

Claire Barliant and Christopher Turner, "Painting Paradox," *Modern Painters*, Summer 2009.

MODERN PAINTERS

PAINTING PARADOX

Charline von Heyl just had a successful exhibition at Le Consortium in Dijon, France, and has taken her time embarking on the next major body of work. As she works on several new canvases, she generously opened her Chelsea studio to talk to *Modern Painters* about the pains and pleasures of the creative process.

by **Claire Barliant** and **Christopher Turner**

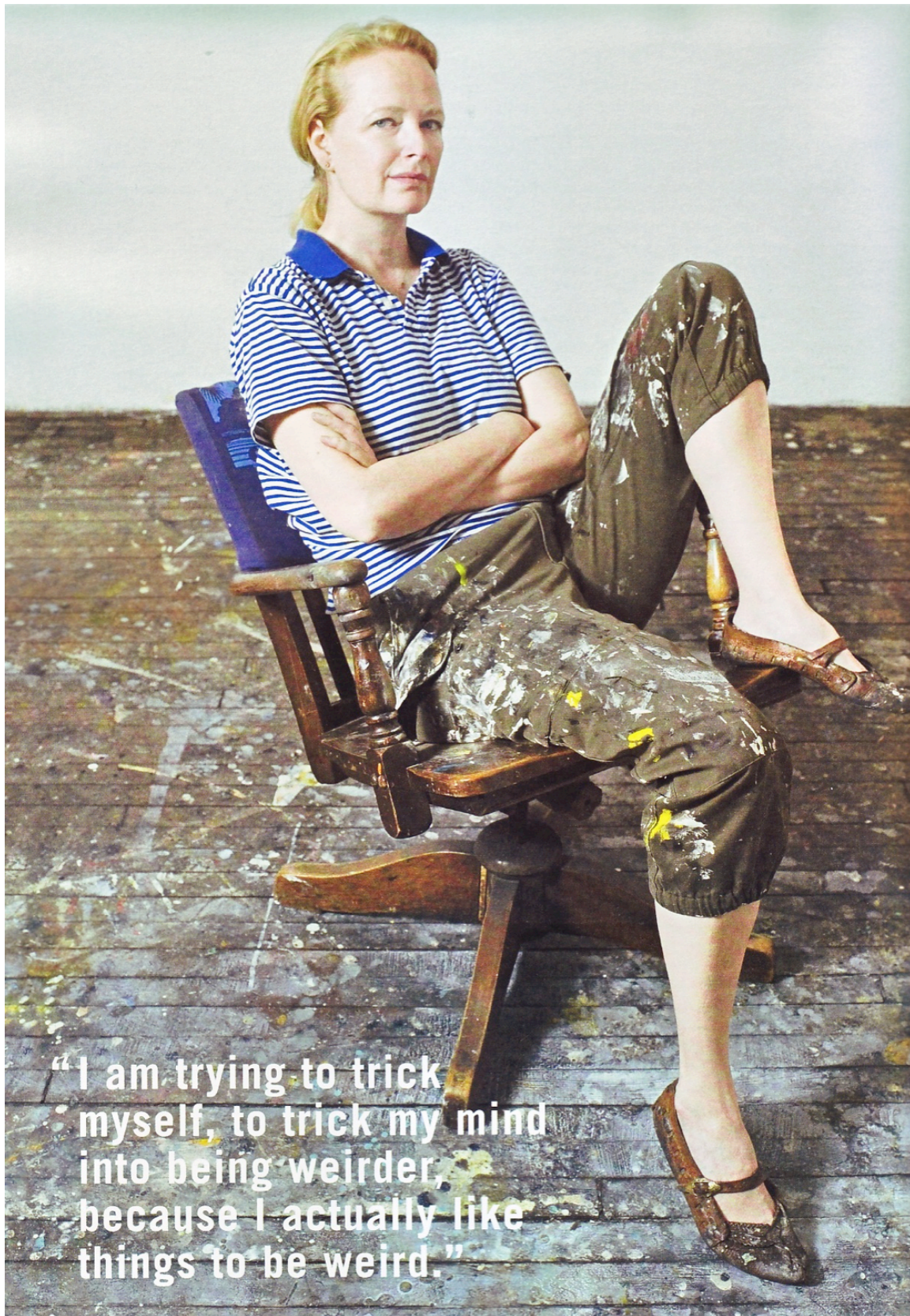
portrait by **Aubrey Mayer**

Charline von Heyl: I am currently in this weird moment that is absolutely necessary: I have to kill off my previous body of work. That means that I have to start by making paintings that are impossible to set free. I've been doing this for 20 years. I start with paradigms that I know I can't fulfill, so I am setting myself up for failure every time, every time for a deeper fall. For me, what makes a painting is a mixture of authority and freedom, where it really just wants to be itself, where there is no justification, or explanation, or anything like that. Where it's just what it is for whatever reason.

Modern Painters: How do you work with source material? How does it feed in?

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CvH: Really, feed in is the right term. I look through a lot of books or catalogues and I'm drawn to whatever catches my eye. The stuff I'm looking at right now is such a strange mixture — I am trying to trick myself, to trick my mind into being weirder, because I actually like things to be weird. I go to the Strand [New York's largest used bookstore] and some book jumps out, grabbing my eye. I found this absolutely horrendous book — Dubuffet at his worst — it's just awful! But there is just something about his paintings.

Second-generation Abstract

Expressionist artists usually have one little trick that they explore, instead of having the freedom to actually go somewhere with it and do something else. So you can just steal that one little trick. I am going to get something out of that desperate feeling of stupidity.

MP: This painting, *Clown of Thorns* [the title is scribbled on the wall next to it], looks like one of Dubuffet's sad clowns.

CvH: That's a painting that has been overpainted a lot, and right now I think it's a good painting. I like its absolutely dead stare, the cartoonish goofiness, the way it is both a clown and this Jesus face. And it just looks like it's in an unbelievably bad mood. Normally, I don't like a face in the painting; I have quite rigid rules in the end. Whenever you have a face in the painting, it seduces the viewer into a dialogue. I like the conversation between the painting and the viewer to be a little more unpredictable. If you had visited my recent exhibition in Dijon, you would have seen that my paintings always insist on a distance from the viewer. They kind of manipulate the viewer into participating in the painting, but they also keep their distance, and they often have some aggressive undertone.

MP: Do you always work in series?

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CvH: In bodies of works, yes. And it seems to...now that I look back, even though the individual paintings are very different from each other, there always seems to be a spirit that is defining one body of work.

MP: Would you say that the sad clown is defining this new body of work?

CvH: Yes, and for me the sad clown is a symbol for the impossibility of painting, and of the artist. It always has been.

MP: And what was the guiding spirit of the Dijon body of work?

CvH: It was also about, and always is about, how a painting insists on its own presence in different ways. That spirit you get from painting is a spirit that is really very difficult to get from anywhere else, because a painting has something about it that is momentous. It is there in a second, but it is also unfolding into different timelines. When you watch a movie, video, or performance, you have the chronological time frame of it; there are very few things that have both direct impact and this gradual unfolding in the same way as a painting. And I think it's a sexy thing. But, it's also something that has to be created. I can make paintings and, bang, they are there, but then, bang, they're gone. I like to make paintings that live in paradox, where your first impression is one you will never be able to re-create. Even when you see the same painting the next time, you are never going to experience the same feeling again.

MP: So how many of your canvases actually make it out of the studio? What percentage do you think?

CvH: A lot, because I work on them until they work. The paintings I'm working on now that I'm not happy with are not failed paintings, they are just not my taste right now, and I am going to keep them in the background, to see if maybe they are going to have their place someday. You know, failure is not the right word, because I'm not striving for the thing that is fashionable right now, the celebration of failure. It is more that I want it to succeed, and I want it to succeed in a way that surprises me. I'm just putting the bar high.

MP: The paintings you're working on now seem totally different from each other.

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CvH: I used to get that a lot when I was a kid, people saying that I was basically just doing group shows. But by the end, you would see that actually it does work as a whole, and that every one could only be a von Heyl painting.

MP: I see that one of the books you're reading is about the actress Romy Schneider.

CvH: Again, I think it's the sad clown theme. Everything about beauty, I think, is what you struggle with as an artist; beauty is so attractive, but it's also what limits you more than anything else. So you have to create a new form of interest that goes beyond that. As we know, it cannot be ugly, either, because ugliness is the other side, the other extreme of beauty. You have to really find a different way of maneuvering. For me, that's where the sabotage comes in [*Sabotage* is the title of her new artist's book (Xn Editions, 2008)]. When you create something indifferent and destroy, transform, and manipulate that into something that you can't quite read anymore, but that has a strong feeling of atmosphere, then you have created something new; this process of extraction is actually quite brutal. I find that when I start working again, I always have to get to the point where I really disrespect my work. I always thought that as an artist, you would get to this point where you just do your work because you know that you can do it. But, being in Dijon, actually thinking to myself, This is a great show, I did these paintings, intimidated me to the point of feeling paralyzed.

MP: Have you ever had a complete mental block?

CvH: Are you kidding?

MP: What's the longest?

CvH: Actually, the longest was this winter, after Marfa [Texas, where von Heyl had a residency at the Chinati Foundation]. The last two years were extremely productive, but after Marfa there was...September, October, November, December, and January. I used to come into the studio and then leave because I was having panic attacks. Then I forced myself to actually stay in the studio, to get into a really bad mood, and leave again. Then slowly, I stayed in the studio; I could at least read in the studio again — that was a way of kind of taming myself. Only in February did I start working again. And now, I just put something on the canvas, I try out what happens, see if it has this playful quality that's going to take me somewhere new. I cannot go

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into the studio feeling happy about my work and try to make another painting like that. It just doesn't work. I mean, it's always phony.

MP: So you always start from the place of total despair?

CvH: That's why I'm drawn to this clown theme; the worst platitude about painting is the sad clown, and then you just start to realize that everything about painting actually incorporates all the platitudes you can possibly think about. And you live with those platitudes. Platitudes that you kind of sacrifice your life for, that make you believe nothing else is important anymore. You're like a druggie that gets addicted to the high of creating something, to creating all this weird shit. I mean, I believe in it because I live it, but I don't take it too seriously. I have a sense of humor.



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