

## San Francisco

### Laura Owens

THE WATTIS INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

360 Kansas Street

April 28–July 23

Categorizing the titular ten works of Laura Owens's current exhibition is an exercise in frustration—intentionally so. Blurring the boundaries between installation, mural, and painting, Owens covers the gallery walls with nonrepeating handmade wallpaper, layered with painterly and nonpainterly gestures referencing everything from blown-up bitmaps to newsprint text, trompe l'oeil, and illusionistic space: in other words, a brief history of two-dimensional representation itself. What appear to be wooden beams creating boundaries between the gridded works are a trick of paint as well; what the final ten will look like when they are cut from the wall panels is impossible to know on viewing now.



View of "Laura Owens," 2016.

This new challenge to the conceit of a painting show can be read as part of Owens's larger, restlessly inventive, and omnivorous practice, which partakes of the high and low references of classic postmodernism (for example, a grouping of framed embroidery by the artist's grandmother, in the back room) while making a constant play between painterly antipodes such as grid and gesture. Here, the dominant tension is between information and noise—thematically and sometimes literally: Viewers can send text messages to numbers printed on the wallpaper, triggering recordings from hidden speakers. But this kind of playfulness serves a deadly serious purpose, which is nothing less than to short-circuit the overdetermination of painting itself.

Owens's major accomplishment with this tactic of concealment and obstruction is to slow down, if not stall out completely, viewers' tendencies to instantaneously read a square panel as a painting, and to jump immediately to aesthetic judgments. Instead, she extends moments of speculation and musing, keeping us floating long past the normal moment of obvious recognition and the hubris of thinking that we know, with a painting, just what we are looking at.

— Monica Westin