2009

Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone, by Elizabeth Armstrong, Johanna Burton, and Dave Hickey. Prestel: New York 2007; Mary Heilmann: Save the Last Dance for Me, by Terry R. Myers. Afterall: London, 2007 (Book Reviews)

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Original Publication Citation

Colaizzi, V. (2009). Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone, by Elizabeth Armstrong, Johanna Burton, and Dave Hickey. Prestel: New York 2007; Mary Heilmann: Save the Last Dance for Me, by Terry R. Myers. Afterall: London, 2007 (Book Reviews). *Woman's Art Journal, 30*(1), 44-47.

skinned African American co-eds perform a tongue-in-cheek musical number during which they broadcast their animosity toward one another. Each group expresses its contempt for the skin color, eye color, hair texture, and facial features of the other. Acerbically titled "Good and Bad Hair," the number is set in a hair salon, referring to the straight-versus-curly hair quagmire that continues to plague black women. See for example, Wahneema Lubiano, "But Compared To What?"

5. Emmet Byrne wrote, "We eventually created a vertical band that wraps the cover and hides the naughty parts while (not accidentally) suggesting censorship, something the artist has faced before." See "A Cover in Context: Kara Walker Catalogue," Walker Art Center Design blog: http://blogs. walkerart.org/design/ 2007/10/29/book-post/ reproduced from *Walker Magazine* (May/June 2007), n.p.
6. John Berger. *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC, 1972).
7. Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 12:1 (Autumn 1985): 203-42.
8. Helen Bannerman, *Little Black Sambo* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1943).
9. See also Robert F. Reid-Pharr, "Black Girl Lost," in *Kara Walker: Pictures from Another Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2002), 35, 47.
10. Thomas McEvilley, "Primitivism in the Works of an Emancipated Negress," in *Kara Walker: My Complement*, 54, 61; Donald Kuspit, "Kara Walker's Cakewalk," *Artnet* online magazine, http://www.artnet.com/ magazine/ features/kuspit/kuspit11-4-03.asp.

Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone

by Elizabeth Armstrong, Johanna Burton, and Dave Hickey
Orange County Museum of Art, 2007

Mary Heilmann: Save the Last Dance for Me

by Terry R. Myers
Afterall Books, 2007

Reviewed by Vittorio Colaizzi

It is an artist's prerogative to shape her persona in an attempt to regulate the discourse around her work; indeed, it is partially expected that she do so. The self is as much a product as the artwork; it is permanently under construction and is, moreover, a collaboration. When an artist has a set of willing collaborators, they can seamlessly present the personality and therefore the lens through which the work is to be seen. But such a wholesale acceptance of an artist's strategy may divert attention from the full scope of her accomplishments, as well as the mechanisms by which she achieves them. On the other hand, a sympathetic voice can provide a textual parallel to the work, so that the act of reading is not simply a gathering of knowledge but an opportunity to dwell in the artist's own way of thinking. Such is the case with two recent books on Mary Heilmann: *To Be Someone*, the catalogue of her traveling retrospective, with essays by Elizabeth Armstrong, Johanna Burton, and Dave Hickey, and *Mary Heilmann: Save the Last Dance for Me*, in which Terry R. Myers explores the genesis and implications of a single painting. The powerful influence of Heilmann's personality, as well as the authors' genuine affection for the artist and her work, is highly apparent in all of the essays; but in some cases this leads to frustrating lacunae as to the building blocks of her art.

Mary Heilmann (b. 1940) will likely prove to be as important to abstraction at the turn of the millennium as Gerhard Richter. Providing a counterpoint to Richter's baleful and perpetual mediation, Heilmann shows how the dashed hopes of modernism do not amount to a prohibition against the pleasures of its still beautiful languages. Her impact can be seen in artists from more than one subsequent generation, including Jessica Stockholder, Laura Owens, and Tomma Abts, all of whom are mentioned in one or both books. Without imitating her style, all of these artists apply some version of her visual wit and easygoing transgression of existing categories. Because Heilmann's paintings feel somehow impoverished, though never ironic, her position is notoriously difficult to define. Her historical significance is clear: She was one of the first to lighten the gravitas of modernist abstract painting, accommodating it to narrative and association.

In addition to paintings, Heilmann makes chairs. They roll on tiny wheels and sport multicolored seats and backs woven from nylon strips. Like her paintings, they wrench the austere purity of geometric abstraction into the here and now. Heilmann is very clear that she wants us to sit, relax, take our time with the paintings, and furthermore to acknowledge their situatedness in a wider culture that includes movies, music, cars, and laughter. Here a possible fissure occurs. On the one hand, the chairs encourage us to study the work for as long as we always knew we should. On the other, they remind us that no painting by itself contains the whole world. This realization compels the viewer to consider the paintings en masse as a part of cultural production, potentially devaluing any one in favor of their total effect of continuous metamorphosis. The chairs both invite and deflect sustained contemplation of isolated paintings, an ambiguity that Heilmann herself skillfully sustains, but that in *To Be Someone* is tilted decidedly towards the second option, the consideration of her output as a field and an attitude.

To Be Someone's three essays are generously illustrated with full page reproductions that make for a truly beautiful book. However, the resulting diminution of plates at the back renders it nearly non-chronological, presenting Heilmann's four decades of work as a perpetual present. Of course nothing is willfully suppressed, but after the early

1980s it is difficult to trace the thread of what must have been a varied and complicated journey. The book's title doubtless refers to Heilmann's overdue recognition on the museum circuit, but its literal source is a song by the post-punk group The Jam. Heilmann's critics are eager to proclaim her interest in the music of various generations, including the Drifters, the Velvet Underground, and the Sex Pistols. The repeated, seemingly breathless, yet often only passing mention of these bands suggests, however, that they are invoked as tokens of an edginess that, especially among younger artists, is by now a fait accompli. The artist's own stance is more complex. Though it is true that she savors the iconoclasm of marrying Barnett Newman with Sid Vicious, she also clearly believes in the emotional power of popular music, and is a serious student of its changes over the last few decades.

To her credit, Elizabeth Armstrong does give voice to Heilmann's thoughts on this subject, particularly with regard to Brian Eno's toying with meaning in pop songs (24). Moreover, she provides a solid and sensitive biography that draws from Heilmann's own 1999 text, *The All Night Movie*, as well as interviews with the artist. During Heilmann's rebellious childhood and teen years, she began lifelong immersions in the subcultures of surfing, beat, jazz, and nascent rock and roll, all outcast movements that were foundational for her abiding square-peg outlook. Armstrong enumerates Heilmann's notable teachers and friends, such as Bruce Nauman, David Hockney, and Peter Voulkos (17-18). Voulkos, as Armstrong notes, is particularly important because Heilmann studied ceramics and sculpture and only began to paint as a way of critically engaging Joseph Kosuth and others who declared painting obsolete (20, 24). At a time when painters were abandoning the easel for three dimensions, she channeled her expertise at building, shaping, and coating back into this beleaguered art. Armstrong suggests that Heilmann never thought pictorially but always in terms of the processes and layers that comprise the finished object.

Although Heilmann is an abstract painter, it would be more accurate to say that she is a cultural producer. Not only does she supplement her paintings with furniture, ceramic vessels, fabric design, and audiovisual presentations, she constructs a context through which to see her work. Having discerned this about Heilmann, Johanna Burton takes as her starting point the unorthodox slide presentation, *Her Life*, that the artist uses in place of the traditional visiting-artist lecture given to students. *Her Life* succinctly announces Heilmann's position, linking her abstract paintings (which Burton obligingly calls "seemingly 'nonobjective'") (49) with snapshots of cars, buildings, and neon signs, all set to her own "mix-tape" soundtrack (now an iTunes playlist). Burton in turn echoes this nonlinear structure. Her essay is a delight to read because it captures the spirit of Heilmann's enterprise, though it lacks a dispassionate account of her means. The prose circles around subjects, and occasional promises of concision evaporate into deferments and asides, for example:

> [A]s we move further into the minutes of *Her Life*—which alternately produces visual surprise and evokes unexpectedly strong affectual fluctuations—one thing becomes clear. In our undergrad art history classes (and even our grad art history classes), the Wölfflinian procession of images held more than one significant difference from what we are experiencing now. It's true that our professors likely didn't set the stage with eclectic soundtracks, nor did they suggest visually that pictures of artworks could be rendered into slow, unstable events up for the taking. But the simpler difference is this: compare and contrast is usually designed to mark distinctions, to say this is like this in X way, but it is different in Y way. In other words, the exercise of asking two "virtual" images (always understood to be merely stand-ins, after all) to take up temporary cohabitation has always been an expedient way to illustrate—and thus parse—context (50).

Such long, clause-ridden sentences are the lingua franca of art writing, and despite never-ending complaints from some quarters, are often necessary for an adequate treatment of complex issues. Burton's command of this mode manages to be both irksome and seductive. It quickly becomes apparent that the ambiguity, circularity, and occasional riveting observations found in her text are an homage to Heilmann's own visual thinking. The act of reading then becomes a two-step analogue to the experience of Heilmann's best paintings. First one is ravished by their luxurious color and casual yet taut geometry, and then one begins an act of archaeology, wherein layers become distinct, their order of application can be deduced, and the always meaningful game of associative "looks like" can commence. In like fashion, Burton's text is less of an organized journey than a lovely amble, but it depends on the reader's willingness to come along.

There is, as mentioned, significant difficulty in explicating exactly how Heilmann's work relates to her abstract forebears. It seems the best way is to resort to elliptical metaphors, which approximate the feeling of looking at one of her paintings, as in: "[S]ipping tea from a lopsided teacup, or, best, sitting in one of her funky latticed chairs... one senses simultaneously the way the artist's promiscuous signifiers rely upon a realm of established effects and yet work to illuminate the operations of those effects" (66).

This marvelous elision of the embodied social being with post-structural theory leaves a neglected middle ground where the painting lies, so that the reader might still wonder exactly what these established effects are and how they operate. Are we talking about color, its intensity and proportion? Or her brushstrokes' pointed refusal of both the hard-edged and the painterly? An absolute familiarity with modernism's tactics is treated as such a foregone conclusion that they become mysterious again. Regarding specific predecessors, Burton poetically lists "a dab of Mondrian, a wisp of Frankenthaler, a Rothkoesque hot spot" (54), without linking these wisps to particular

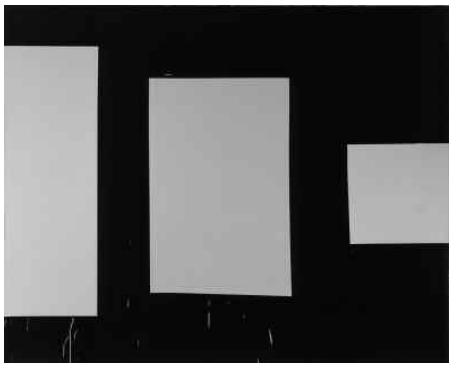

Fig. 1. Mary Heilmann, *Save the Last Dance for Me* (1979), acrylic on canvas, 80" x 100". Private Collection.

paintings. It may be that a more direct treatment would simply be at odds with Burton's notable ambition to weave a literary parallel to Heilmann's work.

Dave Hickey reports from an even more personal perspective than Burton, while at the same time providing a striking realization of her work, describing "the raw physicality of the stretched canvas support, the occasional scuff, flutter, or warp...." He also nails her ambiguous relationship to abstraction's history with the simple claim that she is "absolutely *knowing*" (40). However, despite Hickey's gift of earnest but never overheated rapport, his essay tends to the morosely nostalgic. He describes a kinship he feels with Heilmann because of their parallel journeys from California counterculture to the New York art world, at the same time bemoaning the loss of a mindset of desperation that was replaced by professionalism. Though Hickey's compelling account of Max's Kansas City bar (41-42) is intended to demonstrate Heilmann's own risk-everything approach, by expounding on a lost scene, he reduces Heilmann to a fixture of this scene. A similar effacement occurs with his comparison of Heilmann to one of Norman Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* covers, the one with the little girl sitting outside the principal's office with a black eye and a deeply satisfied smile (39). This is a bold move, and it is dependent upon Hickey's previously published argument that Rockwell was far from the stereotypical family-values real-art antidote to modern life, but was rather a stalwart advocate of the messy individuality and unseemliness that must be tolerated for a democratic society to function. Hickey's take on Rockwell is convincing, but Heilmann's own life and career stem to a large extent from a mistrust or at least a perpetual traversement of any and all types. For Hickey's truly laudable objectives, the Rockwell comparison comes off as rather patronizing. His concluding remarks on surfing are much more effective (43). Like painting, surfing is defined by its materials, in this case the ocean itself, and success depends on negotiating the indifferent and potentially deadly elements. Hickey conveys this situation in a way that is comprehensible and moving to someone who has never even touched a board.

Burton and Hickey's heart-to-heart candor communicates their esteem for Heilmann, but it also begs the question as to whether we should acquiesce to an artist's self-managed persona or whether we could do her more justice by attending to the narrative that appears on the face of the work itself. After all, it is true that in the 1980s Heilmann began to construct shaped canvases, that she frequently returns to and modifies the grid, that she sometimes employs a black linear network that overlaps numerous other colors, and that she repeats the motif of vertical stacks of horizontal colored bands, sometimes crisp, sometimes loose. Exactly when and why these tactics appeared might not be something Heilmann finds interesting to talk about, but they do form part of the record. It may be that such detailed description is still associated with the authoritarian formalism that curtailed the freedom that Heilmann pioneered. But given the unmitigated success of her pluralistic embrace, which now veritably defines the art world, a focus on form may no longer be so dangerously oppressive.

Terry R. Myers bypasses this once-justified assumption in his small but overflowing volume of reflections on a single painting, *Save the Last Dance for Me*, which is part of Afterall Books's One Work series. Far from considering the work with blinders, ignoring its place in the artist's broader oeuvre, Myers treats this painting as a "turning point" in Heilmann's career (39), discussing several others that came before and after. *Save the Last Dance for Me* (Fig. 1) was painted in 1979 and consists of three skewed pink rectangles on a black ground, which diminish in size from left to right. Much, much more can be said about it than that, and Myers accomplishes this task splendidly. He begins with and often returns to a detailed description that constantly strays into other realms, including art history, but also literature, music, politics, and dance. Myers decisively spins formal analysis out of control so that it at last becomes an inclusive category, not an exclusive one. He segues, slides, or dances (all verbs used within his text) from subject to subject in a way that is anything but arbitrary, following poetic threads that echo the radical permissiveness of Heilmann's brand of abstraction. This permissiveness is anything but homogenized postmodern pastiche in which meaning collapses under sheer information overload. Each facet of history, music, fashion, or emotion is there precisely because it is meaningful, and worth drawing into the orbit of feelings that surround Heilmann's paintings.

Part of Myers's account is a succinct sketch of the zeitgeist of the 1970s, including general anxieties about the future of art as well as Heilmann's grief at the deaths of two friends (13-15). These events stimulated her to bring more personal content in her work. Instead of simply grafting meaningful titles onto geometric abstraction, Heilmann made this content simultaneous to and interdependent with "pure" painterly issues. One could say that Heilmann's content is anecdotal, in that the informed viewer will know that *Save the Last Dance for Me* marks Heilmann's mourning for her friends, her contemplation of abandoning New York, and her meeting a new boyfriend in the park while walking her dog. But one could just as easily describe this content as claustrophobia, humor, transgression, hope, and perseverance, all of which are contained in the painting's irreverent color and composition.

Myers begins and ends with a passage by Edwin Denby, in which the example of seeing a "pretty girl" on the street leads to

the claim that seeing most rewardingly requires the good luck to see at just the right moment from just the right angle (1). The attendant implication, that Heilmann would wish her work to be seen in such an unstable manner, helps to establish one of the book's foundational claims, that Heilmann precipitated a paradigm shift in abstract painting in which the stability and autonomy of modernism is set aside for what Myers calls the painting's "situational nature" (49). Heilmann seems to want her work to be subject to fluctuations in sensitivity and receptiveness, or more simply, to the viewer's *mood*, just as in listening to music or tasting food and wine; sometimes it moves us, sometimes it leaves us cold. Myers works from the old modernist premise that art can directly participate in society by creating ever greater freedom and possibility, but he argues that the terms of engagement have changed. In Heilmann's hands, painting participates not through airtight propositions, but by invitation and allusion. This is not only a change in art, but a change in the way we think about art. As a case in point, Myers points out how the spell of Heilmann retroactively bestows a blasphemous disco glitter to Donald Judd's gold and red boxes (52).

Because criticism often reveals unexamined parameters of the moment in which a work appears, Myers judiciously excerpts *Village Voice* critic Kay Larsen's 1979 review in which she admonishes Heilmann for her lack of "push-ups" (73). This memorable and revealing phrase illuminates the continued grip of the critical language of Judd and many others, in which quality was equated with "strength" and "power." Turning this metaphor on its head, Myers credits Heilmann with a different athletic value: agility (75). He writes that Heilmann "internalised postmodernism's, if not feminism's, critique of the ostentatious power play notoriously associated with the mythic role-model of the male genius painter" (75). In other words, Heilmann was one of the first to realize that agility serves the artist better than strength, which has become a liability in culture's increasingly complex and permeable networks.

As noted, Burton and Hickey concentrate more on the paintings' effects, and at this they excel, though the causes remain shrouded in mystery, even as they lie in plain sight. While it is true that Hickey communicates the paintings' particular and unreproducible presence, and Burton skillfully reads the 1996 painting *Lola*, these are exceptions. Despite the refreshing tone and format of Heilmann's slide show, which reverberates through much of the writing on her, the presentation itself traffics in formal comparisons, albeit in a once-forbidden way: She links her paintings with personal experience and inclinations gained from her own cultural habitus. And yet her paintings are not neutral placeholders within a field of references, rather they ask to be deemed worthy based on their own qualities. The worthiness of any particular painting is not severed from life (from dance clubs, from neon signs, from animated TV shows), but neither is it dependent solely on the title and the associations it calls up. Heilmann, after all, makes her chairs not only so that we can sit, but so that we can look.

Both volumes are beautiful objects. *To Be Someone* is a compact hardcover, a mere eight by eleven inches, but its design merits coffee-table status. The horizontal bands of color on the jacket come from Heilmann's fabric designs. The book's numerous plates are supplemented by images from the artist's famous slide shows, as well as installation shots and announcements, only a few in black and white, which illustrate how her paintings and objects enliven a space. There is also an exhaustive bibliography and exhibition chronology. Myers' book, like all in the "One Work" series, is an appropriately slim and small paperback, whose text is broken up by full-page images of Heilmann's work along with her visual interlocutors: Matisse, Mondrian, Stockholder, Matta-Clark, etc., again overwhelmingly in color, with a few in black and white. Of particular note are the many images of the painting in question: a wraparound full bleed on the cover, a page of its own, and two different installation shots, one of its first exhibition, and one in a retrospective decades later. Together they underline both books' theses about the active and dynamic nature of Heilmann's work. •

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Francesca Woodman

by Chris Townsend
Phaidon, 2006.

Reviewed by Jovana Stokic

Chris Townsend's principal goal in this survey is to appraise the work of Francesca Woodman (1958-81), and to "place it within a history of photographic and artistic practices"(6). He situates her work as belonging to post-minimal art, "as concerned with the processes of presentation as it is with the representation of things or of Woodman herself; as concerned to probe and unsettle the limits of the medium in which she chose to work as she was to make images with it" (11). His insistence on asserting the value of her work remains the dominant strategy—explaining how remarkable that such a synthesis of aesthetics and critique was realized by a young woman still going through the conventional stages of an art education. He rightly asserts that "rather than being a prodigy without precursors or peers, Woodman clearly belongs to a defined and recognized tradition" (19).

In the introduction to "Scattered in Space and Time," his essay on Woodman's oeuvre, Townsend addresses the central question of the artist's subjectivity in relation to the photographic representation. The question can be formulated as: Is Francesca Woodman *the subject* of her self-representations? Townsend claims Woodman's photographs of herself are never about her (8). By negating the idea of her works being autobiographical, he closes the possibility of interpreting autobiography in the photographic