

Unabashedly Joyful Paintings That Look Fun and Easy, but Don't Be Fooled

Over the last four decades Mary Heilmann, 68, has been painting with an infectious, unabashedly hedonistic joie de vivre. Working with big brushes and generous quantities of paint, she continues to produce wildly colorful abstractions that riff with irreverent verve on basic elements of Modernist painting: the grid, the monochromatic rectangle, stripes, organic forms, linear webs, spots, checks and drips.

There's a charming sloppiness about Ms. Heilmann's paintings, which are on display in an exhilarating retrospective called "To Be Someone" at the New Museum on the Lower East Side. She makes it look easy and fun. Where some artists would neat up the edges, smooth out the brushy areas and clean up the dribbles, she leaves well enough alone. First thought, best thought. Some paintings are evidently the result of many layers, but the final picture almost always seems spontaneous, and her lively touch gives her works a sensuous intimacy.

Color is the most exciting aspect of her painting. Her palette extends to tarry black, but mainly it goes to bright colors from the 1960s and '70s: fruity stains; carrot and avocado hues; swimming pool blues; psychedelic Day-Glo's, and minty whites. Installed in the museum's second-floor gallery and lobby by Richard Flood, the museum's chief curator, and Ms. Heilmann, the exhibition has a wonderfully airy, optically elating effect.

In describing Ms. Heilmann's work some critics resort to athletic metaphors, as if to guard against the impression that what she does might be too easy. Elizabeth Armstrong, who organized the exhibition for the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach, Calif., where she is a curator and where the show was on view last year, invokes Ms. Heilmann's brief foray into competitive diving at age 12. In her catalog essay Ms. Armstrong sees in Ms. Heilmann's newest work "the rush of the high diver, who must achieve utter precision in order to let go."

For the critic Dave Hickey, the relevant sport, also from Ms. Heilmann's California girlhood, is surfing. In a catalog essay titled "Surfing on Acid," after one of her paintings, he observes that her works "embody the surfer's ethic of finding the moment to fall and never trying too hard to save your life."

The sports metaphors also guard against suspicion that Ms. Heilmann's art might be not too easy but too calcu-

Mary Heilmann
To Be Someone
New Museum

lated. She may be a natural, but she is also a female dandy whose seemingly ingenuous way of painting masks an extremely sophisticated sense of style.

Ms. Heilmann is a Postmodernist scavenger, but unlike Sherrie Levine and Peter Halley, whose parodic abstractions deconstruct Modernist myths, she takes 20th-century art history as her personal toy box. A kind of painterly Pop artist, she gives vibrant new life to standard forms of 20th-century visual culture. Imagine the Ramones covering Cole Porter.

Ms. Heilmann did not study painting formally. She earned a master's degree in ceramics and sculpture at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1967. The earliest works in the exhibition are absurdist sculptures from the late '60s. "Sculpture of Night" (a recent reconstruction of a piece from 1968) consists of a half-round shelf held overhead against the gallery wall by a length of bamboo, the whole covered by black flocking.

It wasn't until after she finished school and moved to New York that she began to paint seriously. In a way, her whole career looks like a self-directed course in learning how to paint by imitating others. Made on unstretched fabric, the show's earliest paintings, "Corona Borealis" and "Malibu," both from 1970, play off the early, post-Minimalist fabric works of Richard Tuttle.

Ms. Heilmann soon thereafter learned to transform her sources with her own

insouciant exaggerations. "French Screen" (1978), in which straight-edged vertical rectangles of red, yellow and blue are framed by red, yellow and blue borders, cranks up the chromatic vol-

ume and the glossy surface on a severe style associated with artists like John McLaughlin and Brice Marden. In a series of black-and-pink paintings of squares and rectangles from the late '70s, Minimalist sobriety is jolted by punk-feminist attitude.

For the next three decades Ms. Heilmann continually and unpredictably re-

Appropriating
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cycled Cubist geometry, Surrealist biomorphism, Abstract Expressionist slash and splatter, Color Field stripes, Ellsworth Kelly's elegant shapes, '70s-style grids and other familiar conventions. Yet her irrepressibly sassy spirit always overwhelms her sources. Nothing she does looks like anything other than a Heilmann.

Often she brings together divergent modes into semiotic jam sessions. "Interval" (2002) consists of three abutted canvases: a rectangle of yellow, red and blue stripes; a green canvas with notched corners on which straight red lines describe a crystalline pattern; and a composition of wavy-edged shapes suggesting a Miró-like landscape. In "Fresno (Ernie Palomino)" (2004) a small canvas bearing a loosely painted grid of orange, lemon and raspberry rectangles is set into the notch of an unpainted wooden panel with receding perspective lines penciled onto it.

This penchant for colliding styles reflects a broader philosophical disposition: a pluralistic, antihierarchical stance. "Embrace the contradictions, live the complexities of life and the world," her art implies.

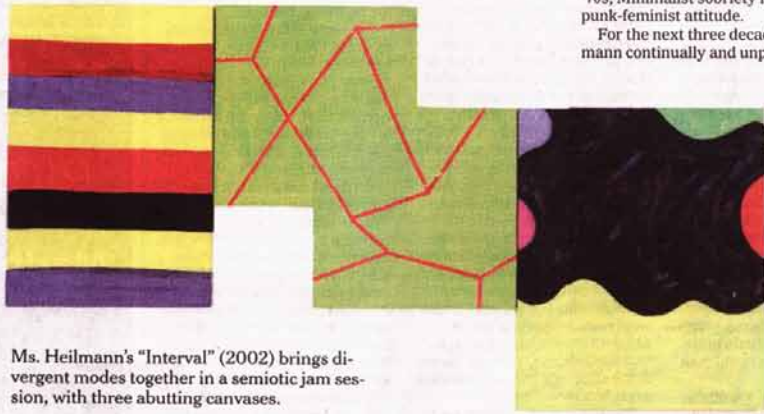
Extending this attitude off the walls is a set of brightly colored chairs designed by Ms. Heilmann. Made of plywood and nylon webbing in adult and child sizes, they roll smoothly on casters on the gallery's concrete floor, and visitors may sit in them.

Meanwhile, along with maritime-theme paintings in the museum's first-floor lobby gallery, there's a bright green octagonal table loaded with ceramic plates, cups and saucers resembling handmade Fiesta dinnerware, all by Ms. Heilmann. It's as if she were getting ready for a picnic.

A part of Ms. Heilmann rebels against the elevation of fine art over the applied arts and resists the separation of art and life. The furniture and dishes reveal an expansive impulse to produce a holistic world. She teeters on the edge of installation art. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, she continues to funnel her most ambitious energies into the concentrative art of painting, and in so doing she achieves states of grace that are harder won than they look.



Mary Heilmann's oil painting "Surfing on Acid" (2005) is in a retrospective of her work at the New Museum.



Ms. Heilmann's "Interval" (2002) brings divergent modes together in a semiotic jam session, with three abutting canvases.

"Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone" runs through Jan. 26 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, at Prince Street, Lower East Side; (212) 219-1222, newmuseum.org.