

Overview



Joaquin's Close Out, 2006. Color aquatint with spit bite and sugar lift aquatints. Paper size: 40 x 30 1/2"; image size: 30 x 22".
Edition 25. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

MARY HEILMANN

"Painting a line across the canvas with a brush is similar to the motion of a wave breaking"

—Mary Heilmann

It seemed like more than just coincidence that the world-famous Mavericks Surf Contest took place the same week as New York artist Mary Heilmann's second residency began in our San Francisco studio. Heilmann completed her first etching project with Crown Point Press in 1998, and I was especially looking

forward to her second visit this past winter. Kathan had run the earlier project, but this time I would be in and out of the studio, connecting with the artist while the printers did the work. Ever youthful and enthusiastic, Heilmann showed up the first morning in very hip black Keds and wearing a jacket by the surfing label Billabong. I couldn't wait to tell her about the Mavericks Contest since I knew that she is a great fan of surfing.

The Mavericks Contest is a major surfing event in which 24 world-class surfers are selected and given 24 hours notice to



Valentine, 2006. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with drypoint on gampi paper chine colle. Paper size: 40 x 30 1/2"; image size: 30 x 22". Edition 10. Printed by Catherine Brooks.



Passage, 2006. Color aquatint with spit bite and sugar lift aquatints and drypoint. Paper size: 40 x 30 1/2"; image size: 30 x 22". Edition 15. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

compete, and it happens once a year in Half Moon Bay, a coastal town just south of San Francisco. At certain times of the year a mix of strong currents and shallow reefs a half-mile offshore combine to produce monster waves, massive walls of water that have been described as the “most dangerous waves in the world.” It takes a tremendous amount of courage and skill to face these 50-foot waves, and they push surfers to the extreme edge of their sport. Throughout the first week that Heilmann was at Crown Point we constantly checked the daily newspaper for coverage of the contest, especially photos of the awesome waves and the surfers who dared to ride them.

Mary Heilmann grew up watching surfers, and her love of the ocean started early, during her childhood years in Southern California. She swam in the ocean near Manhattan Beach almost daily and at a swim club she learned the art of the high dive. In her autobiographical catalog, *The All Night Movie*, she reminisces about the dangerous dives she practiced: “At the club I dove from the springboard and later from the tower outdoors at the Exposition Park. The tower was five meters high. There was the combination of terror, potential glory and the exhilarating rush of vertigo. The descent was at once soaring flight and plummeting weight. Now I can take these memories of feelings apart and think about what they meant, how they formed for me a picture

of desire.”

Now, though no longer diving from a high board, Heilmann is still influenced by the beach culture of her youth. She paints with agility, conveying a sense of exhilaration in her work. In a review of Heilmann’s 2005 exhibition at 303 Gallery in New York, *Artforum* critic Johanna Burton describes Heilmann’s hybrid painting style as “a color-gorged, visual pig-Latin.” Her quirky and high-spirited visual language combines elements of pop art, minimalism, and geometric abstraction with allusions to various forms of popular culture: film, design, and music. In addition, Heilmann borrows visual ideas from domestic interiors and landscapes. For three decades she has skillfully subverted modernism by riffing on different cultural styles from the 20th and 21st century, anchoring her painting in a very contemporary place—a place that makes her a favorite with younger artists (she is often included in shows with artists half her age). Like the surfers at Mavericks, Heilmann proficiently makes the result of long hours of labor look easy and natural. As David Pagel wrote recently in a catalog essay, “A virtuoso of nonchalance, Heilmann makes the complexity and difficulty of abstract painting look carefree and easy, part of the pageantry of everyday life that would simply slip by if not attended to with the devotion and focus made possible by passion.”



Acid Line Up, 2006. Color aquatint with spit bite and sugar lift aquatints. Paper size: 21 1/2 x 17"; image size: 15 x 11". Edition 15. Printed by Catherine Brooks.



Clear Day, 2006. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints. Paper size: 21 1/2 x 17"; image size: 15 x 11". Edition 10. Printed by Catherine Brooks.



Weather Report, 2006. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints on gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 21 1/2 x 17"; image size: 15 x 11". Edition 10. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

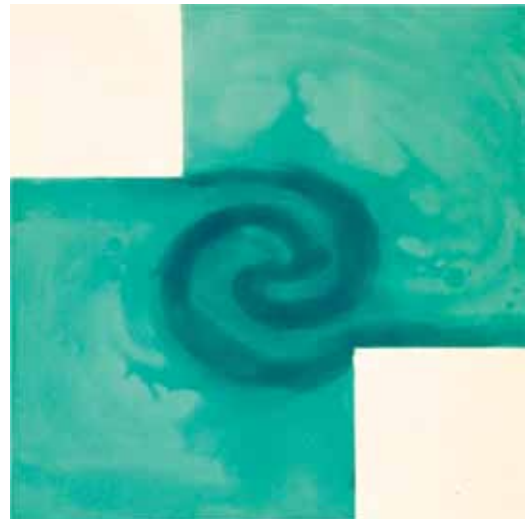
Heilmann didn't waste any time in the studio. Within the first few days she produced a small etching titled *Acid Line Up*. I was excited to see this brightly colored etching in which Heilmann drew minimal but expressive lines, stacking them up horizontally on a rectangular plate like neat rows of waves breaking in succession. Printing the same plate in different colors yielded two other etchings with seascapes as the theme. *Clear Day* is printed in shimmery silver. Its title refers to the weather we were having in San Francisco during Heilmann's stay. *Weather Report* is printed in Prussian blue, a color that suggests the deep sea as well as (Heilmann said) the late '70s jazz/fusion band Weather Report.

The palette in *Acid Line Up*, also found in many of Heilmann's paintings and earlier prints, recalls her punk days from the late '70s: psychedelic acid greens, oranges, and yellows. In a lecture she gave at the California College of the Arts while in San Francisco, Heilmann showed images of her paintings from that period and joked, "I am revisiting my psychedelic phase for the second time around, but this time I am more present for it."

In a fourth small print, Heilmann had the idea to draw a shape of two squares at a diagonal that overlap at one corner. In the center, where the two points meet a spiral form printed in emerald green spins out onto a creamy background of gampi paper chine collé. The composition of this print recalls the way Heilmann often takes shaped canvases and juxtaposes them in offbeat ways either by staggering them side-by-side or abutting them diagonally. When we were viewing the final version of the spiral image, Heilmann, the printers and I talked about the importance of influences and titles. Heilmann expressed her admiration for the sculptor Robert Smithson. We joked about

calling the print "Spiral Jetty." But after we compared stories of swimming in the Atlantic Ocean and being tugged out to sea by strong currents, the title *Undertow* took hold.

During the second week of her project at Crown Point, Heilmann was busy working on a large image that immediately looked very new. She explained that she was working on this new concept in her current painting. She is known for using a traditional grid in a number of playful ways, and in this image she manipulated the grid to suggest one-point perspective. In describing the new strategy, Heilmann talked about the desire to create deep space like hallucinogenic space similar to what you might find in computer graphics or in video games. She uses a computer as a tool in her paintings to refine images. "It's a big



Undertow, 2006. Color spit bite aquatint on gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 21 1/2 x 17"; image size: 12 x 12". Edition 20. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

inspiration for me, the computer,” Heilmann told *ArtNews* writer Linda Yablonsky, “It’s all narcissistic; I just play around with my own art on it, so it’s kind of autoerotic.”

To create the illusion of deep space, Heilmann drew lines that appear to recede towards a vanishing point; these lines were printed in silver on gampi paper chine collé. On a second plate she drew what looked like paint being poured down a canvas; this was printed in a vibrant red. Heilmann teased about calling the print *The Shining* after the film by Stanley Kubrick because in the movie there is a famous scene in which blood flows from a door and down a long corridor. Then we discussed the importance of color and titles to her work, and Heilmann explained to me that titles are like poems because they create a mental picture; they tell stories like songs do. Titles have the power to create imagery that can be evocative of many different sorts of cultural meanings, and with color there can be a mystery as to its association. The use of red can summon up blood, hearts, or passion. Finally, Heilmann chose the title *Valentine* for the print, perhaps in honor of the holiday that was then upcoming. A second version followed. This has an elegant mint green grid with a flow of silver, and is titled *Passage*.

With the completion of *Valentine* and *Passage* and with only a couple of days left in the project, Heilmann surprised us all by producing *Joaquin’s Close Out*, a large, knock-out image of expressive, dripping lines printed in bright violet, reds, purples and orange on a pink background. On her last day, she finished early. As she made for the door, I called out, “What will you do now?” She waved breezily as she replied, “I’m going to Ocean Beach, of course!”

—Valerie Wade



Mary Heilmann in the Crown Point studio, 2006.

In the Crown Point Gallery: *Mary Heilmann: New Etchings*

April 6 - May 26, 2006

**At the de Young Museum:
*Crown Point Press: The Art of Etching***

through August 27, 2006

This exhibition includes a selection of prints from the Crown Point Press Archive, which is owned by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Karin Breuer, Curator of Contemporary Graphic Art at the de Young, curated the exhibition and many of the prints are also featured in Kathan Brown's most recent book, *Magical Secrets about Thinking Creatively: The Art of Etching and the Truth of Life*. On Friday, May 12 Kathan Brown will be presenting a lecture in conjunction with the book and the exhibition in the Koret Auditorium, de Young Museum, at 6 pm. The lecture will be followed by a book signing.

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