

# **Nine Paintings by Abby Heller-Burnham**



## Preface

In the continuum of visual art, an oeuvre of nine paintings is not particularly significant unless the nine paintings happen to be masterpieces. With Philadelphia painter Abby Heller-Burnham, this appears to be the case. The limited oeuvre here on display encompasses a dazzling array of formal and thematic material— precise attention to painterly nuance and detail balanced with an idiosyncratic (intermittently “queer”) vision of urban life in early twenty-first century America. A painting like “The Skaters” embodies this vision— the moody chiaroscuro of the scene, its ambience of desolation, which is a specifically urban (in this case, Philadelphian) ambience; balanced with meticulous formal execution which is nonetheless skewered against conventional painterly representation; create a complex construct which is too formal to be aligned with post-modernism, but also both too dark and too strange to be aligned with middle-of-the-road pictorial art.

To be short; “The Skaters,” and Heller-Burnham’s other masterpieces, are something new under the sun. All are illuminated by the painter’s keen and quirky sense of multiple meanings, of representations whose import multiplies when observed closely and carefully. “The Walls Have Ears” presents a maze of possible meanings and levels of interpretation— the most obvious level concerns sexualized love between women; but the picture finds many ways of being queer, as the games it plays with identities and perspectives are blisteringly intense and complex. It’s a complexity which doesn’t disavow absurdist humor and irony. Compared with what is typically seen in New York galleries, it’s a narrative feast. Many of these paintings are narrative feasts— “The Lost Twins” could be taken as an art-related allegory, or a critique of allegories; a humorous indictment of the process of artistic canonization, or a humorous portrayal of the artist’s vulnerability in the face of time and canonization; a self-portrait, or a parody of self-portraits; or all of these things at once.

This is what Heller-Burnham’s paintings have which has frequently been missing from New York art; a sense of absolute formal and thematic richness, and of boundlessness in richness, resultant from the exercise of intense (newly, American) imagination. “On the Other Hand” is a narrative feast in another direction— the social mores of American “indie” culture meeting the transcendental religiosity of Renaissance painting. The juxtaposition is bizarre, and uncanny— it collapses many centuries together in a novel way, to lampoon hipster culture; but this lampoon is executed with the absolute technical authority and mastery of the Renaissance masters themselves, and so winds up transcending its status as a

lampoon. Not since Picasso has a visual artist fulfilled this many imperatives at once— that the painter is female, and queer, is a triumph both for American art and American feminism. Yet, Heller-Burnham's scope as an artist is too broad to be tied wholesale either to formalism, the American (in its novel Philadelphian form) or queer politics— as with all superior artists, there is a universality to her creations broad enough to align her with the most durable humanism. If the oeuvre of her masterworks is small, it is a smallness which the paintings themselves belie— each painting represents an incision into the aesthetic consciousness of the West in 2013. Like Picasso, Heller-Burnham has her way of enacting phallogentrism— and her uncompromising originality is as brutish in its sharpness. Heller-Burnham not only enacts, but is, an American artistic revolution.

Adam Fieled, 2013

**“The Lost Twins”**



**“The Walls Have Ears”**



**“On the Other Hand”**



**“Learning to Dance”**



**“Frozen Warnings”**



“The Skaters”



**“Ghost of Day”**



**“The First Real Top”**



**“Meeting Halfway”**

