

<https://frieze.com/article/ever-changing-charline-von-heyhl>

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The Ever-Changing Charline von Heyl

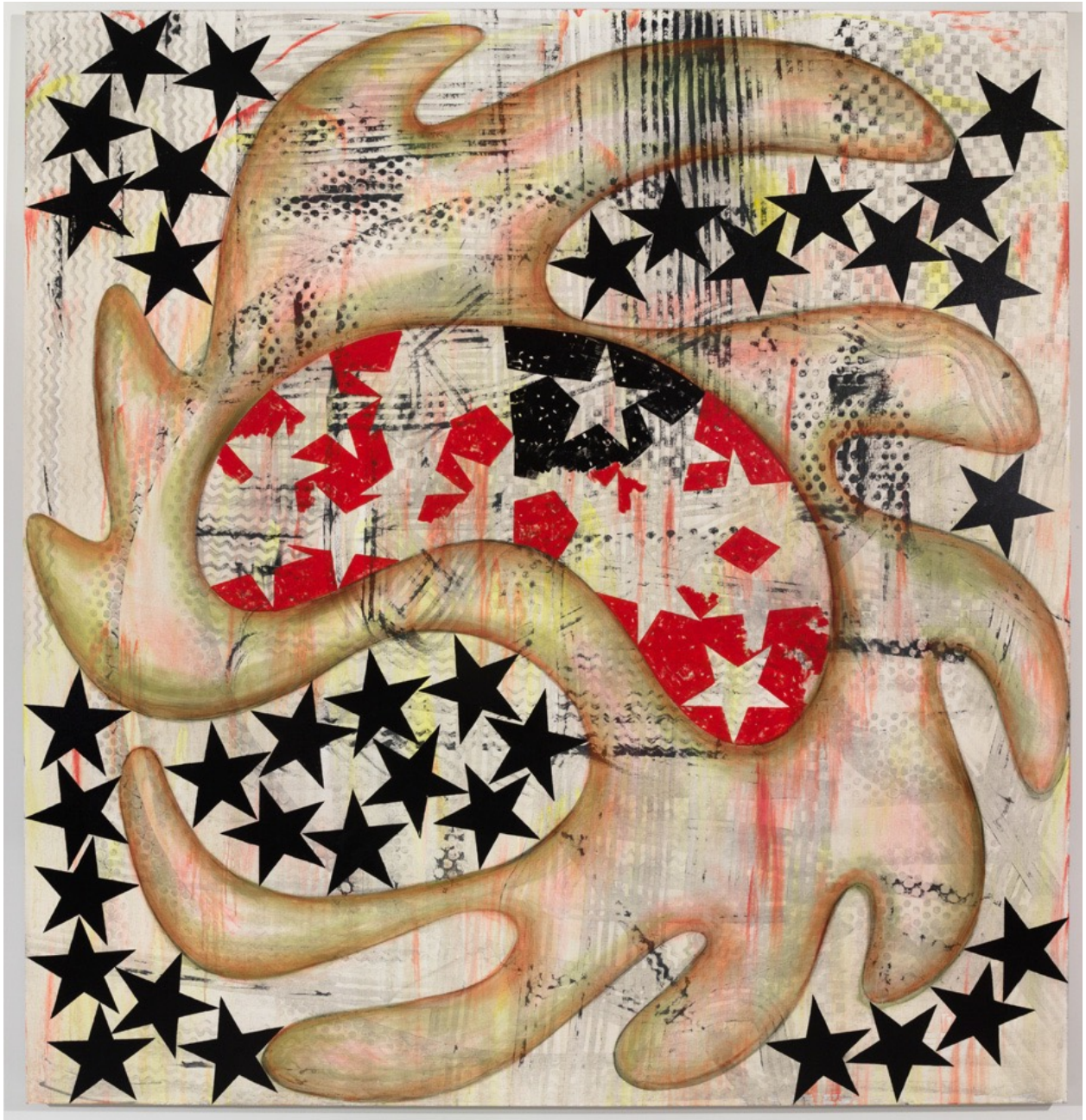
A 60-painting survey at Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, reveals the painter's signature as a switching of styles



Media reports on tattoos sometimes refer to the skin as the ‘canvas of the soul’. But while, on occasion, museums have been known to broach the topic, as with the 2014 exhibition, ‘Tatoueurs, tatoués’ (Tattoo Artists, Tattooed), at Musée du quai Branly in Paris, tattoo culture remains something of a grimy no-go in international art contexts. This may have something to do with the fact that the tattoo aesthetic is associated with a repertoire of forms that is relatively rigid, dictated by fashion and, for the most part, uninteresting; a boiled-down set of conventional templates that, over time, form a sediment and settle into a kind of crust in the depths of the present: stars, ‘tribal’ ornaments, bowling motifs, tumbling dice.

Call it chance, call it mere imagination, but several canvases included in Charline von Heyl’s show at Deichtorhallen in Hamburg seem to have rubbed up against this crust, picking up some of its specific patterns. This is one of many possible associative paths offered by the large-scale exhibition, titled ‘Snake Eyes’, which gathers together around 60 paintings made between 2005 and 2018. Throughout this period, Von Heyl has clearly not sought to establish a consistent, recognizable style. Instead, visitors are confronted with a multitude of layered painterly gestures and approaches that are produced using entirely different techniques – often in one and the same picture. You could say that the artist’s signature style involves switching her approach whenever a signature starts to emerge.

The five-pointed stars included in paintings like *Counterspell* (2015) and *Black Moon Shanty* (2017) recall those that, around 10 years ago, became known as ‘Rihanna stars’: a swarm of five-pointed stars that are tattooed over the singer’s neck and shoulders. They might also be read as stars emblazoned on flags, be it American, Chinese, European or Vietnamese: an equally fitting interpretation. *Dark Nouveau* (2017) recalls the carefree joie de vivre associated with the tribal tattoos that were widespread in the late 1990s. In Germany, these motifs are remembered not only as the first wave of mainstream tattoos, but also as expressions of a new cult of the body that emerged during that period and culminated in techno culture.



Charline von Heyl, *Howl*, 2015, 2.1 × 2 m, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy: Kunstmuseum Bonn
© Charline von Heyl

Some of the canvases, such as *Plato's Pharmacy* (2015), a theatrical juxtaposition of gestural painted backdrop and hard-edged cone-shaped forms, are accompanied by quotations, poems or fragments of song lyrics from the likes of Bob Dylan, Plato and Paul Valéry, as well as brief associative texts by the curator Katy Siegel. The combination of poetry and painting gives the show an added textual level that goes beyond that of the usual 'educational' wall labels. It reads as a modest attempt to reintroduce to the exhibition space those forms of artistic creation that, while often influential to the painterly process, are invariably absent from the final presentation, swept clean within the white cube.



Charline von Heyl, *P*, 2008, 208 × 188 × 4 cm, acrylic and crayons on linen. Courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York © Charline von Heyl

All of these references, whether imagined or actual, linger in a specific kind of suspended state: a sphere of abstraction and allusiveness. Consequently, the most suitable mode of viewing these canvases seems to be a circling of their surfaces, rather than a protracted process of analyzing their specific motifs. 'They are neither questions nor answers, just events,' Von Heyl explains in an interview in the exhibition catalogue. 'Every painting is like a perpetuum mobile. Its movement needs to be kicked into motion – it needs to be activated by the viewer.' These paintings are full of subtlety. With their direct and indirect allusions to music, poetry and the body, they do all they can to seduce. In spite of their flashes of humour, however, there is one thing they take very seriously: if they find themselves being looked at merely in passing, they remain closed.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

Charline von Heyl, 'Snake Eyes' was on view at Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, from 13 July until 24 September 2018.

Main image: Charline von Heyl, Plato's Pharmacy (detail), 2015, 1.6 × 1.5 m, acrylic on linen.

Courtesy: the artist and Petzel, New York © Charline von Heyl

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