



Stefanie

STEFANIE HEINZE's paintings are yummy, but always itchy. They *itch*, *kick*, and *ooze* with vague sensations of the uncertain process that is *change*.

Text by Christopher Chow
Photography by Luca Phantskhava

Stefanie Heinze's paintings open spaces where ambiguous and amorphous forms emerge from her imagination. Whimsical, aggressive, and dreamlike at once, Heinze's paintings configure abstract forms into unexpected, even disorienting compositions, creating vividly colorful "battlefields" in which they exist and belong, to cite one term we settled on in conversation. A native of East Berlin, Germany, Heinze studied at the National Academy of Fine Arts, Oslo (2012) and the Academy of Fine Arts in Leipzig (2014) and participated in the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine (2016) before returning to her home city, where she continues to live and work today. Heinze is interested in shifting the language of painting or inventing one of her own—a practice that, for the artist, has broader implications in creating new modes of optical perception or psychological experience and, ultimately, facilitating the process of change.

When Heinze first stands before a blank canvas, the beginning of the painting process often confronts her with the anxieties that naturally precede a forthcoming change. Heinze refers to Phillip Guston's musings on the dialectical tension between freedom and "unfreedom" that many artists face at the beginning of a painting, reflecting in her own words that "control represents the choice between ability or non-ability." Heinze admits to having struggled earlier in her career with the fear of approaching an empty canvas to control it and the vulnerability of exposing herself to it for others to witness. The surmounting pressure to produce something artistically original or genius during art school only further contributed to her hesitance towards a painting in its initial stages. The blank canvas, as Guston might suggest, can represent the open possibilities of what could be expressed on it inasmuch as it also reveals the psychological barriers that inhibit an artist like Heinze from manifesting them.

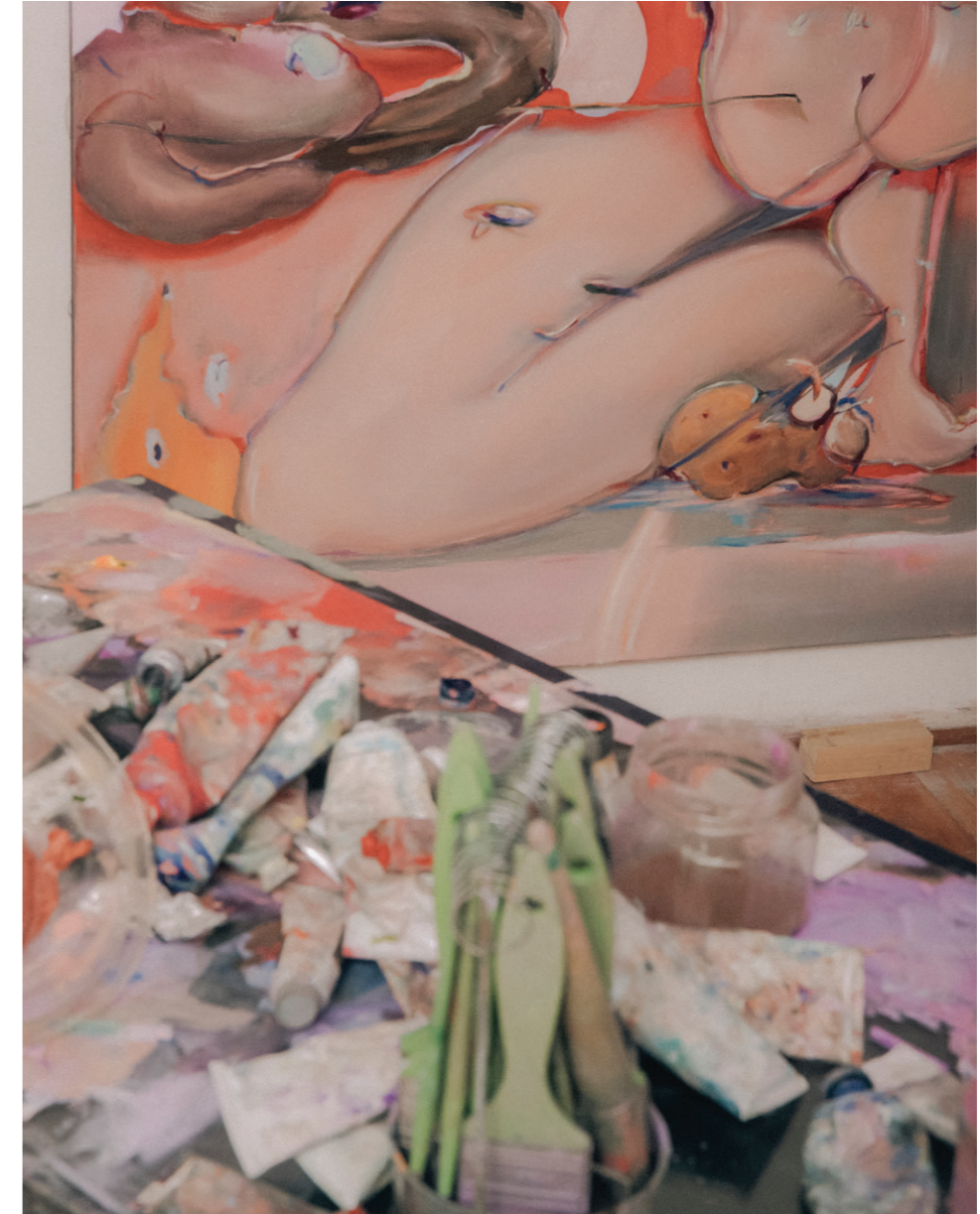
Heinze, however, has since developed her own methods to cross those barriers by accepting and even toying with the inevitability of uncertainty. Especially in the context of a traditional art-historical education that skewed towards male artists, the painter has endeavored to reach beyond conventions and certainties in order to champion the unknown—with "slap and care," she likes to say. Now, at the precipice of change before starting a work, Heinze is learning to negotiate the "choice between ability and non-ability" that comes with control by listening to and collaborating with the painting itself—the very thing that she is attempting to control or change. Investing trust in the process, as uncomfortable as it may be at first, allows her to loosen up and then lose herself in the act of creating, freeing her from the pressure of adhering to strict expectations of how a painting might turn out. Heinze usually begins her work from drawings or collages, which provide initial clarity and control for the painter; but she enters an intimate momentum with her paintings only during the stages of ambiguity that occur further along the painting process. These stages are most productive and audacious for the artist insofar as they are sublime, allowing her to directly confront the esoteric unknown through her paintings and embrace it as she works, often from canvas to canvas, in a rhythm of "wild and dizzying" moments.

Heinze describes her painting process as a series of random decision-making that teeters between intentional and unintentional painterly instincts. She approaches these instincts with a force that frees the abstract forms from her imagination into arrangements on canvas that can be simultaneously playful and abrasive to the viewer. She mirrors the ambiguous nature of her creative process in the amorphous quality of these forms, often translating mistakes on canvas into fine details in a

calligraphic manner. She teases out possibilities for new forms to materialize on canvas as they reveal themselves through layers and layers of color. She is not afraid to exhaust the range of the color palette as she juxtaposes tender neutrals with fluorescent neon intensities. She prefers colors that she does not fully understand, using them as tools to conjure new emotional or sensual experiences, as if to invent propositions of how color can be. She suggests subconscious experiences that may be relatable or familiar to the viewer, but not precisely identifiable by them—experiences that, when represented visually, "can be sometimes yummy, but should always be itchy," she teases. She only feels she has finished a painting when she can recognize that something within it has been brought to life.

What, exactly, is Stefanie Heinze trying to bring to life? Heinze's wet and greasy paintings ooze with the liveliness of both familiar and unfamiliar forms, miscellaneous as they are in color and shape, as they seem to emerge onto the surface in capricious movement. These forms manifest from the painterly gestures of the artist's hand, but they assume a presence and a personality of their own in the aggression of their interaction with each other. Mimicking a clumsiness of physical behavior, they might appear to be leaping, sliding, kicking, resting, or lurching across the canvas. Though partially recognizable by their activity, the forms are nevertheless amorphous by design and therefore share a certain ambiguous nature, regardless of whatever mischief that seems to define their presence in the painting. Heinze intends to bring them to life this way: "I want to see what happens when they don't have to be something." Rejecting the pressure for things to align along with certain expectations or norms, Heinze thinks of her paintings as a home for new forms to merely exist and belong in what she understands to be a state of being.

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No!, 2020. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 72.83×82.68×1.77 inches.
 All artworks: Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York



Third Date, 2020. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 78.74×51.18×1.18 inches.



A Hollow Place in a Solid Body, 2020. Oil and acrylic on canvas Diptych. 86.75 × 110.25 inches.

When I look at Heinze's paintings, however, the sensation of "itchiness" I feel comes from the sight of her abstract forms existing in not so much as a state of being but one of becoming. Like Heinze claims, the forms in her paintings do exist in states of being without having to follow a certain protocol; but their behavior, though frozen in space and time, also undeniably suggests they are working to become something, anything. In this vulnerable stage of transformation that they inhabit, their awkward movements remind me of strange experiences and vague sensations we might come across when we ourselves undergo a state of becoming—a growth spurt, a mistake, a desire to stretch beyond limits, an argument within oneself, a wave of anxiety, a leap of faith, a meltdown, a yearning for something more. Subconscious as they are, these experiences are sure to differ from one person to another, but they share the sensation of an indistinct itch towards the resolution of uncertainty. It is through this connection to the uncertainty that we might relate to the abstract forms of Heinze's paintings in more concrete ways than the fuzziness of forms that immediately meet the eye. We are similarly brought into the world and society not by our own volition, trying to understand ourselves through cycles of change in life, and more often than not, confused! Heinze powerfully captures the state of becoming inherent in this process by visualizing the interplay between the humor of clumsiness that it can involve and the gravity of the perplexing experience that it can be.

Art critics and institutions have been quick to interpret these complex worlds of Stefanie Heinze's paintings as subversive critiques of cultural life, hierarchies of power, or gendered norms. In the artist's works, familiar forms ranging from cigarettes, disembodied body parts, and animalesque figures indeed



Innerspring, 2020. Oil and acrylic on canvas Diptych. 86.75×110.25 inches.



Soft Becomings, 2020. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 72.83×59.06×1.77 inches.

often appear in fantastical configurations that offer brash defiance to the fixity of our everyday social structures, even to the canon of male-dominated art history. But Heinze herself expresses more candid interest in the political potential to instigate internal change by reflecting in her paintings the aesthetics of the psyche and the imagination, or fundamental forces that power the fluidity behind any change. While Heinze's work indeed responds to topical issues in contemporary culture and society, it does not center around or limit itself to them. Instead, it confronts and expresses a general flexibility of the subconscious that provides the necessary groundwork to begin changing the external structures from which social issues might arise. The artist is acutely aware of the natural ability of human perception to recognize familiar sensations as well as create entrances to new psychological or embodied experiences. As such, the deepest political capacity of Heinze's work is twofold; it lies firstly in her work as an artist to confront uncertainty in order to translate experiences of change into visual form, and secondly, in the psychological identifications and reactions that her images may elicit in viewers.

In the precarity of Heinze's work, then, perhaps we can come to see and better embrace the uneasiness that naturally follows any process of change. If we are careful viewers, we might learn from Stefanie Heinze's compositions to seek beauty in the chaos of the battlefield—to become emboldened in states of becoming and free to ooze or kick or hurdle through changes, whether personal or societal. To change, after all, requires one to confront the vulnerability of stepping into uncertain and unknown territory, which Heinze has allowed the canvases of her paintings to safely become for both herself and the ever-ambiguous forms of her imagination.

