

Art in America

Carrie Moyer

By *Stephen Mueller* *October 22, 2009*



Carrie Moyer re-creates, or more exactly reimagines, a particular style: a Gallic Anglo-American mid-20th-century modern (as distinct from modernism), a style sometimes called “moderne,” a look that signifies better living through biomorphic grace. Moyer’s version taps a strain of abstract surrealism, bringing Henry Moore as well as Hans Arp to mind. Her work is technically accomplished, presenting a veritable lexicon of the effects possible using acrylic paints and mediums, all in a daring palette.

The exhibition was called “Arcana,” meaning an array of mysteries. The paintings (all 2008 or ’09) recall a time when abstract meant abstracted from something (the figure, for example, streamlined, distorted or abbreviated), as opposed to “non-objective.” In Moyer’s paintings the focus is indeed on figures, jazzy and stylized, arranged in group tableaux or singly, like portraits.

Mythic Being readily demonstrates Moyer’s methodology, which can be puzzling, especially in the larger works (this one is 50 by 30 inches), where she over- and under-paints, often changing the curvilinear outlines of primary shapes, which are painted out with thicker, more opaque color, and altering their interior workings. The “mythic being” of the title is a standing heraldic figure with a transparent brown-to-violet cloud partially obscuring its large head, culminating in a pointed spike. The surrounding dark color is tonally uninflected, causing the figure, painted white with overlays of brightly tinted acrylic medium puddles, to pop.

Dark or neutral grounds or surrounds are present in all the paintings, and sometimes resemble period interior colors: a café au lait, easy on the lait, for example, or dusty violet. The use of white, or near white, overlaid with bright gels is also effective. The figures in the smaller portraitlike paintings, such as *Tiny Dancer* (2009), seem to be composed of disparate parts and change character from top to bottom, something like the Surrealists’ exquisite corpses. Often, a red line, painted to resemble a string, crosses and loosely joins elements. In *Frieze*, the red “string” links, from neck to neck, pointy-headed paper-doll-like figures arranged in a kind of chorus line. Oddly, this line is reminiscent of similar devices in paintings by Ben Shahn, and the social realists are also recalled in some of the postures elsewhere. Touches of trompe l’oeil dimensionality and a quirky humor complete the mix.

In spite of their art-historical references and stylization, the paintings have at once an experimental feeling and a cohesive finish, reflecting the hand of an intelligent and literate practitioner. The look and method are welcome relief from the prevailing nonchalance and deliberate slacker stance in so much contemporary painting. Moyer’s work is yet another rebirth of cool.

Photos: Carrie Moyer: Tableau, 2008, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 90 by 66 inches; at Canada.