

# ISSUE

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LAUGHLIN,  
AND MORE



# 'HIDDEN WORLDS'

## LAUGHLIN'S PAINTINGS REVEAL INNER WORLD OF INTERIORS

Story by  
Andy  
Coughlan

TO VIEW PAGE LAUGHLIN'S work is to enter a world of illusion. On the surface, her lush, visually sumptuous paintings are decorative and colorful. But what lies below the surface is one key to discovering the illusions on offer.

Instead of the usual canvas or panel, Laughlin's rich oil rests uneasily on a thin surface of Mylar, a fragile plastic most usually found in food packaging.

"The vast majority of my work has been on canvas and on panels," Laughlin said, in an email interview. "I was searching for a presentation for my paintings that would bring a 'light-ness' that serves as a counterpoint to the lush surface, and as a foil to the illusion of depth in the paintings. As a painter, I am always interested in creating illusions and breaking them, as well."

"Hidden Worlds; Paintings by Page Laughlin," a 15-piece exhibition, is on display at The Dishman Art Museum at Lamar University through Oct. 21. The paintings are inspired by photos of interiors culled from popular homes magazines.

Jessica Dandona, director of the Dishman, worked at North Carolina's Wake Forest University where Laughlin teaches.

"I have always been very drawn to her work, both in terms of their beauty and in terms of the intellectual questions they pose," Dandona said. "Page starts with the glossy high-end home magazines that we like to peruse over coffee on the weekends. She starts with something like 'Architectural Digest' and she re-interprets the scenes she finds there."

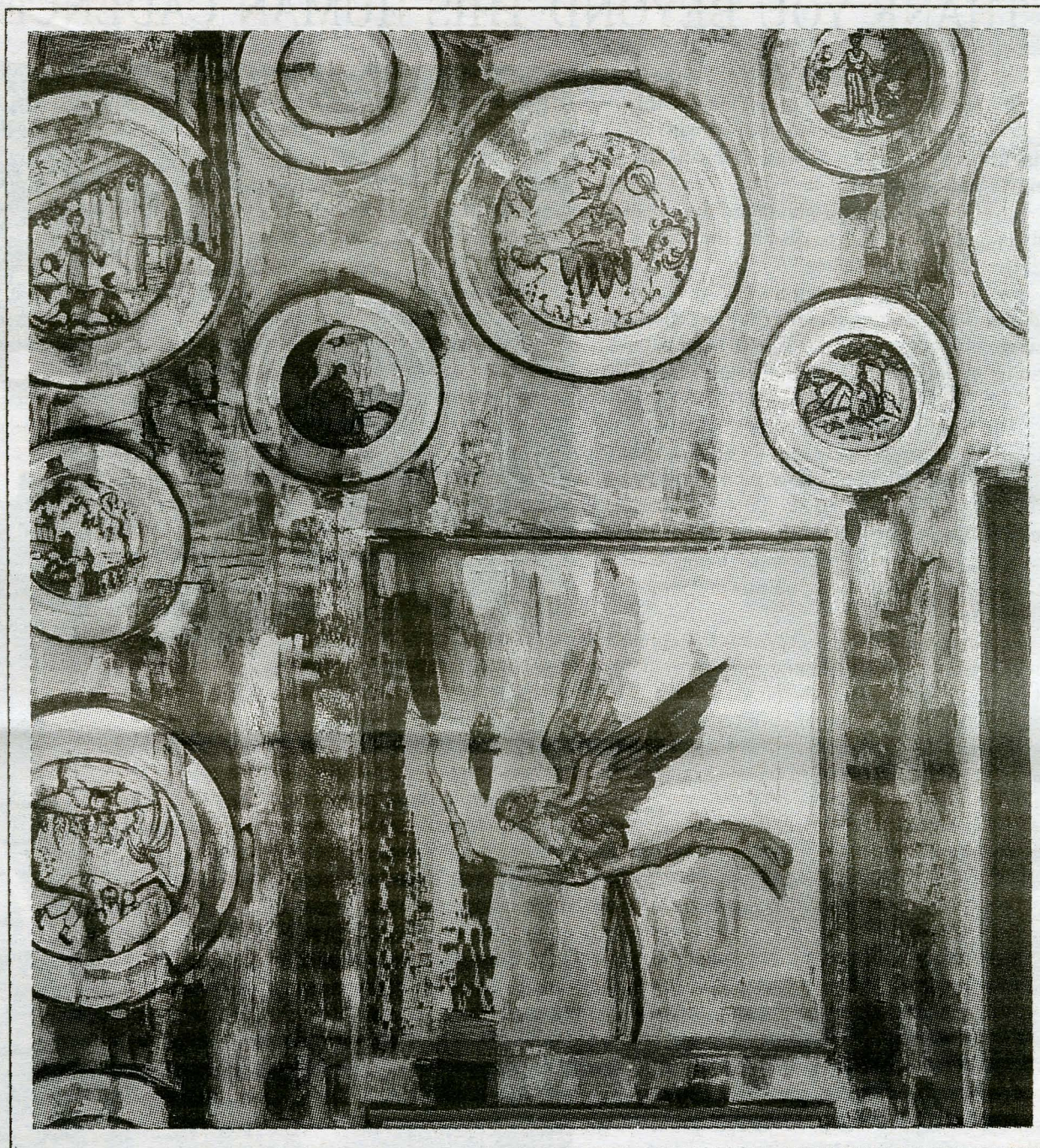
Dandona said Laughlin works on a couple of different levels.

"On one hand she creates this very finely crafted, hand-made work that is in and of itself a luxury product, like the products that are in these magazines," she said. "But she then subverts that in a couple of interesting ways. First of all, she chooses to do oil painting on Mylar, a kind of plastic which is inherently fragile and is also relatively inexpensive. It's something that we associate with commercial products and industrialization. So already you can see her getting away from this idea of a precious, rare object and playing with that idea."

"The Mylar makes the work seem less substantial. So you have these layers and layers and layers of paint accumulated over a year or more — so much time and effort has gone into this work — and yet it is on this very impermanent material that can be easily creased. It's fragile."

Dandona said her interpretation of Laughlin's work is to think of these interiors as not an actual inside, as an expression of what the people who actually live in them are truly like, but, in a way, as a kind of elaborate façade — a reversal of inside and outside.

"She underscores the artificiality of these created spaces through the pictorial choices that she makes," Dandona said. "The other thing that she does is to focus in on the telling detail of the scene. Often, these will be decorative details that employ the bodies of people of color in a decorative way. I know that sounds mysterious, but what I mean by that is that she makes us aware of the strangeness of choice to have a candlestick in the



PARROTS AND PLATES by Page Laughlin

shape of a black woman's body, and thus prompts us to consider how objects construct meaning all around us.

"Her challenge to the viewer, then, is to consider how the choices we make about our own visual environment might sometimes produce meanings that, upon reflection, are problematic."

Laughlin sends messages about how our environment sends messages about who we are and what we believe. Some of those messages can be destructive, Dandona said.

"It's not about any particular race, it's about why we would consider it quaint to turn another person's body into wallpaper as a sign of refinement. In fact, it's asserting a position of power in relationship to that body. You are suggesting that you can use it for your own pleasure, just as we might use an actual body."

Even though Laughlin's work gives the appearance of thickness, there are sometimes small areas of the

Mylar that are left unpainted so viewers can actually see through to the wall behind.

"I love that because it creates that sense of insubstantiality, that these are images, that they are illusion — it takes their sense of presence and solidity and permanence away," Dandona said. "It says these are illusions that we create and throw up to evoke an aura of refinement. But they are impermanent, like all things."

Mylar is non-absorbent so it may take a year for the oil paint to dry. Laughlin had to make the decision on which ones to send to the Dishman based on whether they were dry or not, Dandona said.

Laughlin's work is lush and richly detailed.

"I have always been attracted to seductive paintings," she said. "I love the process of painting and

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embrace the fullness of color and materiality afforded by painting.”

Laughlin draws her influences from a variety of artists, including Giotto, Vermeer, Heade, Guston and Richter, but she also credits the, “hundreds of unnamed artists and artisans who make the wallpaper, painting, rugs, fabric, etc., that are embedded in interiors.”

While Laughlin’s paintings capture the essence of the perfectly designed interior, she said her own house is fairly “undone.”

“My husband and I have restructured our house over time to open up spaces and to create large spaces filled with light,” she said. “I have arranged watercolors to relate to each other and create ‘vistas’ for looking through doorways.”

She hasn’t collected many things, she said, but she has filled her house with space, light and color.

“I do have one very crowded wall that is floor to ceiling artwork by friends, family, former students, unknown artists — a few famous ones as well,” she said. “I call this my ‘Hall of Fame.’”

Close examination of the objects reflects Laughlin’s obsession with looking at objects.

“I love going to homes that are filled with ‘selected items,’” she said. “These might be high-end collections or simple assemblages of someone with a ‘good eye.’ I love looking in junk shops as well. I like seeing the anonymous pieces that are seeming ‘decorative’ but are more potent than that dismissive term would indicate.”

Laughlin has exhibited widely and is well respected, Dandona said, adding that Laughlin was also featured in an article in “Traditional Home” magazine.

“It’s so ironic, because her work straddles that strange line between being so lusciously colorful and beautiful and sensual that, of course, you want to own one and possess it put it in your perfectly appointed interior, and at the same time it is a commentary on the idea of having an interior like that,” Dandona said. “But it’s a good point about the multivalency of artworks, that we really bring our own interpretations to them. So it’s perfectly possible to enjoy Page’s work on a purely visual level without worrying too much about the intellectual content.”

The Dishman Art Museum is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, and is located at 1030 E. Lavaca in Beaumont.

Free museum-dedicated parking is available during museum hours.

For more, call 409-880-8959 or visit [lamar.edu/dishman](http://lamar.edu/dishman).