

THE
CURVATURES
AND
CURLICUES
OF
CHARLINE VON
HEYL





"In the kingdom of kitsch, you would be a monster!" So goes the famous line in Milan Kundera's 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, delivered to the protagonist Tomas by his lover Sabina. In the story, Sabina embodies the human search for complete 'lightness of being' and identifies kitsch as something that needs to be shed, like the constrictive skin of suffocating familiarity. But there's a charm in familiarity too. And surely, wrapped up in kitsch is sentimentality, and the emotional weight we put on objects and knowable images. It is easy to drift off and think of the kingdom of kitsch, of what shape it would take and what sort of monsters would inhabit it, when standing before the works of artist Charline von Heyl. How might a painter like von Heyl—who has such a masterful knack for allowing the broadest range of us to pick out recognisable elements in her abstract works—visualise it?

TEXT
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FOOTNOTES
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In an interview with *Even Magazine* in 2017, von Heyl addressed the very subject of kitsch, saying: "There's an immense satisfaction that I get out of a perfectly curlicued line, for example, or a Disney face. Kitsch is not ironic the way I use it. Kitsch, for me, means a raw emotion that is accessible to everybody, not just somebody who knows about art. That's where kitsch comes from to begin with—it was basically art for the people."

Perhaps von Heyl is best thought of as a quasi-anthropologist, mining the world around her for aesthetically alluring objects and images to feed into her work. From faces and raindrops to bottles and telephones to leaves and stars, von Heyl's unashamedly decorative symbols and signifiers pry open her paintings and make them porous to the viewer. As a result, we are able to find ourselves in them; as if we could spill our own experiences and understandings into the cracks of them and watch them

set. These are paintings von Heyl leaves intentionally without narrative, but they are filled to bursting point with elements that make us feel almost as if a story might be lurking somewhere beneath the surface.

Von Heyl was born in the city of Mainz, in Germany's Rhineland in 1960. Studying at the Art Academy in Hamburg in the 1980s, and later moving through the art scene of Cologne in the early '90s, she became a part of an emerging art scene at Christian Nagel's gallery alongside artists such as Andrea Fraser, Michael Krebber, and Cosima von Bonin. She stayed in the city honing her aesthetic for some years until, feeling somewhat constrained by her experiences as a female painter in a particularly male-dominated environment, she set out for New York City in the mid-'90s. It was in New York that she met her husband, the painter Christopher Wool, and the two have lived and worked in the city ever since.

Her images are charged with desire – a charge that is found looping and riveting throughout all of her works, binding them together, and creating small waves of conversation between them as they hang opposite one another on gallery walls or in her studios. Although each of her paintings feels so distinctly *itsself*, there are marked stylistic recurrences in her work that unite them. The same curvatures and lines are used, the same arrows are painted with absolute precision, the same female face appears in profile, sometimes only as a phantom trace, and from time to time, the same thick black droplets—which could be raindrops or teardrops—are scattered across the canvas. Geometric blocks of colour—often in "dirty pastels" as von Heyl likes to call them—rub up against swirling, gestural washes of paint in which the brushstrokes remain visible. In one particular piece, entitled *Gacela* (2016), a formidable, cube-like form appears to bob on a wave of rose-coloured leaf forms, rising like a dense black iceberg out of pale, pink waters. Elsewhere, paintings are entirely monochrome, as in *5 Signs of Disturbance*, 2018, where the aforementioned black droplets hang over decorative swirls and expressive acrylic line drawings.

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Preferring not to sketch out or pre-plan the works she paints before beginning them, von Heyl instead gives herself over to a series of in-the-moment aesthetic decisions. She doubles back on herself, draws faces or figures and then makes them disappear, and follows the lines that flow from her hand in real time. What she chooses to erase, what she doesn't do, and the spaces between her gestures are all as important as what remains on the final canvas.

Von Heyl process sees her working in series' in a sort of winding up process. It's as though she must paint herself into a frenzy of densely-worked pieces in order to wrestle with an idea until she manages to tease it out in paint. Only then can she unwind and allow for freer, looser works to be made. The spiral image is important. Perhaps each of her paintings could be seen as curved slices that slot into the bigger curlicue of her practice; fragmented parts of something twisting ever-closer towards the centre. For all that movement, however, her paintings are remarkably still, and even more remarkably silent, meditative, and quietly emotional. Movement might naturally appear to conjure depth, but alongside this silence von Heyl somehow retains the two-dimensionality of her surfaces. She has even been known to sand the surface of her paintings in order to achieve the appearance of the absolute flatness she desires.

These days, von Heyl splits her time between New York and the studio she has on the outskirts of Marfa, the small but legendary arts commune town nestled in the high desert of West Texas. After being awarded a residency at the prestigious Chinati Foundation in the town in 2008, von Heyl fell in love with the place and has returned for several months every year since. In this scorched stretch of desert landscape, where Donald Judd famously found a new creative energy and bought two ranches at which to make his minimalist masterpieces, von Heyl is able to achieve the clarity of mind and detachment needed to experiment. It's a place to find the silent, abstract spaces she searches for; a place in which new paintings can come into being, away from the noise.



Tondo, 2017, acrylic and charcoal on linen, 80 inches diameter, Courtesy of Petzel.



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