

## Mary Heilmann Painting Pictures

“My vision of what it was to be an artist,” Mary Heilmann writes, “was to be quietly moving around the studio all alone, energetically fabricating assemblage-type sculptures, or smoothly streaming brushes across canvas panels leaning against the wall of a rough barn. My identity was that of a solitary person, shielded from the world. Because of that, I moved to Long Island. At the time of the move to Bridgehampton, however, my identity began to evolve from silent loner to someone energetically engaged in the discourse surrounding the practice of art.”<sup>1</sup>

After finishing her graduate work in sculpture at the University of California, Berkeley, Heilmann moved to New York City in 1968. Soon after her arrival, she was eager to engage with the artists occupying the Minimal and Postminimal art scene. As Heilmann describes in her memoir, *The All Night Movie*, it was difficult to break into the scene at that moment, and her status as both a woman and an outsider did not help in her quest to become a recognized artist. Disappointed at being excluded from several important exhibitions (including *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 1969), Heilmann made the decision to turn her focus to painting. Within the context of the time, her decision can be described as provocative, contrary, or, in her own word, “rebellious,” turning to a critically maligned practice as a means of stridently defining herself and her work against the norm.<sup>2</sup>

This self-imposed differentiation is key to understanding Heilmann’s relationship to many of the artists who defined this period and whose works have been associated with Dia Art Foundation since its inception. As Heilmann recalls “one of my biggest heroes was Donald Judd, who was totally opposed to painting, but his way of imaging relates to real things that we see in the world, so that inspired my work.”<sup>3</sup> Heilmann painted *The First Vent* in 1972, a hand-drawn rectangular grid in brown and red. In the same scale as the vents in her studio, Heilmann used her fingers to paint the lines, which accounts for its off-kilter appearance. In contrast to the industrial forms that Judd was producing at the time, Heilmann depicted an actual industrial form—an air conditioning vent—in a distinctly personalized manner.

Heilmann began traveling out to the East End of Long Island in the late 1980s, first renting in Wainscott and then eventually purchasing a home and barn in Bridgehampton, which she converted to a painting and ceramics studio. Although she still maintains a studio and workshop in lower Manhattan, she was painting exclusively in and moved most of her ceramic production to Long Island by 1999.

Location is paramount in Heilmann’s work, which is frequently inflected by memory—both autobiographical and cultural.

Her move to Bridgehampton also addresses another constant in Heilmann’s practice: the ocean. As she writes, “the ocean was always a part of my life, from cold foggy San Francisco, to the South Bay coast in Los Angeles, to the Santa Barbara surfing beaches of my college days. I built a studio in Bridgehampton just up the road from the beach, and I always go down there to get inspiration from the waves.”<sup>4</sup> The ocean features prominently in Heilmann’s paintings and memories of water in all forms—surfing, swimming, diving—are recurrent throughout her career. *Rio Nido* (1987), included here, dates from the time of Heilmann’s initial visits to Long Island and was painted at the house she rented in Wainscott. Its title references a resort town in Northern California that Heilmann visited as a young girl.

Since moving her studio to Bridgehampton, Heilmann has both lived and worked close to Dia’s Dan Flavin Art Institute. “The Dan Flavin Art Institute is right around the corner from my studio on the way to the beach, and to me the combination of the waves and the artwork by Dan Flavin is perfect.”<sup>5</sup> From 2015 to 2017, Dia presented Flavin’s icons here, an early series that traverses the artist’s initial interest in painting as it expands to fill three-dimensional form and incorporates light as a medium. Two of Heilmann’s paintings included in *Painting Pictures*—titled *Red Mirage* and *Green Mirage* (both 2017)—were inspired by Flavin’s icons. Heilmann writes in reference to the Flavin series, “I have often thought of my work as having a connection to the iconography that was such a large part of my Catholic upbringing and a spiritual and psychological influence in my life, so Flavin’s icons, and his Catholic background, really struck a chord for me.”<sup>6</sup> Many of Heilmann’s works have addressed her Catholic upbringing, either directly or obliquely, and writing in reference to the painting *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1989) she once said, “thinking of a painting as an icon is kind of a neat way to think about it. You look at an object of art, whether abstract or realistic, and you do get to channel magical, invisible things and thoughts. You get emotional feelings from looking at it, so it is very close to what happens when you have a religious experience.”<sup>7</sup>

Given her Catholic upbringing, Heilmann’s use of the word “icon” is as specific and pointed as Flavin’s choice to employ the term. Both artists exercise it to refer to nonrepresentational artworks that evoke memories of childhood, family, and friends through their titles and color palettes. Ironically, the work that Heilmann presents

in direct relationship to Flavin’s icons utilizes some of her least expressive titles, whereas Flavin’s series features some of his most elaborate, such as *icon V (Coran’s Broadway Flesh)* (1962) named for his friend Stanley Coran.<sup>8</sup> Heilmann’s work operates here not only in conversation with Flavin’s, but also with the building itself, which operated as a church from 1924 to the mid-1970s.

Heilmann writes, “The way I paint is informed by my clay practice. You can see that I use the paint in a physical and sculptural way. The sides of the canvases are painted and are part of the work, so that a painting is an object as much as it is a picture.”<sup>9</sup> The ceramic works included here, *Red Metric* (2015) and *A Row of Cups and Saucers* (2017), address Heilmann’s origins as a sculptor and make apparent that the medium never disappeared from her practice. Despite her self-defined status as a painter, Heilmann has continued to make works in ceramic throughout her career. These two sides of her practice have informed one another and allowed her to create paintings that function as objects in the real world. Seen here, *A Row of Cups and Saucers*—itself a reoccurring motif—speaks to her earlier stated desire to address “real things that we see in the world.” Heilmann chooses again to emphasize domestic usage and a handcrafted appearance, over the anonymized craftsmanship that Judd and Flavin sought.

### notes

1. Mary Heilmann, “Painting Pictures,” statement by the artist, April 19, 2017.
2. Mary Heilmann, *Mary Heilmann: The All Night Movie* (Zurich: Hauser & Wirth; Zurich: Offizin, 1999), p. 40.
3. Mary Heilmann, “Every Piece Has a Backstory,” in *Mary Heilmann: Looking at Pictures* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2016), p. 121.
4. Heilmann, “Painting Pictures.”
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Heilmann, “Every Piece Has a Backstory,” p. 126.
8. Michael Govan and Tiffany Bell, eds., *Dan Flavin: The Complete Lights, 1961–1996* (New York: Dia Art Foundation; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 212.
9. Heilmann, “Painting Pictures.”

**Mary Heilmann** was born in San Francisco in 1940. She received a BA in literature from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1962 and an MA in ceramics and sculpture from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1967. The following year Heilmann moved to New York City, where the work and writing of artists such as Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and Robert Smithson encouraged her transition from sculpture to painting. Since then, Heilmann's approach to painting has developed from geometric shapes to abstract forms referring to personal memory and elements derived from popular culture. Her work has been shown throughout the United States and Europe, including exhibitions at Whitechapel Gallery, London (2016), the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2015), and Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany (2013). In 2007–09 the retrospective *Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone* traveled to the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach, California, Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Heilmann lives and works in Bridgehampton, New York, and New York City.

#### selected bibliography

*Mary Heilmann: The All Night Movie*. Zurich: Hauser & Wirth; Zurich: Offizin, 1999.

Texts by Mary Heilmann and Jutta Koether.

*Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone*. Newport Beach, Calif.: Orange County Museum of Art, 2007. Texts by Elizabeth Armstrong, Johanna Burton, Mary Heilmann, and Dave Hickey.

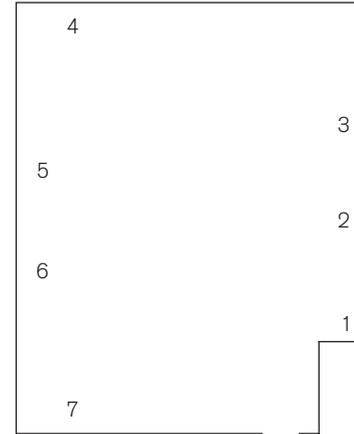
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Van den Bosch, Paula, and Angelika Nollert, eds. *Mary Heilmann: Good Vibrations*. Cologne: Walther König, 2013.

Yee, Lydia, ed. *Mary Heilmann: Looking at Pictures*. London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2016. Texts by Briony Fer and Mary Heilmann.

#### site map and checklist

1. **A Row of Cups and Saucers**, 2017  
Glazed ceramic, paint, and wood  
Collection of the artist, courtesy  
303 Gallery, New York, and  
Hauser & Wirth
2. **Red Mirage**, 2017  
Acrylic on canvas and wood  
Collection of the artist, courtesy  
303 Gallery, New York, and  
Hauser & Wirth
3. **Ray**, 2017  
Acrylic on canvas  
Collection of the artist, courtesy  
303 Gallery, New York, and  
Hauser & Wirth
4. **The First Vent**, 1972  
Acrylic with bronze powder on canvas  
Ursula Hauser Collection, Switzerland
5. **Green Mirage**, 2017  
Acrylic on canvas and wood  
Collection of the artist, courtesy  
303 Gallery, New York, and  
Hauser & Wirth
6. **Rio Nido**, 1987  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
Collection of the artist, courtesy  
303 Gallery, New York, and  
Hauser & Wirth
7. **Red Metric**, 2015  
Glazed ceramic  
Collection of the artist, courtesy  
303 Gallery, New York, and  
Hauser & Wirth



*Mary Heilmann: Painting Pictures* at the Dan Flavin Art Institute is made possible by generous support from Carol and John Finley. Additional support is also provided by 303 Gallery, New York, Philip E. Aarons and Shelley Fox Aarons, Allison and Larry Berg, and Hauser & Wirth.

Cover: Mary Heilmann, *Ray*, 2017. © Mary Heilmann. Photo: Thomas Müller

**Mary Heilmann**  
Painting Pictures  
June 29, 2017–May 27, 2018



**Dia Art Foundation**  
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