

Art in America

By Steel Stillman
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CARRIE MOYER IN THE STUDIO

WITH STEEL STILLMAN

CARRIE MOYER IS A SELF-PROCLAIMED "painting believer," whose history of political activism gives backbone to a body of work that can stand up without it. The visual delights that her paintings offer—congeries of strange, suggestive anthropomorphic shapes layered between rippling, iridescent veils—are so manifest that learning anything more about the artist and her means might be unnecessary. True beauty, however, rewards the curious.

Moyer was born in Detroit in 1960 to young parents who, in the spirit of the day, were searching for themselves. When Moyer was 10, the family moved, first to California and then to a succession of towns throughout the Pacific Northwest, sustained by blue-collar jobs and back-to-the-land values. In 1978, Moyer headed east, first to Bennington College in Vermont, and then to Pratt Institute in New York, where she received a BFA in painting in 1985. She then earned an MA in computer graphic design from the New York Institute of Technology (1990) and later an MFA from Bard College in upstate New York (2001). From 1991 until 2004, Moyer and a friend, Sue Schaffner, constituted Dyke Action Machine! (DAMI), a two-person agitprop operation that promoted lesbian awareness through public art projects.

Now at midcareer, Moyer has been making acrylic paintings on linen or canvas for nearly 20 years, often using pours and fingerprints and adding glitter. From the mid-'90s to the mid-'00s, her paintings reflected her design experience, and featured legible imagery and flat, posterlike space. Then, in 2005, Moyer began inventing ambiguous figural subjects and placing them in shadowy, stagelike worlds. Since 2010, she has plunged deeper into abstraction, attenuating her references to bodies and spaces while amplifying shape, color and texture. Moyer's politics have long directed her choice of subject matter, leading her early on to incorporate into her paintings revolutionary figures like Karl Marx or Mao Zedong. As time has passed, such decisions, like her means, have grown more subtle, and her work has become more enigmatic. It is a measure of Moyer's current confidence as a painter that she's found a way to subordinate polemics to esthetics.

Since 1993, Moyer has exhibited her paintings in a dozen one-person exhibitions and over 100 group shows in the U.S. and Europe. Her other pursuits include teaching and writing. This month she joins the faculty of Hunter College's art department as an associate professor, after having previously taught at RISD. She has been writing about art for more than a decade and is a regular contributor to this magazine. Moyer and I talked early this summer, over the course of two warm afternoons, in her studio—a modest 250-square-foot space carved out of the Brooklyn loft she shares with her partner, the artist Sheila Pepe.

STEEL STILLMAN What are your memories of Detroit in the 1960s?

CARRIE MOYER My father and members of my extended family worked on Ford assembly lines, and we lived in a working-class neighborhood, not far from the site of the 1967 riots, which we could see from our apartment. My parents were still teenagers when I was born and they became swept up in the activist spirit of the decade. I remember being taken to civil rights rallies and peace marches, and I still have a copy of Mao's *Little Red Book* that was given to me by a creepy-looking guy on the National Mall. Though I attended public schools, my mother was passionate about alternative education, and she idealized artists. She set up a room in our small apartment for my younger sister and me to use as an art studio, and on weekends she would take us to the Detroit Institute of Arts to look at the Diego Rivera murals.

STILLMAN Did you study art in high school?

MOYER I took a few painting classes, but by then my primary interest had become dance. In 1978 I went to Bennington on a dance scholarship, but was in a bad car accident that first year and had to drop out. I'd shattered my elbow and couldn't dance anymore. So I moved to New York, and, after a year of physical therapy and taking classes at the Art Students League, I enrolled at Pratt as a painting major.

Being in art school was like being in heaven. I got to make things all day long, every day. The paintings I made at Pratt were a mix of the modernism of people like Dove and Hartley and the cartoonish abstraction that Elizabeth Murray, Bill Jensen and others were practic-

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Carrie Moyer, "Canonical,"
at CANADA, New York,
Sept. 14-Oct. 16.