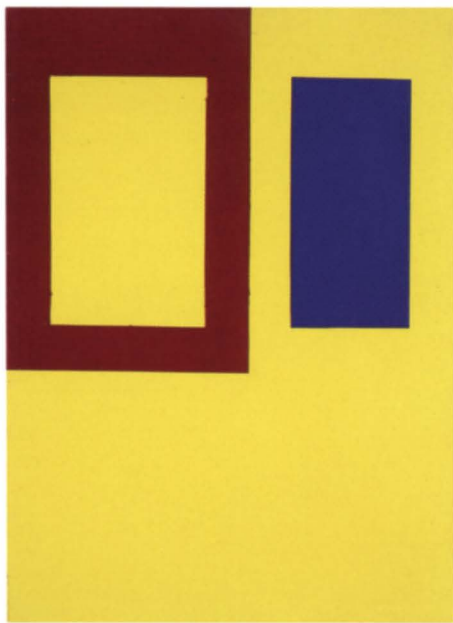


Mary Heilmann:  
Selected Works • 1978-1998

Nov. 22, 1998 - Jan. 20, 1999

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Heilmann's Everyday Pageantry  
(or, it's easy to be a hedonist if  
discipline is among your loves)



*Yellow, Red and Blue*, 1978, acrylic, latex on canvas, 30" x 22", collection David Doubilet, Toronto

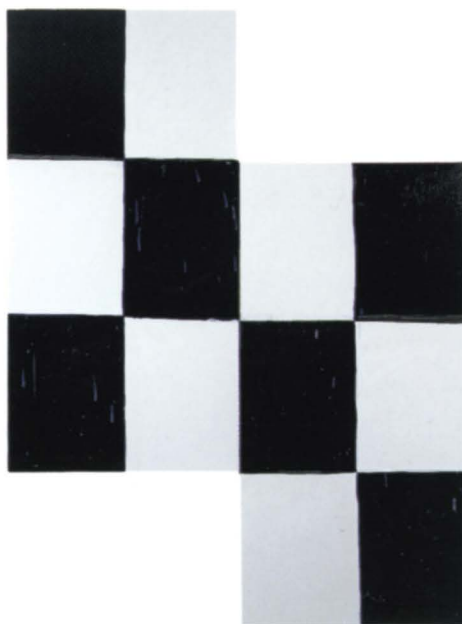
More than any other artist working today (and that includes four or five generations of painters, sculptors, installation-arrangers and all sorts of indefinable in-betweeners), Mary Heilmann makes the idea of high seriousness – along with its corollary, difficulty – seem silly.

Making high seriousness disappear from contemporary art is no mean feat, especially in America, where artists have struggled for more than two centuries to get their work treated with the same seriousness most citizens habitually bring to business and manufacturing, generally manly endeavors whose value and importance is so obvious that it doesn't need to be discussed, much less defended. But because art in this country is still not commonly thought of as a socially useful endeavor whose worth is beyond doubt, and because it has a long history of being relegated to the less utilitarian, more frivolous realms of womanly crafts, pastimes and the making of decorative embellishments, artists have been compelled to go out of their way to insist on the seriousness and importance of their work – often to its own detriment. In the past, this has led to all manner of exaggerated, overblown claims being made to shore up the significance of the objects they make (think of the Abstract Expressionists' insistence on the centrality

of existential philosophy and psychoanalytic practice to their work). More recently, it has led to the pursuit of any number of esoteric meaning-games, cryptically played on the margin of an already marginalized activity.

Rather than accepting art's place on the periphery of American culture, and furiously fighting an uphill and largely symbolic battle for seriousness there, Heilmann begins from the position that the vibrantly simplified paintings she has been making for the past 25 years or so may be as easy as 1-2-3, as accessible as a sunset and as American as apple pie – only a whole lot more satisfying. Unlike most art being made today, which first insists that it be seen as a seriously meaningful endeavor, and only then allows viewers to have a little fun following its carefully wrought gestures, circumscribed maneuvers and in-the-know references, Heilmann's sumptuous, eye-popping pictures of ordinary shapes, hand-drawn lines and bold, screaming colors start with the sensual pleasures you take when you stand or, better yet, sit before them – after all, these paintings are made to be lived with, repaying on a daily basis every bit of the interest and energy you bring to them.

About as incomprehensible as children's building blocks, Heilmann's casually rigorous canvases deliver an instantaneous visual wallop whose bodily impact is not predicated on their place in



*Le Mans*, 1989, oil on canvas, 80" x 80", collection Martin Z. Margulies, New York



*Gaiete Parisienne*, 1982, oil on canvas, 60" x 42", collection Alan Dinsfriend, Boston

art history nor on your ability to "read" them referentially – as signs of encoded esoterica. Put simply, words do not stick to these paintings. In other words, but no more accurately, even the most apt verbal or written description of one of Heilmann's very basic canvases does not come close to capturing or conveying its point-blank emotional power. For example, "fifteen brightly colored rectangles in an ink-black field" hardly accounts for the City-of-Light splendor that twinkles in *Gaiete Parisienne* (1982). Nor does "a black-and-white checkerboard pattern with opposite corners missing" begin to describe the whiplash precision and reckless abandon that animate the dizzying contour of *Le Mans* (1989). And "a pair of abutted canvases, the left one containing four blue stripes that form the silhouette of a ziggurat, and the right one comprised of eight horizontal bands of translucent color" in no way embodies the ancient laziness of summer afternoons in the Mexican desert nor the cool vastness of its pitch-black night skies as efficiently and effectively as *Popocatépetl* (1998) does. There's loads of romance in all of the artist's superficially spare images.

Decidedly social, Heilmann's paintings incite talk – not writing. They generate speech rather than inviting lengthy discursive excursions that are more suited to academic journals and footnoted treatises than to the give-and-take, to-and-fro of animated studio exchanges, the stimulated



agitation of always-abbreviated gallery-chats and the “go-see-for-yourself” giddiness of quickly dialed, “I-just-got-home-myself” phone calls. Shockingly unpretentious, her oeuvre demonstrates that even the best forms of intellectualism have no monopoly on smarts, savvy worldliness and mind-blowing insights.

More than an intellectual exercise, Heilmann’s art is available to a wide audience.

If her works were a part of language, they’d be punctuation marks: mostly exclamation points, but a few semicolons, commas, periods, parentheses, ampersands and ellipses thrown in for good measure. Nearly all of Heilmann’s canvases consist of repeated units that form at least two components, which themselves play off of one another, sometimes complementarily, at other times antagonistically, but always rhythmically. At the root of her paintings are relationships: carefully calibrated pairs (or parallel situations) that get set up (and set in motion). Compositionally counterbalanced against each other, they constantly shift their weight and tempo – sometimes smoothly, sometimes with staccato, start-and-stop suddenness and sometimes somewhere in between.

Unlike other paintings that are also drop-dead gorgeous, Heilmann’s never require viewers to stand before them in stunned silence, in a state of reverential speechlessness. On the contrary, they trigger wide-eyed eagerness from viewers who are attracted to them, often eliciting involuntary bodily responses from the less inhibited among us, who occasionally

gasp, draw in a quick, whistling breath or exclaim (often under our breath, so as not to embarrass our professional selves), something like “Ooo,” “Whoa,” or “WOW!” Such unintentional physical reactions are not qualitatively different from those of kids watching Fourth of July fireworks. On good days, a quickening of the pulse

domestic sublimity takes shape across the Spartan yet luscious surfaces of all her canvases. Although very few have the presence of landscapes, it isn’t difficult to imagine that many are interiors. Architectural elements figure prominently in Heilmann’s images, as do such domestic details as blankets, vases, curtains, tile floors and decorative screens.

At the same time, her paintings of casual, relaxed elegance are completely free of the feeling that they’re slumming with low cultural forms when they embrace such humble experiences and contexts. They aren’t and they couldn’t, even if they wanted to, because the idea of High Art is an old-fashioned European concept that never really took root in America, despite the best efforts of some formidable New York critics. Brought to heady heights with Pop Art’s ascendance, the so-called High-Low Debate is based on a fundamental misconception of how art functions in this country. Often invoked to explain modern art’s fascination with popular formats and vernacular subjects, this divisive argument always ends by legitimizing the very idea of High Art, and



*Mint Serape*, 1997, oil on canvas, 30" x 22", collection Gordon Stewart, New York

may be felt around Heilmann’s paintings, as if one’s body had sent a quick rush of adrenaline through itself so that one’s mind won’t miss any of the excitement.

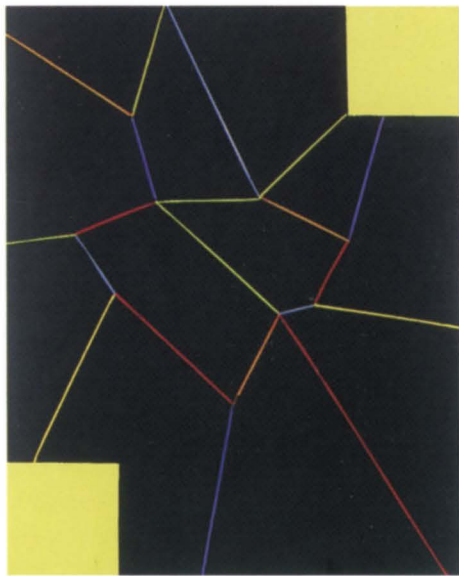
While thrilling, her fun-loving works never go in for the grandeur or magnificence of nature at its most sublime. Instead, they deliver similar visual kicks and sustain similar perceptual acuity, but at a more intimate and down-to-earth scale. A thorough familiarity with the comforts and upsets of something like

thus shoring up its privileged position in museums, cut off from the daily chaos of living culture. In America, however, even abstract painting, modern art’s supposedly highest form, does not belong to an aristocracy of taste or a mandarin class defined by a state-sanctioned academy. Today, it emerges from “below,” the way jazz and Beat poetry once did, embraced by various self-selected groups of interested individuals.

The beauty of art in a democracy is



that anyone can be an elitist, a connoisseur, an aficionado, a participant, or a fan. Passionate enthusiasts do not have to struggle to find out about art or to be admitted to some imaginary inner sanctum. We make it our business to know what's going on, we relish what we discover, and we fight over its meanings with other members of the constituencies art brings together – and keeps apart. Although we regularly criticize those in high places for



*Au Go Go, The Painting*, 1997, oil on canvas, 50" x 40", collection Dell Lemmon, Truro, Mass.

not sharing our particular passions, we do not let their lack of interest diminish our convictions. After all, no secretly encoded knowledge lies behind the sumptuous surfaces of paintings like Heilmann's, patiently waiting to be interpreted by insiders or translated to the masses by high priests or official mediators. In fact, Heilmann's shamelessly accessible works so generously offer themselves to viewers that they seem positively promiscuous. Combining in-the-street sluttiness and black-tie formality, these category-scrambling canvases make unexpected bedfellows of indiscriminate availability and you-can-look-but-you'd-better-not-touch restraint. They show that although art is never all things to all people, it is always more than one thing to each of us – even at its simplest.

This complexity (of response) should not be mistaken for some kind of difficulty (that is intrinsic to the art that stimulates it). Simple things often generate complex

responses – like joy, delight, glee and exhilaration. When we are enthralled by the way the late afternoon sunlight reflects off a stucco wall, or are taken with the tasteful arrangement of a room, or are moved by the full moon rising over the horizon, we rarely link the pleasures of these experiences to anything like difficulty. Art at its best – that is, art like Heilmann's – is not fundamentally different. More often than not, it is something very simple that satisfies us deeply, causing complex responses that can be endlessly analyzed, dissected and scrutinized. Explaining or accounting for the hows and whys of these responses is, indeed, difficult, and many art critics get so caught up in this task that they impute its difficulty to the works they're discussing, replacing the object of their study with the facts of their craft. Moreover, for the past few decades, many artists have aspired to nothing more than to make works that are "critical" and "difficult" – or academic and impenetrable. To my eye, nothing is easier than making simple things seem difficult. (If you've ever been trapped in the bureaucratic labyrinth of corporate culture you'll know what I mean.) The real trick is making difficulties seem simple, crystal clear and easy. And that's where Heilmann's art excels.

In courting carefree spontaneity, her deliberately composed canvases demonstrate that analyzing and experiencing –



*Moira*, 1998, oil on canvas, 75" x 60", collection Michael Lynne, New York



*Jackie P.*, 1997, oil on canvas, 30" x 22", courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery, New York

or thinking and acting – are not the same thing. While it is clear that much careful thought and time-consuming deliberation go into each swipe of her brush, it is also clear that every quickly flicked drip, loosely brushed smudge and solitary dollop of color is fresh and distinct from the considerations that led to its creation. A virtuoso of nonchalance, Heilmann's talent lies in making painting look graceful and easy. At once frank and ravishing, her electrifying images of stripped-bare voluptuousness partake in a pageantry of the everyday, generously serving up not knowledge but pleasure. Based in the conviction that the world is already full and that art does not compensate for its poverty nor add to its riches, her calmly luxurious works focus our attention on what's already out there, intensifying and concentrating our experiences and perceptions. Far beyond the solemnity and gravitas of seriousness and difficulty, Heilmann's simple paintings make "WOW!" sound like an eloquent statement, perfectly suited to those fleeting moments when the world is at once utterly ordinary and absolutely exquisite.

David Pagel  
critic and curator, Los Angeles

Cover: *Slice*, 1998, oil on canvas, 75" x 60", collection Neuberger&Berman, LLC, NY