

CHARLINE VON HEYL



The Not. The Eye. The Trick

Allison Katz



Untitled (11/89), 1989
49" x 61"
Oil and varnish on canvas

The Clever Peasant's Daughter

(by the Brothers Grimm)

There was once a poor peasant farmer who asked the King for a plot of land to till. He was granted his wish and worked the earth with his daughter. One day, embedded in the soil, they dug up a golden mortar. The farmer immediately declared he would offer it up to the King in gratitude. His daughter advised him against this: "He won't believe you when you say you only found the mortar. He will insist upon a golden pestle as well." The farmer objected and brought the mortar to the King. Just as the daughter had anticipated, the King asked for the pestle. When the farmer declared he had none, he was thrown in jail, whereupon he fasted and wailed, "I should have listened to her!" After days of his crying, he was brought before the king, who demanded to know the who and why of his lament. The farmer recounted his daughter's advice. "As you have such a clever daughter, let me see her." The peasant's daughter was brought before the King.

"If you are indeed so clever, then answer this riddle, and you shall become my Queen."

He continued:

"Come to me not clothed, not naked, not walking, not riding, not in the street, not out of the street."

So she went, and pulled off her clothes so that she was not clothed, and took a large fishing net and stepped into it and wound it around herself so that she was not naked; she hired an ass and tied the fishing-net to its tail, so that it would have to drag her along and she would not be riding and not walking; the ass was forced to drag her through the gutter so that she was touching the ground only with her big toe, and so was not in the street and not out of the street.

The Pleasure of the Negative Command

The Clever Peasant's Daughter, as compiled from the oral tradition by the Brothers Grimm, illustrates how the song of *No, no, no* can be a productive refrain. The bulk of the daughter's cleverness resides in her fearlessness when pushed up against the prison of language. In trying to shut her out of logic, the King has inadvertently given her the very key to an opening, that is, a constraint. She must rear her polymorphous, tangential mind to fit between the lines. Her creative intelligence is unlocked by the necessity of an absence-clause: she must illuminate the gaps between his directive.

The Daughter's answer is brilliant, in large part due to its sudden obviousness, its seeming ease. The riddle has been blown open by her answer (OED Definition of To Riddle, v.: to pierce with numerous holes; i.e. "his body was riddled with bullets"). Unlike a conventional answer to a riddle, hers is original, yet not strictly singular. Space has opened up for the reader to imagine infinite variations on what she has devised. Her solution is generative.

Thus: Charline von Heyl's paintings. The Clever Peasant's Daughter's answer is offered here as a rough guide for approaching her work. Whereas before there seemed no way to answer the riddle (of how, today, to make a painting) each painting von Heyl creates is an answer— a proposition, a fruitful barrage born of prohibition. She paints both riddle and solution, in the same picture. There is no hierarchy of, or choosing between, absence and presence. She creates a space freed from ordinary time: "It is always world/ and never nowhere without no." (Rilke.¹) Her surplus imagination fills the void of the heavy question. Her answer—images can be humorous, seductive, ham-fisted, literal, brutal— but they are always imperative in their inventiveness, and paradoxically *obvious*— though no one else would actually have been able to make them.

The (Not) Rules

Von Heyl did actually paint the story of the The Clever Peasant's Daughter, in one of her earliest large-scale works, *Untitled 1989–11*². It depicts a liquid blue field, a white net, and a seductive fleshy arm, each awkwardly stacked upon the other, yet radiating depth, and ambiguous interdependence.

In von Heyl's case, as in all cases, the riddle is self-imposed (for no one asks anyone else to make art.) The painter must embody both King and Daughter. Mythic schizophrenia. This King/Daughter form of interior life is a constant dialectic of emptiness replaced by its inversion: a fullness born of trumping self-imposed obstacles. The riddle is composed of directives half-imposed, half-invented.

When she started making paintings in Germany, Von Heyl's peers were Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, Michael Krebber, Cosima von Bonin. Krebber especially set the tone that painting is primarily an activity that expresses doubt *from without*. At the time, painting was only justified as a comment on painting, which means that one could not "just" paint. The doubt must be imposed upon it. Despite the energy of the dominant dogma, von Heyl stubbornly refused to lose attraction for her way of working within strict material and mental constraints. She had started

her personal investigation. She developed a strategy in keeping with her own outsider temperament: to rely on whatever the moment, or instinct, demanded— to paint like no one (not even herself); to put together exhibitions that look like group shows. No repetition, at least not consciously. The erotics of outwitting oneself is an efficient way to keep the self from coalescing, a way to ensure splintering into multiplicity. *Jouissance*: self-shattering.

So Von Heyl devised an exaggerated sense of what one could not do, in order to return the focus onto the act of painting itself, as a way to contend and wrestle with the doubt from within the frame. She decided to *do* exactly what one could not:

Not a flat surface that is slowly, stubbornly, and deliberately built up with anti-impasto density. Not anonymous brushmarks that undo the concept of an artist's "signature" handwriting. Not anti-iconic, though mythic, private imagery. Not symbolism so loaded it empties out. Not the rejection of a stylistically consistent, fixed subjectivity. Not make all paintings by hand. Not a defiance of the language terms that define a Painting, so well articulated, in favor of the Unnameable.

All these *nots* considered, von Heyl finally had sense of how to ask herself the negatively-phrased riddle; to ask herself how to stay engaged with the age-old, ghosted visage of a blank canvas.

Touch and Go

There is another link to Painting as an inversion: transformation, in the Ovidian sense³. One thing (human, body, *no*) becomes another (animal, immateriality, *yes*) or vice-versa. It heralds the fluidity, randomness, ruthlessness and grace of freedom of form. It is a way to run from the constrictions of language.

There are two kinds of desire operating in von Heyl's paintings. King and Daughter reside in the same body. The desire born of lack versus the desire born of excess; King versus Daughter; the psychoanalysis of Lacan versus the eroticism of Bataille. Perhaps the ideal is the presence of the two, overlapping, checking and undoing each other; an extension of Virginia Woolf's hope that *au fond* creativity is a product of an androgynous mind, has by necessity both visions. Von Heyl's paintings take up this position.

The Eye: A Brief User's Guide

All description runs parallel to experience. Asking language to fully describe a painting is too much. Yet language, and its corollary of naming, are essentially at the core of the riddle von Heyl's paintings trump. Her works propose an obvious, but overlooked dependency on *looking*, or on: The Eye. The eye that craves unity, making pictures out of disparate, even contradictory, parts, in keeping with its evolutionary design. The eye that demands wholeness and accommodates this desire by accepting collisions. In von Heyl's black and white prints and collages, this function is explicit. The violent breaking apart of whole scenes using strips of unrelated scraps form scenarios that are immediately accepted as fact: the complicity of the eye is brutal. Sometimes, the best that painting can do is to demonstrate, without cynicism, the weightless clarity of why our decisions don't matter.

Multiple Wives

The eye is dependent on language: we translate our visions and sensations into words. Yet new research is surfacing that implies Western languages may lack the ability to record subtlety in areas of perception, when compared with indigenous tongues, such as the Matses language of Peru.

Matses speakers are obliged to specify exactly how they came to know the facts they are reporting— one must specify, using a different verbal form, whether it was directly experienced, inferred, conjectured, overheard, etc.

"For instance, if you ask a Matses man how many wives he has, unless he can actually see his wives at that very moment, he would have to answer in the past tense and would say something like 'There were two the last time I checked.' After all, given that the wives are not present, he cannot be absolutely certain that one of them hasn't died or run off with another man since he last saw them, even if this was only five minutes ago. So he cannot report it as a certain fact in the present tense⁴."

This careful obsession with epistemology informs the Matses speakers' perspective of life, resulting in a "blunt sense of truth and causation."

It would seem the Matses language is finer at expressions of subtlety because it incorporates the eye. The man has to see his wives with his own eyes to say they are his. Memory means nothing. It does not rely on names like "wife" or "mine" or "yesterday." The eye belongs to nature, not to the heart.

“The mind is such a new place, last night feels obsolete”

(Emily Dickinson)

Von Heyl's paintings are meant to appear whole *only* while in front of them. Beholding begets wholeness. The painting's existence is contingent on being witnessed. In memory, its contents disassemble into fragments; unmoored glimpses that tease of inexact location. This compels the viewer to return to the painting: to look again. Returning however, one encounters a shifting of the surface, alive with new entries and exits, associations and relationships. It is what links the image to mythology: not as illustration, or in pursuit of narrative; but rather in the form of a timeless quest. Nothing is new, neither is anything old. It is the creation of an object that inspires return, refreshment, layering; in short, “negative capability. (Keats)⁵”

This may be in part an accidental liaison. Von Heyl has no memory for faces, a physiological fact. In her mind, the act of painting also functions as an eternal homage to the *impossibility* of conjuring and capturing faces. This desire for wholeness is a dramatization of the Lack. The surplus that rushes to fill the void is the fruit of excess.

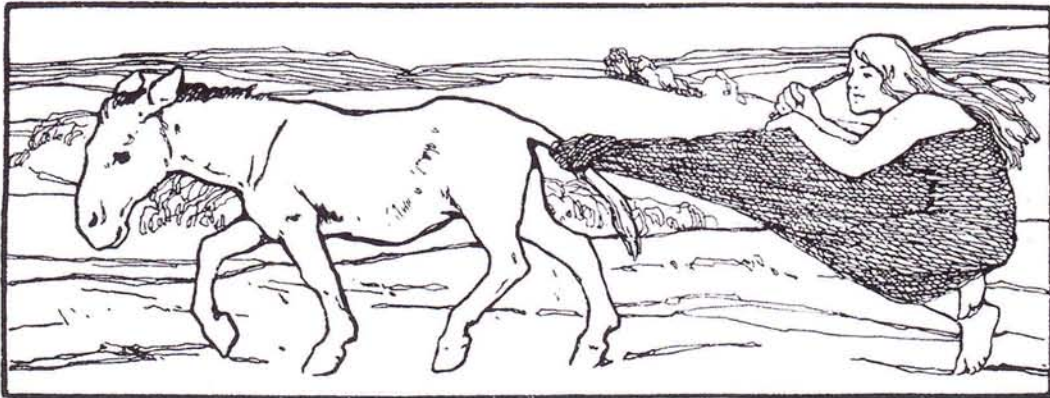
Von Heyl makes paintings that defy the comforts of memory. It is a certain sort of fearless imagination that thrives on a blank slate, on an episodic revival from nothingness. The riddle of how *not* to proceed insists upon being heard. The painter's trick of starting over in the face of the void carries on indefinitely. The eye's instinctive design is activated as an expression of a face that cannot be remembered. It is another way of approaching painting, which in this case also implies its history. Not a “willful forgetting” so much as simply not relying on memory.

The not, the eye, and the trick converge in von Heyl's paintings, intertwined yet distinct, causing an endless renewal of looking and making that are fundamental to her contribution to contemporary painting.

No Matter What

The clever daughter had become the Queen. After some time (for her cleverness is constantly finding expression) she angered the King by ingeniously helping a peasant win back a horse. She sympathized with his plight, as she herself had once been poor. The King banished her for what he considered was betrayal. “Before you go back to the hovel where you came from,” he told her, “you may take with you the one thing that you love.” She then insisted that the King

toast her departure, for she had secretly laced his drink with a sleeping potion. Once he was asleep, she bundled him up in a sheet, placed him in a cart, and wheeled him to her old peasant's hut. Upon waking, the King frantically called out for his servants. His wife came to his bedside and said, "Dear King, you commanded me to take with me my most cherished possession— so I have brought you with me." The King's eyes welled with tears as he said: "You will be mine and I will be yours."



1. Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Eight Duino Elegy*, from the *Duino Elegies*, 1912–1922
2. Von Heyl based it on the Jugendstil illustration by Otto Ubbelohde, from her 1907 edition of Grimm's *Fairy Tales*
3. Ovid, *The Metamorphosis*
4. Deutscher, Guy. "You Are What You Speak." *New York Times Magazine*, August 28, 2010, pp. 42–47
5. John Keats, in a letter to his brothers, dated Sunday December 21, 1871, Hampstead, London: "... and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."