

ART REVIEW: The Quiet Poetry of Mary Heilmann's Paintings at Dan Flavin

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by James Croak

The artist [Mary Heilmann](#) is having a moment. Her current show at of the DIA Art Foundation's [Dan Flavin Art Institute](#) in Bridgehampton is but the latest accomplishment of an artist who dedicated herself to the craft of abstract painting as it went in and out of fashion a dozen times in her 77 years.

Her career trajectory is somewhat improbable. Born in San Francisco in 1940, she started with literature and poetry, earning a degree in the same from UC at Santa Barbara, and later finished a master's degree in ceramics at UC Berkeley.

The concerns and interests in New York City are miles away from those of the Bay area and I imagine it was a difficult transition for her when she moved to NYC in 1968. This was a time when performance art was king, sculpture was acceptable as long as it was large and outdoors, and the craft of painting had closed out of town, of no critical interest.



Mary Heilmann, installation view. The Dan Flavin Art Institute, Bridgehampton, New York. © Mary Heilmann. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York.

Artists who prevail often emerge entirely against the grain, such as the contrarian [Jeff Koons](#) who believed in the 1970s that the future of art was in figurative sculpture, a subject so vieux jeu at that time that it wasn't even taught anymore. Or [Marcel Duchamp](#), whose visually unimpressive work birthed a new type of non-visual art around 1910 and waited half a century for the rest of the art world to get on board as the style parades of 20th century art drifted by.

Such are the thoughts when one views the work of Mary Heilmann and thinks about all the weltanschauungs that she weathered in decades when her type of clean-edge paintings were nowhere to be seen.



“Ray” by Mary Heilmann, 2017. © Mary Heilmann. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York.

Fortunately Heilmann had some major dealers along the way who kept her in the game. One of the most significant of these was Pat Hearn, who passed at an early age but whose prescience was highly regarded by collectors everywhere. Also the adventurous collector and gallerist Holly Solomon, whose potpourri stable included Heilmann. Most recently Heilmann is represented by the west coast powerhouse Hauser & Wirth, which can increase market prices at will. And so they climb.

A Mary Heilmann painting could have been had for low four digits at auction as recently as year 2000, and I am sure many wished that they raised a hand as her works now fetch as much as a pair of His and Hers Teslas. By the end of 2001 they were commanding five figures and climbed that mid-range ladder throughout the early part of this century. Also, one should note along with this slow but steady climb the appearance of her work at the top auction houses in the world: Sotheby’s, Christie’s, and Phillips figure prominently in the 62 public auctions that list a sale.

A few years ago, she broke into blue chip land, crossing over the magical six-figure barrier, with her 1982-2001 “Pink Shoulders” fetching a hammer price of \$110,000 at Sotheby’s Spring auction in 2012.

This is admirable, as anyone who has lasted in the constantly shifting, and often merciless, art world can attest. She fought the good fight without gimmicks over decades, prevailing in the market and now among collectors and museums in general, as money, as expressed in purchase prices, draws the attention of both.

Today, Heilmann’s work can be viewed as poetry in what is distinctly a non-poetic time. That’s not to say there haven’t always been reserved wit and illuminating images among us. It’s just that when the powers that be believe a butt plug with Santa Claus is the art that should be pushed into view, it becomes more attractive for most to revisit the quiet and sustained beauty of a Heilmann painting. Sure the iconoclast humor of a [Paul McCarthy](#) work is a giggle for a moment, but after an hour it becomes a drab sight gag in a career of sight gags and potty jokes.



“Santa Claus” by Paul McCarthy, Schouwburgplein Square, Rotterdam.

Also, Heilmann works against the backdrop of Pop art, which has dominated the scene for at least a generation and is the antithesis of her genre. Think home-cooked meal versus take-out. For this she should be commended.

In the current show at the Dan Flavin Art Institute, there are six paintings and an odd row of ceramic cups and saucers. The cups don't seem to have much to do with contemporary art other than the fact that Heilmann started working in the ceramic tradition, so the colors become meaningful in themselves.



“A Row of Cups and Saucers” by Mary Heilmann, 2017. © Mary Heilmann. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York.

The First Vent on display is probably her best-known work and also, apparently, the oldest. Dating from 1972, it was borrowed from the Ursula Hauser collection. Hard to make a painting that stirs the soul 45 years later, but this one truly does. Heilmann admits that it was actually finger painting, à la ceramics.



Mary Heilmann, installation view including “The First Vent,” 1972 (right). The Dan Flavin Art Institute, Bridgehampton, New York. © Mary Heilmann. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

She traced the outlines of a vent in her loft onto paper with paint on her fingers. The technique was a deliberate break from the industrial forms favored by Donald Judd, the then ranking critic and dominant artist. It was also a departure, of course, from the work of industrial lover Dan Flavin, in whose institute the painting now hangs.

There is humor here for sure, a finger painting that all agree is good hanging in the anti-humanist digs of Dan Flavin. The show is up through May of 2018, so there is plenty of time to see and re-see it. As Mary Heilmann has lived around the corner in Bridgehampton for decades, she must also be seen as a local girl who hit the big time. Mary Heilmann is having a moment.

BASIC FACTS: “Mary Heilmann: Painting Pictures” is on view June 29, 2017 to May 27, 2018 at DIA: The Dan Flavin Art Institute, 23 Corwith Avenue, Bridgehampton, NY 11932. www.diaart.org

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