

Fluid boundaries, Philippa Found

Looking at Tiina Heiska's oeuvre there are certain themes, centred around the female figure, which recur:

- a female figure getting dressed/undressed.
- a female figure alone on a bed/in a room/walking at night.
- close up parts of the female form in fetishistic shoes and clothing.
- a sense of the female figure being watched.

As a list, it reads like an inventory of sexual fantasies. Or fears. Heiska's paintings inhabit and explore an ambiguous position and this borderline is just one of many which Heiska's works play with.

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Tiina Heiska's paintings are derived from staged photographs the artist takes of herself using a self-timer, which she then retranslates into paint. While Heiska's paintings display an inherent painterliness with obvious, bold brushstrokes, Heiska draws the viewers attention back to the photographic medium through the depiction of flash-like lighting and by evoking the motion blur of a photograph through the out-of-focus quality of her finished paintings. This referencing of photography in her paintings sets up an interesting dichotomy in the work between photography's assumed testimony to 'truth' or reality, and paintings constructed, composed nature.

Given that Heiska's paintings originate from photographic images of the artist, one could see Heiska's paintings as self-portraits, however Heiska believes that in the process of translating the image to paint, a transformation takes place where a new character comes into being. Heiska has said of her painted protagonist, *'She is like the main character in a play, the script of which she has misplaced.'*

This idea of her female protagonist being a 'character' is further emphasised through the filmic quality of Heiska's paintings. Presenting her works in series, Heiska's

paintings appear as if a story board and evoke the filmic language of Alfred Hitchcock, David Lynch and film noir. Indeed Heiska's series *Eclipse* (2006) was based specifically on Michelangelo Antonioni's film *L'Eclisse* and Heiska's series *Twin Room* (2009) was inspired by Buñuel's iconic film, *Belle de Jour*.

The presentation of Heiska's work in series sets up an expectation in the viewer that a linear narrative will be revealed across the series of paintings, however there is no set order to the images in Heiska's series and no narrative progression emerges, rather Heiska's paintings appear as fragmented snap-shots, windows into a scene that throw up questions with no clear answers, stolen moments - seemingly viewed without permission. There is a strong sense of voyeurism in Heiska's images, a presence outside of the frame always sensed and implied, which the viewer is forced to inhabit, stalking her lone females from behind as they walk alone or spying on them in hotel rooms. This sense of surveillance is compounded by the grainy quality of Heiska's painted images, which brings to mind CCTV imagery and a sense that rather than performing for the camera, that the female figure is unaware of being watched.

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One of the recurring questions Heiska's imagery plays with is whether the depicted female character is an adult or a child as Heiska's female protagonists typically appears to teeter ambiguously between the two. Often the postures and clothing of her female characters suggest their youth, yet this is confused by the objectification of their body parts. In *Growing Small* (2008) the abandon of the seated and reclining poses of the female figure have a distinct childlike quality yet the close cropping of the body and frequent focus on the figures legs imbues the image with an unnerving sexual quality. In the series *Butterfly Caught* (2006-08) it is the figures clothing that seems particularly childlike – the same pink dress reappearing on the blonde figure in the series *Patent Shoes* (2007). In none of these series do we ever see the figures face, it is either hidden behind hair, turned away, or simply cropped out of the frame of the image. By never revealing the face, Heiska withholds the part of the body synonymous with identity, and instead leaves us to decode her protagonist's identity through props.

These props fall into two categories: the childish: ribbons, hair bows, ballet slippers, knee-high socks, and the sexual: high heels, knee-high boots, short skirts/dresses. Whether sexual or childish, all Heiska's props are united in being overtly stereotypical 'feminine' objects associated with dressing up, and so by revealing and simultaneously concealing the identity of her protagonist behind such props, Heiska's female figures not only suggest something of the inherent masquerade of 'femininity', but also of the inherent nature of disguise in Heiska's work. Art historian Maria Bregnbak has gone further, suggesting the fetishistic love of female accessories displayed in Heiska's paintings associates the work with transvestism¹. Indeed, since the face of the subject wearing these accessories is rarely revealed to us, the presumed gender of the subject also relies on the viewer's assumption.

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A recurring reference in Heiska's work is that of fairytales. In the series *Flashbacks* (2005), we are introduced to a female figure in a red coat depicted in a green – interpreted as forest – backdrop, which immediately brings to mind the story of Little Red Riding Hood. An almost identical motif appears again in the more explicitly named *Goldilocks and Red Riding Hood Series* (2005). Whilst Little Red Riding Hood may appear in her traditional environment, Goldilocks, however, is removed from the cottage and three bears and in Heiska's painting inhabits a decidedly urban interior – a hotel room or modern apartment living room with brown curtains and grey block sofa's. Heiska's Goldilocks is a blonde in lurid pink tights, posing splayed legs, hand on hips, tank-top strap falling off one shoulder and head turned away. While it could so easily be the unconscious, innocent pose of a child, there is a sexual suggestion in the way the composition directs the viewers eyes between Goldilock's legs that is unnerving, making Heiska's Goldilocks seem more child prostitute or adult dressed up to enact a fantasy, than innocent children's character. This is compounded by the fetishistic attention to

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Maria Bregnbak: Patent Shoes (2007), <http://tiinaheiska.fi/texts-2/fragments/>, accessed May 2013

Goldilock's legs that recurs across the entire series. Heiska's re-presented fairytales are subversive in their emphasis of a latent and sinister sexual quality and this subversive sexual over-tone is not exclusive to Heiska's fairytale series, but rather is indicative of the uneasy terrain that all Heiska's female characters posit: a hotel room viewed from a grainy voyeuristic viewpoint becomes decidedly seedy, perhaps even a murder scene; a walk in the park when viewed from behind becomes a dangerous stalk; a childlike pose becomes a potential tease: with the viewer forced into the unsettling position of voyeuristic predator. Heiska's restaged scenes, her attention to props which supposedly define female characters and composition which sexualizes her characters, draws attention to the objectifying and reductive presentation of female characters that is typical of film and to a certain extent literature, where female characters are commonly defined by and reduced to their body parts.

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Another borderline that Heiska's works traverse is between figuration and abstraction. In Heiska's most recent work where the artist has utilised mirrors and other reflective surfaces such as windows and water to create fragmenting light effects and has focused on recording the image of the reflected figure rather than the physical figure, the quality of abstraction has become more overt. While Heiska still uses photographs to aid her painting, the artist has said that she now relies more on letting the paint lead the painting². In recent works Heiska has returned to certain poses and compositions from past series' and when viewed side by side, the move towards abstraction is most evident. There is the standing woman who looks out of a window and is viewed from behind from the series *Eclipse* (2006) that is re-presented in the series *The Pond* (2013) as a spectral monochromatic figure. There is the girl in a white dress, collapsed on the floor on all fours in *Mermaids Legs* (2010) which is reduced to just a series of white lines in *The Pond* (2013). Heiska has said that a recurring theme in her paintings is a woman who is

constantly changing her form³ and as Heiska's work moves further into abstraction, this form seems to have become something less physical, something more spectral, more haunting. Viewed chronologically, the evolution of Heiska's female protagonist therefore might be best described as a reverse becoming – she has evolved from adult to child, to ghost.