

## Priscilla Heine: Flowers, Food, and Art

By [Mark Segal](#) | April 25, 2019



Priscilla Heine was surrounded in her studio by elaborate calla lily-inspired sculptures and large, vividly colored paintings. *Mark Segal*

“There is a calla lily thing going on in my life,” said the artist Priscilla Heine, about her first painting of that flower, whose name derives from the Greek word for beautiful. Dating from 1991, the painting, a colorful, expressively brushy still life, was inspired by a sensory experience in a life full of them.

In the Spanish Pyrenees on their honeymoon in 1988, Ms. Heine and Christian Majcherski found themselves in a restaurant on a Sunday morning. “There were about 50 tables, and each one had this huge vase of wild calla lilies. There were these men in the kitchen who were all cooking and drinking sherry and talking. I could smell everything and hear everything.” The experience has fed into her work ever since.

Ms. Heine’s painting and sculpture emerge from a deep sensual and imaginative connection to the natural world and a willingness to follow where her instincts lead without always knowing the destination. The result is a body of work heedless of the distinctions between abstraction and representation and between exterior and interior worlds.

Born and raised in Manhattan, she was “super young” when she started to draw. “As a child, I lost myself in the work. Following the crayon, I was able to tune everything out and make sense of something else — which is how I continue to work.”

Several months ago, though, she was questioning the direction of her art. “I was feeling a little like, where am I going, and I said to myself, ‘Just get down there and be like when you were really little, take your crayons and let it all go and just do the work.’ ”

Ms. Heine and Mr. Majcherski, who was trained as an engineer, live in Northwest Woods, on the edge of Cedar Point Park, in a sprawling modern house and separate studio they built themselves on three wooded acres purchased in 2000. “My connection to nature and this beautiful landscape has deeply informed the development of my work,” she said, citing as well “the inherent creative aspects of this community, rooted in the arts, nurtured by nature and the light, which infuses everything out here.”

After graduating in 1979 from the Boston Museum’s School of Fine Arts, she moved to Glover, Vt., in the northeast of the state. “I needed a place to think, and I went there because it was the only place I could afford.” She bought land and started to build a studio; it resembled a potato barn, but with a dirt floor and no walls.

In the fall of 1980 she moved for a year to the South Fork, found work as a teacher’s assistant at the Hampton Day School, and rented James Rosenquist’s former studio in East Hampton, where she produced her first post-college body of work. She had early memories of the area because her parents had rented in Amagansett in the early 1960s.

After the school year Ms. Heine spent the summer in Vermont and then moved to the city, settling into a loft on 10th Street between Avenues C and D — Ground Zero, during the ’80s, for the city’s cutting-edge cultural life. In 1983 she met Mr. Majcherski, who had an old-car-and-motorcycle shop on the Lower East Side. They married five years later.

After their first son, Tomas, was born in 1989, she felt uneasy about the expenses and challenges of raising a child in New York. The couple decided to rent the loft and move to the East End. First, they rented, then they bought a house in foreclosure, then they sold it to purchase the land in Northwest.

When not in East Hampton, they divide their time between Vermont and Uruguay. Mr. Majcherski emigrated there from Poland when he was 13 and lived there through his 20s. From his mother, they have inherited apartments in Montevideo and Punta del Este, and have spent a lot of time in Uruguay over the years.

This past winter, Ms. Heine found a gallery in Uruguay where, she said, she will be able to fulfill a longtime dream: to create an installation inspired by her Pyrenees honeymoon. In the years since, she has been alternating sculpture with painting, first filling empty beauty-product packaging with rags and old clothes, then lathering the result with paint.

After taking top honors in Guild Hall’s Artist Members exhibition in 2007, she began to make calla lilies of papier-mâché, reinforced with wire, covered with fabric, and finished with gesso, which takes paint well and is relatively indestructible.

Of her plans for the Uruguay gallery, she said, “My thought is, you walk into a room with hundreds of calla lilies, real ones. Then it would morph into the sculptures. Then, as you’re walking through, you would hear and smell the cooking from a line of tagines.”

She showed a visitor a Lazy Susan she’d made from an upside-down tagine, a Moroccan pot. “I want the viewers to have an experience that is completely on their own terms and ingest it. And I think the flowers and the food will bring them to that place, and then I slip my art in.”

Despite the profusion of lily sculptures in her studio, the artist described herself more as a painter than a sculptor. Her work is characterized by lush, vibrant color and complex layered surfaces. In an essay on her work, the curator Janet Goleas wrote, “Among dense tangles and strokes of pigment, bare linen and swirls of charcoal, her imagery erupts before you as painterly moments coalesce to create a whole.”

Of a 2014 painting, “Engine Room,” Ms. Heine said, “I think the image was a surprise and incredible discovery as it came about. It still surprises me, and I think that’s how I deal with finding images as an abstract painter now. My work has the same mystery for me, where it comes from and how it forms, and I think that’s part of what keeps me going.”



"Engine Room," like many of Priscilla Heine's paintings, surprised her as it took form. *Gary Mamay*

Another epiphany of sorts took place on a river in Vermont, watching water lilies open. “At different times in my life, when I worked on very psychological paintings, the lily pads became for me potholes of desire or potholes of longing. The lily would be a way into a piece, a road to follow that becomes the possibility for many roads.”

She works on several paintings at the same time. “My paintings are layered; some of them are very layered and have been worked on for a long time. But what I’m always looking for is simplicity.” Of a painting she’s returned to many times, she said, “I would never have arrived at what it eventually became if I hadn’t just worked and worked and fooled around. Each mark that goes down is only because somehow, you’re being led somewhere, and it’s to try and find something.”

*Priscilla Heine is represented by Findlay Galleries*