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**Rob Wynne**  
*IN COG NITO*  
2011  
Locks Gallery, Philadelphia



Rob Wynne, a work on paper from "IN COG NITO," September 2011, at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia



"IN COG NITO," installation view, September 2011, at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia

## Close Encounters SAVAGERY AND SUBTERFUGE IN PHILADELPHIA by Linda Yablonsky

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Given the way context changes everything, it's always interesting to see what happens when artists from New York take their work to the provinces. At the moment, Philadelphia boasts two shows that New York won't see, and both are worth a trip to Pennsylvania. The Institute of Contemporary Art is presenting the abstract painter [Charline von Heyl](#)'s first retrospective, while Locks Gallery is exhibiting recent and past work by the conceptualist [Rob Wynne](#).

Over the last ten years, the German-born von Heyl has had shows at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York as well as in Europe. Wynne, a New York native, has been around since the '70s, and now has a higher profile in Paris. Neither is a brand name in their hometown, but that's not a good enough reason to pass over their presence in it. Then again, seeing their work out of competition, as it were, rewards the intrepid viewer with a focused attention too often denied by the swarm of exhibitions always buzzing around New York.

Hornets, drawn with colored glass beads sewn onto vellum, figure in "IN COG NITO," Wynne's show at Locks. The materials might be too beautiful to lavish on a bug, but Wynne gets a lot of mileage from Dadaist absurdity. The insects -- there's a glass-bead spider web too -- are in a patchwork installation of works on paper that go back to his earliest, which includes a reassuring 1972 telegram sent to himself that reads, "I am still alive."

At the time, Wynne was an avid participant in his mentor [Ray Johnson](#)'s New York Correspondence School. He also favored the Duchampian double-entendre. A small collage, begun in 1970, has the image of a man's bathrobe laid sideways on a stick between the typewritten lowercase words, "someone told me that if you sleep on the left side it wears the heart out/faster."



**Rob Wynne**  
*I Am Still Alive*  
 1972  
 Locks Gallery, Philadelphia

Another Fluxus-like work is a typewritten document that reads, "a drawing is going to be made during the winter and then it will be made again and again." The stenciled word "COPY" is stamped on it.

These pieces testify to a young artist trying out the waters of appropriation and its discontents. Since then, Wynne has focused on the slippery slope of fixed meaning, a territory he explores differently than a **Joseph Kosuth**, **Lawrence Weiner** or **Kay Rosen**, artists who also employ language as object or image.

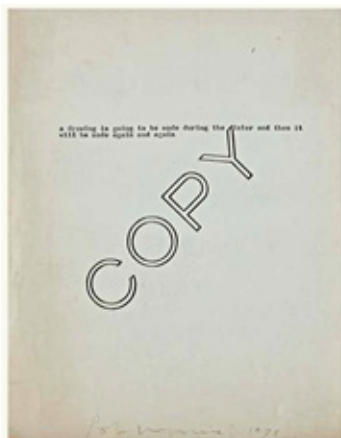
Actually, Wynne's visual syntax aligns him more with the text paintings of **Christopher Wool**. The overheard phrase, the passing thought or the juicy quotation are his stock in trade. For the last decade, he has been working in glass as well as thread and specializing in ideas that are hidden in plain sight by layers of irony.



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At the center of "IN COG NITO" is a word sculpture called *Invisible* that is anything but. Made of hand-blown, clear glass letters spelling the title across a gentle mound of white sand, it is solidly present yet inescapably "invisible." It first saw the light of day at the Holly Solomon Gallery in 1994, when it seemed to inhabit a country alien to that of Wynne's paintings -- canvases printed with enlarged details of Meissen figurines and embroidered in contrasting colors with enigmatic and incongruous word pairings like "Always" and "Sometimes."

At Locks, the sculpture anchors an array of silvery, poured-glass wall reliefs that hover between the literal and the ephemeral. The largest is a whirling constellation of 534 silvered-glass discs based on the spiral image in a Cocteau drawing, *The Vortex of Narcissus*. The other reliefs are spatial plays on words spelled out in letters of different sizes that have the look of handwriting. They're decorative, sure. But so what? They also function as poetic forms of the art of contradiction, perfectly embodied here by *Visible Silence*.



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Von Heyl pictures the polar opposite. At the ICA, what makes the biggest impression is the savagery of her paintings. It was the madwoman fury driving them that stood out the first time I saw her work, which was in the mid-'90s. Now, in the City of Brotherly Love, her overlapping styles of abstraction look more aggressive than ever.

Three sets of framed collage drawings juxtapose photocopied images, woodcuts, inky scrawls, vintage photos, stencils and bursts of spray paint. Now and then a single image -- say, a cactus -- stands out almost as comic relief, but for the most part the drawings remain resolutely abstract essays on how to break pictorial rules.

IN COG NITO, September 2011,  
at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia



Rob Wynne, "IN COG NITO,"  
installation view with *Invisible*,  
1992, and *Vortex*, 2011,  
September 2011, at Locks  
Gallery, Philadelphia

The same is true of her paintings, which veer from expressionist drips to slashing geometrics, from hard edges to smudged. But the big surprise of their installation by former ICA curator Jennelle Porter, now chief curator at Boston's ICA (where the show next appears), is an emphasis on decorative pattern that has everything to do with structure and little to say for decoration.

Gaze across the room and you see spots, webby nets, checks, diamonds and stripes. You see silhouettes and fields of color, now earthy, then saturated and occasionally pastel. All of this activity comes a cropper in *Lazybone Shuffle*, the most recent of the 18 paintings on view. Blue- and pink-striped appendages float atop yellow figures that look like paper cut-outs of trees or windows, which are superimposed on a whole other black scribble and scratch underneath. Behind that there seems to be a golden abyss, yet the whole thing is perfectly flat and resolved. Looking into it brought to mind the "she's my sister, she's my daughter, she's my sister" line from *Chinatown*. It's not pretty, just smart and spontaneous.

From a distance, *Igitur* (2008) has the cartoony appearance of one of Elizabeth Murray's shaped canvases. That's partly because the vaguely star-shaped, blood-red gash on its speed-brushed, lavender ground is a graffiti-like emblem with a cross at the top, the suggestion of a cup handle on one side and a thumb-like appurtenance at the bottom. It looks like the trophy of an open-heart surgery performed by a devil.

*Yellow Guitar* (2010) is Von Heyl's sly nod to still-life painting, though there's no guitar in it. It does have a yellow-checked table-cloth that stands upright, behind a yellow grid that could pass for a misshapen iron gate. A wine bottle floats before it; a long, sharp knife rests on top. Here and there are squares of red, blue and turquoise. All together, the painting has the air of a country kitchen and the makings of a domestic crime scene, pretty and poisonous at once.

Image and abstraction merge beautifully in *Medusa*, a 2006 oil where a muddy haze suggestive of a nude rears from a rock pile of scraped, scarred, brushed and splattered paint. *It's Not Behind Me That I Am (Krazy Kat)*, from 2010, plays with reverse perspective on a canvas wrapped with a bed sheet, where von Heyl lets loose with stained and dripped gold and purple paint over the straight black-and-white lines of a pedestrian street crossing. Krazy Kat's brick flies into the scene from above, and though we see it from below, we are also looking at the top of it.

Von Heyl may owe something to Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen, but her paintings generally live in their own fey, freewheeling world. They don't ask to be loved, only puzzled over and untangled, a task requiring time and space -- two good reasons to get out of town.

"IN COG NITO," Sept. 1-Oct. 8, 2011, Locks Gallery, 600 Washington Square South, Philadelphia, Pa. 19106.

"Charline von Heyl," Sept. 7-Feb. 19, 2011, University of Pennsylvania Institute of Contemporary Art, 118 South 36th Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19104.

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