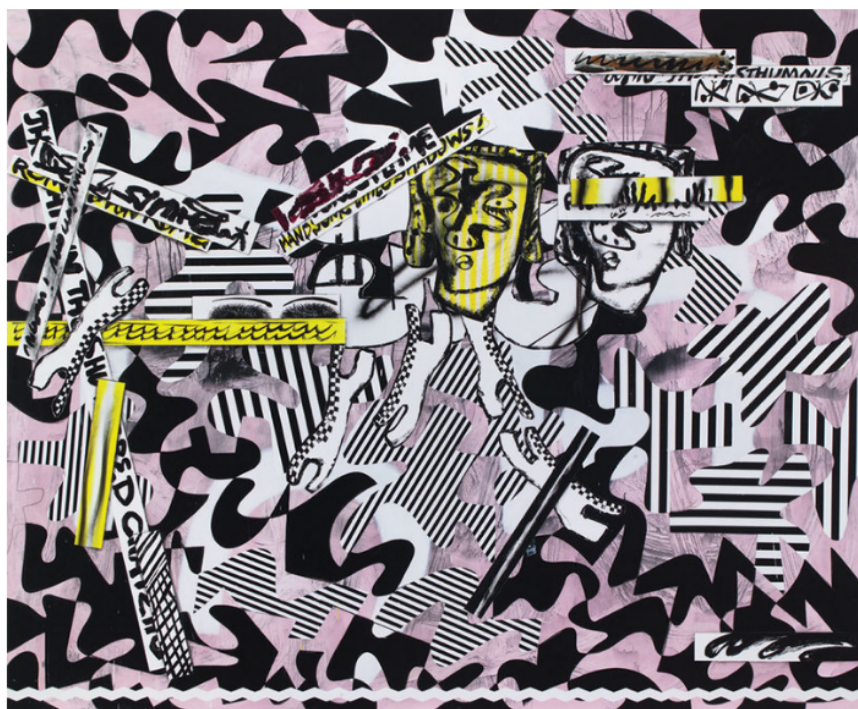


ARTFORUM



Charline von Heyl, *The Language of the Underworld*, 2017, acrylic and charcoal on linen, 90 × 108".

Charline von Heyl

PETZEL GALLERY | WEST 18TH STREET

cites—in a catalogue essay for said survey show—von Heyl's use of the term *Haken schlagen*, which refers to a rabbit's practice of feinting a move, then dashing in another direction to evade predation. It is testament, then, to the artist's facility for composition and mark making (she uses the entire toolbox) that her work commands rapt attention while, for the most part, refusing the facile gratification of pat resolution.

Another distinguishing characteristic of von Heyl's working process is its relentlessly exploratory nature. She is forever reaching into unfamiliar territory, such that each painting presents a distinctly different set of formal problems and propositions. Certain motifs, patterns, and modes of application recur from canvas to canvas, but in dissimilar combinations and configurations, and with disparate affective and semiotic outcomes. Cases in point: The pictorial space of *Tondo*, 2017—one of the first (and least abrasive) of the seventeen, mostly bodily scaled paintings encountered—is dominated by elegant, black, organic forms arising from the filling-in (though some areas remain judiciously incomplete) of fluid, swooping line work meandering about the painting's circular format. The soft, alluring contours somehow

Many of Charline von Heyl's paintings crackle with an awkward intensity. Though her works occasionally lapse into relatively uncomplicated decor, the lion's share of her oeuvre, a thirteen-year sampling of which was recently on display at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg (with condensed versions traveling to museums in Deurle, Belgium, and Washington, DC), is marked by the deliberate upending of formal expectation. Indeed, in attempting to describe the New York— and Marfa, Texas—based German artist's modus operandi, the writer, musician, and gallerist John Corbett

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Jeff Gibson, "Charline von Heyl," *Artforum*, November 2018.

harmonize with a mélange of contrasting and contorted arrow-like, checkerboard-patterned shapes; a constellation of bright-orange, hard-edge abstractions; and a ground of beige and ochre smudges commingling with miscellaneous scribbles and scumbling. By contrast, *The Language of the Underworld*, 2017, located in the gallery's spacious back room, bears similarly undulating—but this time intersecting—line work that yields solid-black and black-and-white-striped jigsaw shapes doing battle with variously adorned and weirdly faux-collaged (by way of impressionistic drop shadows) rectangular bands, a couple of Picassoesque faces, and a white zigzagging stripe toward the bottom of the frame. All of this is set against a pink ground smeared with black. Though undergirded by the same kind of graphic architecture, the resultant atmospheres (to use a word von Heyl has employed to describe her work's overall gestalt) in these two pieces are worlds apart. The first painting, with its circularity and consonant arrangement of elements, is congenial and allusive, perhaps suggestive of a giant petri dish hosting mesmeric amoebic activity, while the second, a jagged panoply of both fetching and discordant components, struggles against itself in an engagingly frustrated bid for compositional equilibrium.

Confirming that the gallery remains the central arena for painterly progress (fairs be damned), this exhibition provided an ideal opportunity to assess and appreciate von Heyl's disruptive method and productively challenging output. Given the work's code-scrambling contrarianism and migratory inclusiveness, her paintings are best seen in batches. In fact, the ensemble effect of this show was as instructively beguiling and as much an artwork as each of the paintings. The dichotomous dynamics of seduction and repulsion emanating from the exhibition likely registered with the art-literate viewer as delectation with a tolerable prick of displeasure. Von Heyl's optical irritants are the grit in the oyster of her endlessly inventive nonnarrative painting practice that ultimately spawns a more complex and durable beauty, thus co-opting the gallery system as rehab for errant aestheticism.

<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201809/charline-von-hey-77364>