Joe Fyfe, "Mining the Field," *Art in America*, December 4, 2011.

Art in America

MINING THE FIELD

by joe fyfe 12/4/11

PHILADELPHIA

VIEW SLIDESHOW Charline von Heyl: It's Vot's Behind Me That I Am (Krazy Kat), 2010, acrylic and oil on linen and canvas, 82 by 72 inches. Private collection, New York. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York.; Black Mirror #2, 2009, acrylic and oil on linen, 82 by 72 inches. Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. ;

Ruminative and energetic, visceral and cerebral, Charline von Heyl's paintings and works on paper, seen in a 10-year survey at the Philadelphia ICA, suggest that perhaps the best tactic at present is to leave high-concept spectacle to other mediums and let painting be its weird old self. Bob Dylan once said that, unlike most performers, he did not reach out to the audience, but made the audience come closer. Von Heyl's work is neither retiring nor ingratiating. She knows that viewers will move closer if they choose to.

Born in Mainz, Germany, von Heyl studied with Fritz Schwegler (b. 1935) in Düsseldorf and Jörg Immendorff (1945-2007) in Hamburg. (She moved to New York in 1996.) In the late '80s she hung out in Cologne with a circle of painters who were known for their aggressively arch attitude; among them were Cosima von Bonin, Albert Oehlen, Michael Krebber and Martin Kippenberger. While Krebber, for one, maintained that the act of painting could only be justified if one cast doubt on it "from without,"[1] von Heyl set about investigating painting from within, delving into its labyrinthine potential. She began making work with a dense and varied facture, building up her grounds-and also undermining them-with all manner of physical and pictorial material. Muscularly compacted paint and textured substances such as sand were combined with fragments of figuration: silhouettes of body parts or common objects such as vases; repeating motifs, such as spiderwebs or windowpanes; heraldic shapes or Escher-like forms presenting optical conundrums. Von Heyl seemed to be testing the limits of how

much stuff-patterns, styles, textures, depictions-might be contained in a single painting, and how many methodologies used in its production. She unpacked painting by overpacking it-and simultaneously attempted to make each work different from the previous one.

Many of von Heyl's formal concerns were there from the start, though her palette has lightened considerably in recent years. Her penchant for filling the rectangle with incident was perhaps influenced by Immendorff, whose "Café Deutschland" paintings are crowded with detail. In her early *Untitled (9/8/90)*, 1990, for example, umber and ocher swirls of shadowy cubistic tesserae intersect with thickly rendered textures, areas of pure white and repeated shapes resembling frames with jug handles. *Untitled (2/95,I)*, 1995, could almost illustrate von Heyl's later statement, "Abstraction and figuration are the same. It's all just paint."[2] The work appears to depict a female figure, perhaps a farm worker, judging from her hat and her pose. Some contours of her body are shaded illusionistically, while others are outlined and painted, doubling as independent, emblematic fragments. Passages of white reassert the front plane while simultaneously interrupting figural elements executed in shades of brown with heavy cross-hatching. Von Heyl unleashed the libidinal drive in painting, only to find that it would mate with anything.

The exhibition at the ICA follows von Heyl from 2001 to '11, with 18 paintings and three suites of works on paper, each comprising 15 sheets. The generally consistent format of the paintings only serves to magnify von Heyl's disregard of stylistic uniformity or evolution. The canvases are large rectangles that tend toward square (90 by 85 inches, 86 by 72 inches, 82 by 78 inches, etc.). De Kooning once remarked, "If I stretch my arms and wonder where my fingers are-that is all the space I need as a painter." In a similar vein, von Heyl has said that working at a grand scale would involve "design and composition decisions, which I am not interested in."[3] While she paints with her eyes, torso and shoulder at close range, allowing an immersive intimacy with paintings that are large enough, she also exerts a detached criticality that sets her apart from her expressionistic forbears.

Von Heyl's paintings demonstrate a lack of concern for resolution, as she continually provokes internal contradictions. Loose gestures may be wiped down to their traces or carefully rendered so as to appear spontaneous. Bits of imagery mix with hard-edge, abstract pattern, straight color and lugubrious smudge. Where many painters work at a piece until internal discord begins to resolve itself, von Heyl chooses to wrangle, noodle, rethink and analyze. Occasionally, she will begin with improvisatory, painterly gestures, only to rework them in a cartoonlike or diagrammatic syntax.[4] One suspects this is what happened in *Black Mirror #2* (2009), an acrylic and oil on linen, which is composed mainly of black diamond and trapezoidal shapes internally framing thick, copper-colored tendrils that cross here and there, approximating a randomly constructed trellis.

Von Heyl is the driest of painterly painters. Her work contains very little in the way of the rhetorical, buttery light that paint can bestow, and relies more on methods derived from drawing, printmaking and even auto body repair. The paintings evidence an

abundant use of bleeds, washes, taping, masking, sandpaper abrasion, scratching and wiping. One also detects the skills of an illustrator in passages where the artist carefully modulates and blends in order to hint at volume. Color is generally underplayed. Von Heyl has said that she "usually will apply color as a cosmetic afterthought,"[5] once the painting has been worked out. She frequently chooses weak canary yellows, certain browns she likes because they dry nearly yellow, faded rose, red, ocher and black.

Big Joy (2004), executed in light brown oil and charcoal using rubbing, seems to have resulted as much from tactile decisions as optical ones. It recalls Robert Morris's "Blind Time" drawings, which Morris produced by rubbing charcoal on paper while blindfolded. Delicate biscuit-shaped charcoal marks float through oil-pigmented sfumato, and sketchy organic forms materialize in atmospheric clouds, effects that make the painting look something like a Twombly, as well. Here, as in many other paintings by von Heyl, the viewer's orientation is confounded; we could almost be viewing the work from within.

We might be viewing *It's Vot's Behind Me That I Am (Krazy Kat)*, 2010, from nearby or behind, or (impossibly) from between the face and weave of the support. This work was executed on linen bed-sheet material that was stretched over the existing painted canvas. It is dominated by a curtain of swipes and long skeins of ocher that wash down over the surface. Jutting upward is a broken, triangular wedge of hard-edge black and white stripes. Stains of liquid acrylic, matte and airy, hang in the membrane of the linen almost like sheets on a line. It is not a common procedure to paint on a porous ground stretched over a primed one, and the work presents a good example of how von Heyl will pursue the technically unusual to achieve subliminally unsettling effects. In addition, von Heyl "carefully changed all the colors of the drops and drippings"[6] in this painting-a degree of reworking that leaves no trace in the finished piece.

A bricklike form, black and white like the striped wedge, floats near the top of the painting, referring to the brick that is frequently aimed at Krazy Kat's head in George Herriman's comic strip. Executed in reverse perspective, von Heyl's "brick" sits on the painted surface, contradicting the apparent flatness of the painting, admitting a soupçon of illusionism and opening another gap in our reading of the work. It is a trick that she often resorts to, giving a nod to irony only to dismiss it. "Irony is a test drive for what you really mean," she said in a lecture in May 2011 at the UCLA Hammer Museum.

Von Heyl's concern with the pragmatics of the painting-the properties of the materials she uses, and the ways she enlists a viewer-sets her apart from her ironic confrères in Cologne. Her paintings converse with those of artists like Robert Bordo, Amy Sillman, Merlin James and Joyce Pensato, who interrogate the interstices of abstraction and figuration. These artists might be considered ardently anti-conceptual in that they seek a route back to painting as much through the body as the mind.

Von Heyl has long been influenced by the writings of the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929). Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924-29) gathered a wealth of photographic reproductions to demonstrate the influence of antiquity on the figurative imagery of later epochs, from the Renaissance and Baroque periods to the early 20th century. Warburg was unusually ecumenical for the times, including in his study objects of design and artifacts of popular culture, from newspaper photographs to postage stamps to furniture. In her Hammer lecture, von Heyl referred to Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* as "a community of images linked through affinity." She lectures about her own work in a similar fashion, mining visual history and culture for formal resonances (works using an interior border, works that have yellow as the main color, etc.). She is drawn, à la Warburg, to African rugs, Native American pottery and comic books; to major artists, such as Marsden Hartley, and "minor" or discarded ones, such as Bernard Buffet or Jedd Garet.

An analysis of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* led Warburg to conclude that Renaissance artists drew upon classical antiquity not so much for iconographic precedent as for pictorial codes indicating movement, as Philippe-Alain Michaud argues in a 2004 study.[7] If Renaissance artists "turned toward antiquity to the point of identifying with it, it was not to discover a repertory of figures but to rediscover the expressive formulas according to which life was represented therein," writes Michaud of Warburg's conclusions.[8] Warburg focused on the tensions inherent in Renaissance representation, in which the taste for classical ideals ran up against contemporary realities. The desire to imitate the past was freighted with conflict. After considering Warburg, one begins to see Renaissance painting as an act of resuscitation, fraught with uncertainty.

Von Heyl reanimates the image bank of painting, her own and others', manipulating sources drawn from her "community of affinities" to breathe life into effigies. And her source is visual and art history, not nature. The painting *Phoenix* (2008), a graphic black, red and blue abstraction on a white ground, could almost be taken for a Jack Youngerman, but it possesses a much more dissonant lyricism. Its main shape, a red curling C, seems to imitate birdlike movement; but in fact the shape imitates other hard-edge shapes from the history of abstraction that themselves evoke birdlike movement.

Even more than in the paintings, though, one can see in von Heyl's drawings-which often elucidate the paintings-an observant manipulator at work, with her thinking more transparent. Avoiding what she speaks of as the "art look" of drawings made exclusively with a tool and the hand, she seeks, as she has told me, "more a seduction of the eye than a celebratory gesture."[9] In her works on paper she combines direct drawing and painting with woodcut, silkscreen, lithography and spray paint-elements that can repel one another-along with Xeroxes of various kinds of photographic images. Graphic patterns and sprayed outlines seem suspended in space, their distinctness undermined by various techniques that blend boundaries. There is no hierarchy of representation, no differentiation among appropriated images, abstract gestures and graphic patterns. The drawings seem to emanate from a mind preoccupied with the infinity of pictorial equivalencies.[10]

Von Heyl's "ferocious input of images," as she described it in her Hammer lecture, was recently demonstrated to me while I was waiting with the artist for a restaurant to open. She took out her iPad. She had purchased online the entire series of *Hellboy* comics, a well-known epic drawn and colored by Mike Mignola. She focused in closely on frames of the strip and examined the drawn details. Then the same thing with a Max Beckmann painting that she had downloaded from a museum site. Computer technology has fueled her tendency, already in place for many years, to view works of art and other composed visual material from an endless series of vantage points. The tropes she uses and the image repertoire she draws upon are endlessly mutable. As a result, her work is idiosyncratic but not necessarily personal-again, something like Bob Dylan's.

In many interviews, von Heyl has shown herself to be very open to explaining her ideas about art and painting. In this way she is a throwback to the generation of Judd and Andre, who were their own best critics. Informed by Warburg, she sees painting as a palimpsest, a collection of signs and fissures leading back to earlier, freighted simulations. I believe that, in her Warburgian approach, she makes a genuinely new contribution to the dialogue on contemporary art. The house of painting is haunted, its walls perhaps thinner than one might once have thought.

Currently On View "Charline von Heyl," at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, through Feb. 19, 2012.

1 As quoted in Allison Katz, "The Not. The Eye. The Trick.," *Charline von Heyl: Paintings 1990-2010*, Dijon, Les presses du réel, 2010, p. 36. This book was published on the occasion of the exhibition "Charline von Heyl: Le jour de boire est arrivé," Le consortium, Contemporary Art Center, in Dijon, Mar. 14-May 31, 2009.
2 In the interview "Kaja Silverman and Charline von Heyl," in *Charline von Heyl*, exh. cat., Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 2011, n.p.
3 Conversation with author, von Heyl studio, Brooklyn, September 2011.
4 She explained this process to me using *Regretsy*, a work not in the exhibition, in which a linear structure was superimposed over, and echoed, an improvised, painterly ground.
5 "Kaja Silverman and Charline von Heyl," n.p.
6 Ibid.
7 Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, trans. by Sophie Hawkes, New York, Zone Books, 2004.
8 Ibid., p. 71.
9 Conversation with the author, September 2011.
10 The artist's fluency is effectively transmitted in the ICA's sumptuous catalogue, a collaboration between von Heyl and the designer Conny Purtill. Square in format, it gives every work on paper a full-page reproduction and is bound so that every painting is a four-page foldout that can be removed from the book and used as a poster.
"Charline von Heyl" travels to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (Mar. 21-July 8, 2012). The artist also has upcoming solo shows at Tate Liverpool (Feb. 24-May 27, 2012), Kunsthalle Nuremberg (July 11-Sept. 30, 2012) and Kunstverein Bonn (Nov. 9, 2012-Jan. 13, 2013).

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