

Artillery Magazine  
Gallery Rounds, January 8, 2020

Laura Owen  
*Books and Tables*  
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Matthew Marks Los Angeles  
by Jody Zellen



Distributed across the otherwise empty gallery spaces (there is nothing on the walls) are carefully placed, custom-designed wooden tables. Atop each table is a specific arrangement of artist's books by the painter Laura Owens. The presentation is inviting as the books are obviously there to be handled, (there are no white gloves in sight). Owens is well known for her large scale paintings, yet throughout her career, she has also made artist's books. While there is not necessarily a one to one relationship between her books and her paintings, the books allow Owens to play with appropriated materials, image-text juxtapositions and narrative structures in a more free-form, albeit contained presentation. It is exciting to see books large and small, printed and drawn, gathered together on these tabletops. There are even surprises — as each table is equipped with pull-out drawers containing even more books, as well as sensors that activate sounds and projections.

Ask for a list that identifies the works on display and you will be directed to another publication, a small black book that cross-references all the books by subject. This "index" identifies places, objects, and ideas within the publication by table and book number. For example, "tree of knowledge" is (T2.B1), while the United States of America is (T3.B1, T3.B8, T5.B2, T5.B8). The list of topics is vast and impossible to categorize as it includes: Alarms, Ants, Banks, Trump, Trumpets, Toilet Paper, Works, Zebras and Zhou Dynasty, among other subjects. While what is presented on each table is loosely thematic, these themes are never identified.

The best way to view the exhibition is by picking up a random book. One book leads to another. It feels like an intellectual treasure hunt. Some books are untitled and small. One functions like a flip-book where a succession of photographic fragments become animated. Others, like *Smartphone Projector*, (2015) are large, beautifully bound and comprised of a sequence of mounted images of increasingly obtuse and distorted advertisements. Owens also presents elaborate fold-outs, sophisticated pop-up books, felt books, books filled with abstract gestures, doodles, recipes, or even audio and video clips. An appropriated historical text from 1699 provides the basis for *A Rich Cabinet with Variety of Inventions*. *Kieseritzky / Anderssen* reproduces a chessboard documenting the famous 1851 chess match between

Adolf Anderssen and Lionel Kieseritzky. *Attention Cream Puff Makers* is a pop-up book filled with child-like drawings.

Opening a blank cloth jacket becomes a journey into the unknown. Will the book be drawn? Painted? Printed? Contain text or just images? Tell a story? Present a dialectic or a treatise. Or simply be a sophisticated arrangement of shapes and colors? Numerous untitled books with blank colored cloth covers reveal visual surprises like layered cutouts or content that extends across accordion folds.

If one stands at any of the tables long enough, mysterious things begin to happen: books slowly start to glide across the table, video images are suddenly projected onto the wall or dart across the tabletops. Looking at the underside of the tables reveals an inter-twinning of wires and electronics, the ah-ha moment. Built into each table is an array of interactive elements. Sensors are programmed to react as the books are picked up and put back down.

Though the arrangement of books on the tables feels casual, nothing is arbitrary or left to chance. A book placed above a hidden drawer is formally connected to what is found below. While it would be amazing to be able to take any of the books home to peruse at leisure, each table is conceived of as a complete artwork. In essence, Owens has created an exhibition of discrete sculptures designed as displays for groups of books. Until the tables are ensconced in a museum or a collector's home, the books are available for viewing: a chance that should not be missed.

<https://artillerymag.com/lauraowens>