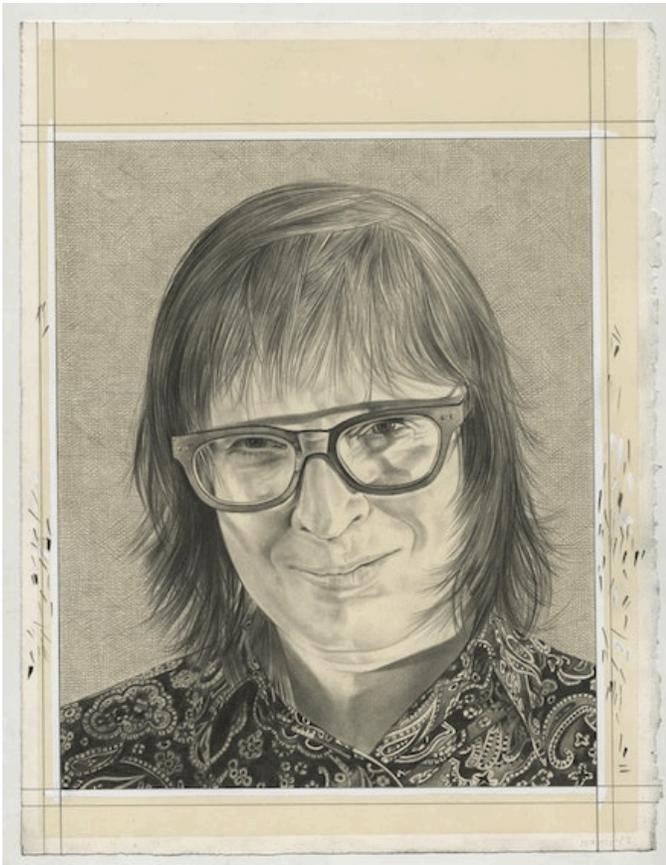


CARRIE MOYER with Phong Bui

September, 2011

While busily preparing for her new exhibit *Canonical* at CANADA gallery (September 14 – October 16, 2011) the painter Carrie Moyer took time to stop by the *Rail's* headquarters and talk with publisher Phong Bui about her life and work.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Phong Bui (Rail): Like Amy Sillman, who decided to go back to graduate school rather late—she graduated from the School of Visual Arts in 1979 and went back to Bard for her MFA in 1995—you graduated from Pratt Institute in 1985, and did not go back to graduate school, also at Bard, until 1998. With one exception in that you also have another graduate degree in computer graphic design from the New York Institute of Technology in 1990. We know Amy went back to graduate

school partly because her work habits were not as efficient, as she told me so candidly in my conversation with her in April 2006.

Carrie Moyer: We all had been there [*laughs*].

Rail: Yes, and partly because the prospect of being a painter was becoming more serious for Amy. What was your reason?

Moyer: I had a period where I was very disillusioned with painting right after I graduated from Pratt. I painted for a few years but it was in total isolation. Suddenly there's no one paying attention to you anymore, and you are trying to figure out how to make it as an artist in New York—an impossible task on your own, to say the least. But it was also during that same period, the early 1990s, that I became involved with gay civil rights activism, participating in ACT UP demonstrations and later joining Queer Nation and the Lesbian Avengers. My political life became far more important to me than my life in the studio. Even though I'd never taken any design courses, I started producing posters and different kinds of agitprop for the groups I was involved in. Politics were very real and very urgent. Suddenly it felt like my work had some kind of tangible and immediate result, which was very fulfilling. I actually stopped painting for a good five years. And when I started again, I just knew that I would only be able to go so far on my own. I was already showing a little bit in the '90s, but to move forward, I needed to be in critical dialogue with smart people. I knew Nayland Blake and Cecilia Dougherty and so was familiar with the program. It occurred to me that if I was going to graduate school, Bard was the first and only choice.

Rail: Before going to Bard you were a practicing graphic designer. Could you talk about what you gained from it that made you appreciate the medium's different function from that of painting?

Moyer: Because of my political activism I suddenly had this strong desire to bring myself up to speed on the history of graphics, particularly agitprop and graphics made by artists: Constructivists, Situationists, Ad Reinhardt, and other artists from the '60s and '70s. I was born in 1960 and grew up as a kid during the peace and women's movements. I was surrounded by those kinds of graphics, then and now. In my teens and early '20s I was a punk and those graphics had a different aesthetic altogether, equally compelling. So as much as I was interested in abstract painting in school, I was also interested in this real, immediate communication that was street-based, images that needed to be very fast and gripping.

Rail: That was what you said to Katrina Fox in the *Scavenger*, a monthly online magazine/portal, in 2009. And as specific as your references to Russian Constructivism, radical iconography of the '60s liberation movements, May '68 in France, and so on were, it seems to me that, apart from the elements you were able to extrapolate from graphic design and then reconfigure into your paintings, you were able to produce an independent output of posters and prints to bolster your political activism.

Moyer: It happened to coincide with the very beginning of desktop publishing, when Macs were first introduced. At one of my first jobs after art school, I was trained to do graphic production on a very large, stand-alone system. Which naturally led to using them to make agitprop after hours! In 1991 I started Dyke Action Machine! with Sue Schaffner. Sue was a commercial photographer and I was doing production and design work at big ad agencies. We were both thinking about Appropriationist artists of the '80s like Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Sherrie Levine. Perhaps using their methods to talk about tangible events and experiences, rather than existential states of being.

Rail: Dyke Action Machine! kind of grew out of Queer Nation, so it makes sense that the posters, the graphic works, on the one hand, were inspired by the appropriation of the '80s, and on the other hand, grew out of the visual language of radical politics that we identify with Emory Douglas, the minister of propaganda for the Black Panther Party, and Sister Corita Kent.

Moyer: Totally.

Rail: And the powerful cover illustrations that appear in the *East Village Others* from New York, *Seed* with the famous star, *Sisterhood Is Powerful* from Chicago, and the *Berkeley Barb* from Berkeley, California. Not to mention the effective use of simple photographic images in *Fifth Estate* from Detroit. I mean, there were many incredible magazines in the '60s and the '70s.

Moyer: Exactly. You can imagine why I might have been prematurely disgruntled with all the limitations of painting! Maybe I didn't yet have the patience that it requires. It was clear to me that I had a strong populist urge and graphic design allowed me to work with a different visual speed—it's much "quicker" than painting and depends on the different location where to view, in this case, the street. I'm also interested in the repeating cycles of these iconic graphics. The well-known Situationist illustration of a hammer smashing CAPITAL on an anvil, for example,

shows up on a Naomi Klein website 30 years later. Or the screen print of Che that continues to appear on T-shirts and patches everywhere.



"Into the Woods," 2011. Acrylic, glitter on canvas, 72 x 72". Courtesy of the artist and CANADA gallery.

Rail: Which reminds me of the way your painting "Burn a Bush," in the exhibit *That Was Then, This is Now* at PS1 in 2008, was installed above the pattern of a repeated image of what appeared to be smoke or a flame-like form that rose upward from the center of the pentagon. It was overtly political up close, but from a distance, with its seductive use of colors on top of the subdued tone of the wallpaper-like background, it is nothing but a pure pleasure. Anyway, when did this desire to combine these seemingly opposite poles begin?

Moyer: I started out as an abstract painter. However, because of my involvement

with public art projects and queer identity in early, 90s, I decided to return to paintings with work that looked at the social ideas about the origins of one's sexual identity, often with black humor, of course. For example, I was completely skeptical of the notion of the "gay gene," an idea that was being bandied about at the time as a means of "explaining" sexuality. So I did a lot of pictures imagining what a lesbian baby or child might look like. I'm not naturally a figurative artist at all, but this content obviously demanded the depiction of people. So the work from that period has a very wonky, awkward relationship to figuration because there was no other way to communicate those ideas (except through photography and text, which I was already doing in DAM!). As I got more and more into painting again, I began thinking about a kind of hybridized painting-poster-space, which eventually showed up in the painting with a broader reference to my own history with political imagery. Because my parents were hippies, I was around that visual culture as a kid.

Rail: So you grew up with a nomadic life? Moving from one place to the next?

Moyer: Yes, my parents were working-class kids who decided to drop out of college and move to Berkeley in a van with their children and all of their possessions. Then they later moved around the Northwest and they did a lot of different jobs, like planting Christmas trees, and my father became an airplane mechanic. I didn't really know anything about having a career until I went to college on the East Coast.

Rail: What career? [*Laughs.*]

Moyer: Oh, a "career," right. I mean being an artist is a kind of avocation that is larger than a career or a job. My mother encouraged me and my sister to develop a passion for something. I wasn't told being an artist had anything to do with having a "real" career.

Rail: How would you describe your experiences at Pratt and then later at Bard?

Moyer: My experience at Pratt was amazing—I had never been to art school, even though I had been making art since I was really young. It blew my mind. I loved it. Rudolf Baranik was a brilliant teacher. So were Jenny Snider and Amy Snider, her sister, who got me an internship at *Heresies* magazine, an experience that was incredibly important in terms of my own introduction to feminist artists from the older generation as well as my own.

Rail: Which later fed right into your political activism and DAM!

Moyer: Absolutely. At the same time I had abstract painters like Phoebe Helman, Jack Sonnenberg, and Ernst Benkert as teachers.

Rail: So what sort of paintings were you making then?

Moyer: They were bright, energetic biomorphic abstractions, which had a strong affinity with painters like Elizabeth Murray, Gary Stephan, Katherine Porter, Bill Jensen— —

Rail: And Terry Winters.

Moyer: Yeah, Terry Winters was huge, partly because he had gone to Pratt. I remember going to his Whitney retrospective in 1992, which included a series of etchings that had X-ray images in them. They were amazing. At any rate, as with my graduate school experience at Bard, Pratt was a life-changing situation. Lately I've been realizing how important that experience was to the way I make paintings now. At Bard the crits operated at a very high level—Suzanne Joelson, Amy Sillman, Stephen Westfall, Nayland Blake, and Cecilia Dougherty provided a vast repository of brain power and information. My first year there was completely overwhelming, but by the end of the third year, I knew what my work was about and how it could operate in the contemporary discourse.

Rail: Most of us who have followed your work for a while know that you identify with the experimental spirit and radical politics of the '60s and '70s, especially feminism, as seen in the works made by artists such as Joan Semmel, Howardena Pindell, Louise Fishman, and Harmony Hammond.

Moyer: Harmony Hammond has been a kind of mentor to me ever since I starting doing DAM! and public art projects. She became important to me because, in addition to being an artist she also wrote a great deal. Her first book, *Wrappings: Essays on Feminism, Art, and the Martial Arts* was very influential to my thinking about art. I began to think about art in the context of everyday life. It was my Linda Montano moment: How can all these experiences and thoughts coalesce in such a way that this mysterious object is produced. Suggestive but not completely legible. I think that's the reason I wanted to go back to painting. I didn't want to make things that were instantly readable. And it was then that I began writing about art.

Rail: Around 2002? 2003?

Moyer: Yes, around that time. My interest in clarity and making sure that people understand me gets funneled into the writing, and my worldview becomes more open.

Rail: Which publication did you begin to write art reviews for in the beginning?

Moyer: The painter Frank Holliday, the art editor of *Gay City News*, asked me and my partner, Sheila Pepe, to write reviews of any artist that interested us. It was great to have this low-profile space to test out my writing at a time when I was trying to see what it was like to use descriptive clarity in text rather than pictures. Then gradually I began to write for *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *Modern Painters*.



"Cherry Blossom Hour," 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60". Courtesy of the artist and CANADA gallery.

Rail: And the *Brooklyn Rail* [laughs]. You know, one of the more pronounced aspects of your work, in addition to what we just discussed, is the way you find a balance between the accident and the control, the formal and the content of images, which concerns the distribution of negative and positive shapes in their spatial organization, as well as how you integrate graphic elements with pictorial

forms all at once. Could you, in other words, describe your process? Do you begin with drawings then gradually move to the painting?

Moyer: Drawing, for the longest time, wasn't directly related to the paintings. For the past five or six years now, I've been making these little taped paper collages, mostly very simple black-and-white shapes cut from paper, which serve as a kind of drawing for me. Before that I had often used a computer and a projector to work out a composition. For example, in paintings such as "Believe in Ruins" (2002) and "The Art of Yesterday's Crash" (2003) a huge clenched fist is rising up over dreary factories. I found the image online in a May '68 Archive and I brought it into Photoshop. The composition would then become a kind of loose structure that I could push around. Never in a dictatorial way. It was about being playful, using a very specific charged form as a kind of "neutral" shape and seeing how much legibility it required. Could I bury it? I mean the whole group of works from *Chromafesto*, my first solo show at Canada in 2003, was about seeing if the audience could "read" political content in abstraction. How little can I leave in there? I decided to "re-route" some of the content by wheatpasting the entire gallery inside with posters—this very distinct separation between kinds of visuals and their assumed agency become more visible. *Chromafesto* was in fact a homage to my teacher at Pratt, Rudolf Baranik, because he used to call his paintings Socialist Formalism, an idea I've pondered for years!

Rail: Maybe, after Social Realism, he had to deal with Clement Greenberg without sacrificing his socialist stance?

Moyer: That sounds about right. During that time I was also very involved with thinking about the politics of Bauhaus, and the desire to make a so-called universal language of art. If you look closely at my paintings from 2002-06, you would recognize iconography from the mid-century like Lenin, Marx, Mao, Buckminster Fuller, and so on. There is also a very direct reference to Color Field paintings, which for many years I considered the ultimate bourgeois paintings. Corporate boardroom art. You know, it's just so *pretty*. *Vacant*. It's like my own psyche being split and I'm showing it to you. It's like some of Yvonne Rainer's movies—*MURDER and Murder* and *Privilege*—that show us the contradictions between her private and public persona that will never be resolved. So in a way I was trying to resolve my own in these paintings. The seeming polar opposite is my interest in Painting with a capital P. I'm a real painting believer and I want people to come close and see the richness of the surface. I've used acrylic paint since the early 1990s and am very interested in its history, starting with magna paint which was invented not that long ago (the 1950s). I'm very interested in extracting some

new visceral, optical, sensual experiences out of these polymers.

Rail: That's how I feel about Jack Whitten: how inventive he is with the medium. Anyway, I like the way Roberta Smith wrote in her *New York Times* review of your *Stone Age Paintings* show in 2007, "Crisp shapes and negative silhouette often evoke prehistoric goddess statues, rock formations, or ceramic vessels." And it's the comparison to rock formations that makes me think of the Max Ernst series of "Forest Paintings," of the late 1920s that evolved out of the *Histoire Naturelle*.

Moyer: I know them very well. I am a total fan of Ernst.

Rail: What interests me about that body of paintings is partly that Ernst utilized both techniques of frottage and grattas, which is about scraping rather than rubbing the surface.

Moyer: His retrospective in 2005 at the Met totally blew my mind. In spite of his vast output as an artist, the very high level of invention is evident in almost every picture. Granted a lot of them are very corny, especially those from the end of his life. But if you just submit to his surfaces and fracture, you can get completely carried away by any of his canvases. Ernst is one of the artists I return to often. I feel like there are so many ways that he has made us aware of this touch, his intimacy with his materials and understanding how they work optically.

Rail: He is an alchemist. Yet his touch is about the hand being so cerebral.



"Warm Leatherette," 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist and CANADA gallery.

Moyer: Yes, I agree. It's more about the effect of the hand, the distance, rather than the mark of the hand.

Rail: In *Time Out*, T.J. Carlin wrote of your 2009 show *Arcana*, that you have “harnessed gravity and accumulation (of painted forms) into a dance whereby elements seem to emerge as much from physics as they do from art history.” I read it as the way you utilize the equal functions of dark and neutral grounds, as well as the surrounding space altogether simultaneously. In fact, this issue brings up two other things that I notice in your paintings. First, however complex or simple they may be in their compositions, whether they insist on a monolithic image like in the paintings “Flamethrower” (2010) or “Red Widow” (2008), or a paired image such as in “Tableau” (2008), or a series of four images, almost like children’s paper-dolls running across, in the painting “Frieze” (2009), the images are always contained within their format. Second, perhaps with the exception of the series of *Painting Propaganda*, which is divided into two different sizes, 36 by 24 inches and 50 by 42 inches, all of your paintings are varied in their dimensions.

Moyer: To address your first point: for a long time I was very interested in the imagery being iconic and static, which is directly related to my fascination with a cruciform composition where the composition doesn’t allow you to escape the picture. It also relates to my interest in using both illusionism and flatness in the same painting. There was a kind of cheesy Abstract Illusionism in the 1960s (Greenberg deniers). Coming up to the present, Photoshop drop shadows also do the same thing—and we “believe” it. In the work from my solo shows *The Stone Age* (2007) and *Arcana* (2009), I was thinking of masks, headdresses, instruments, and objects from Papua New Guinea, Jomon pottery, bones, tarot cards. In 2006 I visited the Menil Collection in Houston and saw the little sidebar exhibition called *Witness to a Surreal Vision*. It’s a “room full of wonders,” objects and pictures that could have come out of Breton’s office or any other Surrealist’s studio. And it’s odd because, having gone to art school through the heyday of postmodernism, my enthusiasm for these “exotic” objects made me uneasy and felt somehow taboo. And then I thought of the Internet, where everything is everybody’s.

As to your second point about using the different sizes, even though I am naturally more comfortable making big paintings, the smaller ones have been a way for me to get ideas out on the canvas without giving into my tendency to overwork the surface. I have been interested in creating a seamless surface, a kind of inevitability, and I don’t like having so much of the pentimenti show from underneath. That is starting to change in the new work and the paint surfaces are

becoming much more built up, almost sculptural. In some ways, the work in this show is about going back and embracing my love of biomorphic abstraction, which goes back to my upbringing in the Northwest, continuing into my undergrad art student years, and on into the present. In fact, most of the new work was painted while I was at MacDowell Colony, which was right in the middle of the woods. It was totally dreamy.

Rail: I would say the change from the previous compressed space, where forms are contained to this new immersive, very expansive space is very evident.

Moyer: Well, one thing that had become increasingly important to my work is an involvement with art history—particularly the history of painting. Being in dialogue with artists of the past is really important to me. However, I feel the need to “name that passage” in relationships or references like I did when I was younger. For example, this one passage in the painting “Cold Mountain,” we looked at this morning ended up being a direct quote from Elizabeth Murray, whose work I admire immensely and whose images are somehow buried in my brain. The other goal I had for this work was to make the pictorial space much more complex. I wanted to get away from these yards and yards of flat color. In May I visited northwest New Mexico for the first time. The trip reaffirmed my interests in rock formations, minerals, and crystals. Different versions of that blazing turquoise sky appear in quite a few of the paintings, in particular “Midnight at the Oasis” (2011).

Rail: How would you describe your use of glitter? We know that Lynda Benglis or Chris Martin use it as part of their desire to challenge so-called “good taste”—or to exercise their “bad taste” for its own sake while having fun doing it. But for some reason I suspect your use of it has different intentions.

Moyer: Well, when I first started using glitter in the late 1990s, it was in part a direct reference to Sylvester, the disco star, and also a way to add razzle to my “history” painting. During the 2000s, glitter became another light source, brighter and more reflective than the white gesso passage or the many unpainted areas of raw canvas. So bringing the glitter into the mix was one way to raise the temperature, so to speak. In other words, the space is so shallow with only these flat planes floating across it and the glitter pushes the viewer away and obscures. The new paintings are far more spatially complex. And I have not been using the glitter much at all—I haven’t needed it.

Rail: It seems to me that because of the complexity of how forms are moving on and off of the canvas, the use of glitter would be too distracting.

Moyer: I agree.

Rail: Do you feel that painting can be political without being overt in its use of imagery or should it be enough to consider its autonomous practice as a political act? The reason I'm asking is partly because in your review of Irving Petlin you seem to understand his other subtle way of addressing global politics, which is the opposite of his old friend Leon Golub?

Moyer: Oh, Leon Golub is to me what Guston is to our generation. In general, it is a very difficult moment to make directly political art—at least for me. It is so easy to look at a lot of contemporary art and think that its using politics as cynical gesture toward attention getting or playing to the moment or whatever. That is not to say that there is no interesting political art out there at all because there certainly is. In my own evolution, it's just not where I am right now. The thing I like about painting is that it invites a kind of intimacy with the viewer. It's a form that really suffers when viewed online. Right now I'm interested in making work that instigates many kinds of conversation. This play with buried histories and narrow-band nostalgia tends to exclude most of one's audience. At the moment people don't need to know what Angela Davis's mug shot looks like or the fact that Jamie Reed stole the safety pin from the Situationists and pinned it on Queen Elizabeth for the Sex Pistols in order to get what I am doing in my paintings. Politics can be very dogmatic for some artists.

Rail: Yes, that was what happened to Malevich. Once he was the director of Petrograde State Institute of Artistic Culture he became very autocratic. Most of his old friends like Kandinsky and Chagall had to leave Russia. Not to mention he became a figure painter in the end.

Moyer: Painters like Barnett Newman talked as if he was rejecting a political position (such as Communism). But he ends up inadvertently advocating for this idea of a capitalist democracy. Malevich is a great example because in the end he embraces social realism—a style he had spent most of his life repudiating. Actually, I've been influenced by Tom McEvilly's great essay "The Monochrome Icon," in which he basically detached different works from their historical periods and uses the notion of the visual as a kind of driving force from Turner to Yves Klein onward. It's a kind of bodily revolution manifested through color. Also I can't help but be hyper conscious of how political art looks historically, past its "expiration date." Maybe that is a symptom of our time. I happen to think that Ben Shahn is a great artist, for example, but do we ever get to see his work much

these days? So the way that political art has been constructed in the 20th century is that when it refers to a moment, it becomes stuck in the moment.

Rail: However you deal with your political impulse, one thing we *do* know about your paintings is that you don't make any apologies for beauty.

Moyer: No, it's more like a call to Pleasure Dome.