

Charline von Heyl

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Installation view: *Charline von Heyl*, Petzel, New York, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella

On View

Petzel

Charline von Heyl

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New York

Charline von Heyl's new exhibition at Petzel finds the artist furthering her engagement with semiotics. She is an abstractionist, albeit one who eschews the categorial delineation between the representational and non-figurative. Von Heyl's pursuit is markedly distinct from the reflexive investigation of the conditions of painting's possibility qua painting, prompted by the American abstractionists of the twentieth century. Her interests are equally removed from those that informed her Neue Wilde compatriots in the 1980s, preoccupied as they were with cartoonish Neo-Expressionism. Sidelining both medium-specificity's impasto skeins and Neo-Expressionism's penchant for narrative, von Heyl

makes paintings that are exceedingly flat (she sands down her paintings to achieve this) and devoid of a vanishing point, hewing toward the line and its broad contours. Where she makes use of perspective, it is that of *reverse perspective*: her objects—a cascade of misshapen wine bottles, flower petals, raindrops—are generally portrayed in adumbrated outline or silhouettes, slowly descending or lightly buoyed. Von Heyl has often remarked that her gambit is to remain “ahead of language” and “create new images,” by which she seemingly means that her intention is to create novel configurations of images that are neither immediately recognizable nor have direct indexical referents with which to piece together a narrative. If meaning, in a loose sense, is to be found, it is not an unveiling but an associational practice, making von Heyl’s abstraction less painterly and more conceptual, concerned as it is with abstracting referents into the domain of meaninglessness.

This comes with a coeval challenge, freighted as the trail toward modernist abstraction is by recognizable modes, including the variegated language of geometric abstraction. Were von Heyl to repeat previous modes of abstraction, the results would not be “novel images” devoid of ready linguistic content but compositions anchored to historical referents. Such appropriationist images would not succeed on the terms that von Heyl has set for herself insofar as they would be “paintings about painting,” the exact kind of postmodernist conceit that von Heyl eschews. In this show, von Heyl meets these challenges head-on and generally succeeds in producing paintings that exclude meaning and narrative. The viewer finds themselves barred from forming sentential interpretations concerning the interior life of the paintings. Some of the most remarkable examples include paintings where von Heyl actually leaves behind some recognizable threads. For instance, in *Joan* (2022), a silhouetted jet-black bob wig is posited over a white and gray rigid grid that stands where the woman’s neck and face should be. *Joan* and *Sad* (2023) are von Heyl’s more solemn, quiet paintings, using copious amounts of negative space and sparse shapes. *Aléatoire* (2023), *Attic* (2022), *Demons Dance Alone* (2022), and *Blue Grotto* (2023) make busier use of askew geometric arrangements. In *Attic*, tangerine and alabaster panels are layered upon one another, a motley of maroon and jade droplets accompanying them; aberrant white splatters guide our eyes upwards before the droplets redirect our gaze. *Demons Dance Alone*’s bright rouge canvas features a dance of silhouettes, including semi-circles, wine bottles, and checkered rectangles outstripped by wayward white lines that form orthogonal axes. Bisecting axes are often instrumentalized in von Heyl’s paintings, with no clear rule dictating their path. In *Blue Grotto*, one can almost contrive the shape of a perched bird and fish amongst the swarming crooked shapes. Although von Heyl makes frequent use of diaphanous overlaid panels, winding shapes, and intersecting lines over monochrome backgrounds, she mostly avoids repeating her motifs and spinning them into a pattern. In turn, her outlines evade the meaning-making proffered by the likes of Reinhardt and Anuszkiewicz’s geometric abstractions.



Charline von Heyl, *Near Far Never*, 2023. Acrylic and charcoal on linen, 82 x 74 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella

Von Heyl also has a distinct fondness for kitsch. *Popular Toys* (2022) features the profile of goose- and fawn-like figures alongside more ambiguous rounded shapes. The title and the artist's repeated remarks that she is interested in fetishization (a la Freud) indicate that the painting's motifs are based on toys. Their contours are bedaubed with lemon- and tawny-colored haze reminiscent of airbrushed t-shirts. Below these silhouettes is a grouping of lop-sided floral petals disguised as basic shapes. There is also an inextricable ugliness to this work—not the brute and deskilled cloddishness employed by William Copley or Carroll Dunham but what the late Marcia Tucker calls “antagonism turned to aesthetic ends.” Rather than relying on crude jokes, asymmetric portraiture, or the appropriated lexicon of outsider art and art brut, von Heyl genuinely advances this endeavor by eliciting mild aesthetic offenses. She manages this by shirking proportionate

shapes and using graphic elements, pocked and stretched. The full breadth of this play is on display in *Near Far Never* (2023), a downright cascade of distended two-dimensional shapes splayed across a blank canvas. Despite the diversity in how each shape is mended, there is a unity to the works, distancing von Heyl's works from the "out of order" collages produced by Louise Nevelson (with whom von Heyl shares an interest in uprooted signifiers).

Unfortunately, meaning does seep back in works like *Funnybone* (2022) where flowers, arranged into flat columns, are set into a repeating pattern. One of the gallery walls, dedicating curated smaller works salon-style, is fitted with lesser pieces, including unremarkable animal portraits that lack the semiotic challenges enjoyed by her sprawling pieces. Nevertheless, the exhibition is mostly successful. Von Heyl delineates a theoretically rich and often visually interesting—though not always sensuously pleasing—path for abstraction to move forward.