

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

MARY HEILMANN: *TO BE SOMEONE*

2009

Looking over the past four decades of painting in the United States, it's no surprise that Mary Heilmann is widely considered one of the premiere artists of her generation. Hers is a uniquely American focus that combines kaleidoscopic sensibilities ranging from popular culture to punk rock to Renaissance perspective. She is, in fact, undergoing a renaissance of her own as her career retrospective, "Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone," finishes up its American tour at New York City's New Museum of Contemporary Art. The show, organized by the Orange County Museum of Art in California, has been met with rousing applause and critical acclaim. Speaking from her Bridgehampton studio last month, the artist shared some of her thoughts on art, life and other forms of hullabaloo.

Ms. Heilmann, who paints in a sun-filled barn situated a few yards behind her 1920s Sears & Roebuck Catalogue House, still goes back and forth to Manhattan. She says of Bridgehampton, however, "This is home. This is where I work." She emerged from the back room of the studio with a pot of French press coffee and a tray of ceramic cups and saucers slathered in brilliant Crayola-color glazes. Setting the tray down, she pulled out her laptop and opened up a few color-saturated images of her signature cups and bowls, stacks of plates and other designs. "We're making the ceramics in Brooklyn. It's a collaborative effort I'm doing with Steve Keister and Rachel Bleiweiss-Sande. It's called the 'Flying Saucer Project,'" she said. Taken all together, the ceramics look remarkably like her paintings.

Hanging on the white walls of her studio, shaped canvases in various stages give way to walls of books and posters, pictures of friends, gallery flyers and collectibles. Five or six boxy chairs dot the center of the room. "They're sculptures," she explains. "I started making them about 12 years ago. I bought the webbing at the local hardware store." The "Clubchairs," made of painted wood and woven strips of polypropylene webbing, sport electric color combinations like chartreuse and pink or red and mustard yellow.

"Donald Judd was a big influence for me," she said, referring to the famed minimalist sculptor. "He designed furniture. His chairs are similar, but mine are actually comfortable," she giggled. "There's a thesis right there."

The sense of active daydreaming in her studio is palpable. Bars of color accumulate in rows or slide toward the margins of paintings, quivering at the edges where they meet side by side. Squares and grids and rebel geometries hug the canvas, even extending over the sides of the stretchers – in that nether region usually reserved for requisite drips and smudges. Heilmann's paintings are humble, unfettered, and the degree of full-frontal honesty they possess is breathtaking.

“You go into Mary’s studio and sit down with her on that big couch and you just find yourself completely sucked into the work,” said her friend and fellow painter, the artist Billy Sullivan. “Mary’s just Mary. Her work is amazing.”

“As a young artist I did everything I could to make sure I was not successful,” she mused. “I was cynical, dedicated to being weird. I nearly got kicked out of graduate school. I was radical -- asocial.” She went on, “I came to New York and wanted to be one of the guys. I was very ornery about that.”

In fact, she turned to painting at a time when the medium had hit what seemed like a dead end. “I chose it because it was an abandoned territory,” she said. “There was tremendous work being done in sculpture. No one was painting.” The route she followed to get there was an indirect one. She had a knack for throwing pots and wanted to study in Berkeley with the legendary sculptor/ceramicist, Peter Volkous, an artist who broke all the rules and in the process revolutionized the ceramic arts. He had a Herculean presence in California, and his famed teaching style was as courageous and explosive as his art. The long link between Heilmann’s ceramics and her painting that began here is key to understanding this important artist’s development.

“Volkous was great,” she said. “I studied ceramics and sculpture with him. When it came to the craftsmanship of painting, I had to learn that on my own.” Indeed, the critic Dave Hickey drew a connection between Heilmann’s application of glazes and her painting style, saying in his catalogue essay for her 2007 retrospective that she painted her canvases “as if they were ceramic objects, as if, more specifically, they were pots.”

This deceptively simple observation is one of the cornerstones of Heilmann’s work. Early on, the emerging painter defiantly troweled pigment across the canvas, scooping it away in awkward grids or gluing bits and pieces on to the surface and then furrowing into the wet paint. There she forged a fragile alliance that rested somewhere between painting and sculpture. When Heilmann arrived in New York, painting had already made its resounding thud, as if hurled off the roof of the art world. The only brushes used back then were likely to be industrial mops. “I was on my own in the 70s,” she recalled. “I didn’t have a gang.” She palled around with post-minimalist sculptors. “Keith Sonnier, Jackie Winsor, Richard Serra – they saw the work.” Somewhere between Pop and minimalism, the roots of Heilmann’s oeuvre began to emerge.

The finesse with which she now applies paint has influenced a generation of artists that includes Elizabeth Peyton, the painter with whom she shares the floors of the New Museum this fall. Up on the third floor, the elevator doors open to a vast display of Heilmann’s paintings that exude an eye-popping visual clarity. Visitors swarm through galleries, crowding together for private lectures or relaxing in front of the flat screen TV where a recreation of Heilmann’s famed slide show is on view. “When the students would fall asleep, I didn’t like it,” she said, “so I came up with the idea of adding a soundtrack to my lectures.” The souped up slide show became the basis for her book, The All Night Movie, published in 2000. In the show, paintings fade in and out between pictures of suburban L.A., sunsets and endless highways.

Surprisingly autobiographical, one of the keystones of Heilmann's abstract paintings are the simple fragments excised from her own bi-coastal history. They include a cast of characters that begins with the southern California surf culture of her childhood (she grew up in El Segundo) and moves through San Francisco's beat generation (she went to a Catholic girl's school there), the psychedelic era, the awkward geometry of New York's city streets and, of course, music. From Billboard hits to acid rock, Bebop, R&B, punk, funk and boogie-woogie, for Heilmann, music has been a powerful elixir since the beginning. "I'm big into internet radio now," she smiled. "You can listen to radio anywhere. Any time."

Things started to change for Mary Heilmann when gallerist Pat Hearn came to her studio in 1986 at the suggestion of the painter, Ross Bleckner. "She came over to the studio three days in a row and just stared at my painting," recalled the artist. "She was fantastic." Indeed, since her first show at Pat Hearn Gallery, Ms. Heilmann's career has been on a steady upswing, having survived the many moods of this unpredictable, often fickle art world.

"It's such a gift to be able to see all my work together. And after all this time plugging away," she said. "It's pretty much something you do with your own two hands, but it takes a whole community of people to keep artists like me going. The people who write about it, the clever installations, the people who come to see it -- it's not just me -- everyone adds to the experience."

In open defiance of museum culture everywhere, every so often at the New Museum a Heilmann "Clubchair" befitted with ball casters zips across the gallery floor, propelled by one cheerful artist or another. The mood here, decidedly upbeat, is buoyed by the crisp and joyful directness of Ms. Heilmann's art. Gathered in front of "Hokusai," a 2004 diptych, a group of young students embark on a discussion regarding the influence of Japanese art and the graphic intensity of Heilmann's work. "I get the wave thing," remarked one young artist as he pointed to the right panel. "I think the left side is about windows." "Like a window into history," said another.

In November of last year, it seems that the renaissance of Ms. Heilmann's art met its apotheosis with the remarkable coincidence of having her paintings featured on the covers of both Artforum and Art in America at the same time, a feat achieved by only one other artist in memory, Roy Lichtenstein. Appearing just as her retrospective was starting its cross-country journey, Heilmann's glossy re-emergence heralded a multitude of appearances that included the 2008 Whitney Biennial and a room devoted to her art at Matthew Marks Gallery during the exhibit "Painting Now and Forever, Part II." Further, she was chosen, along with John Waters, to be the visual centerpiece for The Tenth Annual Armory Show in celebration of the late gallerists and husband and wife, Pat Hearn and Colin De Land. Before that, her work was included in the groundbreaking show, "High Times/Hard Times" and a massive exhibition at the Vienna Secession in 2003. By art world standards or any other, this is a comeback of the highest order.

Back in Bridgehampton, outside the studio window longtime Hamptons farmer Robert Comfort is plowing the 2-acre field that sits astride Ms. Heilmann's studio. "He's planting rye grass for the winter," she said. The artist bought the adjacent farmland some years ago in an attempt to protect the land along Narrow Lane. "We want to have a small farm and a pear

orchard," she continued. "The deer eat everything, so we planted millions of sunflowers. Just for fun. They're so beautiful," she said, gazing out the window. "The field faces west, so I can see the sunset all the way across. It's cultivated in rows so I look out at a vanishing point."

Underneath their unassuming exterior, there lurks a deeply sophisticated palette and a radical sense of pictorial structure in Heilmann's paintings. On the studio wall several new works revolve around dramatic vistas, horizons and the vanishing points the artist now enjoys. In one, a spongy field of brushwork appears to have melted the horizon line. "I've been looking at Vermeer and Renaissance perspective, but it's also very psychedelic," she smiles, "I can't wait to see the Francis Bacon show and I love video games where they zoom across those roads." She went on, "But the field has had an effect on my work, too. Now there's green in my painting. Oh -- and sunflower orange."

"Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone" is on view at the New Museum of Contemporary Art through January 26, 2009.

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