

The logo for Whitechapel Gallery, consisting of a solid blue rectangle divided into two horizontal sections. The text "Whitechapel" is in the top section and "Gallery" is in the bottom section, both in a white, sans-serif font.

Whitechapel  
Gallery

# Mary Heilmann: Looking at Pictures

8 June – 21 August 2016

Large print labels and interpretation

Gallery 1

## Front of gallery

### **The First Vent**

1972

Acrylic with bronze powder  
on canvas

Hauser & Wirth Collection,  
Switzerland



### **Little 9 x 9**

1973

Acrylic on canvas

Hauser & Wirth Collection, Switzerland

The grid has been an important emblem of modern art, from the paintings of Malevich and Mondrian in the early twentieth century to the sculptures of Carl Andre and Eva Hesse in the 1960s. In contrast to regular lines of a conventional grid, the ones here were done by hand without a straight edge. Heilmann made alternating horizontal and vertical lines by drawing her finger through the red acrylic paint while it was still wet, revealing the darker undercoat. This painting is equally inspired by her interest in mathematics and by her experience teaching finger painting to children.

Right side of gallery – next to door  
anticlockwise

## Mary Heilmann: Looking at Pictures

The surf culture of Southern California, the 1960s counterculture in San Francisco, pop songs and friendships with New York artists, poets and musicians are the well springs of Mary Heilmann's dazzling abstractions. Heilmann (b. 1940, San Francisco) studied poetry, ceramics and sculpture in California before moving to New York in 1968 and only began painting after realising that she could not get any attention for her sculptures as a woman artist.

*Looking at Pictures* surveys the artist's five-decade career, beginning with paintings based on the square, the grid and domestic architectural details. Heilmann playfully undermines the purity of geometric abstraction with irregular lines, non-primary colours, and dripping paint. As with her post-minimalist peers, process is an importance part of Heilmann's work. She views her paintings as puzzles that gradually reveal the methods by which they are made. 'Gazing at a picture like this can amuse me for hours', she has said, 'It's like watching a movie.'

(continues on next page)

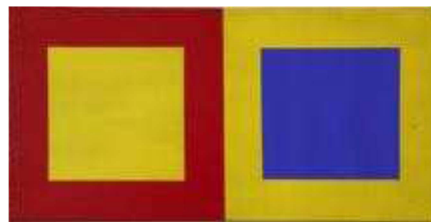
In works from the 1970s and 1980s, Heilmann introduces her artistic influences – including Mondrian and Matisse – and key geometric motifs: the sliding square, the stepped form, horizontal stripes, the line intersecting the grid. These abstractions are juxtaposed with her glazed ceramics, which bring together elements of both painting and sculpture.

Although her paintings remain resolutely abstract, Heilmann's later work, on view in the galleries upstairs, take a distinct turn towards the personal through the introduction of 'autobiographical markers', making reference to friends and personal experiences, her love of popular culture and the ocean.

## Right side of gallery

**The Rosetta Stone II**  
1978  
Acrylic on canvas

Collection of the artist  
Courtesy 303 Gallery, New  
York and Hauser & Wirth





**Gordy's Square (3 x 3 yellow Blue)**

1976

Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection

Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth

With this work Heilmann pays homage to the history of abstraction, particularly to Kazimir Malevich's painting *The Black Square* (1915), and to her close friend Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–78) who was known for his cutting and removing section of walls and floors from abandoned buildings. Heilmann scrapes away some of the blue topcoat to reveal the yellow underneath. 'I wasn't really thinking about painting,' Heilmann explains, 'I was thinking about structures.'

Left to right:

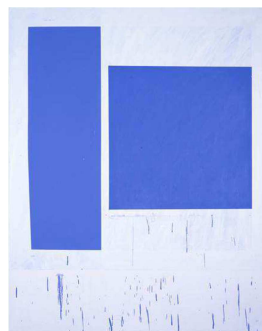
**Blue and White Squares**


1997

Oil on canvas

Collection of Jennifer and  
Matthew Harris

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<p><b>Green Queen</b> 1977 Acrylic on canvas Collection of the Artist, Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York and Hauser &amp; Wirth</p> <p><b>Green Weave</b> 2013 Oil on canvas Private Collection, Zurich, Courtesy Häusler Contemporary, Munich   Zurich</p>	<p>n/a</p> 
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n/a	
<p><b>Ming</b> 1986 Acrylic and watercolour on canvas Hauser &amp; Wirth Collection, Switzerland</p> <p>Trained as a ceramicist, Heilmann is influenced by the colour of glazes. This painting is based on Chinese blue-and-white porcelain, which came to prominence during the Ming dynasty and was made possible by the Persian trade in cobalt. After painting two blue and white rectangles, she then added a heavy meander line on top to break up the grid.</p>	

Left to right:

**Matisse**

1989

Oil on canvas

Private Collection

Courtesy Hauser & Wirth



**J.J.**

1986

Acrylic and watercolour on  
canvas

Hauser & Wirth Collection,  
Switzerland



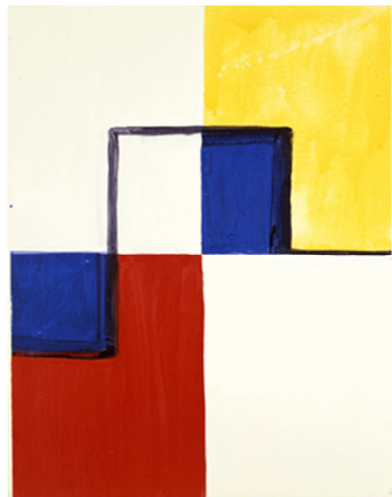
**Little Mondrian**

1985

Acrylic and watercolour on  
canvas

Private Collection

Courtesy Hauser & Wirth



**Chartreuse**

1987

Acrylic and watercolour on  
wood panel

Hauser & Wirth Collection,  
Switzerland



**Back of gallery**

Left to right:

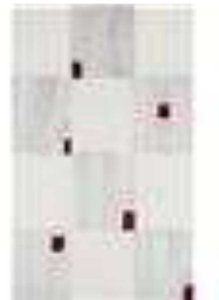
**Little Red Boxes**

1989

Oil on canvas

Private Collection

Courtesy Hauser & Wirth



**Lifeline**

1990–94

Oil on canvas

Private collection

n/a



## Left of gallery



### **El Niño**

1983

Oil on canvas

Collection of Rick and Jolanda Hunting

The stepped form in this painting derives in part from the traditional Pueblo architecture of the southwestern United States, but Heilmann also sees this motif as a simple figure. The striped patterns in her work are often influenced by the colourful Mexican serape blankets and shawls.

Left to right:

### **The Big Black Mirror**

1975

Oil and enamel on canvas

Hauser & Wirth Collection,  
Switzerland



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<b>Kachina Gate</b> 1980 Acrylic on cut-out canvas on canvas Collection of the Artist Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York and Hauser & Wirth	n/a
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## **Jalousie II**

1974

Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection UK

Courtesy Gerber Stauffer Fine Arts, Zurich

Some of Heilmann's early paintings are based on architectural details from the domestic environment, such as doors, mirrors and vents. Referring to everyday objects, these rectilinear forms also gave her the opportunity to experiment with geometry. The title of this work is based on Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* (1957), which plays on the double meaning of *jalousie* in French. The novel's narrator jealously observes his wife, often through the house's jalousie windows, interacting with a neighbor with whom he suspects she is having an affair.

### **The Big Dipper**

1969

Non-firing clay, lead foil,  
paint

Collection of the artist  
Courtesy 303 Gallery, New  
York and Hauser & Wirth



n/a

### **Corona Borealis**

1970

Acrylic and graphite on unstretched canvas

Collection of the artist


Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York and Hauser & Wirth

Reflecting her longstanding interest in stars and star maps, Heilmann titled this work after the constellation Corona Borealis, which in Greek mythology refers to the crown given by the god Dionysus to the princess Ariadne. One of her earliest canvases, this painting is indebted to the process-based sculpture that Heilmann made just prior to moving to New York. The grid is formed by folding the unstretched canvas and the stars by masking out seven shapes.

## Front-left of gallery

<p><b>Black Petal Plate</b> ca.1983–84 Glazed ceramic</p> <p>Collection of the artist Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York, and Hauser &amp; Wirth</p>	n/a
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## Middle-right of gallery

<p><b>Twinkle Detail</b> 2001 Oil on canvas</p> <p>Private Collection, London</p>	
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## Middle of gallery

### Mary Heilmann's Ceramics

In the mid 1960s, Heilmann attended the University of California, Berkeley to study with Peter Voulkos, an artist renowned for his large ceramic sculptures influenced by Abstract Expressionism. Heilmann's early work with ceramics shaped her approach to painting. She paints, particularly with acrylics, in a manner akin to modeling with clay, using her fingers and tools to manipulate the quick drying medium. Ceramics have also influenced her view of the canvas as not simply a two-dimensional support for pigment; she views her paintings as objects (the edges are always painted). She often applies paint like glazes in semi-transparent layers, the brilliant properties of the latter have influenced her palette, which is apparent in her use of bold colors typical of ceramics such as cobalt blue, turquoise and mint green.

Heilmann's ceramics are hybrids between painting and sculpture. Most are geometric planes of colour that hang on the wall but others are three dimensional objects, vessels of a sort, sitting on a surface. Some compositions resemble her stepped forms or sliding squares, albeit aligned vertically rather than horizontally.

Left to right:

**Cup Drawing**

1983

Oil on ceramic



**Glaze Test #1**

ca.1980s

Glazed ceramic



**Glaze Test #2**

ca.1980s

Glazed ceramic



All works collection of the artist

Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York and Hauser & Wirth

Left to right:

**Fracture**

2011

Glazed ceramic on painted wood



**Mazatlan**

ca.1980s

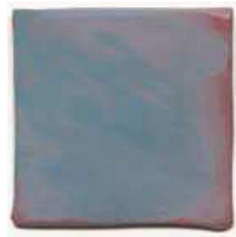
Glazed ceramic



**Desert Fog**  
ca.1980s  
Glazed ceramic

**Navaho**  
1985  
Glazed ceramic

All works collection of the  
artist  
Courtesy 303 Gallery, New  
York and Hauser & Wirth




Left to right:

**Shadow Cup 2**  
1985  
Glazed ceramic  
Collection of the artist  
Courtesy 303 Gallery, New  
York, and Hauser & Wirth

**Black Cracky**  
1990  
Oil on canvas  
Collection S.M.A.K. Stedelijk  
Museum voor Actuele Kunst,  
Ghent, Belgium



<p>Left to right:</p> <p><b>Red Metric</b> 2015 Glazed ceramic</p> <p><b>Hellfire Series #2</b> 1984 Glazed ceramic</p> <p><b>Curl</b> ca.1981–84 Glazed ceramic</p> <p>All works collection of the artist Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York, and Hauser and Wirth</p>	<p>n/a</p> <p>n/a</p> 
<p><b>Orbit</b> 1978 Acrylic and latex on canvas</p> <p>FWA, Foundation for Woman Artists, Antwerp, Belgium</p>	<p>n/a</p>



n/a

**Pink Sliding Square**

1978

Acrylic and latex on canvas

Private Collection

The sliding square is a recurring motif in Heilmann's oeuvre. At the time this painting was made, pink and black were popular colours among new wave and other post-punk acts, which Heilmann saw in clubs in New York and San Francisco. The combination also evoked the Mexican-American pachuco youth style of the 1950s when Heilmann was young.

**Piano**

1983

Glazed ceramic

Collection of the artist  
Courtesy 303 Gallery, New  
York and Hauser & Wirth



## **ACCESS INFORMATION**

For details on parking, assistance dogs, adapted toilets, lifts, large print transcripts and free audio described tours or any other access facilities:

**T +44(0)20 7522 7888**

**[access@whitechapelgallery.org](mailto:access@whitechapelgallery.org)**

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