

Heidi Hahn

Kink Odelisk

1.9.23–14.10.23

“I take a brush and try to find a form,  
these shapes, a pose that’s going to do  
something to the shape of the canvas  
and within the canvas.” – Heidi Hahn

Text by Marion Eisele

Heidi Hahn paints women’s bodies that present themselves quite differently from those of their art historical predecessors. In the exhibition Kink Odelisk the US-American painter makes critical references to the so-called Odalisques, the old-masterly portrayed concubines - nameless icons of classical painting. In this way, she continues her exploration of painting on the one hand, and the representation of female identity on the other. Characteristic here is the break, the unconventional, the “kink“ with which her 14 female protagonists incorporate the space of the canvas. The bodies have been reduced to large, round sharp-edged color fields and often no longer possess attributes that identify them with the female sex. Facial expressions occur thanks to fewer sharp lines, which leaves room for the viewer to personally identify with the figure and it’s often rather melancholic appearance. Yet these over-proportioned bodies weren’t painted to be an image or a projection surface for someone else’s demands– they determine what is painted; they are the painting – the shape, the colour, the space. At the same time, they elude withdrawal, concealed in the cipher-like composition as if they were themselves symbols or signs for a much more complex reality. The various postures speak of resistance, if they have not already disappeared into abstraction. The depicted women bend their legs, fold their arms or lower their faces. Unlike the famous odalisques, who loll about on the bed for contemplation and illusion, Hahn’s women do not lend themselves to objectification. They crouch and muse as individuals; they are complex, ambivalent, and polyphonic.



Kink Odelisk #8, 2023

Oil on canvas  
163 × 178 cm

Heidi Hahn works in parallel on the individual series of works without preliminary drawings or sketches. Her application of paint is correspondingly spontaneous and intuitive. In various spots, previous layers and work stages become recognizable. Particularly with high-contrast details, it becomes apparent how material, color and form are in negotiation; that they wrestle with each other until the final image is found. In doing so, stylistically Hahn creates very different works in which a wide variety of painterly techniques are skillfully employed. And even if at first glance they appear very light-footed, thanks to the large areas of color and lack of spatial perspective, on closer view, one discovers the sophisticated decisions and deliberately placed tensions. The color turquoise is not given a soft tone in Hahn’s work, but set against red and green-brown hues that recall the muddy varnish of old oil paintings.

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Hahn's formalist approach is reflected in the high degree of abstraction, the little-to-no spatiality and the mature texture of glazed to impasto-gestural paint applications. The main theme of the paintings is painting itself - and here Hahn formally links herself to Abstract Expressionism. A style in which, until recently, the quick, large brushstrokes were read as a gesture with masculine connotations and the female representatives were historically neglected as a result. For her own way of working, she chooses the term "narrative formalism" and in it inseparably connects the narrative character of the pictorial content with the autonomy of the image.

"How much is necessary for the female figure to remain recognizable? And to what extent must she be abstracted so that she frees herself from her attributes?"



Kink Odelisk #10, 2023

Oil on canvas  
193 × 152,5 cm

Biographical Note:

Born in Los Angeles in 1982, Heidi Hahn currently lives and works in New York and Düsseldorf. Her works are part of renowned museum collections such as the Dallas Museum of Art, Moderna Museet Stockholm, High Museum of Art in Atlanta, New Orleans Museum of Art, Kadist Foundation Paris, New Century Art Foundation Shanghai, Philara Collection or Saastamoinen Foundation Art Collection, Helsinki. Her paintings were presented at internationally renowned museum exhibitions such as at LSU Museums L.A, High Art Museums Atlanta, the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art or New Orleans Museum of Art.

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