

Charline von Heyl's Alchemical Images

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What do the painter and the pirate have in common? The latter's plunder at sea could be likened to the artist's hunt for colour or form, taking what they like and discarding the rest. Or what makes the painter like the magician? The alchemy attempts that gave rise to oil paint, for instance, or the age-old relationship with illusion. These are made-up riddles; there is no punchline. But they're puzzles you could imagine the nine, large-format paintings in Charline von Heyl's exhibition at Galerie Gisela Capitain posing – watching you mull them over, knowing full well there is no answer. It's all surface here.



'Charline von Heyl', 2021, exhibition view, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Gisela Capitain; photograph: Simon Vogel

In *Pirate's Grave* (2020), light-washed blocks of bright pink and periwinkle atop irregular gridded sections coalesce with black-accented fish, hook and sword shapes in acrylic on linen. Compressed on the picture plane, the painting's many overlapping forms settle into a cohesive whole. The impression is not one of interaction between shapes but, rather, the immediacy of an image, which, alongside the incorporation of figurative elements into her painting, distinguishes her work from the abstraction of peers like Amy Sillman. The self-contained resolution of Von Heyl's canvases is also what unifies the diverse group of paintings exhibited here, which range from the black, ballooning X-shape, surrounded by seemingly hairy black lines and featuring multicoloured marks and splatters in acrylic, oil and charcoal on barkcloth and linen in *County Fair* (2020) to the tangle of rounded, checkerboard plumes that appear as if digitally rendered in acrylic, oil and pastel on raw linen of *Ghouligan* (2020). While they differ in technique and style, all these paintings have a suggestive opening, which often takes the form of a subtle disturbance in the composition. In *Pirate's Grave*, it is the thin, black hook itself that functions as such, almost literally drawing you into the painting, in concert with the other solid black sections.



Charline von Heyl, *Bunny Hex*, 2020, acrylic on linen, 2.9 × 1.8 m. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Gisela Capitain

This is a move in Von Heyl's bag of tricks, and the colour black is her greatest ally. It has a grounding effect on each painting in the exhibition, accentuating her colourful compositions with negative space, scratches, wisps or stain-like marks. Where much of the history of painting could be dictated by the artist's relationship with light, Von Heyl pays attention to the shade that signals its absence instead. The use of interference paint in works like *Bunny Hex* (2020) and *Radio Silence* (2017) underscores this dynamic, as the iridescent paint obstructs light waves so that the colour alters depending on the angle you're looking at it from. In *Bunny Hex*, this means that the ghostly googly-eyed forms, which appear dusty pink when viewed straight-on, turn grey when seen from the side, as the painting becomes monochrome at this angle. The effect recalls a lenticular print, as

the shifting palette transforms the painting's atmosphere to the extent that it seems to represent something entirely new. With its dozens of cartoonish eyes, the work also appears to riff on the optical illusion of the ubiquitous gaze, whereby viewers have the feeling that a portrait's eyes are following them around the room. Further, in a mode verging on tongue-in-cheek, the painting's oscillating colour is a way of making it look alive – a clear jab at perennial questions around the death of the medium. But Von Heyl takes painting's status seriously, particularly in her belief in its expansive possibilities. Her attempt to reinvent her work upon each encounter with the blank canvas is palpable, positioning this essential confrontation as enabling possibilities rather than constituting constriction. As such, these paintings – and her continuous experimentation more broadly – are a testament to the way in which boundlessness can be found in constraint.

'Charline von Heyl' is on view at Galerie Gisela Capitain until 29 January 2022.

Main image: Charline von Heyl, Pirate's Grave, 2020, acrylic on linen, 2.8 × 1.9 m. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Gisela Capitain