

*Priscilla Heine: The Inexhaustible Present*

By Carter Ratcliff

Filling her paintings with traces of her gestures, Priscilla Heine invites us to see her as an abstractionist. This is not the only invitation she extends. Heine's world has the buzzing, peaceful atmosphere of a garden on a pleasant day, and no one could be blamed for simply entering that world and luxuriating there. The prevailing weather is sunny and slightly breezy, though a luminous cloudiness fills some of her paintings. *Midnight Carriage*, 2020, is dark, fittingly enough, though its darkness has a paradoxical glow. Light in all its permutations is among Heine's main subjects. Another is permutation itself.

As wide bands and lush blotches of bright color spread over the surface of a painting, she offers us a chance to see more than, strictly speaking, is visible. Her paintings are alive with things she doesn't picture so much as invoke with colors and shapes that become allusions to flowers, clouds, birds, stems, tendrils, rocks, and more. Now and then, with the help of a title, we sense a human presence awaiting our arrival and welcoming it. Unlike the ordinary world, Heine's is made expressly for our habitation.

Recording bursts of pictorial energy, each brush mark keeps its options open, preserving the possibility that an allusion to one thing might become an allusion to something else. Everything remains open not only to interpretation but reinterpretation. As we look, petals become butterfly wings; a bird becomes a blossom, a blossom becomes a cloud—though none of these transformations is

permanent. At once improvisatory and confident, Heine's brushwork persuades us not to come to any rigid conclusions.

Occasionally, a confluence of color-patches, lines, and dots evokes a face, which might be human but could also be a set of features of the kind we decipher from a flower or the wing of a moth. And in *Life's Machine*, 2021, physiognomy becomes physiology, the body's interior tangle of nerves and veins. Yet Heine is anything but an illustrator. The streaks and swirls that spread across this large, three-paneled painting could signify the thrusting, careening energies of a preternaturally colorful forest or a bird's-eye view, a map, of a complex alluvial plain. Every sensibility will find in each of Heine's paintings the reading that fits best with its inclinations and stock of associations. Her art welcomes a boundless range of responses.

Sometimes an abbreviated indication of a natural form takes on the clarity of a hieroglyph. Elsewhere, a decisively intended blotch of color overflows its pictorial purpose and accidents ensue—rivulets of paint run down the surface like streaks of rain. Of course, Heine knows when this will happen. Her random effects are not entirely random. As her imagery brings you into the space it creates, the imagination is enfolded and things begin to merge—the intentional with the accidental, physiology with physiognomy, the hieroglyphic with the natural, bird with blossom. All the contrasts I've drawn turn into complementaries, and we begin to sense that Heine's abiding subject is the unity that underlies life's infinitely various forms. She evokes the fullness of being.

And she challenges us to become aware of the way we make sense of what we see, how we endow imagery with meaning. This awareness is not required in the

ordinary course of daily life. Snapshots, book illustrations, posters demand no self-reflection, nor do familiar objects. Our understanding of these things feels automatic. The virtue of Heine's art is that it draws us, on occasion even jolts us, out of our interpretive routines. Thus, she prompts a heightened consciousness of the part we play in shaping our experience. Ambiguity does not, of course, permeate every inch of her oeuvre. It would be difficult not to see the two forms in the lower-left-hand corner of *New Day*, 2021, as vessels of some sort. Elsewhere in this painting, however, everything is joyously up for grabs, exulting in its openness to whatever imaginative response we can bring to it. Every time we return to *New Day*, it renews itself, as do all of Heine's paintings. Each one of them ushers us into a new day, new hour, new moment. She is an artist of the inexhaustible present.