

## Laura Owens Teams Up with Cleveland Teens for a Playful Show on Time Travel

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Though unequivocally a monographic show, "Rerun" is clearly the product of many (fresh and youthful) voices, much to its benefit.

by Andrea Gyrody May 23, 2021



Installation view, *Laura Owens: Rerun*, Cleveland Museum of Art at Transformer Station, Cleveland, 2021  
(Copyright Laura Owens; all images courtesy the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London, and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne; photo by Ron Amstutz)

CLEVELAND — In a recent conversation with French writer Édouard Louis, artist Laura Owens recounted her adolescence in Norwalk, Ohio, a small town about an hour west of Cleveland. She described a town overtaken by evangelical churches and right-wing conservatism, an environment that was “very heavy, and very super racist.” “I felt like I was a bit of a Cassandra,” she said, cursed like the

Trojan priestess of Greek mythology to a life of uttering the truth and not being believed. “In that situation, when you are that person, you are ridiculed and hated. I didn’t feel like I had a choice. I felt like I had to get out and it was [about] figuring out how to do it.”

Owens did get out, and the exhibition *Laura Owens: Rerun*, on view at Cleveland’s Transformer Station, marks something of a homecoming. Revolving around the theme of time travel, the show spans two galleries: one features a number of Owens’s mature paintings alongside objects from a study collection at the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA), while the other, more intimate space is completely lined with a dizzying, site-specific wallpaper peppered with all sorts of amusing Owens juvenalia and playful references to the objects in the first room. It is a show so incredibly dense with details that point elsewhere that it feels a bit like an elaborate inside joke, to which the ordinary visitor is only partly privy.



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In many ways, *Rerun* is exactly that, minus the punchline. Though the show originated in conversation with Emily Liebert, the curator of contemporary art at the CMA (which has a partnership with Transformer Station), it is also the product of a rather unusual collaboration with one of the CMA’s teen programs.



From the start, Liebert says, Owens “didn’t want to simply exhibit her work in Cleveland, she wanted to use the exhibition as a vehicle for engaging with the local community, and she was especially interested in working with teenagers, because that’s the age — she herself was a teenager — when Cleveland’s culture and the CMA in particular were so meaningful to her.” Liebert, who saw Owens’s request as a ripe opportunity for interdepartmental collaboration, arranged for Owens to work with a select group of high school students culled from a program called Currently Under Curation, co-directed by Sabine Kretzschmar, manager of the CMA’s Education Art Collection, and artist and educator Darius Steward.

Beginning in the summer of 2019, the students met monthly with Owens and Liebert to explore the CMA’s archives and collections, and to have wide-ranging discussions that are reflected in nearly every aspect of the exhibition, from its theme and title to the take-away newspaper that the teens, inspired by Owens’s use of newsprint in her paintings, wrote and designed. The students also weighed in on which paintings would be borrowed for the show and wrote the wall labels for those works, drawing on research they had conducted (guided by Kretzschmar and Steward) on Owens’s oeuvre and its place in art history.



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I spoke with two of the teens involved in the project, Jamal Carter and Arica McKinney, both rising seniors at Cleveland-area high schools. Neither had known what to expect when they first met Owens, but reported that after some initial awkwardness, she put them at ease. “She wound up being, like, a really cool person,” Carter said. “I guess my expectation wasn’t for her to be so down to earth, because of her platform. [...] But she communicates just like a normal person and she talks to us just like we’re normal to her.”

The teens, in fact, developed a texting relationship with Owens, asking questions both personal and curatorial. Carter described feeling overwhelmed when tasked with writing about Owens’s spare 2001 painting of a pair of monkeys in a floating landscape, and texted her directly to ask for help. Owens responded with a “long gigantic paragraph,” Carter explained, and “I had to break it down, deconstruct it, and make it into my own piece” — resulting in a concise wall label that elucidates the work’s many references, including 17-century fabrics, Chinese painting, and a kimono with images of gibbons.

Though the exhibition is clearly the product of many voices, it still reads, unequivocally, as a “Laura Owens” show. The teens contributed ideas, opinions, images, and texts, all of which were funneled through the artist into work that is distinctly her own. But that isn’t necessarily a criticism of the project. What I initially saw as a strange proposition — having a group of high school students help curate a monographic exhibition alongside the artist herself — struck me as obvious, inevitable even, by my third visit, because of how deeply aligned it is with Owens’s point of view. Her work captures countless references, high and low, functioning like a kind of sticky fly tape for bits and bobs of visual culture; her paintings have an inherently open posture, absorbing and assimilating a cacophony of inputs. With fresh, digital-native eyes, the teens became Owens’s partners in that process of mining sources, and ultimately became sources themselves, much to the exhibition’s benefit.



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Carter and McKinney both expressed pride in the show and awe at Owens's work, especially its larger-than-life scale. "It consumed me," Carter exclaimed, whistling to emphasize how "blown back" he was by the exhibition. But Carter and McKinney also both indicated that the curatorial experience left them wanting more. Teens have a lot to offer the museum, they told me, including diversity and new perspectives, some of which they hope will come through in *Relapse*, a book project they have initiated in response to their work on *Rerun*. What the teens really want, though, is the opportunity to curate the art of their peers—and to see it given the same exposure typically reserved for internationally-recognized artists like Owens.

*Laura Owens: Rerun continues by appointment through May 30 at Transformer Station (1460 West 29th Street, Cleveland, OH). Organized by Emily Liebert, the show was developed in close collaboration with the artist as well as Jamal Carter, Xyhair Davis, Skylar Fleming, Yomi Gonzalez, Joseph Hlavac, Agatha Mathoslah, Arica McKinney, Maya Peroune, and Deonta Steele.*