberating throughout the work, drawing distinct elements into a fleeting harmony.

And so, we confront moments where the messiness of paint and the labor of screen-printing merge with the smooth scalelessness of the digital, as though the airbrushed foam sets of *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* were combined with the slippery anonymous surfaces of *Toy Story*. Even in the foam world we have an innate sense of scale, our own reality maintained in its margins, but in the digital world we renounce our bodies, we simply morph along with the scene, big to small and back again without friction or pause. In the digital world, we lose the viscosity of analog imaginings—more specifically, we lose how touch and feel might extend into these universes of projection—rather we are delivered wholly malleable abstractions, worlds where proportion is fully elastic, where we are liberated from our bodies. It is elating as much as it is alienating. Much art incorporates one or the other of these effects, the haptic presentness of objects, or the

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fluid anomie of digitally morphing imagery, but these paintings are not exclusively of one or the other universe, managing to intertwine and conflate these effects, making the distinctions between them irrelevant. From them, marks and their varied manifestations blur analog and digital procedures as they appear and reappear in painting after painting in slightly altered forms and at varied scales. Each acts as a singular expression when taken in on its own, but in total, they evoke a disorienting semiotic and phenomenological play, offering no singular point of resolution, other than the elusive marks that pulse through them.

We might recall seeing marks that behaved similarly in earlier paintings, like one from 1997 that features a sequence of primitive seagull-like forms ghosted by crude drop shadows on a field of pure blue (*Untitled*, 1997). The seagulls are schematic, two bubbly arcs in succession that lay dumbly on the painting's surface. They have the same improbable roundness that the new paintings feature, only more than a decade earlier, and compared to the recent canvases, they have an air of coarse simplicity. Yet a similar sense of disorienting scale is in evidence, the marks seeming like doodles blown up huge, much as the painting's blue ground evokes the sensation of total flatness and infinite regress at the same time, the sky acting both as a monochromatic surface and an expanse of unmodulated deep space. We could think further back into Owen's practice, when this mark can be found yet again in a sequence of small drawings from the mid-1990s, or think of one of its more mature moments when this sort of mark appeared in grand scale in 2011. This time the once modest mark is smeared across nine huge canvases of identical size, and within it a sea of others begin to appear, alluding to fractal-like worlds within worlds, evoking a universe seen through a microscope, curling brushstrokes filling the canvases like microbes darting around in a purple petri dish. The mark itself is now room-sized, and we are at the prequel to the Pavement paintings, which took that massive mark and then fractured it, split it up, knocked through it with text, only to have the gesture break up even further by being sold individually. It leads us to read the marks like a line of indecipherable text, attuning ourselves to every detail as we might when confronted with a foreign language that we have only a rudimentary familiarity with, grabbing ahold of repeating sounds, rhythms and cadences to guide us to some level of comprehension. It is an automatic process and it is nearly impossible to resist the impulse to search for some semblance of structure when confronted with something methodically inscrutable. This cadence is how the linearity of the massive purple smear could later coexist with the fragmentation present in the Pavement paintings. The text in the Pavement paintings will always imply the sequence of others even without the mandate that they be kept together. Regardless of whether or not they were shunted to a multitude of far off places never to be hung together again, they could remain whole in absentia. This fragmentation is, of course, how the marks had always been treated, dispersed to homes and institutions around the world like a scattered jigsaw puzzle, but here the tension between the works' fragmentation and its continuity became all the more clear, bits of the phrase circulating through the world, creating an ever expanding and ever rearranging constellation with the potential to return them to a linear procession hardwired into their surfaces. Now the paintings act like a thread connecting New York City, London, Paris, Dubai, Aspen or wherever else the wealthy hide their treasures. Each painting a portal between places, each implying its absent brethren, who are held together by a single gesture that can be read as a phrase as easily as the text that ghosts it.

These reflections and repetitions articulate a gesture that unfolds through strata of mediation, linking together works, their sites of display, and the seemingly disparate layers that comprise them. With the slipping away of painterly commonplaces such as the authentic or signature mark, different concerns take their place. Forms function to draw moments of production together, skewering the paintings into relations with one another along an axis outlined by a series of internal duplications and gestural cadences. This effect is native to the digital and the possibility it offers of accumulating endless layers at multiple resolutions, and the pinning together of its

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infinite duplications in the virtual space of the screen. But here, the expressive immediacy of the hand's gesture, the slippery world of the digital, and the furrowed histories of accumulated *décollage* coexist in a single move, brought about in real space, while rendered in masking layers manipulated by mouse click and filled in later by a laborious accumulation of paint. The canvases attest to a mark that extends across time and through layers of mediation. A mark that occupies the work as a dull rumble, which links together rather than punctuates.

It is this model of gesture that Giorgio Agamben argued for, describing it as “a communication of communicability.” For Agamben, the true gesture “has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality.”¹ Here we could say that instead of asserting our “being-in-language” Owens is asserting our “being-in-aesthetics.” We are constantly replaying, reusing, and transforming found materials (in language and in aesthetics alike), we quote and re-quote ourselves as we reiterate phrases and stories distorting them slightly each time, and this reuse and referentiality is not opposed to production, but is in actuality the core of production; it is through this that individuals and things are linked together, that new outcomes are produced, and on the surface of every discrete object is the evidence of a multitude that preceded it, whose marks are present on it like a sequence of runes; these points of connection draw the world along with the work wherever it may go. Thus, the location of the gesture is not simply in the act, in its manifestation in immediate and discrete terms, but rather it is in the space between manifestations or materializations, in the gaps through which the gesture passes unnoticed until it finds something to reverberate off of, resonating with what it is compatible with, and in so doing, draws a pathway through the world that is specific to it.

Owens displayed a very early sensitivity to the in-between, as in a 1997 painting showing two canvases hung obliquely in relation to one another, and it makes sense that the first engagement with the gaps between things would be an attempt to simply depict it. As Owens had recounted, “I'd been thinking about the relationship between the viewer's body when looking at paintings and walking past them or even being in-between them or seeing them in your periphery.”² Two years later, this interest would present itself experientially in the pair of mirrored numbers paintings. Hung on opposite walls, it was impossible to see both at once, making the viewer the fulcrum between works, and the vessel of the works' transmission; it was through the viewer and their movement, their pivoting, their attempts to remember the specifics of the painting they were just looking at to compare it with the one they held in their view, that draws the works into relation with one another. The scene she had earlier only depicted is brought to life in the active negotiation with the paintings as objects in space. In turning between them, the paintings flicker into and out of perception, alternating between a visual and a mnemonic experience, the body of the viewer mediating their oscillation through its repositioning. That is to say, the physical movement of the viewer, and their use of the memory of what they had just seen forms the axis on which the pair of paintings establish meaning; thus meaning is not located *in* the painting, but *between* the paintings. As Owen's herself put it, the viewer “would be between paintings ... activat(ing) the whole space.” The viewer carries the work with them, and through the inhabitation of the viewer, the work expands into the entire room. This simple mnemonic prompt connects the canvases to one another as much as it connects them to the world and people they are surrounded by, and forms the basis for a gesture that extends indefinitely as it dissipates through the bodies and the world they circulate within in the form of the new sensitivities they carry with them. This chain of proximities distributes the gesture of the work, sending its pulsations into an ever-expanding field of relations.

But what does this sort of gesture mean to the history of painting, which still relies on the authenticity of the mark and its ability to express in a singular act? And we would do well to

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consider that the mark is the residue of a gesture, a snapshot of its passage, like a footprint or bullet hole, different gestures leave different traces, both materially and experientially. Owens puts it in terms of gender, asking “... is it even possible for a woman artist to be the one who marks? At the same time, in 2013, does anyone at all have this ability, or is it an antiquated or sentimental idea? Isn't it interesting that the male orgasm has a DNA imprint that will replicate itself over and over again, reinforcing itself the way language or naming might, but the female orgasm has no use, no mark, no locatability? ... I want to think about how it can be the model for a new gesture.”⁴ To misunderstand Owens' definition of this sort of mark as anti-authorial would be to position the female as an absence, as lacking something her male counterpart could presume. Rather, this “female” gesture permeates layers of mediation and reference, surging through boundaries and calling forward the circumstances that surround it as it diffuses through them. Rather than puncturing through, it inhabits the layers it moves through causing them to resonate with one another, and because of that, its scale and force are far more expansive, leaving a multiplicity of markings in its wake. We could say that for the masculine gesture, the mark is its culmination, a singular impact that announces itself in the explosive disturbance it makes, its energies dissipating quickly. The gesture that Owen's posits favors connection over finiteness; it locates meaning in connectivity, and pleasure in cursivity.

It is just this notion of having no explicit use and thus refusing instrumentality, while at the same time having no “locatability” or no “ends,” that so strongly resonates with Agamben's notion of the potential of the gesture. He writes, “... gesture breaks with the false alternatives between ends and means ... and presents means that, as such, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends.”⁵ We have, in Owens' painting, the proposition of a mark which neither finds definition in a singular formal composition, nor as renouncing composition for the open-endedness of process for its own sake. Rather it is “the exhibition of mediality,” a “purposiveness without purpose,” that extends through the works.⁶

Owens gives us neither the assertion of a singular and expressive index of furious motion, nor its dismantling, the latter being most familiar in painting of the postmodern period, which perversely extended the Greenbergian model through its ritualized parody, preserving it through acts of negation. Owens' locates a third term adjacent to this binary, engaging in an investigation of depth, the flatness of painting and the grid, both in earnest and with a healthy dose of perversity. We see grids—that emblem of modernist resoluteness—defiled, punched through with arrays of willowy flowers and cartoonish scrawls rendered in pastels or the vulgarities of hot pinks and yellows, but still they offer the staid and stoic assertion of painterly flatness and the material rigor we had come to expect of them. Owens deploys these grids in paradoxically representational terms, giving them drop shadows, or transforming their somber geometries into gingham tablecloths or plant trellises. It is not that these are incompatible moves, rather they show the opposition between decorative flourish and formal seriousness is specious at best. She makes this abundantly clear at the beginning of her career, where, in one of her earliest paintings, a gingham motif and a hard edged grid are paired with a shallowly rendered shadow: illusionism, materialism, and the decorative smeared together in one deceptively spare composition. She does not hide the grid; each evocation of this modernist scaffolding stands to the fore of her canvases, operating as a signifying element while engaging in a provocative play with painterly depth and deductive structure. The result is a set of marks that refuse to fit neatly into any discourse about materialism and referentiality. In 2011, the grid paintings reappear in the faces of functioning clocks, the hands poking out from the canvas like hash marks, fragmented lines, and irregular crosses that constantly rearrange themselves. Then in 2012, the grid would become the scaffolding holding a series of paintings together, extending between the canvases which cling to it like a creeping vine. False depth shifts into actual depth and modernist rhetoric becomes domestic kitsch, like a sequence of Mondrians in drag, utopian functionalist form is brought into

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the vulgarities of the commonplace, contaminated by the improvisation and the “making do” that defines everyday life.

It was Judith Butler who, in the maelstrom of 80s identity politics, pointed out that even gender is something we try on, perform, and dispose of, an insight that was presaged in C.E. 8 by the story of Tiresias in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, who as punishment was turned into a woman by the god Hera. After spending eight years as a female, he would be called upon for the expertise he acquired to settle a bet between Hera and Zeus as to which sex derived more pleasure from copulation. To this, he responded that while male pleasure was as narrow as it was explosive, like a swiftly running stream, female pleasure was as wide and deep as the sea. His answer displeased Hera, making Zeus the winner of their bet, and as punishment Hera struck him blind, as though he, in confessing this, had betrayed a secret held in confidence. Blinding was unmistakably a sexual punishment, a second phallic smiting, a reminder of both the frailty and limitations of the masculine. To ameliorate this act, Zeus gave him divine insight, his vision no longer one that pierced and separated, but one that connected things together, that experienced the world as a sequence of trajectories rather than an accumulation of finite things and impermeable surfaces; it was a transformation from the divisive to the cursive. His was now a vision attuned to fluidities.

What becomes literalized in this story is the arrival of a kind of sight, one that follows the harmonies and reverberations between things, that sees a network of interrelations and rearticulations rather than hard edges and discrete entities. Owens’ work inhabits this way of seeing, finding meaning in resonances, and redirecting our attentions to them. She draws the grid of modernity into the territory of the backyard gardener, the hobbyist, the domestic, appearing as plant trellises, newspaper personals, gingham table cloths, screen doors, and so on, deflating its pomposity while embracing its formal utility. And transforming the gestural mark into a slow rumble that permeates across works and time, emerging with renewed intensity in unexpected forms. Owens succeeds in formulating a gestural mark that is not exhausted in its expression or repetition, that is not singular in its moment, but seems to gain momentum through its reduplication and echoing, reverberating through the paintings, and the people and places they come into contact with. It is the pleasure of connectivity, of things being in connection with one another, rather than in the awe of the explosive, discrete, and finite. It acts as we do in life, at once inhabiting the extant forms around us, mimicking and mirroring what has come before, and adding our own momentum to them while also using them for our own purposes, altering their trajectories in a manner that finds specificity in repetition, in the collaging together of the iterations of others, which are themselves borrowed, a sequence of endless duplications and recombinations that build over time, finding agency in these acts while cultivating a sensitivity to the significance each pathway carves through the world.

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NOTES

1. Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2000, p. 59.
2. “Laura Owens in Conversation with Scott Rothkopf,” in *Laura Owens*, JRP|Ringier, Kunsthalle Zurich 2006, p. 195.
3. Ibid., p. 197.
4. “Optical Drive: Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer Talks with Laura Owens” *Artforum*, March 2013, p. 236.
5. Agamben, *Means Without End*, p. 56.
6. Ibid., p. 57

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