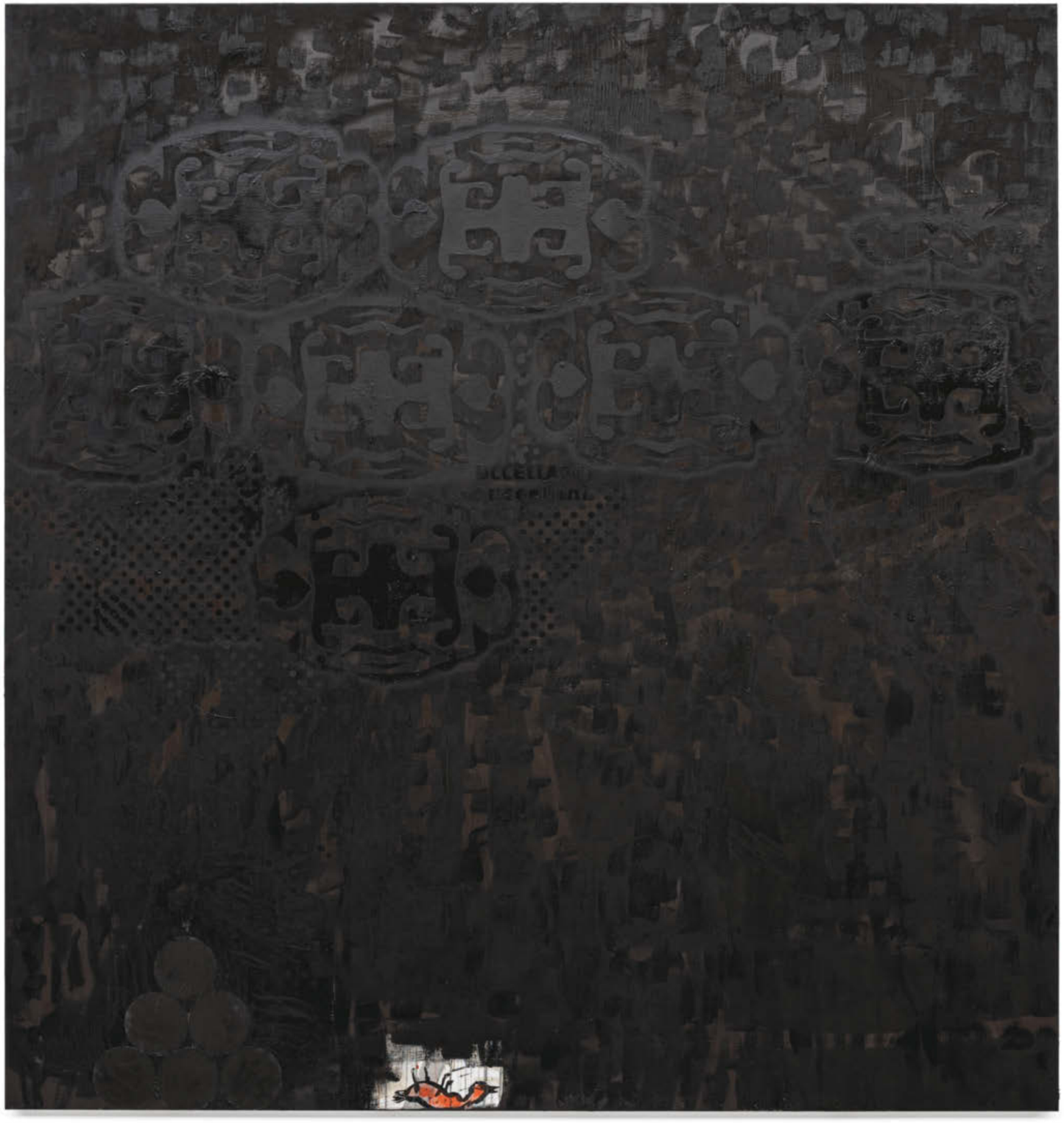

CHARLINE VON HEYL

in conversation with
MAX DAX

Paintings as machines, paintings as batteries: on the eve of a major new show in Brussels, CHARLINE VON HEYL sits down with *Max Dax* to discuss thinking without words, the freshness of Van Eyck, and the pure joy of the process and presence

Portrait by
CHARLIE DE KEERSMAECKER

Opening spread left: DECREATION, 2025
Acrylic, charcoal, and spray paint on linen, 208 × 198 cm

Opening spread right: DALA, 2024
Acrylic, charcoal, and oil on linen, 208 × 188 cm

Charline von Heyl is today one of those rare artists about whose work her peers, as well as critics, have only good things to say. Max Dax is certainly one of them. In what follows, Von Heyl talks almost from within her paintings, from a place so close to the work you might feel as though you're standing directly before one of her canvases. In fact, it's all about the work, specifically, the new paintings premiering at Xavier Hufkens this fall.

Some biography, then. Born in 1960 in Mainz, Germany, Von Heyl studied painting in Hamburg under Jörg Immendorff, for whom she would later work as an assistant, and later in Düsseldorf under Fritz Schwegler. Attracted by the provocative atmosphere of 1980s Cologne, she relocated to the city that the likes of Albert Oehlen and Martin Kippenberger called home, securing her place in the history of the scene with her participation in 1990's *The Köln Show*, a group exhibition now considered legendary. Slowly, the village-metropolis on the Rhine was being drained of much of its former life, and Von Heyl, like many others, moved to Germany's emerging art capital, Berlin—before finding a home in New York and never looking back.

In the US, she was quickly accepted as a "painter's painter," earning her first institutional recognition in 2005 with *Concentrations 48* at the Dallas Museum of Art. Two retrospectives then followed: *Charline von Heyl: Now or Else*, which toured from Tate Liverpool to Nuremberg's Kunsthalle, and a second that in 2011 traveled between the Institutes of Contemporary Art in Boston and Philadelphia. Her biggest US survey show came seven years later, *Charline von Heyl: Snake Eyes*, which opened at the Hirshhorn Museum and then traveled on to Hamburg's Deichtorhallen.

But through it all, as Von Heyl tells Dax, she never developed a style, never settled for any one particular mode—and, in that eclectic process, revitalized abstract art.

MAX DAX: Charline, you moved to the US from Germany in the 1990s, already having made a name for yourself as an artist. Do you consider yourself a German or an American painter?

— CHARLINE VON HEYL: Neither, actually. I am just a painter. Of course, where your roots are and where you live make a difference, but the world—especially the art world—is just not that local anymore.

When you started out, you were part of a group of like-minded individuals in Cologne and Hamburg. You were in dialogue with people who now all have their own voices and have changed the art world. How did rubbing shoulders with such strong personalities as Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, and Mayo Thompson shape you?

—It was an exciting time, with so many brilliant minds and fresh art. There was invigorating dialogue. It was challenging, but also inspiring and motivating. I was actually living with Mayo Thompson at the time. I consider myself lucky to have started out like that. It always felt like the right time and place. But that was a long time ago.

Are you a 21st-century painter?

—I see painting as anachronistic. That's part of its power. Of course, I am not oblivious to what is going on right now, for better or worse, but yes, this is the 21st century. But I believe painting needs to transcend that to be relevant. Even if it's soaked in it. As a painter, I don't live in the 21st century. I live in the present. In that sense, I would say that I'm a painter of the present. I am painting presence.

As Andrei Tarkovsky said, "If art wants to touch its audience, it must be genuinely personal." Any artwork must contain your own story to be substantial, even if it's filtered beyond recognition.

—He's absolutely right. Incidentally, painting cannot function any other way. For a painting to come into being with power, it must be as enigmatic as I am to myself. Sometimes, it almost feels as if it develops in parallel with my intentions in a revelatory way. This process is inconceivable without my own thoughts, history, and feelings—elements that have an ambivalent relationship to each other, yet propel each other forward. That's at the heart of it. Otherwise, it would just be a product or design, and ultimately uninteresting. But it's complicated, since being authentic, which is what this is about, is a necessity but also somewhat of a fantasy.

About 20 years ago, you started titling your paintings, adding a meta level. It immediately raised the question of your elective affinities, which lie outside of art, in areas such as film, literature, and music.

—I love the term "elective affinities." So much in painting is exactly that, on so many levels. Giving a title to a painting is an act of naming

KUNTERBUNTERGANG, 2025, acrylic, charcoal, and oil on linen, 208 × 188 cm

"SI LE ROI …," 2023, acrylic, charcoal, and oil on canvas, 52 × 46cm

it—a final touch—and it often provides a key to unraveling the strange chains of associations usually hidden within.

One of the paintings exhibited in Brussels at Xavier Hufkens is named after the film *Uccellacci e Uccellini* by Pier Paolo Pasolini. What does it mean to connect a painting to existing content in this way?

—I watched *The Hawks and the Sparrows* in English while working on the painting. The great Totò plays the leading role. There's an apocalyptic mood in the film reminiscent of Samuel Beckett, but it's also very funny. It's about the Sermon on the Mount, and Totò's task is to study the language of the birds and understand what they're saying to each other. In the end, he learns that even birds are not always peaceful. Pasolini's movies are aesthetically satisfying too, as are the cover designs of his books and the posters. I fell in love with the lettering on one of the posters: "Uccellacci," meaning "big birds," is written in capital letters; and "Uccellini"—"small birds"—is written in lowercase, in a cool mid-century font. The juxtaposition works almost like an image. I had to make a stencil, and I couldn't stop putting it everywhere: the studio floor, the studio wall, my T-shirt. Finally, it jumped onto two of my paintings. For a moment, I thought, "Shit, I ruined them." Writing on a painting is problematic. It's hard for a picture to be visual when there's text on it. But it worked so well that I left it in. Only then did I add some birds. The words in the painting were an instinctive move. I was surprised that I didn't edit them out, and now the work is about that. Big birds, small birds, and the language of birds.

You rarely reveal your sources as openly as you do in your Pasolini painting.

—There isn't a clear cause-and-effect relationship that can be revealed in a linear fashion. I also don't think it would be helpful to have that, nor do I think it matters. Ultimately, the painting should evoke something in the viewer that I don't want to control. They must make the painting their own and interpret it as they wish. The formal moves are so arbitrary and often jump in such an incomprehensible fashion that, even if I wanted to, I wouldn't be able to sum up what happened and where it came from.

Do you create an environment that's like a stage on which you can paint better?

—Exactly. I really do curate my studio. Once a body of work leaves, I take everything off the walls and pin new pieces up before starting again. Sometimes I make paintings just for decoration, and even those can end up in other paintings. For example, I copied and pasted by hand a tiny painting that I called *Nymphy* (2024) into a larger painting, *Twiggy* (2024). This is part of the process. In the end, though, the painting becomes its own entity, indifferent to what I put into it, or why. Of course, I push for a certain vibe when I see that it's going in an interesting direction. But a painting is often finished before I've had a chance to form my own opinion about it. Then, I sit on the sofa, baffled, and look at it, trying to understand it. I simply enjoy the fact that a new painting has manifested before my eyes.

> Like a film director who shoots more scenes than necessary for a movie, I want more paintings to choose from so that I can edit during the installation process

Does a painting determine when it's finished?

—Yes, I don't finish a painting, but I recognize when it's finished. It's often a surprising moment, especially when it's completed quickly, as I always assume it will take a long time. Then it's incredible.

You painted all 34 of the paintings and works on paper in Brussels in a relatively short period of time. Did you work specifically toward this exhibition?

—For quite some time I've arranged things so that I no longer have to work toward an exhibition. I always make sure that I have enough playtime. This means that when I paint, I don't think about any exhibition. You can see that in the eclectic and diverse paintings. With such a wide range, an exhibition concept is impossible anyway. Like a film director who shoots more scenes than

necessary for a movie, I want more paintings to choose from so that I can edit during the installation process. In Brussels, miraculously, I used almost all of the paintings I brought, almost all of them found their place. The result turned out to be greater than the sum of its parts, which I think should always be the goal for a show.

Are the paintings that aren't shown leftovers? Or are they waiting for another opportunity to be displayed?

—My paintings are independent entities. Those not on display in Brussels will be part of a different constellation in the future. Each of them functions as an individual *Bildmaschine* (image machine) and will have a life of its own. I see an exhibition as a large image machine, where all the parts must work together to create visual and emotional energy. The space between the paintings is also important.

What exactly do you mean when you refer to your paintings as "image machines"?

—Metaphorically speaking, they are machines because they work with balance and imbalance. They generate power yet remain in equilibrium. All paintings are "viewing machines" too. As a viewer, you must reactivate them each time. It's interesting that everyone's viewing habits are different. However, as machines, paintings initiate perpetual motion that demands and manipulates attention.

Don't you paint according to your style?

—I never consciously worked on developing a style, nor was I ever interested in doing so. Style is always conventional, ultimately predictable, and often an end in itself. As a painter, you want to enter a realm where something fresh and new happens. I do have a specific visual language, though, one I've developed over the years, with an extensive vocabulary.

You've basically been painting in a similar format for decades—an almost-square, 210 × 190 cm surface. Is there a practical reason for this? Or did it simply suit you and subsequently became your signature format?

—All of my paintings have the same height because I approach each one so differently. If I were to vary the format as well, it would get too confusing when I put them next to each other. I would provide too much visual information. I like having at least this one rule. In fact, the format also suits *me*. When I paint, I can reach every part of the canvas without a ladder or step stool. It suits my movements and my body.

You started painting at a time when there was a big debate about whether painting still had a future.

—Thankfully, that debate is over.

Nevertheless, the old question remains. As a painter, you work with the same basic materials as your predecessors: stretcher frames, paint, canvas, brushes. This is why size matters when it comes to painting. What gives you confidence that painting, with its limited materials, will continue to exist?

—Personally, I don't find that question very interesting. What matters to me is having the freedom to embrace the anachronistic nature of painting. I am interested in the pure joy and challenge of being a painter, being immersed in materials and colors. Despite my creative impatience, I've managed to shape this life for myself, and that's good enough. Yesterday, I was in Bruges and stood in front of a Jan van Eyck portrait that looked as fresh as if it'd been painted yesterday. A chair from the same period looks like a 15th-century chair. But the painting, with its psychology, intensity, and mastery, hangs before us as if it had just been created. Painting can transcend time. That is incredibly powerful. That's why I refer to paintings as "batteries" and "machines." Paintings can have this direct force.

They cannot be translated, because they are not bound to language.

—Exactly. Paintings never have to be translated. That's what makes them so powerful. Then again, my mother was French, and I grew up experiencing a rupture between different concepts of identity. I also realized that there are always multiple perspectives, and that something is always lost in translation. You and I could have our next conversation just about language and its significance for me as a painter. The concept of language is incredibly important to me, in every respect. As a human being and a person, I am shaped by language, by thinking about language. For me, being a painter means asking, "How do I think without language?" Can painting represent that somehow?

DEFY AUGURY, 2025, acrylic, oil, and flashe on linen, 208 × 198 cm
Previous spread: Exhibition view, CHARLINE VON HEYL, at Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, 2025

This comes from someone who claims to have "a complete lack of visual memory."

—I don't carry visual ideas with me. When I stand in front of a white canvas, no image comes to mind that I want to paint. I have to actively go to the canvas and start in with a brush or charcoal. Only then will a picture unfold. As I paint, I evaluate what I'm doing in the moment. Consequently, much of what I create is erased, painted over, transformed. At its core, painting, like everything else, is primarily an act of editing. Of course, some painters envision a scene they want to translate into a painting. But I don't want to translate anything. I want to create a painting.

Does it really matter how you start a painting?

—Not really, but it sets things in motion. One move will lead to the next. The canvas will start to fill up with layers. You can correct and edit everything during and after the process. For me, it's like this: I have the paintings that I call "battery paintings," which I make for myself, to activate the studio's energy. Then, there are paintings where something else emerges and I react to it. It's either satisfying or irritating. That's the interplay between composition and decomposition. At the end of this process, a new painting emerges.

To what extent is painting a solitary process for you, or do you interact with others?

—I don't like having other people around in the studio. I don't like having assistants or anyone else nearby while I paint. In that respect, I'm very solitary. I don't even go to my painter friends' studios anymore. That was important when we were younger, but now we all know what we're doing. It's enough to see each other's finished work, and we're proud and happy for each other. In the studio, however, it's best to be alone.

You're married to Christopher Wool, who is also a painter. Don't you discuss your work with each other? Do you visit each other's studios?

—Funnily enough, I'm never in New York! I'm never in his studio, and he's never in mine. We rarely go to each other's openings either. In Marfa, Texas, however, since our studios are next door to each other, we naturally look at each other's work. It's more like a respectful thumbs-up or thumbs-down kind of thing. Those are the only comments, which are noted, of course, but have no consequences.

With every new painting, though, you both face the same problem: there is no such thing as an empty canvas, to paraphrase Gilles Deleuze—"the painting before painting." Are you not afraid of the white canvas?

—No, but you're touching on an important point. Deleuze talks about clichés. From the moment you start painting, you have to work against clichés, because they are already present on the canvas. Thus, the canvas is never empty. I have reached a point, though, where this question is no longer urgent for me, because my paintings have become so much my own that I no longer care if they resemble anything else or if they might be misunderstood. If anything, the cliché I have to work against is my own. But that doesn't change the accuracy of Deleuze's statement.

From the moment you start painting, you have to work against clichés because they are already present on the canvas. Thus, the canvas is never empty

Are there practically no more clichés for you?

—Of course, clichés still exist. In fact, new ones are constantly being added. Even the painter in front of a canvas is a cliché. But it doesn't bother me anymore. Besides, since I don't have a visual memory, the question of clichés was never urgent for me. I'll say it again: I can't imagine my own images, nor can I recall those of others. This means that I'm alone in the room when I paint. Still, things do pop up out of nowhere in my paintings, so I guess there's some hidden storage in my mind.

Don't you ever wonder how Van Eyck managed to capture light?

—Yes, I do. But only when I'm standing in front of one of his paintings in a museum. Viewing a painting is an experience, and I'm always grateful for it. However, as soon as I leave

the museum, I seem to have forgotten the painting. Yet every visit to a museum sets something in motion. It could be as simple as recognizing a certain shade of ochre that I might not otherwise use.

Do you have ritualized daily routines like Thomas Mann's—writing in the morning, having lunch and a siesta, then writing again in the afternoon?

—I wake up very early nowadays because I don't drink alcohol anymore. From that moment on, I'm fully awake, yet I stay in bed for two hours. I mainly read, and I read very intensely. It's still extremely important to me. Then I slowly make my way to the studio, eat something, and start working. I usually paint until 6pm—I've become quite the daylight worker! Of course, my time in the studio isn't only filled with painting. I also spend it looking, reading, and watching movies on YouTube.

That's not procrastination?

—No, procrastination means putting things off. Though I sometimes do that with tasks, it's different with painting. I distract myself so I can reformulate my thoughts afterwards. It's an act of recalibration, not a waste of time. That's why I don't use social media. At the same time, I do recognize the internet's benefits. YouTube's archives have been opened, and a lot of historic, amateur documentary footage from wartime and the postwar period has been revived and recolored by AI. It feels spookily contemporary. I also watch the daily routines of Japanese office workers and the mating habits of slugs, which are incredible.

And yet, I hardly see any dystopia in your images.

—I carry dystopia within me, which is enough. My paintings—and maybe paintings in general—don't work well when they comment on anything. They exist simply to exist, and to create an alternative world. As a counter-concept, they can function politically because they empower. They can empower viewers, expand interiority, and inspire change by encouraging agency. As I said before, I experienced this firsthand yesterday in front of Van Eyck's work.

But aren't YouTube videos also enablers, except they're algorithmically fed to you? How much of this process is consumption, and how much is self-empowerment?

—It's probably a bit of both. As much as I embrace chance and allow for synchronicity in my life and work, I also consciously work to avoid becoming predictable. I put a lot of thought into ensuring the YouTube videos I watch aren't tailored to me. I rarely follow suggestions. Instead, I enter a new search term. I don't have an Instagram or Facebook account, and I've never "liked" anything. I don't "follow" anyone either. While I welcome open internet archives, it's equally important to me that algorithms don't patronize me. But it feels like a losing battle.

So, you work in two studios, one in Brooklyn and one in Marfa. To what extent have changes in location become routine? Where did you paint the paintings you're showing in Brussels?

—Partly in Brooklyn, partly in Marfa. This is the first time I'm seeing the pictures hanging side by side, in Brussels. It's surprising and exciting for me too!

Have you noticed any differences between the two places? Is it a different way of working?

—I paint a little more in Marfa than in New York. People always assume that Marfa is a refuge where I can express myself away from the world. But the opposite is true. My studio in Brooklyn's Navy Yard is a secret, and I don't let anyone in. In contrast, Marfa is more of an open studio because many people pass through town, and it's easy to organize a visit. If you wanted to organize a studio visit in New York, you can forget about the rest of your day simply because of the traffic. I've completely stopped inviting anyone there.

Since you don't let anyone in, could you describe how your Brooklyn studio is set up?

—It's filled with small triggers, force fields that I install in the room. Books, objects, images, and other things. One of the new paintings is titled *Dala* (2024). The title and shapes in the painting refer to the wooden Dala horse. It's the souvenir that everyone brings home from Sweden. Its shape never changes, and it has an incredibly beautiful bright-red paint job consisting of several layers of lacquer. The lines and ornaments painted on it are always the same. I wanted all of that in this painting. I was interested in the detachment involved in creating it, painting the surface without interest. I wanted to paint like a Dala-horse painter who

decorates this object for the thousandth time, in exactly the same manner. Also, consider the incredibly perfect form! The Dala horse was carved for centuries before it took the form of the ideal "little wooden horse," combined with this highly desirable red lacquer. I wanted to capture that feeling and transfer it to the painting. Of course, the painting itself looks nothing like a Dala horse, but I got the red color exactly right. And you can see the horse in there somewhere. My studio is full of objects like that—objects that make me yearn for something I don't quite understand.

It's an almost industrial approach to painting. Is that what you mean when you say "detached"?

—Exactly. Distant, mechanical, formulaic, repetitive. That's an approach that applies to the *Dala* painting. I use different approaches for other paintings though.

You also mentioned books as opposed to "charged objects" that function as triggers.

—Yes, I have tons of books in both studios. I'm a terrible book hoarder. Sometimes I buy books for their covers. I bought *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams for its cover. I loved it so much that I copied it into the painting of the same name now in the Brussels show. Art books are super important too. I always have stacks of them around me, and I look through them when I need inspiration. If a book actually has the author's signature, it feels like having a bit of their presence, like an actual artwork. There's definitely an alchemy between all these things that transforms the studio into my very own laboratory.

In Brussels, you are also showing a series of new lithographs and etchings. More precisely, they are lithographs printed over etchings.

—Yes, that's correct. But the works were originally conceived as etchings. I reworked them using lithography because the black of the etchings wasn't black enough. To me though, they are still essentially etchings.

Printing lithography on etchings to enhance the intensity is similar to using both acrylic and oil paints in the same painting—it's like working against the grain. Oil paint takes a long time to dry, while acrylic paint dries quickly. Rarely do painters use both types of paint in their work.

—With acrylics, I can work quickly. I can paint in layers and edit the image. Oil paint, on the other hand, requires the painter to push the pigment around until it's in the right place. Ultimately, the painting is full of brushstrokes. But you will hardly ever see a brushstroke in my paintings. When I use oil, it's always for a reason. I can glaze with oil. I can emphasize and highlight certain colors. For example, I had to use it for the cadmium red in *Dala* because I could never have achieved the same intensity with acrylic. Only oil paint has that rich sheen, much like the Dala horse itself. Sometimes, I use oil under acrylic so the surface will eventually break in a particular way to create a pattern. In other cases, I use oil as glue to hold the pigment in place. Every use of color and material represents something and serves a purpose. You can't glaze with acrylic either. If I want a transparent surface, I have to use oil paint. In that sense, I'm like a car mechanic who knows exactly which wrench to reach for when they're under the car.

Would you say that your work is "total painting," since you seem to draw on the full range of possibilities instead of limiting yourself?

—To me, it's still just painting. Any means is acceptable to achieve the desired image. Yet I don't need those many different means. There isn't a huge variation in my work. On the other hand, there are these fantastic colors with special properties that react differently to light. In my new painting *Zeno* (2024), for instance, the painting transforms from green to orange when viewed from left to right. Technically, that's only because of the paint. Sometimes I think, "If William Turner had had something like this, he would have freaked out." He would have loved to experiment with interference colors, but they have only been around for about three decades. Does the use of such colors make my paintings "total"?

You could also limit yourself in your choice of materials and means of expression. Limitations can give rise to strength.

—Yes, but I'm just not that kind of painter. I have set limitations for myself, of course, but I don't need to express them for their own sake—and they change with each painting.

Charline von Heyl's solo exhibition at Xavier Hufkens in Brussels closes October 25, 2025.

FOLKLORE, 2024, acrylic and oil on linen, 208 × 173 cm