LA WEEKLY
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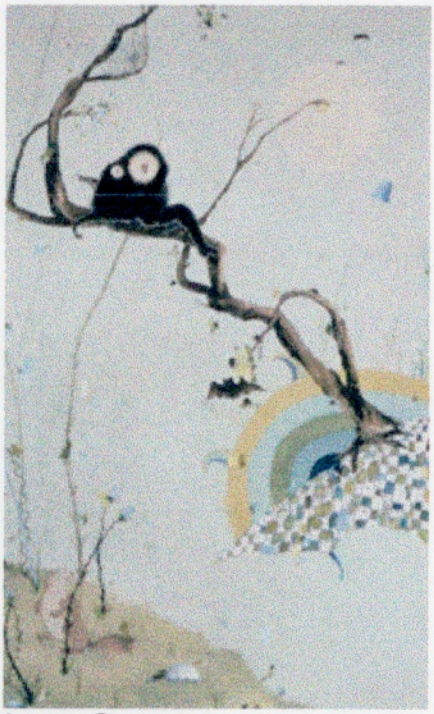
Godawfulism II

It ain't what you paint (it's the way that you paint it)

by Doug Harvey



Laura Owens, *Untitled Monkey* (2001);

I first started talking about Godawfulism in these very pages a couple of years ago, while trying to get a handle on what, if anything, actually characterized L.A. painting in the '90s. I came to the conclusion that the hallmark of this generation was a profound and perversely gleeful pursuit of wrongness, camouflaged by seemingly earnest variations on conventional picture-making strategies. Thus I was surprised and heartened to find, in the catalog for the current exhibit of Lorser Feitelson's hard-edge abstractions from the '50s and '60s, an account of the seminal L.A. Modernist's deep interest in the "unintended Godawfulness" of Frenchie Cubist Robert Delaunay's clunky color-wheel abstractions. Clearly, the roots of contemporary Godawfulism reach further back than I suspected — all the way back to the founding sensibilities of the L.A. aesthetic.

Alongside his wife, Helen Lundeberg, Feitelson was arguably the most dominant artistic voice in 20th-century Los Angeles, founding not one but two major manifesto-totin' art movements, supervising the Depression-era WPA mural projects for SoCal, curating exhibitions, opening galleries, hosting a nationally televised show about art, and mentoring several generations of younger artists as an instructor at Chouinard and Art Center. His first movement, Post-Surrealism, was largely forgotten until critic/curator Michael Duncan assembled a detailed historical overview as one of last year's opening exhibits at the Pasadena Museum of California Art. The second, Hard-Edge Abstraction, laid the foundation for L.A.'s international breakthrough in the '60s with the Ferus Gallery artists (Bob Irwin, Craig Kaufmann, Ed Ruscha, et al.), and continues to this day in the slightly quirky retro-chic homages of locals like Bart Esposito and Monique Prieto.

Feitelson's geometric abstractions have, as a result, gotten considerably more play than the older, weirder Post-Surrealist work. Every couple of years since the artist's death in 1978, a local gallery or museum space has trotted out different combinations of Feitelson's extensive oeuvre, much of it still on the market. The latest show, at Louis Stern in WeHo, is no exception. With each passing year, the availability of such historically significant canvases is increasingly inexplicable. As it happens, the issue of Feitelson's significance is a bone of some contention. The catalog essayist — Michael Duncan again — takes pains to establish Feitelson's precedence over East Coast blue-chipper Ellsworth Kelley in the development of '50s U.S. geometric abstraction, and early in his catalog essay recounts the snub received by Feitelson — and the three other participants in the landmark 1959 exhibit "Four Abstract Classicists" — at the hands of critical demiurge Clement Greenburg, whose guest-curated "Post-Painterly Abstraction" show at LACMA excluded the lot.

Who knows what creepy art-world machinations were behind such a gesture, but in a way we should be grateful. While Feitelson may have tended toward the Godawful in some of his color choices, the paintings on display in this show — covering two decades, from 1945 to 1965 — are the caliber of work that would have been snapped up and ferreted away by the mid-'70s back East. The show picks up just when

Feitelson's elaborate Post-Surrealist figuration became reduced to arrangements of flattened geometric "magical space forms."

The organic formal roots of his abstractions — particularly in the human body — help explain their unabashed sensuality, if not their prescient shag-a-delic currency. Their physicality goes deeper than merely echoing bodily contours: They produce distinct, occasionally unsettling physical effects with their optical exuberance and subtle, gravity-conscious compositional interplay. So while it's a shame Feitelson doesn't get the respect he deserves, his champions don't seem to be running out of steam, and the public continues to enjoy regular free access to virtuosic abstract painting that kicks the ass of its derivative contemporary L.A. counterpart.

Of course, the history of 20th-century art also describes the struggle of artists to expand the notions of what could pass for art. Painting, drawing, printmaking and sculpture increasingly became regarded as symbols for narrowness and authoritarianism. As *Artforum*-style discourse began to dominate academic, curatorial and critical practice, young artists found they could garner the praise of their betters by producing self-ridiculing objects in these despised media — deliberately slapdash parodies of perceived or imagined rules of good art making. These works, while often difficult to look at, aren't true Godawfulism. Let's call them Lesser Godawfulism.

One can't discuss the role of this illustrative branch of anti-painting without raising the specter of Laura Owens, the enormously successful young L.A. painter whose extravagant midcareer survey is just winding down at MOCA. Whatever else you think about Owens' work, she hasn't gotten stuck in a lucrative stylistic rut like so many painters. Not exactly. The exhibit encompasses a variety of routines: Chinese monkey paintings, Elizabeth Peyton–style figures, thrift-store sweater embroidery motifs, and minimalist geometric abstraction turned clunkily into cartoon landscapes. Unfortunately, if none of these brash inclusions of overlooked culture or iconoclastic broadsides rattles your cage, there's not much here to look at.

The novelty of Owens' work presupposes that the viewer's idea of art — particularly contemporary painting — does not include stains, straight-from-the-tube paint (or caulking or whatever it is), kitties and bunnies and monkeys, naive draftsmanship, and whatever formal or narrative shtick was forbidden by one Modernist sect or another at some point. And while people with these specific prejudices still exist, they are getting on — two generations older than Owens, her teachers' teachers — and don't occupy much real estate in the Art World anymore. Where these demons do live on is in the minds of a small privileged generation of ex-hippie artists and art professionals, as some sort of unslain father figures continuing to hold them back from their groovy Modernist apocalypse. Owens' work is almost pure reaction; if you've taken an intro-to-modern-art course, you can predict the parameters of her vocabulary blindfolded — essentially "Fuck You," with emphasis on the quotation marks.

Still, I liked her MOCA show better than I expected. A handful of Owens' works — mostly those uncluttered by grrrlish whimsy — go far enough in their dumb, obnoxious monumentality to compete on their own terms. The untitled 1996 seascape with drop-shadowed seagulls has an enormous, unearned presence, as does the 12-foot upside-down bleached-out Automatist doodle in the last gallery. There are a few other surprises. They may be accidents, or there may actually be an artist struggling to emerge from within Laura Owens. We won't know unless she stops playing daddy's girl to a bitter, nostalgic, tenured generation that still wants to think it's rebelling. Christ, even Lawrence Kasdan got over it.

Thankfully, one doesn't have to look far to find painters continuing to operate outside the quotation marks. At L.A. Louver, R.B. Kitaj's elegiac but buoyant *Los Angeles Pictures* — exploring the lingering erotic presence of the artist's late wife — are models of accomplished visual economy and actual, pre-post-ironic sincerity. Up the beach at Angles, the two central works in Kelly McLane's second solo show push her already fragmented landscapes to new levels of fracture, as swarms of locusts seem to devour swaths of the picture plane, leaving a surface flickering with the struggles of its own making. Awesome.

If you're downtown, swing by POST to see a small group of fast-and-furious abstractions by Linda Day — intricate stripe paintings that are saturated with the spectrum and perceptual idiosyncrasies of the Southern California landscape — and a larger group of abstract paintings she assembled into a group show called "a(KIN)." Among these are a couple of new, Feitelsonesque works by Nancy Evans — certainly one of the most underrated painters in L.A. Strong and surprising works by Lynne Berman, Hector Romero, Marie Thibeault and several others (all of whom happen to be friends of Day's) show just how many artists are capable of looking at visual art — from Lorser Feitelson to Laura Owens and everything beyond and between — as a sensory continuum in which to operate instead of a set of theories to define yourself against. It's not High Godawfulism, but it's better than nothing.

LORSER FEITELSON | at LOUIS STERN FINE ARTS, 9002 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood, (310) 276-0147 | Through

LAURA OWENS | at MOCA, 250 S. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, (213) 626-6222 | Through June 22

KELLY McLANE | at ANGLES GALLERY, 2230 Main St., Santa Monica, (310) 396-5019 | Through June 14

LINDA DAY | at POST, 1904 E. Seventh Place, Los Angeles, (213) 622-8580 | Through June 28