

# Petzel

Jerry Saltz, "Hardcore," *The Village Voice*, March 7, 2006.

## the village VOICE

### Hardcore

A wonderful snake pit where styles thought outmoded turn dangerous again

By **Jerry Saltz**



*Dunce*, 2005.

Given that for every five solo shows of a living artist in a New York gallery only one is by a woman, and that only a small percentage of these are by women painters, and an even smaller proportion of those are by women who paint in what could be called an abstract manner, for a woman to be painting in a nonrepresentational, vaguely gestural mode right now is, consciously or not, a political act. If that woman is over 35 it could be called revolutionary. Some would say it's suicidal.

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In the early 1980s, women who were shunned from the House of Painting turned to a medium that had been considered irrelevant, a mere tool of conceptual art, and certainly less lucrative than painting—photography. The rest is art history. Although there isn't a group of like-minded women painters working closely together these days, something other than frustration is brewing. Here and there you'll see women painting in a territory hitherto occupied mainly, if not exclusively, by German male painters. Over the last 30 years, women who have painted in this more flamboyant way have included Joan Mitchell, Joan Snyder, and Louise Fishman. More recently there's been Sue Williams, Cecily Brown, Jackie Saccoccio, and Katharina Grosse (whose wild spray-painted room-paintings would have lit up the current Whitney Biennial.) And right now there's Charline von Heyl, 45, who is German, which may not be coincidental considering that innovative painters seem to tumble out of Deutschland like clowns from a Volkswagen. Von Heyl has lived in New York for more than 10 years and is currently having her fifth and best solo exhibition since 1996. Sometimes I think von Heyl is just a late entry in the de Kooning sweepstakes (one of her current paintings is even titled *Woman*). Even so, much of her art takes me to a wonderful snake pit where styles I thought were outmoded turn dangerous again.

This show is typically gutsy, uneven, hot-blooded, and cerebral. There's no one look to a von Heyl. None of her new paintings depict anything, yet each evokes a lot. There are hints of Tiepolo's billowy space, Beardsley's sinewy linearity, and Michael Krebber's caustic materiality. There's also a lot of old-school 1940s and 1950s abstraction, which can be off-putting. No matter. I thought I saw waterfalls, dragons, bicycle wheels, and bodies. *Happy End* recalls a washing machine in spin; *Poodle Pit* a leaf fire or frozen fireworks; *Woman*, the edgiest odd painting out of the show (probably my favorite), conjures an oxidizing X-ray and seems to feature a dark sexy thigh and maybe a hint of more. *Dunce* is a stroboscopic shadow play; *Bluntschli*, the weakest, is a Blaue Reiter jumble; and *Greetings* is a Chinese landscape seen through a Swiss chalet window. Von Heyl is unafraid of making big, serious, stupid paintings. Her work, which is neither abstract nor representational (terms that are all but obsolete by now), is discovered in process, not mapped out beforehand. It is visually engorged but still

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sketchy, intensely open-ended. Sometimes this openness dissipates into unfinishedness or academicism, or her color turns turbid and arbitrary. This may explain why her starkly graphic black-and-white drawings and paintings which involve limited palettes are better.

In all of von Heyl's work your eyes do a circuitous dance, traversing stippled, scrubbed, and stained surfaces, crossing patches of almost bare canvas, exploring what looks like photographic space, and following reedy streams of fleecy pigment laid down with rags, washcloths, and sticks. Soon you realize that a whole painting might not contain anything that is identifiable as a brushstroke. This varies the internal speed of von Heyl's work. You start, stop, and recheck how marks are made, and experience her decisions and erasures as thought processes and gambles rather than preplanned or bravura painting. As a result her work doesn't come off as expressionistic, apocalyptic, or angsty.

Von Heyl's paintings seem infused with an amplitude or allover-ness; something that makes them feel real and illusory simultaneously, open to being seen by different people in different ways at different times. Her paintings are visually conflicted yet confident in this ambiguous state, self-conscious while being self-assured. They tell the story of their own making.

Von Heyl is not a good artist because she's a female who paints but because of how she paints. Throughout her work there's an emotional remove. Mondrian wrote about painting "pure reality," Kandinsky, "inner reality." Von Heyl's work isn't mystical; she's smart but thankfully doesn't approach abstraction as a conceptual project (the downfall of so many painters these days, e.g., Fiona Rae.) She's closer to Cézanne who said, "I have very strong sensations." Von Heyl paints her sensations, guarded and otherwise, in serendipitous, thoughtful torrents, subjecting her work to constant editing. She's painting something in a feverish, hardcore way while using her entire body as a reference.

<http://www.villagevoice.com/2006-03-07/art/hardcore/>