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heightened sensitivity to a tingling array of sensations, and settles into uneventful business-as-usual, when you're oblivious to your most intimate surroundings. Like Heilmann's paintings, Cannon's smart dresses are made of cotton and linen, as well as of velvet, silk, organza, and charmeuse. Embodying an understated exoticism or sense of well-heeled hedonism, they provide a wonderfully open-ended model for the way Heilmann's insouciant paintings need to be seen – or felt.

David Pagel

Mary Heilmann
and Elizabeth
Cannon
Installation view



FRIEZE
January-February 1996
Issue 26

Mary Heilmann and Elizabeth Cannon

Christinerose Gallery,
New York

One of the best things about the juxtaposition between Mary Heilmann's juicy oils on canvas and Elizabeth Cannon's sexy dresses is that the paintings require so much less of an imaginative leap than the garments that it's difficult to think of them as abstractions at all. For once, the immediacy and concreteness of abstract painting is as obvious and specific as an ordinary article of women's clothing. Which is not to

suggest that Cannon's spiffy shifts are mundane or unexciting. On the contrary, both the paintings and the dresses – despite their stylish refinements, casual sophistication and idiosyncratic complexity – appeal to our senses and bodily impulses at a level that's simultaneously more primitive and nuanced than our minds can make sense of. In other words, to see Heilmann's fluid, geometric gestures next to Cannon's snazzy party dresses is to sense that non-representational painting takes place not above language's loftiest reaches (in some realm of transcendence), nor below its threshold of discernible significance (in the murk of pre-verbal indistinguishability), but in-between the gaps in the provisional system's practical approximations – in the slivers and slippages between needs and fantasies, where memories feed desires in an ongoing, less than fully conscious process. Only upon reflection does the silky rustling of such barely perceptible intuitions settle into something like knowledge.

To backtrack a bit, Heilmann's abstractions require less of an imaginative leap than Cannon's fashions: when you look at her

paintings, your body is already involved with the rhythms and tempos of their splashy patterns and the springy punch of their resilient, semi-translucent colours before your mind has a chance to catch up with what's taking place. What transpires as viewers try Heilmann's loose, giving images on for size, is an immediate, intimate and physical exchange between an embodied consciousness and a body of work. In contrast, Cannon's quietly ravishing dresses set up a more mediated series of experiences. Where the paintings are available to any interested viewer in the fullness of the present, the articles of clothing exist in a state of potential. Trying them on for size requires a complex, imaginative act that experienced shoppers can perform in an instant: seeing oneself in a particular garment. In an art gallery, where you can look but you'd better not touch, Cannon's dresses slow down the fast-paced decisions that are second nature to connoisseurs of fashion, dramatising three separate steps involved in successful shopping. First, the dress must catch your eye, distinguishing itself from the others on racks or mannequins. Next, it's got to capture your fancy,

to trigger enticing or satisfying images of the fabric's texture and cut as it hangs over your body's contours. At that point, if you're still interested, you head for the dressing room to test your impressions against the dress's actual fit. Cannon's gorgeous *Confetti Dress* (1994), *Crystal Dress* (1995) and *Tiffany Dress* (1995) defer this decisive moment of truth, suspending their functional designs in the dreamy, hands-off world of fantasy, which is limited only by your imagination and shaped only by memories, both recollected and unremembered.

Heilmann's paintings also take shape in this space of suspended animation, fleshing out the feel of finely cut fabrics as they fall across your skin and caress every inch of your body, even where you can't see it. It is in this sense that it's more accurate to say that these abstract works, like many of those that came before them, are meant to be felt (by your body), not conceived (by your mind). It is as if Heilmann has painted them from the inside out, visually articulating the way beautiful clothes feel the moment you slip into them, before the skin of your neck, shoulders, back, breasts, stomach, hips and thighs loses its exquisite,

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