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## THOMAS LAWSON

1 Ian Hamilton Finlay, Little Sparta (Dunsyre, Scotland) Finlay's death this spring was a profound loss. But his garden remains a thoughtfully poetic legacy continuing to flourish in the high moorland country of southern Scotland. You can get lost in the intricacies of a mind contemplating the riddles of civilization in this studiously unkempt riff on the idea of a labyrinth. It is a carefully choreographed space, with the planting and the paths weaving through it bringing fragments of sculpture and language into and out of view. One moment you are in an intimate place contemplating a verse by Ovid or a small stone model of a tank; the next you turn a corner and the vista opens to a wild landscape prefaced by roughcut boulders on which ORDER and DISORDER are inscribed in a severe Roman typeface.

2 Monique Prieto, "A Great Stink of Burning but No Smoke" (ACME, Los Angeles) Intent on confronting the muteness of her earlier, nonrepresentational paintings, Prieto recently began using a weird, blocky, graffiti-inspired typeface to cram phrases from Samuel Pepys's diary into her paintings' frames—creating dramas of half-voiced anger, fear, and confusion that hover on the edge of the inarticulate. The clumped letters and words shout to be heard, and once deciphered remain strange, full of foreboding and threat.

3 "Gustav Klimt: Five Paintings From the Collection of Ferdinand and Adele Bloch-Bauer" (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) This aesthetically

incandescent show created a delirious “whatif” moment: an imaginary permanent collection that would draw metaphoric links between Klimt’s work and Los Angeles’s early, Austrian-designed modernism, the weighty presence in the city of many intellectuals exiled from Nazism during the ’30s and ’40s, and, more recently, the light-filled sensuousness of Craig Kauffman and the decorative loopiness of Laura Owens. The paintings themselves were stunning, revealing a viable alternative to any Picasso-led version of the path to modernist abstraction. Here Art Nouveau patterning and Orientalist borrowings, with a splash of medievalism, come together to create shimmering surfaces of rhythmic pattern and a web of cross-cultural reference.

4 “Nothing Is Neutral: Andrea Bowers” (Gallery at REDCAT, Los Angeles) This show, organized by REDCAT director Eungie Joo, was anchored by *Letters to an Army of Three*, 2005, a video in which actors, artists, and writers of various ages, genders, and races sit in front of flower arrangements reminiscent of Dutch still lifes and read the desperate pleas of people seeking help with abortions for themselves or for their loved ones. These heartbreaking letters, written during the ’60s and early ’70s to California-based activist group Army of Three, were reproduced elsewhere in the gallery as fine-grained drawings and juxtaposed with period wrapping paper featuring kitsch-pop floral designs. The power of the installation, with its graphic punch and searing intimacy, was matched by the visceral power of the words, and both were intensified by the horrible realization that current progress is constantly under threat.

5 Neil Young I’ve spent a lot of time painting this year, and the sound track in my studio has been *Prairie Wind* (Reprise, 2005), Neil Young’s best album in years, which was made even better by the release this year of Jonathan Demme’s brilliantly simple concert film *Neil Young: Heart of Gold*. Demme’s Ozu-inspired stationary camera reinforces the haunting grace Young achieves in the simplest repetitions and harmonies. Young’s songs conjure a whole history of loss—of youth and innocence, of course, but also of a resonant folk tradition drowned by the relentless, attention-deficit-producing fast cut of commercial culture.

6 Samuel Beckett, *Eh Joe*, adapted by Atom Egoyan for the Gate Theatre, Dublin (Duke of York’s Theatre, London) In this performance of Beckett’s 1965 television play *Eh Joe*, Michael Gambon appears alone on the stage, sharing the space with a huge screen that shows a closeup of his ravaged face in real time. In a series of nine movements the camera moves in ever tighter, while a female voice tells of the man’s serial mistreatments of those

who loved him. Gambon's face records each revelation with an unnerving precision. At thirty minutes, the piece is simple and short, cold and cruel.

7 James Benning, *Casting a Glance* (work in progress) One of the pleasures of working at CalArts is keeping up with the work of brilliant colleagues. I recently saw several reels of raw footage from Benning's current project, a reconsideration, from the vantage point of Benning's hard-bitten romanticism, of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, through the lens of time. The finished work will consist of a series of one-minute stationary shots, edited from a year and a half of filming the monument in different seasons and at various water levels, revealing Smithson's project as both a melancholy testament to lost time and a still-breathing, ever-changing artwork.

8 Rodney McMillian (Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles; "Ordinary Culture: Heikes/Helms/McMillian," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis) Throughout his Vielmetter opening, McMillian repeatedly read Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" speech from behind a podium, across from a big, blue, near-abstract painting with a crowd of crummy cardboard coffins scattered in front of it. In Doryun Chong's group show at the Walker, a video recording of this performance played in a gallery featuring a dirty-looking vinyl floor mounted on the wall (still holding the shape of the room it once served) and black-swathed columns of paint cans. Separately and together, these shows provided an extended essay on the rhetoric of hope and redemption brought low by seemingly inevitable entropic loss.

9 Joan Jonas, *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* (Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York) Jonas works like a gardener, cutting and pruning images and ideas over time to bring forth new growth each year. Last spring I saw a workshop version of this piece at Rosamund Felsen's gallery in Los Angeles, but I was hardly prepared for the grandeur of the finished work in Dia:Beacon's huge basement space, with its Egyptian columns and reverberant acoustics. Conceived around the art historian Aby Warburg's 1923 lecture bemoaning the loss of a space for spirituality in modern life, *The Shape . . .* offered a phantasmagoria of images and sound, using live performance, video feedback, and music. By collapsing space and time, as well as old-world and new-world cultures, into a hallucinatory garden of ideas and imagery, Jonas created an original space for the contemporary imagination, where devotion and reflection can exist without the trappings of institutional hierarchies.

10 Farrow & Ball This summer Susan and I repainted our flat in Edinburgh, and became devotees of the paint company Farrow & Ball. The colors,

apparently developed for those interested in the accurate re-creation of Georgian, Victorian, and Edwardian country houses, are peculiarly subtle and very rich. They're evocatively named—"Mouse's Back," "Dead Salmon," "Book Room Red"—and satisfyingly dense, almost like the colors in early Brice Marden. And ecologically sound, too.

*A Los Angeles–based artist and writer, Thomas Lawson is Dean of the School of Art, California Institute of the Arts, and an editor of the journal Afterall. An exhibition of his paintings will open next spring at Laxart, Los Angeles.*



# Thomas Lawson

A LOS ANGELES–BASED ARTIST AND WRITER, THOMAS LAWSON IS DEAN OF THE SCHOOL OF ART, CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS, AND AN EDITOR OF THE JOURNAL AFTERALL. AN EXHIBITION OF HIS PAINTINGS WILL OPEN NEXT SPRING AT LAXART, LOS ANGELES.

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1. View of the Wave Lawn at Little Sparta, Ian Hamilton Finlay's garden and grounds, Dunsyre, Scotland, 2006. Photo: Robin Gillanders. 2. Monique Prieto, *The Wind*, 2005, acrylic and oil on canvas, 84 x 72". 3. Gustav Klimt, *Adele Bloch-Bauer II*, 1912, oil on canvas, 74 1/2 x 47 1/2". 4. Andrea Bowers, *Atom Egoyan*, 2006. Performance view, Duke of York's Theatre, London. Joe (Michael Gambon). Photo: Anthony Woods. 5. James Benning, *Casting a Glance*, 2006, strip from an unfinished color film in 16 mm, approx. 90 minutes. 6. View of "Ordinary Culture: Heikes/Helms/McMillian," 2006, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Rodney McMillian, Untitled, 2006. 9. Juan Jonas, *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, 2005. Performance view, Dia:Beacon, Beacon, NY. Photo: Paula Court. 10. A can of Farrow & Ball paint.

