

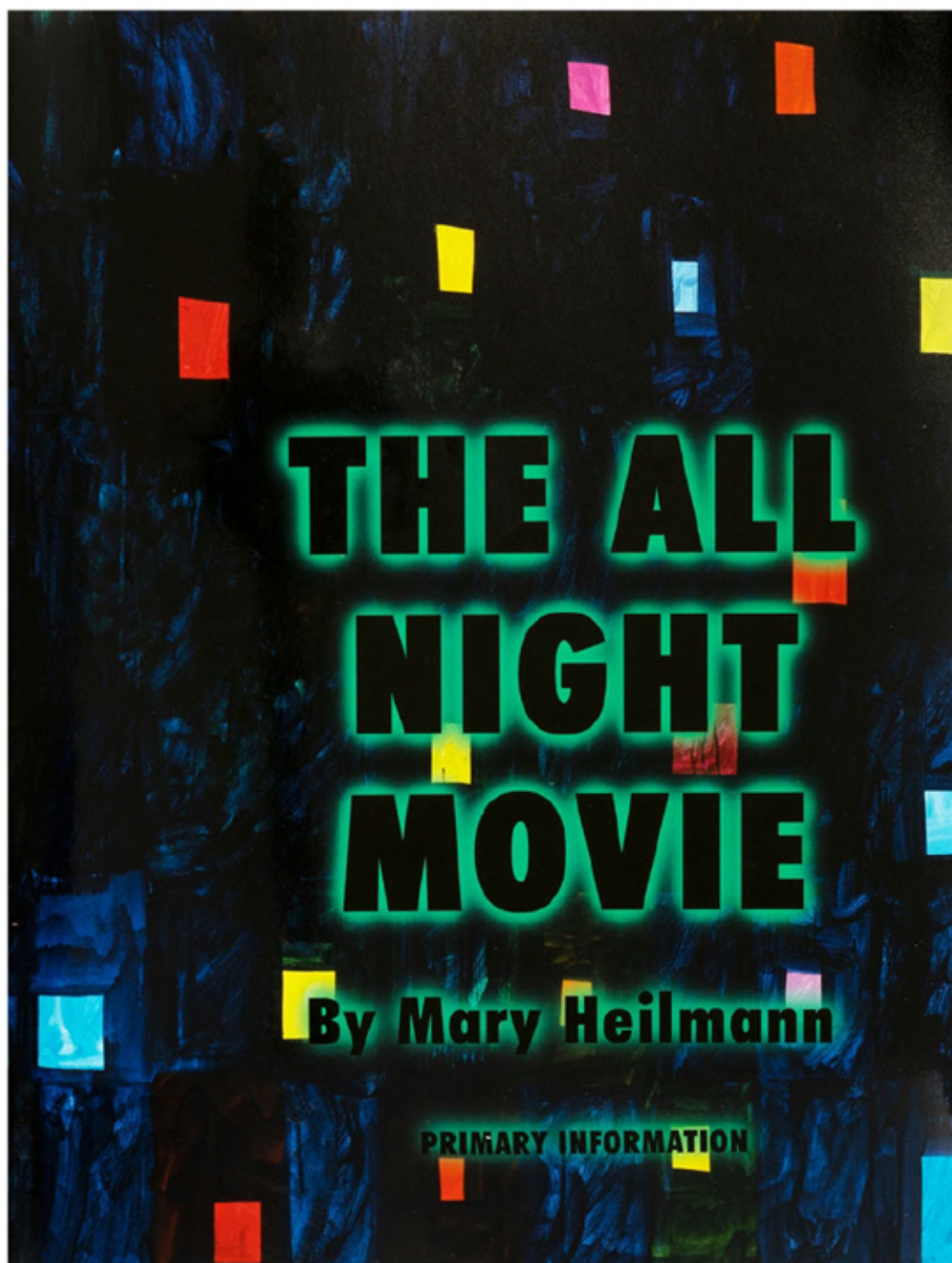
# Mary Heilmann's The All Night Movie

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Mary Heilmann  
*The All Night Movie*  
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Be forewarned—you will never approach Mary Heilmann's paintings in quite the same way after reading *The All Night Movie*, in which the artist uses words and images to trace her life from her early years in California to her arrival at artistic maturity in New York in the early 1990s. (This facsimile reprint also includes a rather telegraphic essay by artist-critic Jutta Koether, as well as German translations of both Heilmann's and Koether's texts, reflecting the volume's original occasion for a 1999 show at Hauser and Wirth's Zurich gallery.) It's not so much that learning new facts about Heilmann's life and seeing countless snapshots from her archive will influence your image of the artist and her work—though this is certainly one consequence of the book—as it is the discovery (if you didn't already know) of just how connected many of her paintings are to specific moments, people, and places in her life. The 1987 painting *Rio Nido*, for instance, was inspired by Heilmann's memories of a childhood vacation at a working-class resort on the Russian River, which she lovingly evokes. A slightly later painting, *The Glass Bottom Boat* (1994), featuring brushy blocks of blue on a white ground, memorializes a Catalina Island boat ride the artist enjoyed at the age of seven. Less nostalgic but just as personal, her defiantly loud pink-and-black painting *Save the Last Dance for Me* (1979) was intended to celebrate her love for graphic designer Mark Magill—their affair didn't last, but twenty years later he collaborated with Heilmann on the freewheeling layout of *The All Night Movie*. With bold colors and overlays, many of the spreads are designed to resemble Heilmann's compositions, though the book also includes twenty pages of conventionally presented paintings and a 1999-era resume.

It took Heilmann years to arrive at the realization that, as she puts it, each of her paintings could “be seen as an autobiographical marker” meant to evoke moments from her past or, in some cases, her “projected future.” While Heilmann is by no means the first painter to conceive of her work in autobiographical terms, the historical discourse around her chosen mode—geometric abstraction, in her case loosely painted, with a preference for minimalist grid structures—is heavily formalist. The work that crystallized her embrace of the personal was *The End* (1978), a jarring red-and-yellow painting created after the deaths of her friends Gordon Matta-Clark and Norman Fisher: “I began to feel a need for more content in my work because of these events in my life. I was still working in a bright-colored, geometrical, nonimage way, but as I gazed at the work I began to see new meaning in it,” she writes, “I began to see that the choices in the work depended more on content for their meaning. It was the end of modernism and, though I hadn't heard the news, the beginning of postmodernism.”



Throughout the book, which had its beginnings in double-projector slide lectures Heilmann delivered at art schools in the 1990s, she vividly evokes various milieus she found herself in. Many of her descriptions are imbued with a strong sense of a paradise lost, whether it's the California surfing scene in the late 1950s, the Beat cafes and nightspots of San Francisco in the early 1960s, or downtown New York in the 1970s. Even in 1999, those moments seemed impossibly distant; now, more than twenty years later, they are veiled with the unreality of legend. A few years too old to qualify as a Baby Boomer, Heilmann, who was born in 1940, offers not only the story of her own life but also the portrait of a generation (and the music it listened to, from the days before rock-and-roll to Brian Eno). But for all her embrace of successive countercultural scenes, from So-Cal surfing to beatnik San Francisco to the Great Hippie Drop Out to the desperate theater of punk and the money-flush New York art world of the 1980s, Heilmann frequently felt like an outsider. She lived for beaches and waves, but never actually surfed; as a young woman artist in New York, she was shut out of exhibitions by her male peers; in the 1980s, after giving up drink and drugs, she felt socially inept at nightclubs and stylish restaurants (there's a hilarious scene in the book where she embarrasses herself at an artworld dinner at Mr. Chow's); and when her painter friends left Pat Hearn Gallery, she felt out of place "in a milieu of photo-based neo-conceptual work."

But ultimately none of that mattered. Unlike many of her friends, Heilmann survived, and, what's more, found a way of painting that could enfold all she had experienced but without any of the self-destructive, self-glorifying behavior she once thought necessary to being an

artist. As the book closes, she happily surrenders her alienation and accepts that her “roots had been a boring Catholic middle-class of schoolteachers, engineers, cops, and nurses.” With a concision that echoes the no-nonsense qualities of her paintings, she says bluntly: “The passion and fear went out of my life and into the work.” A good motto for any artist who hopes to be in it for the long run, as Mary Heilmann still very much is.