

Charline von Heyl

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Press Release

Charline von Heyl's first exhibition at Xavier Hufkens presents a dynamic suite of new paintings, works on paper, and etchings that pulse with invention, wit, and formal tension. Long regarded as a vital force in contemporary painting, von Heyl conjures a visual universe that is as expansive as it is unpredictable. What emerges is a protean body of work: restless, confident, mercurial, and alive with inquiry and mischief.

Born in Germany and coming of age in Cologne and Düsseldorf during painting's revival in the 1980s, von Heyl diverged from the prevailing paths of many of her contemporaries. Eschewing irony and cool detachment, she forged a visual language rooted in buoyancy, risk, and a fierce independence of thought. Her paintings do not follow preordained themes; instead, they arise from an embodied process of looking, reading, and lived experience.

A quiet thesis of the exhibition is captured in *The Open*, a painting whose title nods to Rainer Maria Rilke's *Eighth Duino Elegy*. Von Heyl's own translation of its opening line—*"With all eyes the creature sees into the open"*—invokes a meditation on the divide between human and animal consciousness. For Rilke, "the open" is the animal's pure, unselfconscious perception, unclouded by the foreknowledge of death. The human gaze, by contrast, turns inward, burdened by self-awareness and retrospection. Von Heyl channels this metaphysical tension not overtly, but through perceptual states that hover between sensation and cognition.

Improvisational and elusive, von Heyl's work is charged by the tension between lyricism and its undoing. Patterns and motifs—eyes, birds, pins, swirls—may recur, not as fixed symbols but as shifting visual events. Each painting generates its own internal logic—dazzling in its immediacy, rigorous in its construction, and defiantly resistant to categorisation. In *Kunterbuntergang*, for example, bowling pins—one of her recurring motifs—bob in and out of focus, tumbling and falling. The tondo *PanAm*, pushes this vitality even further: gestural dynamism collides with graphic flatness in a composition that feels both unruly and carefully calibrated. This spirit of experimentation and curiosity extends beyond the canvas. Her works on paper and etchings are not supplementary but integral—charged with the same velocity, rigour, and subversive play. Agile, intuitive, and texturally rich, they offer parallel inquiries into the possibilities of image-making.

Restraint, too, has its place. Some works soften exuberance in favour of tonal clarity and compositional stillness, where reduction becomes a form of intensity. Yet even these paintings remain irreverent, never solemn or doctrinaire. *Decreation*, for instance, smuggles in a witty undertone. This subtle provocation extends to von Heyl's titles, which offer glimpses into a thought-world that teases without revealing. Whether borrowing from Rilke's lyricism or adopting the deadpan register of generic prose, von Heyl's fleeting allusions shimmer at the surface. *Uccellacci e uccellini*, named after Pasolini's film *The Hawks and the Sparrows*, depicts two birds mid-flight—an unusually direct gesture in von Heyl's elliptical lexicon. A central theme in the film—the

protagonists' attempt to decipher "the language of birds"—echoes her own interest in encrypted communication. This theme surfaces again in *Speak in Spores*, whose title evokes a vegetal mode of communication, inspired by how trees and fungi communicate underground. This biosemiotic view—where forms "speak" in nonhuman registers—mirrors von Heyl's own aesthetic: complex, open-ended, vibrational.

von Heyl is a visual acrobat. Throughout the exhibition, she demonstrates a rare painterly dexterity: the ability to choreograph chaos without taming it. Each painting she makes poses a new formal puzzle. At the core of her practice is a belief in painting as a living form of knowledge—generative, volatile and perpetually in motion. Each canvas becomes a site of experimentation: never conclusive, always open. Her works offer not answers, but propositions. In doing so, they pose a deeper question: what can painting do now?

Charline von Heyl (b. 1960, Germany) lives and works in between New York, NY and Marfa, TX. She studied painting in Hamburg and Düsseldorf and participated in the Cologne-based art scene in the 1980s. *The Giddy Road to Ruin* is currently on view at the George Economou Collection in Athens in June, focusing on works from the 1990s to the present and curated by Adam Weinberg and Skarlet Smatana. Her paintings were featured in the 59th Biennale di Venezia (2022). Von Heyl has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, including at the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C. (2018); Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle (2018); Deichtorhallen, Hamburg (2018); Tate Liverpool (2012); Kunsthalle Nürnberg (2012); Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2012); Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2011); Le Consortium, Dijon (2009); Dallas Museum of Art (2005); and Vienna Secession (2004), among many others.

von Heyl's work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom; Whitney Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, Paris, France; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts; Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Kunstmuseum Bonn, Bonn, Germany; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California; among others.

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