

## Kati Gegenheimer: We've Only Just Begun

Sentiment, as delivered in a seemingly sticky-sweet and "girly" manner, or the emphasis on symbols, colors, or idioms associated with young girls, pre-teens, and teenagers, has long been a thematic fascination for Kati Gegenheimer. These are the main themes of Gegenheimer's first institutional showcase, *We've Only Just Begun*, inspired by the 1970 Carpenters' song. On view in PAFA's Morris Gallery, Gegenheimer's familiar motifs of hearts, bows, flowers, notes, stars, moons, and birds are emblems and patterns of continual emotion that are not trite or fleeting, but lasting, trusting, and hopeful. These symbols immediately communicate lasting love and care, just as the first few chords of the Carpenters' melody connote enduring adoration. Like the song, Gegenheimer traffics in the saccharine or sentimental to inspire a long look at how love — romantic, familial, brotherly—is a choice, one that requires time and rewards patience.

*We've Only Just Begun* presents paintings from the last four years, created with a palette of vibrant, almost electric colors, including pink, teal, magenta, lavender, and chartreuse. Framing the other sixteen works here and composing the gallery-wide *Palette Trim* (2026), these colors also charting the exhibition, keeping time as they simultaneously serve as a pathway for experiencing the work. These twelve hues contour the bars in the musical score depicted in the exhibition's titular painting, which serves as its central work. In it, this color palette forms the horizontal, rectangular bars of the musical staff, extending into the first measure of the song and structuring the composition while maintaining a visual tempo that extends into actual space through *Palette Trim*. As with the white and light lavender musical notes, the staff is articulated through heavily impastoed passages, built up through small brushstrokes, and culminating in a complete notation reading "we've only just begun." The score, intelligible to those who can read music, serves as an anchor to a dense background of symbols and motifs, all delicately rendered in soft, smooth variations of blues and greens against an electrically viridescent plane. As the foreground of abstract shape and brushwork overlays a more delineated, representational background, our eyes sweep between synthetic and concrete symbolism. The composition and coloration of both imbue the experience with an exuberance, as if we are looking at a confetti of motifs. That the staff's colors are mostly expressed in brushwork that clearly showcases the artist's hand implies a heightened, urgent sense of emotion, in tension with the slow-looking required by the background's details. Hand, color, and time converge in *Palette Trim*, which, cut to match the Furness-designed trim of PAFA's Historic Landmark Building, is composed of pure color with visible brushwork and extends that brushwork and color from a flat canvas into architectural space.

Such high saturation and clear hand is often associated with girlhood, that transitory time between childhood and adulthood for femme-identifying people. In the 1990s, when Gegenheimer was a girl, high-keyed neon tones and fantastical imagery defined mainstream girl identity, with Lisa Frank, gel pens, sparkly karma beads, or candy necklaces the style du jour. Hearts, flowers, and interior scenes are motifs associated with the feminine for centuries. Gegenheimer coalesces these classical forms with period-specific coloration and composition in her heart-shaped paintings, including *The Edge of the Earth Ballet* (2023) and *Dawn Chorus* (2025). Both works imply a beginning and an end (an edge or dawn, respectively), with their

imperfect heart-forms, hand-cut and painted to depict transient moments, whether birdsong, a sunrise, or a sunset in sherbert orange or lime green. Bright, spirited adornment belies the reality of girlhood, which is often a passage marked by the trauma of transforming bodies and an introduction to how femme bodies are packaged and produced in relation to seeing and being seen.

Girlhood is a transitory phase, traumatic or not, intrinsically a passage of time in which one identity evolves into another. It's both an ending and a beginning in which new possibilities form as others close. "We tend to romanticize girlhood and things that are 'girly' as being somehow soft, cosseted, or frivolous, and yet the reality is that it's often a time that is so much darker than that, filled with emotional violence and shock," writer Sophie Gilbert told *The Atlantic* in 2024. Such darkness under a more gleeful surface is alluded to in Gegenheimer's *Grief and Its Changing Forms* (2021), *Make Your Own Luck* (2021), or *Silver Linings (Vase Half Full)* (2022-2026). Each work records something ephemeral—flowers or fire—in a state of beauty and stasis, despite the inevitability of its disintegration and ending. These paintings are all doubles, records of a particular moment transformed into memory. Hidden throughout the compositions of these paintings are beads of color matching *Palette Trim* and *We've Only Just Begun*, further implying a sense of iteration, multiplicity, and expansive space. Just as *Palette Trim* extends into the gallery space, the peachy-pink velvet ribbon in *Grief and Its Changing Forms* interrupts the flat image's plasticity with the materiality of the bow, which has a second life after serving as an embellishment on Gegenheimer's wedding dress as she began married life.

Doubles, multiplicity, and iteration are inherent to girlhood, even if they are more often associated with the maternal side of womanhood. Girlhood — its reality, its imaginary, and how both are perceived — haunts womanhood, shaping the adult sense and expression of femininity. Gegenheimer entangles this symbiotic relationship through her pattern of using doubles or mirrors. This idea of multiples is echoed even in the exhibition's title: a diptych painting seen with a heart at its top seam. Across the room, hung at its exact opposite is *Space Bridge* (2026), a small canvas with a hinge (bound by a spiral reminiscent of a teenager's school notebook). Two irregular hearts are part of a larger pattern of circles that butterfly the bind, connecting two pink halves into a full hinge. The hinge is another oblique reference to the Historic Landmark Building and its architectural ornamentation, and indeed, the painting becomes a girlish replica. Homages to the Historic Building are stippled throughout the salon-hung wall of paintings that surround *Space Bridge*, including flowers, tile tessellations replicating those around the staircase, and the chartreuse border along the top, all of which recall Furness's flourishes. These more feminized, painterly reverberations offer iterative possibilities of what might seem historic or static.

Perhaps this is most pronounced in *Mars at Belmont Plateau, After Homer's Fox Hunt (Wall Calendar)* (2026), a vertical diptych in homage to Winslow Homer's *Fox Hunt* (1893) within PAFA's collection. Gegenheimer's version is an outlandishly oversized wall calendar, the tribute painting an iteration of her dog, Mars, in Fairmount Park. Instead of crashing waves, however, the Philadelphia skyline is in the distant top left, a city where Gegenheimer both lives and circumvents almost daily as she juggles her various jobs and studio practice. Everyday life is

alluded to in the day grid in the diptych's lower half, with its squares filled with biographical or seemingly prosaic notes, such as her car or grocery list. As painter and writer Mira Schor has deftly argued, list-making is itself a feminist practice, and the shopping list in Gegenheimer's painting is a record of care and maintenance. This lower portion of the painting is overlaid with a pink drape, a curly curtain arch that almost completely recedes into the background, but not quite. Reminiscent of the red drapery in Charles Willson Peale's *The Artist in His Museum* (1822) in PAFA's collection, Gegenheimer's ghostly curtain configures the painting as a self-portrait of sorts while simultaneously inviting us into the messiness, beauty, and mundanity of life as a Philadelphia painter today. Through this doubling and contemporizing, Gegenheimer offers portals to possibilities amid the specters of the past.

Likewise, *Lightning in a Box (Hope Chest)* (2025-2026) gestures towards dreams in the girl's iconography. A panel shaped as a trunk or jewel case, inlaid with moons, stars, flowers, and hearts, this painting has an orange glow from behind, as if beckoning from beyond. Its title and shape suggest not only Benjamin Franklin's infamous electricity experiment but the tradition of putting away keepsakes or goods for a future life. Often intended as a girl's dowry for when she became a married woman, a hope chest contains aspirations made literal. They are also found in the Pennsylvania Dutch tradition, which Gegenheimer grew up with in Bucks County, PA. Hope chests are akin to jewelry or music boxes for women and girls alike, often playing songs when unlocked. One such music box belonged to Gegenheimer's grandmother and played the Carpenters' "We've Only Just Begun" as it opened. The box, the hope within it, the love expressed in its contents, ultimately inspired Gegenheimer to evoke the song and its sentiment in painting. For Gegenheimer, the song-as-painting is an invocation to return to hope, possibility, and love, despite the everyday world surrounding us.

—Leah Triplett

**Kati Gegenheimer** (b. 1984, Bucks County, PA) is a painter living and working in Philadelphia, PA, where she is an Assistant Adjunct Professor at the Tyler School of Art and Architecture. She received a MFA in Painting and Printmaking from Yale University in 2013 and a BFA in Printmaking with a minor in Art History from the Tyler School of Art in 2007. She has mounted solo exhibitions at Kristen Lorello, New York, NY, (2026, 2024), North Orange, Montclair, NJ, (2022) and Gross McLeaf, Philadelphia, PA, (2021). Her work has been featured in *Create Magazine*, *Maake Magazine*, and her exhibitions have been reviewed in *Impulse Magazine* and *Title Magazine*. She is a recipient of a Joseph Robert Foundation Grant and the Yaddo Artist Access Grant and has been awarded artist residencies at The Edward F. Albee Foundation, The Goldey House Artist Residency, the Elizabeth Murray Artist Residency, and Yaddo. Gegenheimer is represented by Kristen Lorello, New York, NY.

**Leah Triplett** is a curator and writer based in Philadelphia. She is currently Curator of Contemporary Art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), where she co-organized the 2026 reinstallation of the permanent collection. She also spearheaded the return of the Morris Gallery, PAFA's exhibition space for artists who have not previously had an

institutional showcase. Exhibitions for PAFA include Kati *Gegenheimer: We've Only Just Begun* (2026), the East Coast presentation of *William Villalongo: Myths & Migrations* (2025), *New Horizons: Recent Contemporary Acquisitions* (2025), and *Artists as Cultivators* (2024). Previously, she was the curator for Boston's Now + There, organizing temporary, site-specific public artworks throughout the city and co-leading the Public Art Accelerator for emerging artists interested in bringing their work beyond the studio. She taught at Boston University from 2021 to 2023, and in 2025, she was a visiting curator at Fire Station Artists' Studios, Dublin, and Notre Dame Kylemore, in Ireland.