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## Houdini with a Brush

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Charline von Heyl: Snake Eyes

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A good painting focuses our attention in a matter of seconds—what is sometimes called wall power—and it also holds our gaze over time. It repays prolonged looking. A good painting appeals to both the eye and the mind, the one refreshing the other. There is no one thing or set of things that a painting must do. A good painting can look like anything at all, or like nothing we've seen before.

All painting is, in a way, a response to pressure. In the case of realism, the visual world seems to demand from the painter some kind of representation. A maker of abstractions, on the other hand, with no reference point outside of the canvas, responds to a buildup of pressure in herself; she has to convince herself of the rightness of her actions. She may have a predilection for certain shapes, or for ways of making marks or color harmonies. A painter makes her own loose system by which elements in a painting can be made to relate to one another, one that reflects a personal notion of order vs. chaos. Having made up their rules of engagement, some painters then



Charline von Heyl/Petzel, New York

Charline von Heyl: Dunesday, 62 x 60 inches, 2016

push against them; the protocols are tested to see how they hold up under stress. One makes difficulties for oneself. Think of it as the painter getting out of a jam of her own devising; like Houdini with a brush, she backs herself into a corner from which a daring escape must be made.

The art of painting has real vitality at the moment, possibly because the old arguments about whether or not to paint are finally just empty husks. Talent is everywhere, with good painting in almost every part of the globe. Yet there are probably only a handful of painters whose work one must see, whom other artists look to for a sense of permission as well as a gauge of morale. One of them is Charline von Heyl, an uncommonly inventive and resourceful painter who is currently having a midcareer survey at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C.

Von Heyl was born in 1960 in Bonn, Germany, and came of age among the artists in Cologne and Düsseldorf who orbited the two suns Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen. In the 1980s in Germany, a deconstructionist attitude toward painting was in the air; interrogating the purpose as well as the nature of the form was de rigueur. One question burned: What does it mean to make a painting? The answer was simple: whatever you can make it mean.

In 1985 Von Heyl moved to New York and soon began to attract attention for her confident optical abstractions. Starting in the late 1990s, in a succession of solo shows at her longtime New York gallery, Friedrich Petzel, we could watch her develop a spatial virtuosity that meshed with a gift for shape creation, color harmonies, and a general willingness to try just about anything. Her work has continued to grow in both clarity and complexity, and in that hard-to-define quality known as “resolution”: the feeling that a painting could not be any other way.

A retrospective of the last fourteen years of Von Heyl’s work, organized by Evelyn Hankins, a senior curator at the Hirshhorn, opened in the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg last spring, and in the fall about half of those paintings traveled to Washington. The selection of the pictures overall is excellent, and the limited space at the Hirshhorn resulted in a tightly focused and dramatic progression. You emerge from the show feeling energized, with a sense that painting itself has been invigorated, liberated from long-held superstitions about what is or is not permissible.

Von Heyl is primarily a painter of shallow space inflected with shapes and patterns of great variety and precision. She favors a vertical rectangular format that is a little wider, a little more square than would commonly be thought elegant, and this extra width speaks to a forthright and generous approach to composition. Though vertical, her paintings are wide enough to allow her to really get in there and muck around; they are similar in proportion,

height to width, to de Kooning's later work. Von Heyl occasionally works on extra-long horizontal rectangles, which accomplish something similar.

Her paintings are often quite different from one another; they fall into rough groupings based on certain formal devices or painting processes, like stripes, or loose, watery backgrounds, or all-over patterns, or translucent over-painting, or imagistic drawing. Many of them start as fairly developed compositions, which are then painted over in a different color, an act of defiance or desperation that essentially redirects the picture down an entirely different road. Von Heyl's far-reaching rummage through diverse stylistic mannerisms has now opened up even further to produce results that she herself probably did not foresee. The basic architecture of her paintings appears to be largely intuitive, at times even serendipitous, and foregrounds a truism about process-oriented painting: that all is in flux, and was, until just this moment.

Her work feels current in part because of its wider-than-usual web of influences and sources, and, more importantly, because of the intelligence and taste with which she deploys them. A painting might feature interlocking shapes like a jigsaw puzzle spilled on the floor; passages of agitated, flickingly brushed virtuosity, as in *Bluntschli* (2005); an all-over pattern of black shapes that seem to reference the devil's own French curves, or fire decals from custom car painting, as in *Dark Nouveau* (2017); while yet another might feature outline drawing of a cartoonish figure, set on top of drips and splatters, as in *Samurai Rabbit* (2017); or all these approaches, and more, combined. *Jindy* (2013) features green, gray, and dark pink squiggles and loops made with a wide brush, like handwriting practice for giants. Floated on top of this, descending from the top edge and more or less centered, is a torso-like shape rendered in crisp horizontal black-and-white stripes—it looks like a stubby convict in a striped onesie. The painting is a riot; you can't take your eyes off it.

In *Lying Eyes* (2005), coppery washes and tangles of lines, like an explosion of brown-sauced spaghetti, are bisected midway down by two burnt sienna triangles that come to a point in the lower-left quadrant. The colors bleed out and into one another like watercolor, some darker, some lighter, and all shot through with splotches and streaks of white, like the negative shapes of tie-dyed fabric. Into this two-toned ground are introduced horizontal ribbons of watery color and hard-edged pink-and-white lines that crazily intersect like so many spilled pick-up sticks. There are as well some black lines, and a black shape like the letter "T" in just the right, unexpected place. In Von Heyl's hands, this duo-tone party trick is rich, deep, and allusive. There are intimations of flesh as well as celestial circuitry gone haywire.

She can make constructions of great complexity, or she can exercise a nervy restraint with compositions that border on emptiness, like *Bois-Tu De La Bière?* (2012), in which a cadmium yellow rectangle supports scratchy, dry-brush black lines all around its perimeter

with a few extra triangulated lines invading the middle. The lines are neither beautiful nor descriptive; the yellow doesn't yield an inch. It's an uningratiating painting that says, "Never apologize."

Attitude really does beget form, and Von Heyl's attitude makes visible things that were previously obscure or hiding in plain sight. Fabric design, typography, folk and hobby art, artisanal printing, frottage (rubblings), graphic design, cartooning—all these styles of visual thought and more are gathered under Von Heyl's stylistic tent. What they mostly have in common are secondary or tertiary applications of Bauhaus principles of composition, which for generations showed up most brilliantly in weavings and designs for fabric, as well as in illustration and advertising design, and which we can now feel in her sensitive use of patterning.

One of Von Heyl's epiphanies seems to have been that the charge leveled at the early work of Frank Stella—that his stripe paintings looked like fabric—was actually high praise. Another was that one of the least-valued and shortest-lived art movements of the 1970s, Pattern and Decoration, was ripe for picking. In Von Heyl we see pattern everywhere; high-key color harmonies, like pale lemon, mauve, taupe, and mint green; or finely calibrated intervals between light and dark colors; repetitions of patterns or the alternation of two or more patterns side by side or overlapping—visual polyrhythms or syncopation. In paintings like *Zenge* (2012) and the sublime *Russian Jazz* (2016), a detail of which is on the cover of the exhibition catalog, one or more elements is introduced to disrupt the patterned decorum. Pattern in art is rhythm and music, it's painting's pulse—the pulse of life. Think of the rhythm of light and shadow that we experience riding in an open car, looking up at a canopy of trees on a bright, sunny day—the staccato alternations of dark, light, dark. Von Heyl manages to get that feeling into a painting.

You can feel her delight in the kinds of elegant, patterned paper that one might find in a high-end candy store or perhaps at a boutique counter, thin sheets used to line boxes of handkerchiefs or rolled into a jaunty cone to hold a few precious chocolates. Bands of two or three tart colors, plus black, or stripes of muted colors, or solid shapes floating on atmospheric grounds—as much as any art historical reference, such small triumphs of graphic design seem to be her inspiration. These visual styles, invoked so lovingly in her work, are like stumbling onto treasure that has been under one's nose all along. Merely appreciating these everyday gems isn't enough. Translating their effects to the size and materiality of ambitious painting involves risk. Von Heyl knows how scale affects meaning, and efficiently manages the translation from printing to painting.

How one applies the color greatly affects how we perceive it. A good use of a specific color density is *Killersmile* (2011), which consists of vertical stripes of a medium tan/taupe alternating with bands of very pale beige. Crossing through at greater or lesser angles are

stripes of darker taupe, one of which is inflected—bent at the knee, so to speak—by a jet-black needle, an obsidian scalpel piercing the high-style pattern. The black shape, moving as it does from left to right, the right point touching the edge of the canvas, is like a louche figure smiling out of the side of his mouth. The whole painting has a refined, high-stepping independence. It's like seeing a chic woman walking down Fifth Avenue in a tightly belted camel hair coat.

Von Heyl is a ferocious shape-maker and a pirate of the color black: black stripes, black smears, hard-edged black shapes, black charcoal lines and marks, black cutouts, negative shapes dropped out of black, black stars, arrows, and darts; black shapes like long plumed dresses or the trains of dresses; shapes like tree branches or felled trees, or pooled waters. Black, black, black—the element that gives the paintings a feeling of confidence, authority, of being “resolved.” In *Absences Répétées* (2015), sharp black triangles, like a row of shark's teeth, whose points just touch the painting's left edge, are both the superglue and the framing device of the composition. They make all of the other elements in the painting—washes, scrapings, spray-paint lines, two vertical columns of letters in red paint that spell out the painting's title—cohere, and they give the painting its attitude of fearlessness. Black in painting is like a knife in a rumble: don't bring it if you're not prepared to use it.

Not all of Von Heyl's shapes are hard-edged. In *Slow Tramp* (2012), an elegant puddle of dense black, like a body of water seen from the air, flows diagonally across the bottom half of the painting, pooling on top of coppery-pink, mauve, and white vertical stripes. The top half is dominated by a fattened vertical rectangle that overlaps the black inland sea; its bottom edge appears to have been eaten away by something, hollowed out. The rectangle itself is a beautiful darkish purple-gray, on top of which are darker warm-gray shapes—lines, blobs, and crosses that look like they have migrated from a painting by the late German artist A.R. Penck. The top edge of the painting is a loose dark-grayed purple that ends in a little tributary feeding into the lake. Along the right edge of the pictographic rectangle is one of Von Heyl's signature in-filled shapes, this time with a liquid-looking gray wash that's halfway between the two grays of its adjacent neighbor. The painting has a bruising gravitas—moody, glamorous, and dramatic.

The last five or so years have been especially rewarding for Von Heyl: she seems to have gained the ability to see painting from afar while at the same time staying immersed in it. Her most recent works, several of which are in the Hirshhorn exhibition, have a circusy,



Charline von Heyl/Petzel, New York

Charline von Heyl: *Absences Répétées*, 82 x 78 inches, 2015

midcentury-modern playfulness and wit, and a kind of fun that doesn't rely on irony. The way she deploys shapes, especially in paintings like *Bait Ball*, *Dark Nouveau* (both 2017), and *Soul Rag* (2018), is more overtly reminiscent of the early giants of modernist painting—Picasso, Matisse, and especially Miró, who is a very hard artist to make use of without looking corny, but somehow Von Heyl makes me think of him as a more contemporary painter.

What, after all, was the core meaning, the essence of the work of those early pioneers but the transmutability of everything into everything else? Images, teapots, flowers, eyes, landscapes, breasts—things are always turning into other things on their way to or from abstract shape, or pure form. And out of these transformations comes the awareness that shapes express us, take on our values and even our aspirations. Von Heyl brings this conviction into the present; her pictures celebrate making the kinds of connections—between shapes, or between shapes and images, or between images and meaning—that we float through or that float through us all the time, but that we tend to disregard in everyday life, largely because we have little or no vocabulary to describe their effects. An insect is turned over in the hand, examined for its curiously asymmetrical iridescence, and let go to fly away again.

As in the work of a handful of other contemporary painters such as Amy Sillman, Laura Owens, and Philip Taaffe, the penchant for pattern recognition, for an all-over visual coherence created out of visual falling-apartness that one senses in Von Heyl's paintings seems to mirror this feeling of connectedness that we all experience but don't have a name for. It's related to the sensation of the urban world trying to make sense of itself; endless rows of high-rise apartments in a modern city; the ubiquity of bar codes, touch screens, keypads. In Miró's time there was rhythm, the pulse of life under pressure. Now there is circuitry, the continual thrum of pixel traffic. We would like to make sense of the alienation that pervades modern life, to reclaim its effects at human scale. Some paintings can do that.

Von Heyl's work also shows the way that painting can assimilate the look and feel of the technological landscape. Some of her paintings have the aspect of computer-generated special effects: an image shattering into pieces and cascading off the "screen"; or images revolving in space, showing us a schematic dimensionality. Her work isn't important because it imports or mimics the look of things on screens; it's important because it uses those looks, or the ideas that power them, to give a fuller account of her engagement with painting. The long-standing ideas that lie underneath our fascination with technology—time travel, miniaturization, ubiquity, connectivity—are convincingly made available to painting through the work of Von Heyl and other artists. Her boldness with graphic tropes proves she is sufficiently confident in painting to not have to protect it from contamination.



It's never kitsch or novelty for its own sake; there's always a structural reason at the heart of her juxtapositions.

If the cocktail napkin cartoon has been the presiding spirit for a certain swath of sophisticated painting over the last thirty or so years, in Von Heyl's work of the last few seasons that spirit seems to have narrowed to one related graphic source: Mad magazine. I don't know if the young Von Heyl, growing up in Bonn, ever saw a copy of what was for us in the Midwest at midcentury more or less the style bible, a combination of The New Yorker and The Paris Review for the under-fourteen set. But she has absorbed so much Americana over the last twenty-some years that when the painting calls for it, she can make an elegant rendering of a period telephone or other artifact from a more stylish time.

In the world of contemporary art, youth has been oversold. Von Heyl is fifty-eight, and it seems to me that her extroverted and zestful paintings could not have been made in youth. Experience does count for something. It takes time to reach this degree of pictorial organization, the full orchestration of it.

It's interesting to track the distance, intellectual as well as geographic, that Von Heyl had to travel to achieve her present freedoms. So much of the vocabulary around painting in the 1960s and 1970s derived from minimalism, the notion that the way a painting or any other visual structure functioned was to make the viewer keenly aware of its participation in the act of looking. And more important, since the emphasis was on this relationship between art and viewer, it was thought that the art itself resisted becoming "merely" an image, and that reducing art to the status of an image nullified its experiential complexity. In reality, this image-resistance was illusory.

Even an abstract painting is an image—an image of abstraction. That's the starting point for much of the work of the last forty years; it is the divide between artists of de Kooning's time and those of our own. The same ideas of authenticity in painting still apply, but to the essentially performative condition that was the sine qua non of the 1950s is added another, more cultural dimension. Now a painting must somehow convince us that it has taken the ideas about painting's privileged status into account and also deliver on the promise of authenticity regarding each element in the painting. Put another way, painting now has to break theater's so-called fourth wall and rebuild it simultaneously.

Von Heyl instinctively recognizes this for the opportunity that it is and constructs her reciprocities of form and content accordingly. A good example is Boomerang (Aboriginal Sin) (2017), a large, nearly square painting that features seven yellow boomerang shapes with red tips and black squiggly lines running down the middle of each one. The boomerangs sit on top of a cascade of black shapes that seem to be derived from flames, numerals, leaf patterns, water droplets, etc. They inhabit the world of the Mad cartoon Spy vs. Spy, in which highly stylized black shapes stand in for espionage agents. In the painting

the black shapes themselves lie atop a dirty white ground, the edges of which are streaked with candy-cane pink and mint green. The energy released in the dispersal of the forms on the square canvas is itself boomerang-like, a high-intensity, flinging sensation. Energy ripples off the surface.

In *Old Fish New Fish* (2016) the gestural, improvised parts of the painting are in direct conflict with the hard-edged cutout geometric forms. The bottom third of the painting is occupied, in the sense of an occupying power, by what looks to be a fanciful hind section and tail of a whale, cut out of a quantity of black shot through with white stripes. Clinging to the left edge of this truncated aquatic mammoth is a small, cute red fish with a gaping, smiling mouth and a glowing red eye, its tail fins like serrated sewing scissors. The two fish, both old and new, are swimming in a soupy yellow sea into which green, black, and a bit of pink and lighter yellow are swirled. As if to heighten the artifice, three sides of the painting have a white border. This is a good example of a painting that might sound like a mess if you heard it described over breakfast, but in real life it works with great acuity and precision.

How do we get at the meaning of a painting in the absence of subject matter? How do we know when an arrangement of shapes, colors, and lines is “authentic” or, even more slippery, “true”? Why does one arrangement of forms reward prolonged viewing, while another that employs similar elements is used up in a glance? The narrative of abstract painting is straightforward: “I did this; I made this.” Understanding an abstract painting involves retracing the painter’s decisions and actions that led to its completion. We just need to accept that on some level we can trust the artist, that her choices and decisions make sense even if we don’t understand how she arrived at them. Inside the painting, everything must feel true.

One of my favorite works in the Hirshhorn show is *Dunesday* (2016; see illustration on page 16), which features four bowling pin shapes resting on the painting’s bottom edge. Each pin is made out of a different colored pattern (red star; red, white, and blue bars; half yellow, half blue, with a red-and-blue collar around its neck like a mallard duck; and ultramarine, green, and white splotches). The fifth element in the line of pins is clearly an impostor. It looks more like a bong in which floats a cascade of red dots. The five crisp, jaunty forms, each of which can make you smile, stand in front of a splashy, washy orange-and-yellow ground interwoven with black and green drybrush semidescriptive drawing. The top edge of this bouillabaisse is cut into by an extravagantly notched, ovoid, undulating line. Behind all this, there is a sharp black-and-white horizontal zigzag pattern, which at the distance the painting sets up for itself takes on the aspect of waves at sea.

All of this is visually engaging, up-beat, and deeply pleasurable. The question remains: What do these things have to do with one another? This question is essentially



unanswerable. Putting the viewer in the position of having to accept their coexistence as a pictorial inevitability is the painting's great strength—syntax at work.

Von Heyl's best, most precarious paintings, the ones that teeter on the edge of control, make clear that the artist is not just making products; she is keeping alive a sense of the moment-by-moment decision-making that goes into the pictorial process, one whose goal is a renewable sense of surprise. She has spent her career forging an inclusive, synthetic pictorial amalgamation, one that parallels the shifty, unfixed, synchronous nature of contemporary experience. As a consequence, the road ahead is taken with only a rough map. One has a compass, of course, composed of one's history and the history of one's teachers—in other words, experience and taste. Sometimes, however, a painter may not even know if or when she has reached her destination, and in any case is apt to arrive solo, perhaps looking around a little to see if anyone else is there.