The Best Part of Mary Heilmann's Memoir Is the Paintings

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A black canvas square is interrupted by an off-center rectangle of pink. The pink is not quite bubblegum — it's rosier and matte. A matching pink drip rolls down the canvas, asserting its subtle imperfection. "The End of the All Night Movie" (1978) is a painting by Mary Heilmann. The title, when paired with the abstract image, evokes the way a movie screen glows, illuminating the darkness around it. The pink is a window of color, a moment of hope. _The All Night Movie_, named after this painting, is also something of a window. The 1999 monograph/memoir documents the influences and inspirations behind Heilmann's colorful abstract canvases, providing a deep look into the connection between her art and her life.

The artist begins the book with a reflection on the possibilities of two-dimensional space. "I am obsessed with the space in Asian painting," she writes, "how there can be several kinds of space at once. I play with this idea as I look, my eye and my mind flicking back and forth from one sense of space to another." From here we get our title: "Gazing at a picture like this can amuse me for hours. It's like watching a movie."

Heilmann is best known for her vibrant geometric compositions that combine crisp lines with more organic brushstrokes. The abstract, open-ended nature of her paintings invites personal associations and interpretations, and Heilmann subtly steers the narrative with titles like "Woody's Truck Stop," "Two Spot Charm," and "Looks Like Music" — names that often evoke a feeling more than they delineate a subject. The titles contribute meaning to artworks that might otherwise seem purely abstract.

First published in 1999, *The All Night Movie* has recently been reissued by Primary Information. Designed by Mark Magill and Heilmann, with an essay by artist Jutta Koether, the book pairs the acclaimed painter's personal account of her life with corresponding images of her work, as well as childhood pictures and photographs of friends and peers. The book's design serves as an extension of her practice with space, color, and composition — overlapping the works, scaling them up and down, creating an immersive collage effect. Barring a couple of exceptions where the overlapping imagery and words impede legibility, the design adds to the overall reading experience. In a 1999 interview with artist Ross Bleckner for *BOMB Magazine*, Heilmann said that "The pages are designed like paintings or to have a similar effect as paintings, where you put forms and colors together to get a certain emotional hit."

Heilmann starts the chronological narrative by tracing her youth and adolescence in California; She describes playing in the ocean, vacationing with her family, and joining a swim club in Los Angeles. Though most of her stories don't stand out as particularly well-spun, they do provide useful contextual glimpses into her personality and work. The titles of her paintings connect directly to these anecdotes: "Make Believe Ballroom" comes from a radio program she listened to in her teens; "The Glass Bottomed Boat" refers to a family vacation to Catalina Island; and "Sea Wall" seems to correspond to her time living by the beach on the West Coast.

Among the most memorable of her early musings is when she recounts her trip to Tijuana in 1962 to get an abortion. Her frank description demonstrates the everyday importance of access to reproductive healthcare as well as the trauma and perils of pursuing an illegal abortion. She was fortunate to have a friend with enough money to cover the procedure (which was performed by a dentist) and drive her across the border. "I spent the night sleeping on the operating table," she writes, "and in the morning we left."
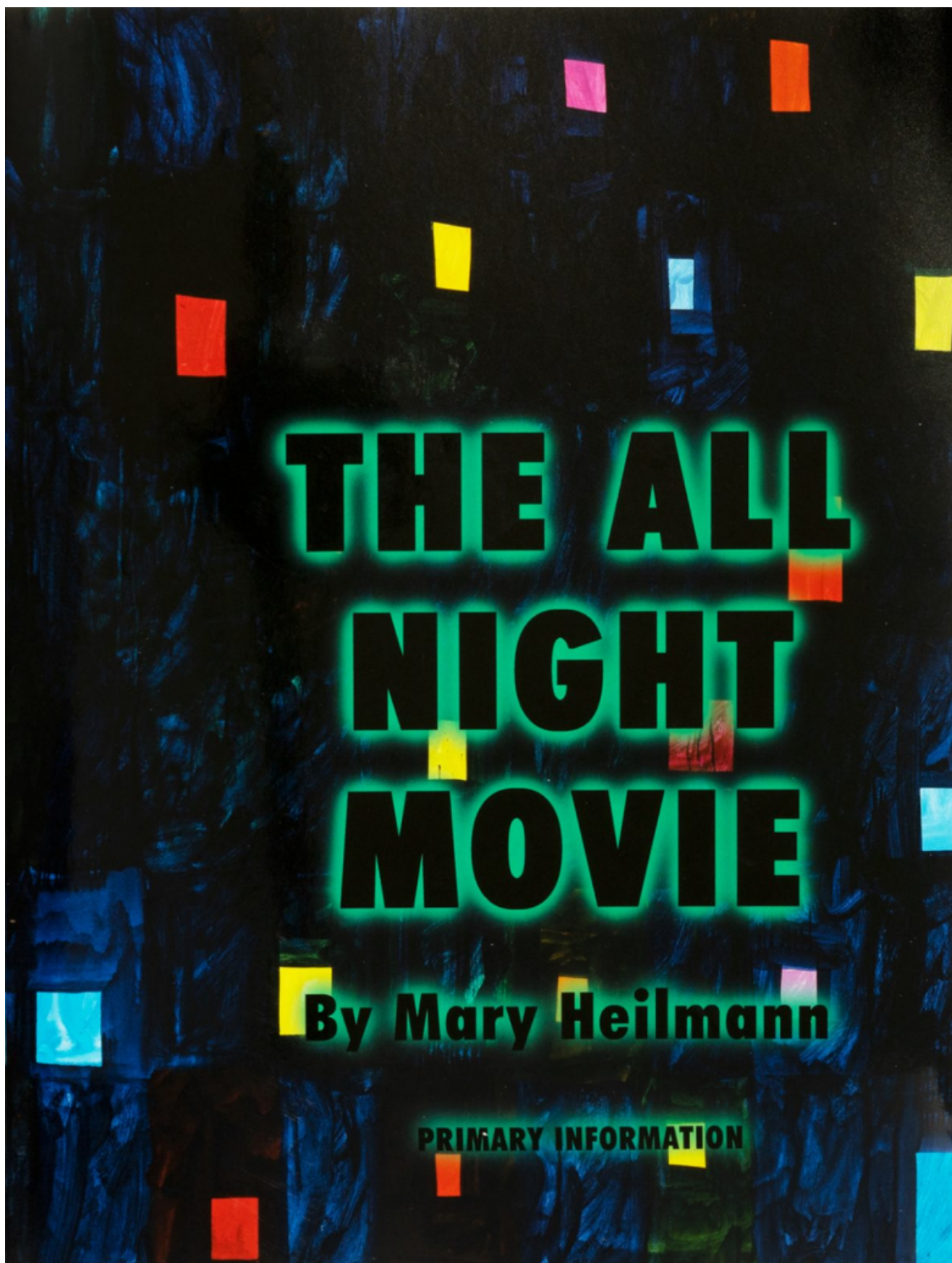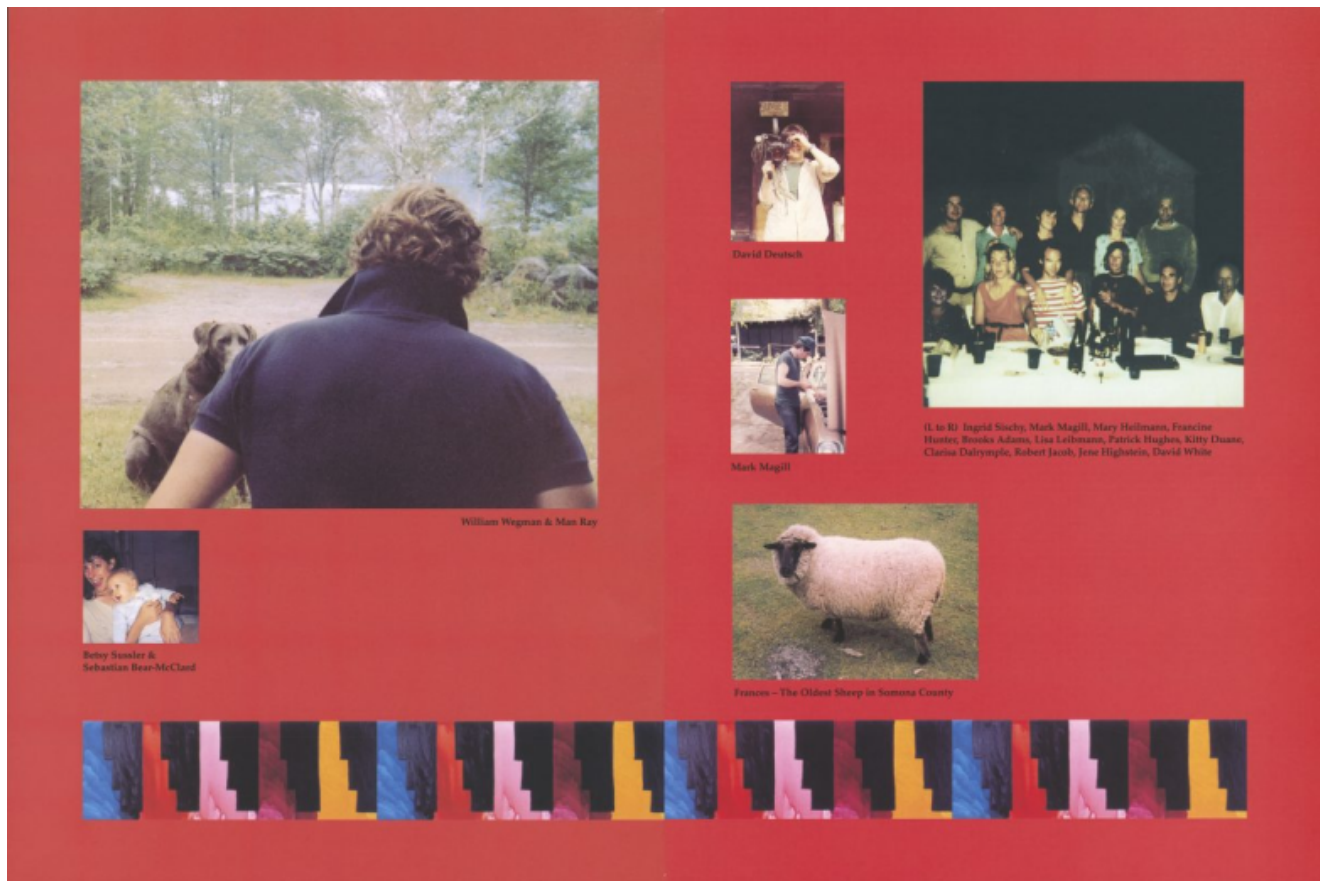
Mary Heilmann, *The All Night Movie*, Primary Information, 2022
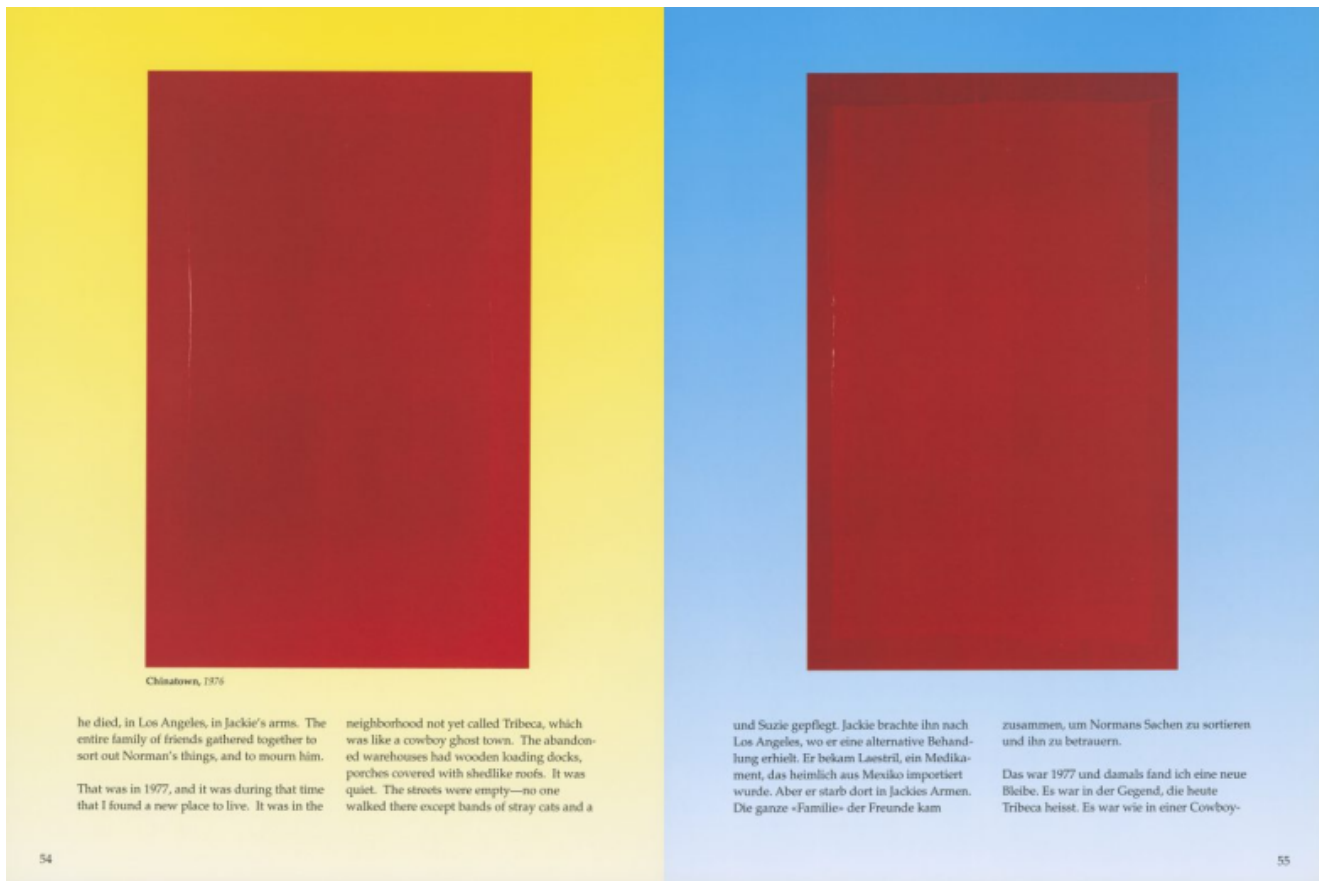
Page spread from Mary Heilmann, *The All Night Movie*, Primary Information, 2022

Like many young artists in the 1960s and '70s, soon after college Heilmann found herself drawn to the burgeoning art scene in downtown New York City. From here, her story follows a familiar arc of the scrappy artist in the big city, adding her personal recollections to the record of a landscape that would be unrecognizable today. She describes what would become Tribeca as "a cowboy ghost town" with empty streets except for the "bands of stray cats and a few itinerant men who made their homes in the abandoned buildings." She names her artistic influences, her peers, her lovers and friends, and the way her work evolved during that pivotal time. Though she arrived in New York as a sculptor, she soon switched to painting, a "rebellious move" made in reaction to being excluded from the 1969 *Anti-Illusion* exhibition at the Whitney. What follows is a list of mostly bygone names and places, memories of the people who had a lasting impact on her life and work, descriptions of the apartments in which she lived, the parties she attended, and the immense joys and grief that ensued.

The All Night Movie only covers Heilmann's paintings through 1999, which means it's missing two decades from an artist who has continued to paint and exhibit her work to this day. Artist and writer Jutta Koether supplies the somewhat whimsical second portion of the book, adding additional color and context — whether real or inferred — to many of Heilmann's works. It's an appealing and thoughtfully crafted format. Still, the real star of the book is its final third, where the paintings are left to speak for themselves.

Page spread from Mary Heilmann, *The All Night Movie*, Primary Information, 2022

The All Night Movie *by Mary Heilmann (2022) is published by Primary Information *and is *available online and from independent bookstores.*
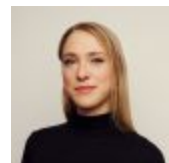
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