

Charline von Heyl's audacious eclecticism

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Charline von Heyl, Petzel, installation view

Contributed by Barbara A. MacAdam / Where to begin in exploring Charline von Heyl's formidably eclectic and multifaceted show of new paintings at Petzel Gallery? She embarks on a visual discussion with her mostly nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American predecessors and counterparts in a tour de force. The show, cluttered yet precisely deployed, demands equally targeted unpacking, close looking, and an individual assessment of each painting on its own terms.



Charline von Heyl, *A Child Telling a Joke*, 2022, acrylic and crayon on linen, 82 x 74 inches

It is daunting to navigate the complexity of thinking and creating that we associate with this German-born and -raised artist, who currently spends her time between Marfa, Texas, and Brooklyn, New York. Like her German cohorts Sigmar Polke, Jörg Immendorff, Albert Oehlen, and Werner Büttner, von Heyl appears determined to dominate all prevailing modes of abstraction. But it's important to realize that she is a proudly self-taught artist and not beholden to any one school or technique. It's also interesting that while abstract painters today are mostly women, von Heyl's sources here are largely men.



Charline von Heyl, Sad, 2023, oil on linen, 82 x 78 inches

Her approach is archaeological. She excavates layer upon layer from the past to determine what she wants to say. Language is very important to her, especially the language of seeing and of feeling. In her notes, she references titles and literary inspirations as far-reaching as Clarice Lispector, Peter Handke, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. She draws on painterly sources as diverse as Hans Hofmann with his push-pull effects via opaque painted squares, and Carroll Dunham with his stylized and wittily cartoonish plays on nature. That's not all. Implanted in her canvases are everything from Walt Disney characters to dense illuminated manuscripts.



Charline von Heyl, *Funnybone*, 2022, acrylic and charcoal on linen, 82 x 78 inches

While there may not be actual landscapes among these works, there are surely nods to them, as there are in Dunham's playful portrayals, which von Heyl emulates. In her painting *A Child Telling A Joke*, the peculiar shapes seem to be visual puns for chattering away, with zigzags indicating laughter. She is not afraid to have fun, to depict animals, or to hint at the personal and the biblical. She includes faces and skulls – everything that touches her, from poetry to news to dreams to art history – which she mulls over in full view.



Charline von Heyl, installation view



Charline von Heyl, Joan, 2022, Acrylic and crayon on linen, 82 x 72 inches

Deadpan enigmas show up. The strange shape in the modernist-style painting *Sad* seems to be at once figure and ground. *Funnybone* is composed of ribbon-like stripes that look like country wallpaper, with small painted handprints mysteriously set mid-stripe. Is this an indulgence of kitsch or a more serious suggestion about how to read a painting with the creator's handiwork in evidence? Are we surprised by its charm and prettiness?



Charline von Heyl, installation view

We encounter a Schnabel-esque portrait of a faceless woman set on a fine grid and a Condo-like conglomeration of heads. Von Heyl helps us decipher it all with a quote from critical theorists Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, examining contemporary Western culture: *"It is a question of a model that is perpetually in construction or collapsing, and of a process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again."*



Charline von Heyl, *Near Far Never*, 2023, Acrylic and charcoal on linen, 82 x 74 inches

Near for Never takes off from a black-and-white modernist graphic design with geometric Matissean shapes planted atop a fine linear grid and delicate flowers improbably set amid the forms, disrupting interpretation. The title itself is disarmingly confounding, and von Heyl's excerpt from a Gertrude Stein quote only reinforces that reaction: "*Clarity is of no importance because nobody listens and nobody knows what you mean ... you mean what you know, what you know you mean, which is as near as anybody can come to understanding anyone.*"

So we are not surprised to see links to the Cubism of [Juan Gris](#) and then to [Arshile Gorky](#) and the [CoBrA](#) artists [Asger Jorn](#) and [Pierre Alechinsky](#). All of this registers the almost, but not quite, appropriationist quality of von Heyl's art, from the domestic to the expressionistic, filled with warmth and even anger. She has acknowledged that it was the

wild German artist Martin Kippenberger who most influenced her. “He was anarchic,” she explained. Perhaps she is, too – knowing few bounds but surely kinder and not so reckless.

“Charline von Heyl,” Petzel Gallery, 520 W. 25th Street, New York, NY. Through October 28, 2023.

About the author: Barbara A. MacAdam is a New York–based arts writer.
