

## Priscilla Heine: *Under the Lilies* by Amei Wallach

At the far end of a summer day, as shadows smudged the white of his Springs studio Willem de Kooning once said, “You yourself are like a big stew.”

“There’s a lot in there already,” he mused, contemplating the day’s work “But the stew doesn’t know that. Somebody has to pick it out. So, you start doing it.”<sup>1</sup>

In her own Cedar Point studio, a tangled skein of roads away, Priscilla Heine has for many years been excavating the stew that is herself through painting, and, more recently, sculpture. She’s sly about it. She pushes the formal pleasures of charcoal line, lavish color, syncopated rhythms, and teeming activity up front and center, so that the eye at first glosses over the turmoil, peril and eddying emotion beneath.

Like de Kooning and the painters of the abstract expressionist generations, she paints in the present tense. Vagrant thoughts unmoored by the physical act of painting are apt to bump against sensibility and history – both art and personal – as well as the fluid possibilities of endless incremental decision-making.

“Since I was quite young,” Heine says, “I believed that painting is just a recording of that time and that moment. It’s about being very present, following an idea. Following an idea. Following an idea: showing a human being thinking a thought and just following it to the very end.”<sup>2</sup>

Her paintings are records of a real person in real time who is responding, remembering, processing: dreams, appetites, desires, beauty and the grotesque, tranquility and entropy. In her chaotic childhood, seem and be seldom bore any relationship to one another. The glittering surface of exotic adventure and scintillating company was cosmetic, masking turmoil and deprivation. In her paintings, luminous color and voluptuous forms often scumble what lies beneath.

*Under the Lilies*, a painting which she began in 2007 and completed in 2008, is her most arresting and succinct statement of the paradox. A fountain of white erupts across the upper half of the painting, with the buoyancy and lyricism of blaring trumpets. It outshouts layers of cursive charcoal gesture and of swimming pool ultramarine propelled into droplets and spray. The trumpeting white tendrils are a rather more blowsy version of a motif that recurs often in Heine’s paintings. They riff on a bouquet of calla lilies, her emblem of harmony and joy.

She has rapturous memories of calla lilies: of watching women in black dresses picking calla lilies in Portugal, where the flowers grow wild, and of her honeymoon, in Perpignan, in the foothills of the Pyrenees, where late one night she was transfixed by restaurant tables dressed with great vases of calla lilies.

“We could hear the men in the kitchen talking and cooking and could smell the food. Perfection! So, any time I am stuck in a painting I bring in calla lilies and the painting is resolved.”

*In Under the Lilies*, a gush of lilies arcs from a ghoulish pod, prying it open to reveal a monstrous creature with a head the mottled ultramarine of a swimming pool gone putrid, and a lacerated lozenge of blood red for a body. This is the cartoony menace of the late Philip Guston, which continues as favored territory for young artists today.

Heine integrates all of it. Her art may be rooted in the eternal present of the abstract expressionist gesture, but it hardly stops there.

She was born in 1956. Her time and her moment have straddled the final decades of the 20th century, and the early years of the 21st. So, her tools of excavation and ever deepening thought include much of what has happened since de Kooning ladled his stew. In particular, she's infected with the Fluxus focus on anti-art and garbage as the open sesame of everyday existence, most notably in her sculpture. Like the post-minimalists who emerged just as she was coming of age, her images sometimes materialize out of and dominate their background, as in the 2008 *A Very Fine Woman*.

She subverts the irony of pop and the surreal zaniness of Carroll Dunham and his generation with a highly personal, emotion-laden iconography, as in the 2009 *Mr. Sweet/love*. Somehow Heine discerns in the painting's urgent scramble of layers, colors, emerging and submerging images, swirls and scrapes, "A man in a dashiki crossing 125th street." There's also a rooster in there somewhere, and the cacophony of existential angst pushed and pulled to the edge of buffoonery. She grew up in New York, with summers on the Mediterranean, studied art at Tufts and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and soon after exiled herself for a series of summers in a cabin without electricity on a lake in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. The water, like a minimalist plane, and the swimmers emerging out of it instigated her first mature subject matter. Back in the hullabaloo of the Lower East Side, however, she discovered her affinity with movement – the movement of children at play; of girls twirling; of paint careening, cascading, splashing; of layers scraped, wiped, and washed. In paintings such as *Birdland*, 2009, the act of addition and subtraction attains a furious velocity.

Her most extraordinary gifts are as a colorist. She's fearless with color, which can be as pure as Yves Kline pigment, as in *Prussian Thrust*, 2008, or as psychedelic as the lurid opposition of an electric lemon cadmium yellow to ancient ochre and burnt umber in the 2007 *High Seat*. The colors, part to reveal and conceal the looping charcoal line that underlies so much of the work, so that drawing and painting are in constant play, together with image and abstraction, surface and the abyss, seem and be.

In the diptych *Angel*, 2008, she brings it all together. The adamant burst of swashbuckling color describing a sensuous line or bulbous form is intensified by a white ground constructed out of layer upon agitated layer of dark, light and dripping hue. The tenuous balance of the blatant elements emanates raw energy and unabashed sexuality.

There's often a primal kind of sex in these paintings, as in the matted vaginal aggressiveness of *Lady's Swamp*, 2008. In this, as in other ways Heine has taken permission from Louise Bourgeois' forays into autobiography and the unconscious.

"Whenever I felt stupid about my connection to the psychological, I thought about Louise," Heine says.

In particular, Heine remembers seeing an exhibition of the soft sculptures that Bourgeois began making out of her own clothes in the mid-1990s. Heine's sculptures cannibalize not only her own clothes closet, but that of her husband and children, as well as the jars and containers of beauty products in which she, like so many other women, encapsulates dreams and disguises despair. She crushes, mutilates, stacks and manipulates these artifacts of her life, in a process similar to the one she brings to painting. Not that the sculptures keep any distance from painting. They drip with color and brushwork.

Except for that dynamism, the sculptures sometimes evoke the vanity table of Miss Havisham, the Dickensian anti-heroine who presided in overdressed faded splendor in a disintegrating house kept precisely the way it was on the day she was left at the altar.

That is the entropy that Heine's art so lustrously flails against. In its conflicted quest towards the harmony of color and beauty it achieves the clamorous poetry of a present dynamically reworking the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Willem de Kooning to A. Wallach, Springs, East Hampton, 5/10/78

<sup>2</sup> P. Heine to A. Wallach, East Hampton, 9/3/2009. Unless otherwise noted all Heine quotes are from this conversation.

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*Louise Bourgeois: The Spider, The Mistress and the Tangerine* (2008)

*Ilya and Emilia Kabakov: Enter Here* (2013)

*Taking Venice: The Rauschenberg Factor*, in progress

Her writings have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Smithsonian*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Art in America*, and numerous publications. From 2000 to 2005, Wallach served as president of the U.S. Section of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA/USA).