

Art

MONTHLY

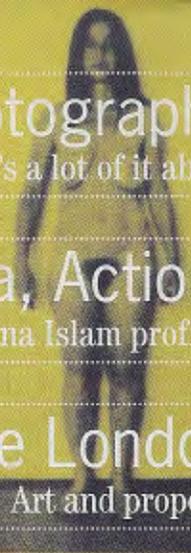
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Photography
There's a lot of it about

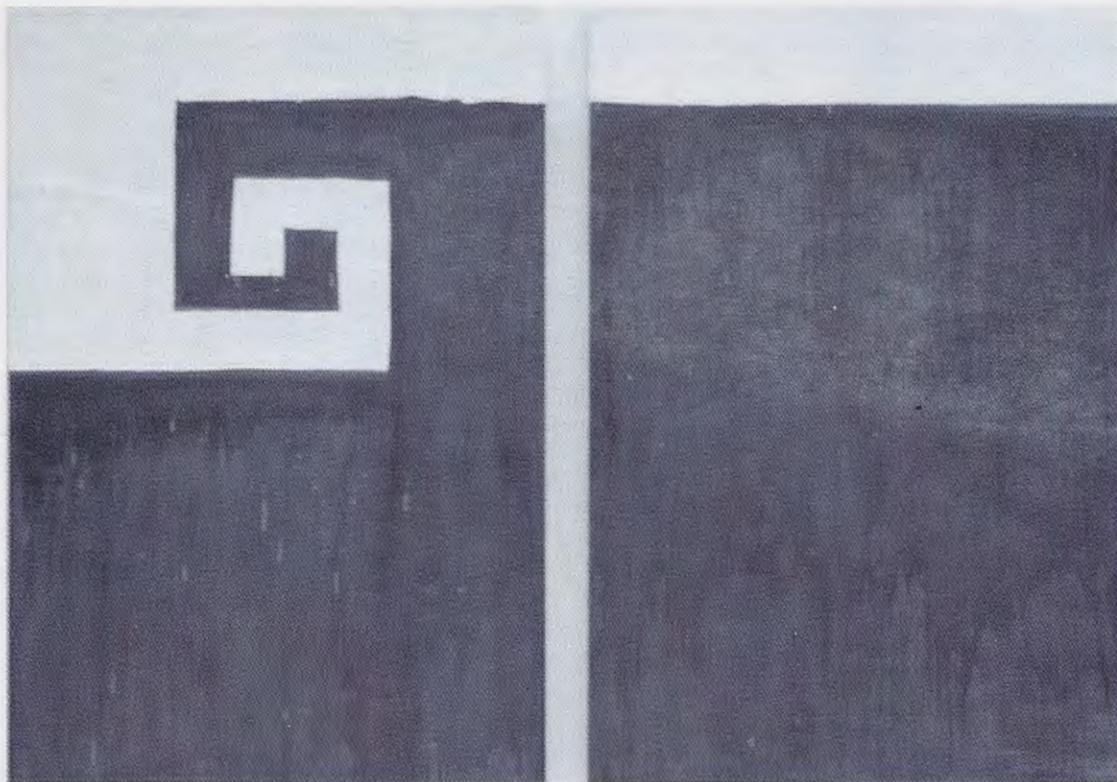
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Creative London
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Mary Heilmann
The Ninth Wave 1989
 1998



■ Mary Heilmann

Camden Arts Centre London April 6 to June 3

Greengrassi London April 6 to May 12

At Camden Arts Centre Mary Heilmann's hedonistic paintings luxuriate in the skylit main gallery. At the far end is the blue sea: *Pacific Ocean*, 1998, *Waves and Particles*, 1989, *Miramar*, 1994, *The Ninth Wave* 1989, 1998. The near end is predominantly red, green, yellow, with suggestions of the city, music and drugs: *Chinatown*, 1976, *Liquid Sound*, 1997, *Chemical Tune*, 1999. The arrangement works: we take in the ensemble while relishing individual paintings. At Greengrassi, there is just one group of four small brightly coloured canvases by Heilmann sharing the room with three paintings by the younger Joanne Greenbaum who initiated the match. The pairing is effective and has the advantage of showing what kind of work has issued from Heilmann's influence.

You have to wonder how Heilmann's incandescent paintings have a hope in hell over here. Their surf/hippy/love evocations are hardly the urban America that generally interests us. Moreover, their self-contented languor is the antithesis of that reflexivity that legitimises the British version of hedonism in contemporary art. Relocated to London, this work looks as though it has always been out of fashion – like Belgian painting from the 70s, currently viewed as too unremarkable even to be irritating.

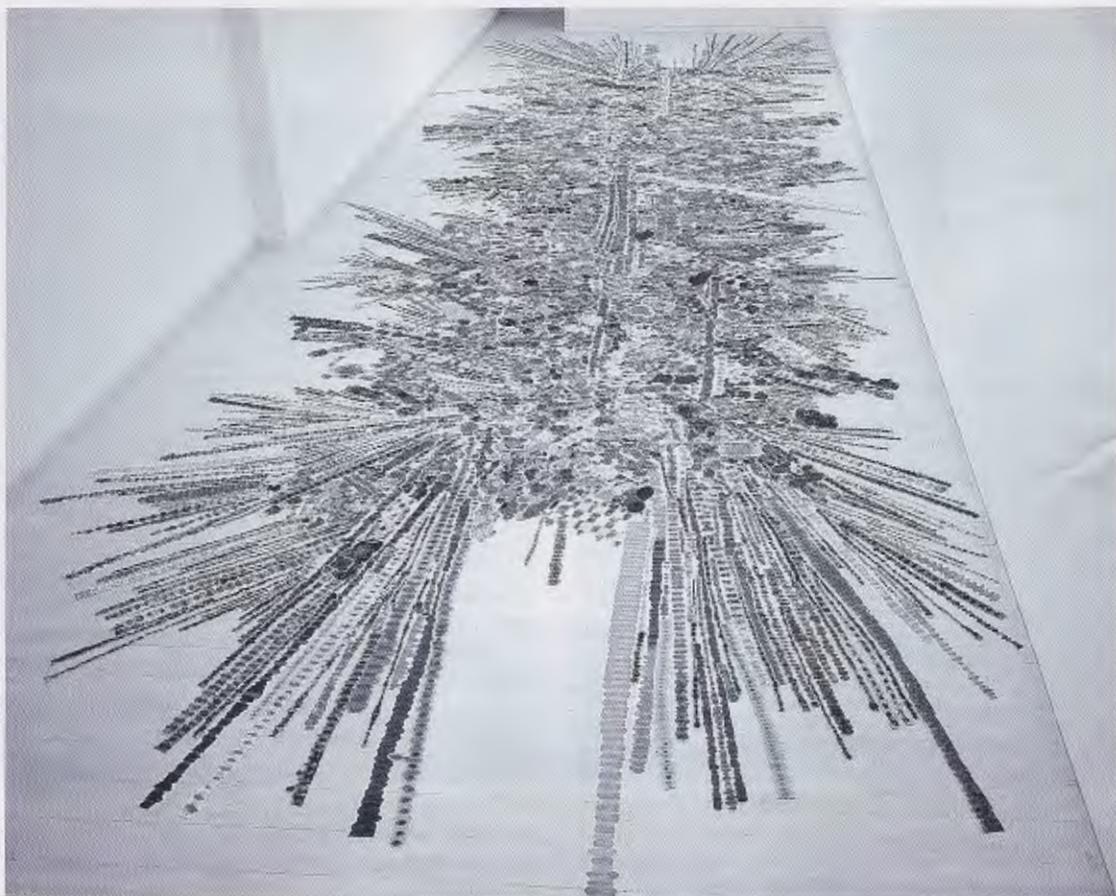
Yet Heilmann is New York's canonised abstract painter, hip, but always enough of an outsider to survive trends. Her culture goes deep into the mythology of alternative Americana: sex, drugs, Beat poets and surfers followed by sex, drugs, Post-minimalists (hanging out with Bruce Nauman and Gordon Matta-Clark), David Bowie, New York Dolls; then, abstinence and the East Village (showing with Pat Hearn) and, finally, old master status influencing the likes of Moira Dryer and Jessica

Stockholder, with students like Laura Owens and Monique Prieto. All the time painting these unfashionably gaudy canvases.

The disparity with London is due to some extent to an inveterate New York painting culture underwriting its continued practice. All painting gets instantly mapped onto a backdrop of critical positions receding as far as Jackson Pollock and hence props up a hierarchy where all are guaranteed a place but which too willingly reads eclectic invention as superficial.

Although here it looks staid, in New York Heilmann's work has always seemed unconventional and liberating. In her 90s shows at Pat Hearn's SoHo space, her casual brushwork, eccentric geometries and saccharin palette were wilfully at odds with the then current terms of self-critical painting or conceptualism. They took pleasure in going against the grain, rearticulating the familiar vocabulary of gesture and geometry to mix inappropriate references which included popular music, cinema, signifiers of femininity, minimalist grids, sex, clothing and the ocean. In that they were always keyed into personal memories, sometimes delving far back to early childhood, they share Howard Hodgkin's preoccupations, if not his narcissism. Indeed, all Heilmann's indices of feeling, like the way she asserts her ineptitude, like her kindergarten palette and her oh-dear pentimenti, have to be read against her geometry, which in a kind of homespun dialectic puts both sentiment and restraint under surveillance. Take Camden's *Pacific Ocean*, 1998, where all that happens is that a straight black line forks out across three equally-sized manganese-blue canvases. This painting is interesting because of the specificity of its components: just the blue to evoke the sun angling off a still sea, the triptych stretching far enough horizontally to feel like a scanned horizon, all skewed by the weirdness of that line undermining the prototype minimalist rectangles.

Heilmann explains it was Brian Eno's music which showed her the possibilities of a postmodern emphasis on multivalency and contingency. The earliest painting



Polly Apfelbaum
Single Gun Theory
 2001

at Camden is *Chinatown*, from 1976, a large red monochrome diptych whose systematic paint scraping derives from process art of the early 70s. Its deliberation and effortfulness are shortly to transform into a lexicon of unorthodox gestures and slips by which the paintings' construction is opened to contrasting rule systems. By the time of most of the Camden works, trying to pin down Heilmann's process is as consequential as an evening's conversation over margaritas. Attention drifts, motifs blur, feelings of benevolence and well-being increase. The paintings look as if they might once have been abandoned in a Mexican hotel, slowly bleaching under the awnings. The Spanish thing is pervasive. There's a stripey *Neon Serape* at Camden, and elsewhere there is *El Segundo*, *El Niño*, and *Rio Nido*. Camden's *Waves and Particles*, a stepped canvas of alternating blue and white bands with crazy-paving lines across it, has the dirty colour of weathered deck chairs. A white hook shape crosses the deep transparent blue of *The Ninth Wave*, a diptych so sloppily covered it seems a cross between a downpour and lazy boat painting. Heilmann admits this kind of insouciance is hard to achieve. With so much of her already in the work this induced casualness is a way of extricating subjectivity, and in its repertoire includes paint bleeding under masking tape, visible underpainting, and splashes on monochrome fields.

The ocean theme at Camden is convincing but might have been better framed had it been accompanied by some of the important pink and black series of the late 70s, where the reference to femininity becomes explicit. Also missed is the uncompromisingly mad geometry of those early to mid 90s works like *Red Cracky*, *This and That* and *Modern Art*. Had it taken up all three Camden galleries, Heilmann might have had a better shot at overcoming local prejudices. Instead we must make do with this partial, somewhat oblique introduction. ■

Mark Harris is an artist.

■ Drawings

Frith Street Gallery April 6 to May 18

Just for a moment forget the drawing premise, this exhibition offers a rare opportunity to talk dirty – that is, to discuss one of the most exciting paradigms of practice there is today, deftly coined by one of the American artists in the present exhibition as 'fuck-you formalism'. With Polly Apfelbaum, Jim Isermann and Ingrid Calame on board you can however be sure it's going to be an open-ended formalism, begetting a type

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