

Heidi Hahn

- American, b. 1982 in Los Angeles, California
- Lives in western New York, teaches at Alfred University, assistant professor of painting and drawing
- 2014 MFA, Yale School of Art; 2006 BFA, Cooper Union, New York



Body of Work

Heidi Hahn always paints in series, often starting with the same figure sketched on multiple canvases. She stated in a May 2018 interview with BOMB magazine, “They start to grow apart through formal decisions, like in one painting the time of day is high noon and the other can be late at night. Then the expressions shift. So the woman might have the same pose throughout, but all the other factors are up in the air. I don’t really draw beforehand, all the work happens as the paintings unfold. I guess that’s the exciting part of painting, it can be so malleable until it’s done. I like the possibilities of multiple endings or conclusions. I’m always trying to figure how to tell the same stories in different ways.” Her narrative settings include slumber parties, lovers in bedrooms, cemeteries, cave parties, Christmas interiors and exteriors, and sometimes these places look familiar while others are ambiguous.

She always includes a character, either a person or a cat or a dog, and these figures are rendered in different styles within the same painting and usually not interacting with the viewer or each other. “I love the idea that my paintings can be this one continuous moment. The viewer gets to meet up with this woman, or women, going about their day, and we just get little glimpses. . . I think of the characters in my paintings as being trapped. Painting for me is capturing time, and when that moment has been captured it’s just fixed, it’s a fact. I think that is what’s heartbreaking about painting. It’s this moment in time and it will never move forward. It has a history but no future.”

Hahn has been awarded residencies at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown Mass and the Headlands Center for the Arts, San Francisco among others. Solo exhibitions of her work have been held at Jack Hanley Gallery in New York and Premier Regard in Paris and she has been included in group exhibitions at Anton Kern, New York, Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, H I L D E, Los Angeles and John Wolf, Los Angeles, among others.



2016, *Orange You Glad*



2017, *The Future is Elsewhere I (If It Breaks Your Heart)*

Heidi Hahn

Heidi Hahn's work splits the difference between the imagistic and evocative qualities of painting, between its ability to construct narrative and its desire to evade language altogether. Hahn's images relay iconically depicted female figures set against loosely rendered backgrounds that can suggest a real location—a city street, a bathroom, a bedroom—or give only a hint of site within what is an otherwise largely abstract surface. This ambiguous treatment of ground evidences the artist's refusal of specificity, her purposeful confusion of temporalities, bodies, and of interior and exterior as place and metaphor. The women pictured, elongated and somewhat lumpy—their barely insinuated faces hard to read beneath their heavy hair—suggest not so much particular people as symbolic figures who have conjured their own settings, which in turn seem to be mental states as much as places, alienated, melancholy, intimate, and fleeting. Hahn's figures reference women in her life, including her friends, mother, and sister, but they become archetypal and often amusingly cartoonish in her hands, their import derived largely from the distinct affective resonance of the painting. The artist deploys a range of visuality—canvases can be minimal, almost color field paintings, or lavish, awash with patterning, details, and dynamic brushwork—to give life to her recurrent women. While we cannot know them, we might sense the (inner) world they inhabit.

Hahn constructs her paintings beginning with a figurative image painted directly onto the canvas; she does not create preparatory drawings, preferring instead to sketch with paint. She often paints the same image on multiple canvases—up to 10 at a time—and then works across the canvases simultaneously. Some paintings maintain the structure suggested by the artist's initial outline, but most morph into radically different compositions, becoming singular elements in a larger body of related works. This mode of working reflects two critical things about the artist's practice: her understanding of representation and abstraction, and her abiding belief in the process of painting.

Hahn has described abstraction as a mode of “falling apart”—something that was once clear and articulable is dissolving. While she begins with a specific representation, each work is determined by an improvisational process and the materiality of paint, which in the artist's hands runs the gamut from silky dark outlines and inky washes of color to thick impasto topographies and lustrous looping brushstrokes. Hahn offers a deeply painterly version of illustrative tendencies that call to mind the work of such artists such as Joan Brown, Phillip Guston, Ezra Jack Keats, and Henri Matisse. The resulting paintings bear traces of previous gestures, evidenced in sketchily marked lines visible below thin fields of pigment and in palimpsests of overpainting. They are works that find their own logics in the possibility of paint.

The earliest painting in this group of five, *Everything Left is Plain* (2015), ostensibly shows a frowning blonde woman seated sideways below a wall clock that reads 12:30. This literal image begins to fall apart as the viewer observes the rest of the painting, an experience Hahn understands in relation to a hierarchy of composition in which information is read beginning with the most representational—the women that populate her works—to the most suggestive and nebulous. The woman is perched on a tangle of sheets on an unmade bed, but this familiar interior space is also presented as a surreal and icy arctic landscape. The wall behind her is deep reddish umber; thin areas near the top of the canvas appear like atmospheric effects created by the changing time of day or auroras of light in the sky. The initial implication of a domestic

setting is at odds with the ambiguity of the rest of the scene, and Hahn's figure begins to suggest a dreamlike narrative beyond herself.

The Future is Elsewhere (if it Breaks Your Heart) #6 (2017) pushes the complex relationship between figure and ground further. A woman appears cropped at the bottom left of the canvas; only her brown hair and barely rendered face, delineated with just a black dot for an eye, and her shoulders are visible. She is in front of a thickly painted yellow background, an almost modernist monochrome, crowned by the suggestion of a pink raincloud depicted with a loose coil of oversized brushstrokes. A hurried application of scraped dark blue paint is rain falling in sheets from this cloud. The imagistic aspects of this painting are barely there; each is rendered in a different style that seems to self-consciously call out varied painting techniques. Hahn's work relies on a sparse but expressive set of marks to create a story and a feeling around this woman; the paint does the work of relaying the sensation the illustrated image only alludes to. The title suggests the possibility of "elsewhere." Is it a site beyond the space this figure occupies, or is she already in that somewhere else? A woman walking down a city street is an unknowable universe of selfhood.

Hahn's paintings are both seemingly simple narratives and elusive, expansive images. Painting here is beyond language, an amalgamation of color, texture, gesture, line, and surface that conveys as much about states of being as a story ever could. Each woman Hahn depicts is in a world unto herself—each painting an embodiment of this world.

- Diana Nawi, curator, Los Angeles