

## Heidi Hahn: Flex, Rot, and Sp(1)it

By Louis Block | December 22, 2022



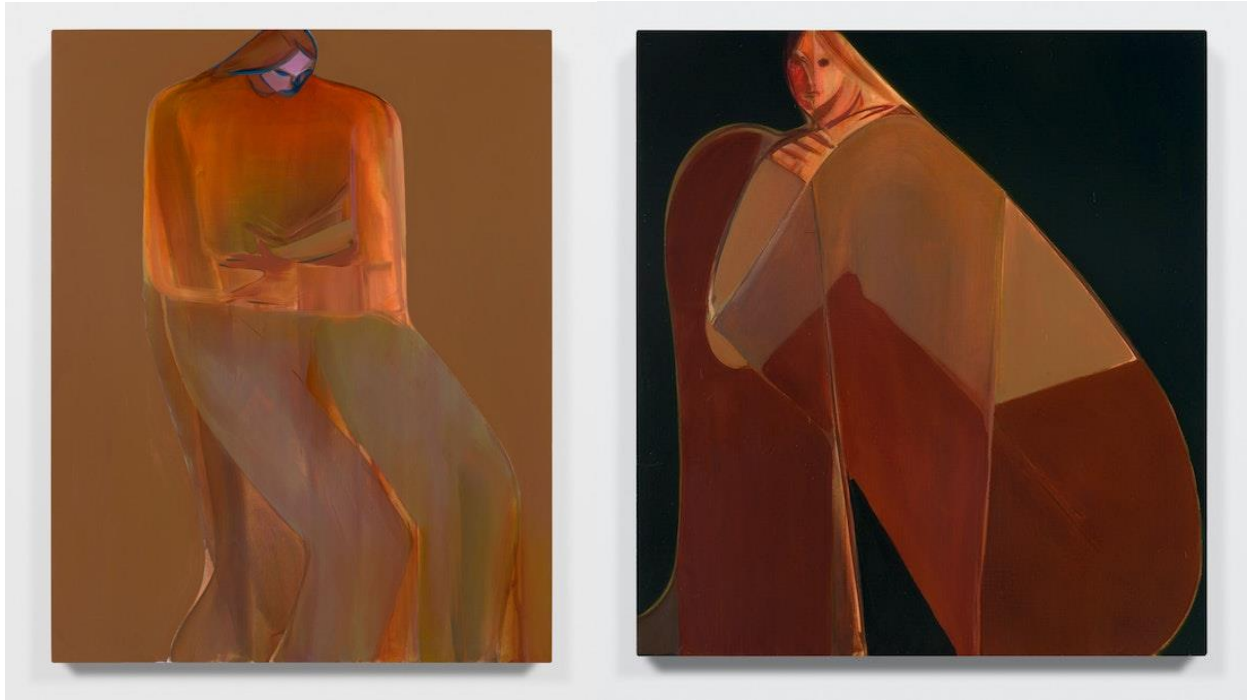
Installation view: Heidi Hahn: Flex, Rot, and Sp(1)it, Nathalie Karg Gallery, New York, 2022. Courtesy Nathalie Karg.

What makes figure painting so daunting? Is it that our eyes are more attuned to inconsistencies in anatomy than in other fields? I think it has to do with the paint itself. Paint works more like weather than like an organism: it moves in sheets, rivulets, floods, and accretions—it doesn't branch out, or grow, or bend. Figure painting is impressive by default because it makes the medium into something contrary to its nature. But Heidi Hahn's paintings of solitary figures achieve something rare by forming believable pictures of people while remaining true to the medium's tendencies.

I saw some of Hahn's canvases at an open studio this spring, leaning against the walls, butting up against each other, reeking of oil, encircling a floor of stained newsprint—mostly pages of this paper. It was an arena where it seemed layers were applied in tandem, where an entire series could be worked at for months and then all resolved in just a few hours. The canvases were bodies by default, stacked, caught in steps of description. But these eight paintings at Nathalie Karg are each resolved in different ways, their layering so complex as to make me question what I saw in that studio. I do not know how these paintings work, so I can only describe some of their mysteries.

There is a sitting figure, arms crossed, surrounded by an opaque brown. Her torso transitions from dark orange to yellow to green like mango skin, but that orange layer fades to the background at the belt line, subsumed by vertical sheets of gray that miraculously become thighs. That orange—so solidly the subject of the painting, reads as negative space in its bottom half, and thinned layers of pigment, slowly accumulating against that glow, read as legs. Up close, the surface is all veils, transparencies, drips. There is even a line left of the right leg that suggests a shadow, or movement, or desire. It is such a liquid picture, but nonetheless conveys volume. I cannot identify the exact borders of this sitter's limbs, but I can describe them as melancholy, withdrawn.

## MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Left: Heidi Hahn, *Flex, Rot, and Sp(l)it 9*, 2022. Oil on linen, 76 1/4 x 60 1/4 inches. Courtesy Nathalie Karg. Right: Heidi Hahn, *Flex, Rot, and Sp(l)it 11*, 2022. Oil on linen, 70 1/2 x 64 1/4 inches. Courtesy Nathalie Karg.

There is a kneeling figure. Two succinct brushstrokes make feet crumple against the corner of the canvas, and a fleshy, worked-at patch of pink describes aggravated pleats of fabric. The pink is thrown into a line of yellow and white, then a gradient evening out into a hem, almost as if musculature were imprinted onto the texture of clothing. There is X-ray precision here, and there is a single line dripping with turpentine, standing in for a fold.

There is a yellow figure sitting on the floor, her outline turned into a racetrack, the glimpse between thigh and calf almost architectural. The sketchy shape between knee, elbow, chest, and waist is a quickly-drawn island, a view through the situation, and the curve of the shoulder is a deflection back into the eyes—looking through that scaffolding.

There is a figure dancing or stretching in thick pink oil like muscle straining or fabric twisting. There is a figure sulking, with limbs gathered in a knot. There is a figure grasping her knees together, looking out past her cuboid features.

These canvases might be deciphered over hours of observation, tracking the drifting daylight across brushstrokes to determine exactly which pigment, applied in which order, formed these pictures. I'm envious of that exercise. But I'm also content with my situation, where there is room left for magic. It's not that Hahn is hiding anything, but that her canvases match the complexity of their subjects. I don't even know if there's a reference, or if the pictures arrive straight out of that creative arena, where there is nothing but color and speed. Whatever happens there, its pathos reaches far beyond the studio. These paintings are some of the best arguments for the medium.