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Carrie Moyer on New Work, Teaching, and Art-Making in a Pandemic

Moyer's solo exhibition *Analog Time* at Chelsea's DC Moore Gallery presents new works on canvas and paper

By Amy Boone McCreesh

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More studio time: Something artists crave and structure their lives around, in hopes of getting one more hour or one more day to work. Some of us were granted that wish last year, but of course it's complicated. Like many artists, the painter Carrie Moyer struggled with what a pandemic world would look like: How will we work, how will we care for ourselves and others?

This year brought a global pandemic, crumbling institutions, and deeper reflections on the fraught culture and history in the United States. During this time, Moyer created much of the work for her exhibition, *Analog Time*, at DC Moore in Chelsea, on exhibit through May 1, 2021. In a time of extreme uncertainty, she was able to separate her feelings from studio practice and ask, "What does the work need today?"—a simple but difficult mantra to embrace as an artist. Her third solo exhibition with DC Moore, *Analog Time* presents more than a dozen new works on canvas and paper created between 2019 and 2021.

The gooey, seductive, yet formal paintings appear deep and spatial with patterns and smaller mark making. With faux shadows and layered planes, Moyer smartly handles the illusionary space of abstraction that many painters attempt to wrangle. Her past career in graphic design along with our pervasive relationship to screens today often informs the nuanced shapes, color, and space in her compositions.

Moyer is a staple in American contemporary abstraction, fusing feminist painters of the past with her own visual vocabulary to create a subtly pointed take on the often male-drenched genre of painting. Moyer has exhibited widely across the United States and Europe since the early 2000s. Her work was included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, and since then she has had exhibitions at the MCA in Denver and the Portland Museum of Art. Examining her career and catalogue confirms a breakneck pace of work and solidifies her as the powerhouse and icon she has become. On top of the rigorous exhibition schedule, Moyer runs the MFA graduate department at Hunter College.

Moyer will open a collaboration with her partner, Sheila Pepe, at the Museum of Art and Design in New York this May in *Tabernacle for Trying Times*, an extension of a project they started for the Portland Museum of Art last summer. Her images will also soon have the opportunity to grace your bookshelf this fall, with a monograph published by Rizzoli.

In mid-April, I spoke with Moyer via Zoom, both of us in our studios. Interviewing Moyer during the ongoing pandemic made me think about the expectations we put on ourselves and others and the unseen burdens that many of us carry while creating art. Moyer's calm demeanor that has weathered the art world and beyond gave me solace during a time when having a studio practice can feel monumental and frivolous all at once. We talked about the reduced visual stimulation for artists during the pandemic, the perils of online teaching, and the act of painting when times get tough.



Hell's Bells and Buckets, 2020, acrylic and sand on canvas, 60 x 60 inches

Amy Boone-McCreesh: I keep thinking about how this time period will be viewed in hindsight, culturally and historically, so I think we should start by talking about the ways your studio practice has changed or adapted during the pandemic.

Carrie Moyer: In a funny way, many artists are talking about having more time in the studio. A lot of the time I'm teaching from my studio so that I end up having more studio time. But it's very strange. I'm in Brooklyn. It took me six months before I started taking the subway again. I don't know how it will be remembered on a large scale, but for me, it will be remembered as a time where I felt like I was paying more attention to the present, which is something I tried to talk about in the essay for my show. But then, of course, much of our pandemic lives have taken place on Zoom because we haven't been able to go anywhere. I've literally been in this little tiny corner of Brooklyn for practically a year and have grown to appreciate it. At the same time, a lot of people around me and in my neighborhood have been in crisis with their jobs, the pandemic, food shortages... it's so complicated. It feels like we're being asked to live in the moment in a new way. I've always been a very future-oriented person, so I'm actually trying to take that as a lesson. It sounds very corny, but that's how I feel about it.

I'm head of the graduate program at Hunter College and last spring we were truly in crisis mode. We've since adapted to teaching art online, but for the first three months, none of us could wrap our heads around what that would even look like.

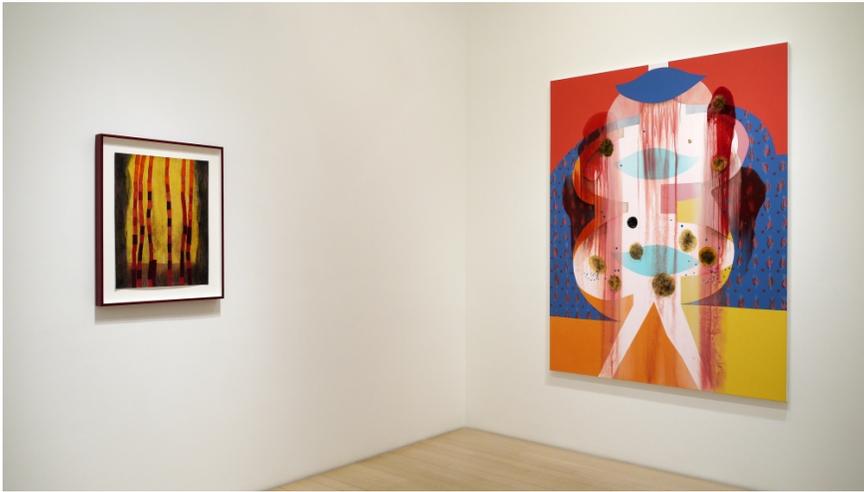
I'm so happy when I'm in the grad building with my students. I appreciate the exchange of energy that is not possible on Zoom. I feel grateful to even have a job right now. The pandemic has caused us to be hyper-aware of our own condition or where we're positioned. On one hand, the wealthy have fled the city to the Hudson Valley and Long Island. And then there are our neighbors in Brooklyn who don't have enough to eat. Being aware of all these things at once has been intense.

I saw your show recently, it looks great! I've been watching your work for a long time. In what ways do you feel this work is different and/or the same as previous shows? For me, there were familiar moments in the opaque organic shapes, but the details and smaller marks felt different.

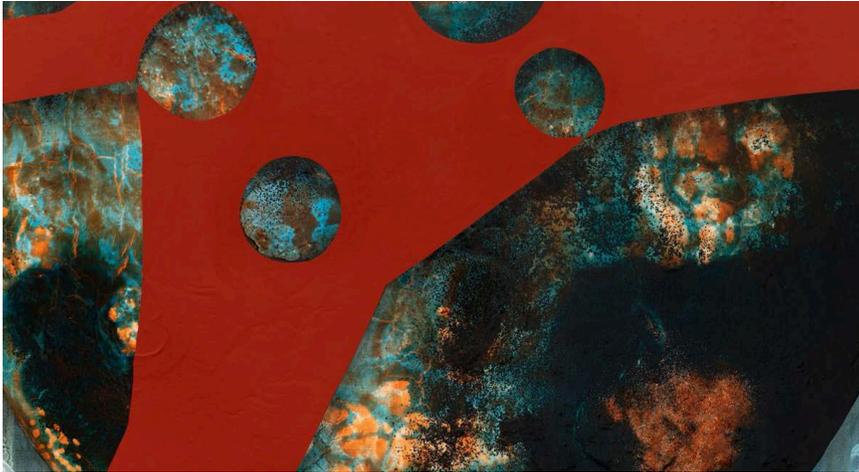
What you describe is spot on. As I said before, school was very intense for me in the spring but I knew I had an academic leave scheduled for the fall. I spent a couple months just working on paper, which I very rarely do. I don't know what I thought would happen; I'd do some sketches or... ? What ended up happening were these little paintings. In other words, I found that I was unable to make anything fragmentary or incomplete. Everything emerged as a total composition. Working on paper allowed me to explore different ways to create surfaces.

Smaller marks and even patterns have been coming into the work for the past couple years. I was in Italy two years ago with my wife, Sheila Pepe, at a residency, and just being in an environment where everything is covered with patterns just blew my mind. The walls, the furniture, the floor, everything. I've always been a huge devotee of the Pattern and Decoration movement, I just haven't thought of how it would factor into my work. There were two or three important museum shows on P&D recently, so I've been accumulating the catalogs and thinking about using pattern as a way of intervening on the big flat areas of color in my work.

I'm always interested in pulling in whatever my art historical fetishes of the moment are. So the paintings reflect that. The residency was in a castle in Umbria where many of the objects and interiors were very old therefore handmade. The environment was so overwhelming and sensual. Everything was well cared for and thought out in relation to the objects and architecture around it.



Carrie Moyer, *Analog #2*, 2020, mixed media and collage on paper, 25 1/2 x 19 5/8 inches;
La Signora, 2020, acrylic, glitter on canvas, 78 x 60 inches



Carrie Moyer, detail from *Galaxyhymne (Galaxy Hymn)*, 2021, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 66 x 60 inches

This is the first time I had seen works on paper in any of your exhibitions, can you talk a little bit about them?

I've made prints for many years. And I usually work out compositions with these small paper collages. But I never think of paper as a kind of surface to hold what I need. The amount of labor that goes into the paintings never seemed like it would translate onto paper. With the paper I got really interested in the quality of light that's harder to create on canvas. There's a kind of immediacy and moodiness. Plus they were so much fun too. I did manage to find 300-pound paper that I really liked so I could work really intensely and not destroy the paper.

There seems to be a nod to technology or the acknowledgment of digital or screen visuals in these paintings—is there any truth to that? For me, the details, light, and shadows, are operating a little differently than they have in the past.

It's so interesting that you say that because, for me, that aspect of my work has been around for a while. One of the things I'm really interested in is the idea of a confusing space. For many years I worked as a graphic designer. This was during the 1990s and the beginning of desktop publishing when business documents would often have a shadow behind a map or legend—something dumb, something that wouldn't get a shadow. Why did Microsoft even allow users to put a shadow behind boxes? The conventions that demonstrate space have been in the work all along. I am also playing with the very strong taboo against illusionistic space that was evident in high modernist painting. That's very esoteric, inside-painting information. So it's interesting you picked up on it that way. Other people have talked about it in terms of more evident collage in the new work.

I do feel like the work is more spatial in a sense, but what is the space attached to? In our world now, we look at screens and there are all sorts of conventions on how to show space that have nothing to do with reality. I love that you framed it that way. That makes me very happy.

We both teach college and I feel that as an artist, teaching provides direct access to the lives of young people, burgeoning artists, and a front-row seat to changing culture. What role do you feel teaching plays in your life and even your own work?

Teaching right now is really hard. That needs to be acknowledged, not only because of the pandemic but because we're dealing with institutions that need desperately to be overhauled. So recognizing the white supremacy built into our institutions and trying to figure out how to undo it is on the table. That's definitely going to take the rest of my teaching life. I'm really interested in it. It also poses a huge number of challenges because institutions are slow. Those issues are really feeding my brain a lot. I also love the energy of being around young artists.

I don't know how much it affects my studio practice because I've been making stuff for such a long time. I'm sure it does in a way I'm perhaps not aware of. My students are really interested in issues around identity and family history—things that also drove my work when I was younger. But I've figured out a way to deal with myself as a whole person and not just focus on certain aspects such as being gay or being a woman. As I've gotten older, I've tried to synthesize those parts of my identity into my overarching interest in abstraction.

In the classroom, I feel like I have a front-row seat to watching people trying to figure out their identities in a very explicit way. That part of it feels new, because while there has been a rise of figuration in art, the way it has been attached to identity is something I didn't expect. Assuming that literal representation alone has the ability to change the art world is simply not enough. At the same time, that is a lesson people have to learn on their own. Students have to go through that period in their work. So here we are, working with people in the process of finding out.



(Left to Right:) Carrie Moyer, *Galaxhymne (Galaxy Hymn)*, 2021, acrylic, glitter on canvas, 66 x 60 inches; *Analog #4*, 2020, mixed media and collage on paper, 22 x 14 1/2 inches; *Analog #1*, 2020, mixed media and collage on paper, 21 7/8 x 19 3/8 inches; *Analog #6*, 2020, mixed media and collage on paper, 21 1/4 x 14 7/8 inches



Orange Zone, 2021, acrylic, glitter, and sand on canvas, 66 x 60 inches



(L-R:) Carrie Moyer, *Reverie (There's a Hole in My Bucket Dear Liza)*, 2021, acrylic, glitter on canvas, 78 x 96 inches; *Pet My Leaf*, 2020, acrylic, glitter on canvas, 78 x 60 inches; *Seed Release*, 2021, acrylic, sand, glitter on canvas, 66 x 60 inches

What coping mechanisms do you use when times get tough in the studio or when you are feeling down as it relates to your studio practice?

One of the things—and I know this is going to sound ridiculous—is cleaning my studio. It resets my brain. I look at supplies I haven't used in a while and look at art books. I have tons of art books in the studio.

After getting my BFA from Pratt, I used to keep a cot in my first studio. I would get to a point where I didn't know what else to do and it was upsetting, so I needed to lie down. But sleeping in the studio doesn't happen anymore, unless I'm painting late into the wee hours.

The other way I deal with being stuck is to start another painting. I usually have four or five paintings going at a time. When I hit a wall on one, I usually move to the next.

This will sound cheesy perhaps, but one of the main takeaways from grad school was learning that working in the studio has nothing to do with my feelings. It's more about what the work needs that day. It's about being able to separate yourself from the work and figuring out what you need to do to realize your idea—whether you're happy, sad, hungry, cranky, whatever. It takes a long time to actually grasp that. You are expressing a set of emotions in your work, but what you're feeling as you paint might not have anything to do with what the painting is expressing. That was a big lesson for me.

You are such a staple in contemporary painting. What are your thoughts on creating a life that allows you to keep working and growing in the studio?

I've had periods where I didn't make art at all. I actually stopped painting completely for about five years when I was in my mid-twenties because I was just completely flummoxed by how to go about having an art career. It was so scary to me. I've had other periods where I've struggled to make work, for sure.

You have to work hard to set up your life around your studio. However you earn your money or whatever your day job is, you first need to ask yourself if it's serving the studio. Luckily, I like teaching. I used to do freelance design work, which is actually a better way to support your studio. Teaching pays less and it's more mentally taxing than working on an ad campaign. On the other hand, teaching is way more interesting and rewarding. So all of these things have to be weighed out.

I'm also in a relationship with an artist, so we both share values around the importance of the studio. We don't have conflicts about being in the studio "too much." Even though it hasn't felt like a conscious plan, now when I look back I can see that the studio was the center all along. Everything else had to adapt to that center, from where you live to what your job is to your relationships or how you spend your free time. That part of being an artist is not as glamorous as it looks from the outside. On the other hand, I often feel so lucky that I have space and time to follow my own thoughts or just do nothing. We live in this culture that demands that every second be productive, and part of me really resists that requirement. Being an artist can mean spending an afternoon looking at picture books, doing research, or experimenting with materials and a new methodology. It's all the little things that don't necessarily ever lead anywhere, but they're so important.

I read in an interview that you want your paintings to be accessible and allow an access point for a wide variety of viewers, which I really love. In your eyes, what are ways we can encourage engagement with contemporary art for those that may feel intimidated or outsiders?

It's a conundrum because, on one hand, I feel that a lot of museums are working really hard to invite a broader audience in. There's way more educational stuff and text on the wall. The programming in some museums is changing. Understanding some kinds of art does require specialized knowledge but that doesn't mean it's beyond the average viewer.

It's a hard question because I'm not smart enough to think of where abstract paintings would be shown besides a gallery. A gallery is a convention that is important for showing this work. When I was growing up, abstraction was viewed as the pinnacle. It signified total engagements with art culture and a rarified language. I want to make paintings that are both interesting and rewarding for the most knowledgeable viewer and for those who know nothing at all. I want my paintings to feel accessible and invite questions.

I believe that abstract painting doesn't require some kind of esoteric knowledge to be enjoyed. One of the great things about being in the Whitney Biennial was how many different kinds of people got to see my work. There aren't many shows in America like that. Even for people who don't normally go see art, the Biennial is an event. You ask a good question about access which feels especially real for those of us who grew up in working-class families. You want to make work that is inclusive, yet you're really part of this very small intelligentsia, so what do you do about that?



(L-R:) Carrie Moyer, *Analog #9*, 2020, mixed media and collage on paper, 28 x 18 1/2 inches; *Bestiary*, 2020, mixed media and collage on paper, 22 x 15 inches