

Mary Heilmann: Looking at Pictures

Dates 8 June - 21 August 2016 (Media View: 7 June 2016)

Galleries 1, 8 & Victor Petitgas Gallery (Gallery 9)

Admission Free

The Whitechapel Gallery presents the first major UK survey of the American artist **Mary Heilmann** (b.1940). The exhibition spans the artist's five decade career, from her early geometric paintings made in the 1970s to her recent shaped canvases in day-glo colours. It features approximately 45 paintings as well as a selection of ceramics, chairs and works on paper, many of which have never been exhibited, offering a unique insight into her playful approach to abstraction.

Born in California, Heilmann studied poetry, ceramics and sculpture before moving to New York in 1968 and taking up painting, partly in response to the predominance of sculptors among her contemporaries. The exhibition title *Looking at Pictures* is inspired by a section in the artist's memoir, *The All Night Movie* (1999), in which she highlights the self-referential and autobiographical nature of her work. This display explores Heilmann's formal approach to painting and abstraction, and considers the autobiographical themes that run through her work.

The exhibition begins in Gallery 1 with an array of the artist's early paintings, including her works based on the square, the grid and interior architectural details, such as *The First Vent* (1972) and *Little 9 x 9* (1973). The gallery includes a selection of Heilmann's ceramics, which influenced her approach to painting. In *Little 9 x 9*, for example, she used her fingers to manipulate the paint to create an irregular grid, revealing the ground beneath and creating a textured surface. The influence of modern masters such as Henri Matisse and Piet Mondrian can be seen in works from the 1980s, such as *Matisse* (1989), a white and dark blue shaped canvas with a geometric motif, and *Little Mondrian* (1985) and *Sliding Square: Green and Gold* (1975), which are made up of rectilinear forms.

The exhibition continues with Heilmann's slide show, *Her Life* (2006), which juxtaposes images of the artist's work with photographs she has taken over the years. Set to an eclectic mix of songs, images of her abstract paintings are shown alongside pictures of neon signs, parked cars and the ocean. The snapshots from Heilmann's life imbue her paintings with a highly personal significance. Also on display are watercolours - including landscapes and studies for paintings - from the artist's sketchbooks, which are exhibited for the first time. A group of larger works on paper, including acrylics, oils and watercolours, were primarily made in the 1980s and 1990s.

The exhibition closes in Gallery 8 with paintings, dating from the late 1970s to the present, which relate to key moments in Heilmann's life such as friendships, places she has lived or spent time, and her love of popular culture. While music and films are referenced in works such as *Bush of Ghosts* (1980) and *The Thief of Baghdad* (1983), other paintings hold a personal significance, including *311 Castro Street* (2001), Heilmann's childhood address, and *Primalon Ballroom* (2002), a music venue in San Francisco in the 1940s and 50s and later artists' studios. Recent works inspired by scenic highways and ocean vistas include *No Passing* (2011) and *Maricopa Highway* (2014), which evoke road trips, road movies and

Press Release

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video games, while *Crashing Wave* (2011) uses rich greens and blues to depict the surf along the ocean's coastline. Examples of Heilmann's chairs will be on display in this gallery, giving the viewers an opportunity to sit and discuss the works on view.

Notes to Editors

- Born in California in 1940, Heilmann studied ceramics and poetry before moving to New York in 1968 and taking up painting. In New York she began exhibiting at Holly Solomon Gallery in the mid-1970s and then showed regularly at Pat Hearn Gallery in the 1980s and 1990s. Heilmann has exhibited widely in Europe and the United States and has had solo shows at Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht (2012); Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2010); Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach (2007); Secession, Vienna (2003); Camden Art Centre (2001) and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (1990), among others. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at The Warehouse, Dallas (2015); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and Hamburger Bahnhof - Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin (2015); Kunstmuseum Bonn, Bonn (2013); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2012); MCA Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2012) and Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry (2012). She is represented by Hauser & Wirth and 303 Gallery.
- For over a century the Whitechapel Gallery has premiered world class artists from modern masters such as Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Frida Kahlo to contemporaries such as Sophie Calle, Lucian Freud, Gilbert & George and Mark Wallinger. With beautiful galleries, exhibitions, artist commissions, collection displays, historic archives, education resources, inspiring art courses, dining room and bookshop, the Gallery is open all year round, so there is always something free to see. It is a touchstone for contemporary art internationally, plays a central role in London's cultural landscape and is pivotal to the continued growth of the world's most vibrant contemporary art quarter.
- *Mary Heilmann: Looking at Pictures* is curated by Lydia Yee, Chief Curator, Whitechapel Gallery with Habda Rashid, Assistant Curator, Whitechapel Gallery.
- The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, which includes essays by Lydia Yee, Chief Curator, Whitechapel Gallery and Briony Fer, Professor of Art History, University College London. The publication will also include texts by Mary Heilmann about a selection of her works on show in the exhibition.

Visitor Information

Opening times: Tuesday - Sunday, 11am - 6pm, Thursdays, 11am - 9pm. Free entry.
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Press Information

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