

SOUNDING THE NEW

CARRIE MOYER *Sirens*

by Clarity Haynes, April 6, 2016

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Carrie Moyer, *Sala de dos Hermanos*, 2015. Acrylic and Flashe on canvas. 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and C Moore Gallery, New York.

Sirens, Carrie Moyer's museum-quality début at DC Moore Gallery, consists of fourteen, mostly large-scale, almost garishly bright abstract paintings. Moyer is a veteran of the New York art scene, and has exhibited widely, most recently with SCAD. Her work has progressed since the early '90s—from graphic design-based, politically motivated work intended as queer activism,

to representational painting, to abstract painting that borrows from 1970s feminist art.

In her current show, the references tend less toward Judy Chicago and more toward Matisse. Walking through, I was reminded of the *Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs* (October 12, 2014 – February 10, 2015) at MoMA; it's interesting to note that Moyer plans her compositions by making small collages from cut paper. *Belvedere* (2016), which features arched windows as a frame looking into a space beyond, immediately brings to mind Matisse's classic *Dance* (1909). Goddesses with blunt heads frolic, their bodies dissolving into rounded forms that become one with a green mountainous landscape. But there's something playfully transgressive here as well: the stylized figures bob right out of the framed interior space, and glittery polka dots punctuate throughout.

Moyer's ambitious project is nothing less than a celebratory queering of abstraction. In as much as "queer" can be defined as a purposeful nonconforming, or a utopia envisioned outside of the quotidian, these paintings are queer. In *The Green Lantern* (2015), a cluster of opaque serpentine shapes frame the space, giving way to a frankly bizarre, bright-green, octopus-like form in the middle. It's goofy, funny, and surprising. *Sala de Dos Hermanos* (2015), a 72-inch-square piece centered on two arched window shapes, recalls stained glass in a church. But the "glass" itself is a blast of biomorphic freedoms. The frontal twin shapes could be seen as phalluses or breasts—a contradiction, perhaps, unless you see it as intentionally genderqueer.

The paintings appear to have been caused by natural events. Chthonic, transparent poured areas are corralled by graphic, slabbed shapes reminiscent of cut paper. Neither of these sections looks brushed-on in the traditional sense. Abandoning the brush is a decisive choice for Moyer. The painter Catherine Murphy has described the mid-century brushstroke as a macho imperative she chose to reject. Amy Sillman and Louise Fishman, both influences on Moyer, reclaimed the Ab-Ex brushstroke to explore new possible meanings. But Moyer is also an inheritor of the irreverent, cartoonish forms of the '80s, as exemplified in the work of Elizabeth Murray. In many ways, Moyer's somatic yet curiously bodiless work resembles that of a digital artist, or a sci-fi influenced artist. I get the feeling she's bypassing the brushstroke in order to imagine new ways of embodiment, perhaps offering a glimpse into the future.

There is a spiritual, ethereal, and religious aspect to Moyer's work, which marries the sacred to the profane. The saturated colors and shapes invoke joy. The paintings glow like stained glass windows; it's as if they are lit from behind by sunshine. Moyer's work is not after subtlety; it wants to knock your socks off. Chroma can be a form of confrontation (an early piece is titled *Chromafesto*). In this sense, unapologetic visual pleasure can be understood as a surrogate for unapologetic sexual pleasure. *Intergalactic Emoji Factory* (2015) displays a confrontational festivity that speaks to color's subversive power: a brilliant rainbow spectrum rises above a bed of black glitter. To me, the painting tells a theatrical story about gay pride, what it has meant and continues to mean—affirmation, community, and the opposite of shame. It's interesting to consider Moyer's history in this context: in the '90s, she co-founded the iconic public art project Dyke Action Machine. At the time, there was a sex-positive rallying cry in queer communities that was partly a response to the AIDS crisis. The affirmation of pleasure in the face of annihilation was both metaphorical and real. The slogan "Silence = Death" addressed the necessity of speaking up and fighting back, refusing to be ignored.

Vieni Qui Bella, 2016, ("Come Here, Beauty") is an ode to Moyer's wife, the fiber artist Sheila Pepe. A sheet of dripping blood-red paint is foregrounded by a web of green-grey ropelike forms that recall Pepe's multidimensional crocheted works. This piece is a reminder that for a lesbian to self-define and speak of pleasure is a political act. (Pepe, interested in similar themes, once titled a show *Hot Lesbian Formalism*.) Creative dialogue between romantic partners is something we're all familiar with through the example of countless heterosexual artist couples, but to witness this in a same-sex female couple is still new, and refreshing.

Despite Moyer's many influences and art historical references, her work does not look like anyone else's. She is creating new territory and forging her own language in paint. A kind of deep, bodily theatrics are at play in these smart, masterful paintings. It's hard to leave the gallery—the works literally cajole the viewer to stay. *Sirens* gives more than it asks: it is fundamentally generous. This is a big, beautiful party to which we're all invited.

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