

# HYPERALLERGIC

Carrie Moyer Reaches for the Stars Moyer's new paintings revel in color and visual pleasure, scrambling distinctions between abstraction and representation.

Gregory Volk March 10, 2018



Carrie Moyer, "Aegean Knees" (2017), acrylic on canvas, 72 by 60 inches (all images courtesy DC Moore Gallery and Mary Boone Gallery, New York)

With an acclaimed appearance in the last Whitney Biennial, and now two concurrent one-person exhibitions at DC Moore and Mary Boone, painter Carrie Moyer is enjoying what she modestly called, in a conversation with me, "a moment."

That may be, but I suspect this moment may well be a long one. Moyer's new acrylic paintings, exuberant and protean, revel in color and visual pleasure, scrambling distinctions between abstraction and representation. They are thrilling, and they matter. You want more than just to look at them; you want to be with them, open yourself to them — to all their turbulence and playfulness, whimsy and occasional severity. In this desolate and often infuriating time, when so much seems broken and intractably grim, these paintings matter all the more.

Of the two exhibitions, the one at DC Moore, memorably titled Pagan's Rapture, is bigger and excellent. The show at Mary Boone (curated by Piper Marshall), with another memorable title, Seismic Shuffle, is smaller and wonderful. In both galleries, Moyer's paintings are chock-full of surging (yet always meticulously composed) activity. Pours and stains are important in Moyer's process. Carefully rendered forms with precise borders and opaque matte shapes (including swooping curves, arcs, arches and bulbs) encounter unruly drips; pools of color and multicolored streaks, some cascading down the canvas; enchanting, ethereal translucencies; and scattered, bedazzling glitter — oftentimes in a single work. These paintings also deal in complex, layered emotions. The same painting can easily seem very thoughtful and ebullient.



Carrie Moyer, "Stellarium" (2016), acrylic on canvas, 48 by 36 inches

Although primarily abstract, Moyer's paintings hint at numerous things both in and out of this world: grasses and fronds and galaxy clusters; roiling magma and an asteroid; cornichons (those little French pickles) and orbiting planets; and body parts like breasts and knees and swollen moons, to mention just a few. Many of Moyer's more strictly abstract forms have a curving, sensual, biomorphic look, connecting them with nature. Often you don't know exactly what you are seeing, which is fine.

At DC Moore, the red knees in "Aegean Knees" (2017) might also be breasts, or sloping dunes, or purely abstract swells. At Mary Boone, the top part of "Stellarium" (2016) is a starry night sky. Underneath, a fleshy mound rises, which could be a breast, shoulder, belly, or hill, replete with magnified images of what look like blood cells and microorganisms. Cells, body, landscape, and the universe are all intertwined. You often don't exactly know where Moyer's scenes are situated, which is likewise fine, whether underwater or in outer space, in a burgeoning garden or deep in the earth where seething magma flows.

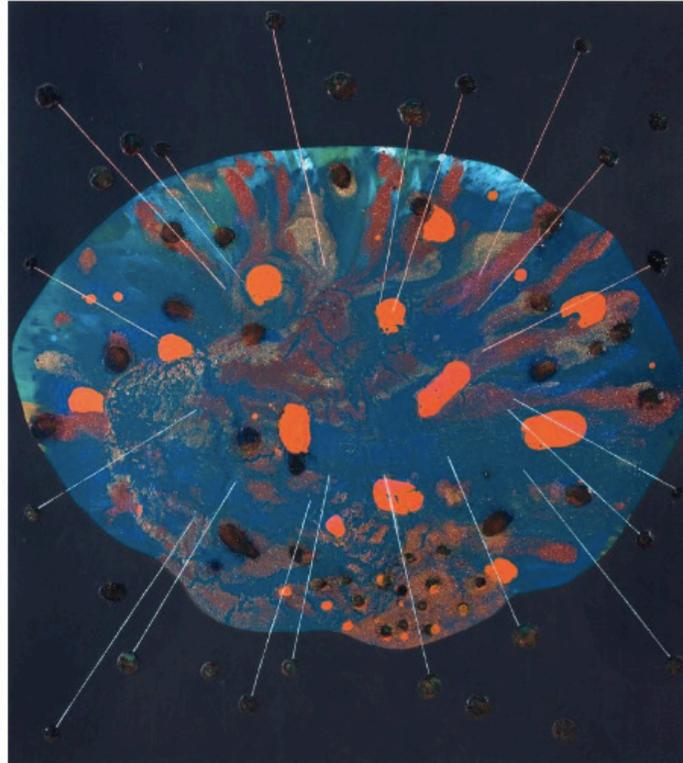


Carrie Moyer, "Sassafras and Magma" (2017), acrylic and glitter on canvas, 60 by 54 inches

At DC Moore, two of the more remarkable paintings, one earthly and the other cosmic, involve magma and an asteroid. In the showstopper "Sassafras and Magma" (2017), a jet-black, leaf-like or branch-like form is in the foreground. Behind it is a simmering red, orange and yellow area that looks downright molten; scattered about are several blue circular forms. This painting posits a link between foliage and scalding magma. In "Gego's Asteroid" (2017), a mostly blue, rock-like asteroid floating in or streaking through an inky black expanse is festooned with orange and dark brown blobs and smears, and glittery, multicolored streaks. Thin, pinkish-beige and light blue lines jut from the object, most sporting dark near-circles at their outer tips.

These lines, the oval shape of the asteroid, and of course the title evoke the magnificent spherical sculptures of Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt), the German-Jewish artist who fled Germany in 1939 for Venezuela and became a leading artist in her adopted country. As you look at Moyer's complex asteroid and its eventful surface, you may find yourself thinking of landforms and the ocean seen from a satellite's height, but also of disco balls and party decorations. It's a glamorous asteroid with a scruffy streak; and it is, quite simply, stunning. It is also almost bursting with wild energy.

At Mary Boone, in *Hot Metal Twice* (2017), you encounter one of Moyer's recurring motifs: a foregrounded lattice, arch or, in this case, a gate, which you look at, but also through and beyond, to dense activity elsewhere. The gate here is black and gray and it's got floral decorations: it's a cultural object functioning as mediated nature. What's behind is surprising. The background, although it is very close to the foreground, is primal, fiery, and raw, with reddish-orange pours cascading down and ragged black forms streaking up, as if propelled from a volcanic eruption. It's as if the feigned and polite nature of a decorative gate has suddenly provided access to unruly and tumultuous nature.

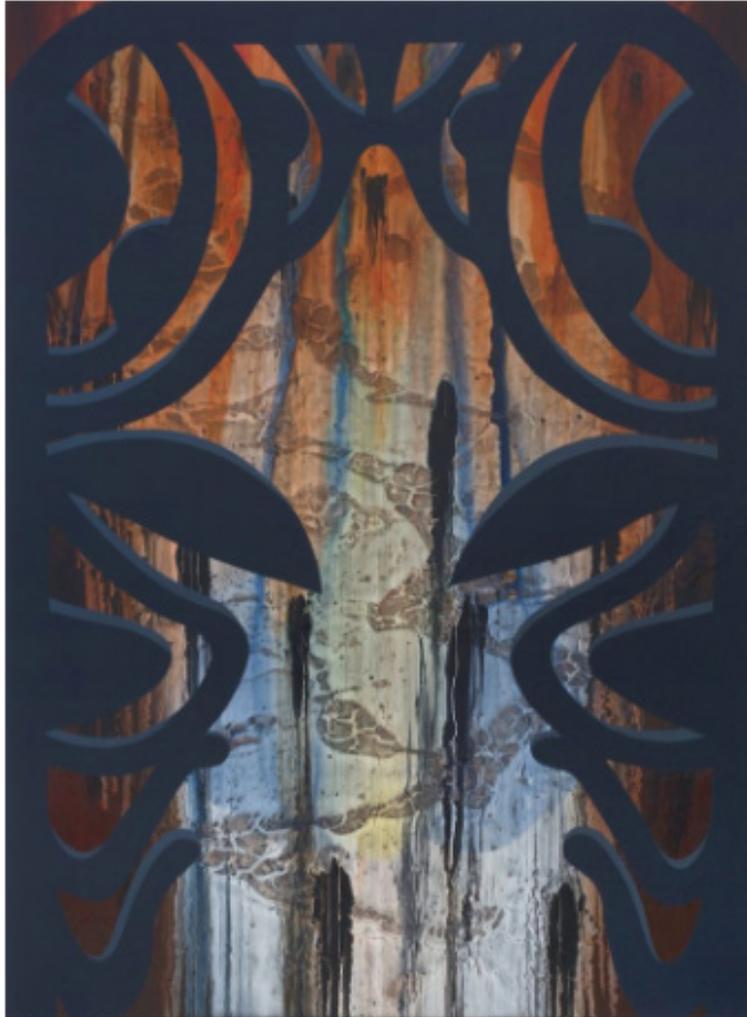


Carrie Moyer, "Gego's Asteroid" (2017), acrylic and glitter on canvas, 60 by 54 inches

Moyer is hardly a nature painter per se, yet in ways both obvious and subtle, nature is essential in her work. Her paintings are suffused with transformation and fecundity, less in the sense of representing natural forms (although she does this, sort of) and more in the sense of channeling potent natural powers into her paintings — not merely a flower or a plant, for instance, but “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower,” as Dylan Thomas put it in his marvelous poem.

At Mary Boone, “Afterparty in the Rhizosphere” (2017), again fusing abstraction and representation, is a celebration of teeming growth (the rhizosphere is the nutritive, microorganism-packed region of soil around plant roots). Irregular greenish bands angle up from the bottom, a bit like swaying seagrass. Two halves of a curving black parallelogram, one half partially occluded by the seagrass and drifting yellow circles, sweep from side to side. A large, light green, frond-like shape, with parts seemingly cut out so that it appears at once opaque and transparent, stretches from bottom to top. Two delightful reddish-orange bulbs, each sporting a smaller maroon circle and attached to bending beige stalks seemingly sway in the middle. They could be marine plants, but also breasts, strange eyes, or, as Mia Locks points out in her insightful catalog essay, ovaries at the ends of fallopian tubes.

A long time ago, in 1836 to be exact, in his essay “Nature” — an enormously influential essay that inspired many of the romantic landscape painters of the day (along with poet Walt Whitman, nature enthusiast Henry David Thoreau, and probably poet Emily Dickinson too, among many others) — transcendentalist poet-philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of “an occult relation between man and the vegetable.” Way back then, the visionary Emerson was beginning to articulate a non-anthropocentric understanding that we, as humans, are part of and connected with nature, not imaginary masters of it, and that non-human beings and things have their own independent power.



Carrie Moyer, "Hot Metal Twice" (2017), acrylic and glitter on canvas, 90 by 66 inches

Updating matters, Moyer's paintings can be said to explore an occult relation between a woman and the vegetable, and beyond that, with lava, rocks, planets, galaxies, scattered grit, oceans, the sky, microscopic forms, and the sparkling heavens, among many others. Moyer is a really smart and adventurous painter, and she's got expansive, painterly chops in spades (you recognize that she absolutely adores acrylic paint, not to mention glitter). But it's the ample vision underpinning her vibrant, quasi-abstract paintings that ultimately makes them so compelling.

These paintings explore a deeply felt connection between humans, nature, and the cosmos. In her excellent book *Vital Matter: The Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Jane Bennett has written of the "vital materialities that flow through and around us," which we don't often heed or even detect because of what she calls "our human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption." This seems very close to Moyer, whose paintings are full of such vital materialities, in terms of imagery but also in terms of actual paint.

Moyer's unusual history has been amply discussed elsewhere, including an illuminating 2016 *Hyperallergic* interview conducted by Jennifer Samet. In brief, in the 1990s Moyer abandoned "elitist" (her word) painting for queer activist art and guerrilla lesbian activities, especially as part (together with photographer Sue Schaffner) of *Dyke Action Machine!*, the long-anonymous "organization" that wheat-pasted savvy and provocative dyke-centric posters on New York streets for years



Carrie Moyer, "Afterparty in the Rhizosphere" (2017), acrylic and glitter on canvas, 96 by 78 inches

She eventually returned to the studio, and as Mia Locks points out in her essay, this involved a shift from agit-prop posters to more “poetic” paintings. All of this is true. These new paintings by Moyer are poetic and evocative and not at all political in the sense of addressing this or that pressing issue, or advocating for a cause.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, Moyer’s paintings are deeply and profoundly political, as much really good art often is. In this terrible Trump time, lorded over by rampaging white men, as teeth-clenching awfulness emanates from Washington no longer on a daily, but an hourly, and even minute by minute basis, Moyer’s paintings explore a robust and decidedly alternative consciousness. They are an emphatic rejection of all things malevolent and sordid, and an emphatic assertion of pleasure, catharsis, inventiveness, sensuality (understood comprehensively), unbridled growth, and connection with the world.

When you’ve had it up to here with the next immoral monstrosity coming from the highest levels of the government, it would be wise to make a beeline to both of Carrie Moyer’s exhibitions, for pleasure and wonderment, certainly, but also for sustenance and psychic health. There are times when art really matters, when it provides welcome assistance. This is one of those times.