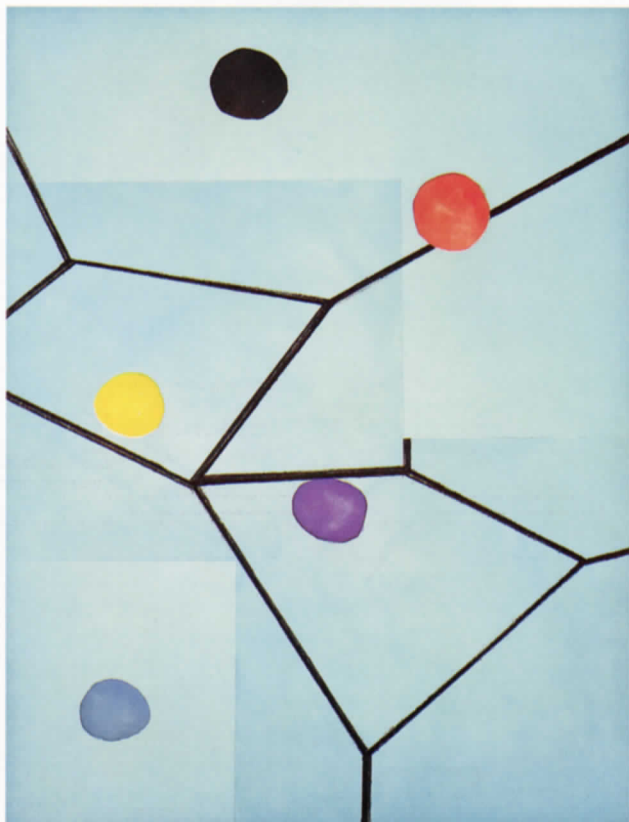


# Mary Heilmann

## New Releases

Crown Point Press  
Fall 1998



Mary Heilmann, *21st Century Fox*, 1998. Color spit bite aquatint with soft ground etching and aquatint. Paper size: 41 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 30 $\frac{1}{2}$ ”; image size: 29 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ ”. Edition 40. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

“You know what one of those guys said to me?” Mary Heilmann had just come from a visit with some old San Francisco artist-friends: “You really *get* color—in a girl sort of way!”

“Wow!” I said, my eyes on a wall full of working proofs of the prints you see illustrated here. “Did that offend you?” Secretly, I was thinking that though the remark wasn’t politically correct, it did sort of fit.

“No, not really,” Heilmann laughed. “I like being a girl—a bad girl, of course.” In a 1990 biographical essay, she reminisced about her actual girlhood in 1950s San Francisco: she and her friends as “little high school girls done up in the beat style sneaking out to late-night party pads—scared and thrilled.” She was born in San Francisco in 1940, but spent her early childhood in Los Angeles, going to movies

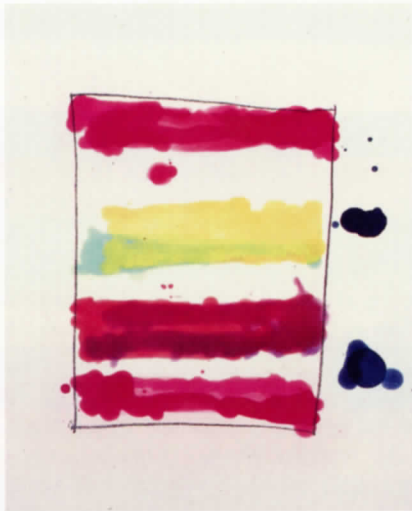
and playing on the beach. Her family moved back to San Francisco just as Alan Ginsberg’s *Howl* was published, and Mary hung out in the North Beach coffee houses and decided to be a poet—studied poetry in college at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She shuttled back to the Bay Area for graduate school at Berkeley, where she switched to art and began with pottery (Peter Voulkos was her teacher) and also made what she now calls “cute welded steel sculpture.” Then another teacher, Jim Melchert, took her class on a field trip to see Bruce Nauman’s first exhibition at the Nicolas Wilder Gallery in Los Angeles. “There were casts of a leg that leaned against a wall. I came home and made something as close to that as I possibly could,” Heilmann remembers. Later she met Nauman and his mentor at U.C. Davis, William T. Wiley, and “spent hours with them drinking corn whisky.” She thought Andy Warhol was terrific.

When she finished school, she moved to New York, and hung out at Max’s Kansas City where you could have arguments about art with Robert Smithson and Richard Serra—who was, incidentally, a high school friend from San Francisco. “This whole exciting anti-form thing was happening in sculpture,” she explains. “I was comfortable with that; I was right there with them, working with glitter and dust and thinking about black holes in space.”

She started “doing things with canvas and paint” in the early 1970s because “there was a big vacuum there in which



Mary Heilmann in the Crown Point studio, 1998.



Mary Heilmann, *Garden Study*, 1998. Color spit bite aquatint with soft ground etching. Paper size: 21 x 17"; image size: 13 1/4 x 10 1/4". Edition 30. Printed by Daria Sywulak.



Mary Heilmann, *Ocean*, 1998. Color spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 21 x 17"; image size: 13 1/4 x 10 1/4". Edition 15. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

to operate. Painting was alleged to be dead." Sculpture was definitely dominant at that time—perhaps it still is—but a few artists we now know searched for new approaches to painting. Most of those who worked abstractly shared with their sculptor friends an inclination toward minimal forms: Richard Tuttle used often-ephemeral sculpture materials for what seemed like painting concerns. Robert Ryman and Robert Mangold (one emphasizing touch, the other not) pursued painting each with his own kind of purity.

Heilmann was affected by the restraint of the time—her paintings have an implied underlying grid, and often use geometric forms. But she seemed a little off-hand about it all. If she had stayed in San Francisco, she might have become a conceptual artist using actions and installations in a straightforward, often humorous way that was being developed here in the 70s. In general, humor in art didn't reach New York until much later. Heilmann's humor, her refusal to take herself too terribly seriously, is, I think, inherited from her roots here. The "girl-ness" ("Can we talk?") probably comes from L.A.

David Joselit, who wrote a catalog essay for a Heilmann exhibition in 1990, points out that while most grids are thought to be spiritually inspired, she tips the grid, dissolves the colors, "flowing and intimate." Allusion attaches itself: a painting looks like a package of something, or reminds you of a swimming pool or the set of a T. V. show. All this stuck onto New York painting. What an odd hybrid! "Delightfully vulgar and gaily carnal," wrote a critic. "Such caring care-

lessness," approved another. But these are recent remarks. Back then, the work looked "feminine" (which was not a complement) or maybe just brazen. Now, Mary Heilmann is seen as a pioneer of postmodernism, and she gets lots of rave reviews. "This exhilarating show," wrote Paul Mattick in *Art in America* last year, "...creates a density of feeling and idea often belied by the simplicity of means."

"More than any other painter working today," wrote critic David Pagel, "Mary Heilmann can make a quickly flicked drip, a loosely brushed smudge or a solitary dollop of color seem like a big event."

In the etching studio, watching the printers pull a proof off the press and pin it on the wall, there was a long silence while Heilmann absorbed it. Then she turned with a grin and announced, "*21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox* is finished!"

"Why the title?" I asked, after our initial excited remarks.

"It's inspired by a line in a Doors song, 'she's a twentieth century fox'," she replied. "It looks like a Formica kitchen, has an element of trailer trash, yet there's something about the future there too, don't you think?" She laughed. "Maybe that will get people to know this art isn't totally serious!"

I was trying to think why Heilmann's art sometimes is called postmodern, and I guess its playfulness is part of the reason. Another part might be Heilmann's pleasure in what she calls "sampling." "I like visual bits," she says, "And I like casually quoting different styles. Finding meaning in my work is something like reading tea leaves. It means





**Above left:**

Mary Heilmann, *Pentimento*, 1998. Soap ground aquatint with color aquatint and spit bite aquatint on Gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 41 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 30 $\frac{1}{2}$ "; image size: 29 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Edition 20. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

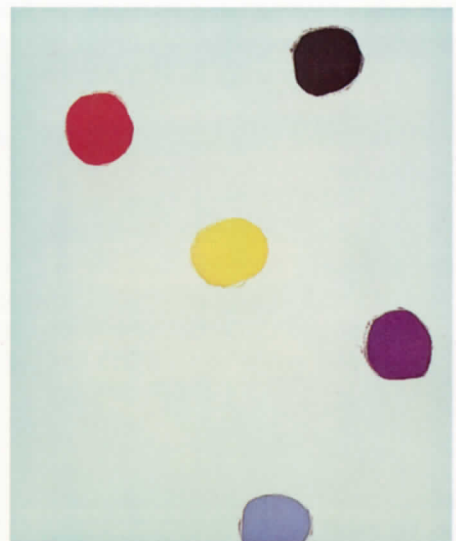


**Above right:**

Mary Heilmann, *Graffiti*, 1998. Soap ground aquatint with color spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 41 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 30 $\frac{1}{2}$ "; image size: 29 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Edition 10. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

**Right:**

Mary Heilmann, *Melody*, 1998. Color aquatint. Paper size: 24 x 19"; image size: 13 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Edition 30. Printed by Daria Sywulak.





Mary Heilmann, *Margot*, 1998. Color aquatint with soap ground and spit bite aquatints. Paper size: 41 1/8 x 30 1/2"; image size: 29 1/2 x 21 1/2". Edition 40. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

stuff, but that gets revealed later, after you've finished drinking the tea. I think of what I'm doing as making a kind of visual journal, locating us in a mixture of cultures, past, present, future."

Heilmann is often included in exhibitions with artists under 40, though she is over 50 herself. She says she's glad to be getting older, because it's not so easy to be distracted by "love and other emotions." "My life is devoted to maintaining a state of concentration for my painting," she explains. "Almost like being an athlete in training." She says she loves printmaking because of the opportunity to work with other people. Her image of an artist's life, she remarked,

was struck in the 50s—"no husband or children, lone, poetic, a night woman. I chose the vocation because I thought I could be a nut. But that's all changed now." Now, she says, she realizes that "the work is better when you can work with others: printers, publishers, gallery people. We're all in it together, and we pick up energy from each other that keeps things fresh."

The first print Heilmann made at Crown Point was the small image with dots, titled *Melody*. Then came the more ambitious *21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox*. After it was finished, Heilmann made a third plate with dots on it, and—seemingly on impulse—drew a rollicking gesture on another plate to go behind it. We printed the gesture in black first, and then she had the idea to try a gray-white, which printer Daria Sywulak thought would show up well on a thin sheet of cream-colored paper *chine collé*. Heilmann wanted to use the gesture plate both ways, so the *chine collé* version became *Pentimento*, and she made a fourth dot plate which she printed over the black version of the gesture. This time she made the dots blot-like, soft and dripping. She called the print *Graffiti*. "I love working with expressive gestures," she exclaimed. "You know, I haven't done this very much until now, and the action seems strange and exotic, like painting itself seemed when I first started doing it after years working as a sculptor." To further explore gesture, and in honor of the house she is presently building on Long Island, Heilmann next made two small prints: *Ocean*, and *Garden Study*.

As Heilmann's time with us came to a close, she completed the striped print, *Margot*. "Oh, it's gorgeous," she said, after trying out several different color combinations and arriving at the right one. She thought a few minutes, then added, "I'm not adverse to gorgeousness at all. I just want it to look like it happened without a struggle."

—Kathan Brown

Mary Heilmann is represented by the Pat Hearn Gallery, New York City.

### **Catalog available through Crown Point Press:**

**Mary Heilmann: A Survey.** Published by The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA, 1990. Essay by David Joselit, with a statement by the artist. 24 pp with 7 color plates. \$5 + \$3 s/h.

Quantities are limited, so please call before ordering.

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