



Born

1940, San Francisco, CA

Education

BA, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA
MA, University of California, Berkeley, CA

Lives and Works

New York, NY and Bridgehampton, NY

About the Artist

For every piece of Mary Heilmann's work—abstract paintings, ceramics, and furniture—there is a backstory. Imbued with recollections, stories spun from her imagination, and references to music, **aesthetic** influences, and dreams, her paintings are like meditations or **icons**. Her expert and sometimes surprising treatment of paint (alternately diaphanous and goopy) complements a keen sense of color that glories in the hues and light that emanate from her laptop, and finds inspiration in the saturated colors of TV cartoons such as *The Simpsons*. Her compositions are often hybrid spatial environments that **juxtapose** two- and three-dimensional renderings in a single frame, join several canvases into new works, or create diptychs of paintings and photographs in the form of prints, slideshows, and videos. Heilmann sometimes installs her paintings alongside chairs and benches, an open invitation for viewers to socialize and contemplate her work communally.

Teaching Connections

Media and Materials

ceramics, digital prints, painting, sculpture

Key Words and Ideas

abstraction, craft, icon, popular culture, spirituality

Related Artists

Janine Antoni, Elizabeth Murray, Judy Pfaff, Jessica Stockholder, Richard Tuttle

An artwork can transport a person in a soulful, rich way without having any fear of punishment or hell or sin or any of those other good things.

DISCUSS

Before Viewing

- How can colors and shapes convey a narrative? Can abstract imagery tell a story? How?
- What is an **icon**? Can a contemporary work of art function as an icon? Why or why not? Give specific examples.

While Viewing

- Heilmann says that color can be thought of in an iconographic way. List the colors that could be considered iconographic in Heilmann's work, and the associations they bring to mind.

- What kinds of **juxtapositions** does Heilmann make in her slideshows? In what ways are her images both representational and **abstract**?

- Heilmann says of some of her early paintings, "First they're objects, and then they're pictures of something." What do you think she means by this?

After Viewing

- What are the sources of inspiration for Heilmann's work? How do different sources come together in her paintings, ceramics, and slideshows?

- Heilmann says that she wanted viewers to have an antagonistic response to her early work. What do you think that comment means? Describe other artists or art movements that have "caused trouble" and challenged the status quo?

- Heilmann states that, as she matured, she realized that the most important thing about doing artwork was about communicating and having a conversation through the work. What does Heilmann communicate through her work?



Installation view, *Flying Saucer Project* ceramics on *Chartreuse Table*, New Museum, 2008. © Mary Heilmann, courtesy the artist, 303 Gallery, New York, and Hauser & Wirth, Zürich London

CREATE

- Create two paintings using two different approaches. First, create an **abstract** image and title it after you are finished. Second, create a title and then create an abstract image. How do the processes and finished works differ?

- Curate a collection of works that **juxtaposes abstract** and representational images—found, drawn, painted, or created digitally. Narrate a story based on the sequence of the images.



Two Lane Blacktop, 2008. Oil on canvas, 42 x 42 inches. © Mary Heilmann, courtesy the artist, 303 Gallery, New York, and Hauser & Wirth, Zürich London



Lovejoy, 2004. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 inches. © Mary Heilmann, courtesy the artist, 303 Gallery, New York, and Hauser & Wirth, Zürich London