Art in America

Webs of Relation: Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe at the Museum of Arts and Design

By Jackson Davidow
April 14, 2022

View of "Tabernacles for Trying Times," 2021–22, at the Museum of Arts and Design, showing *Parlor for the People*, 2020. PHOTO JENNA BASCOM/COURTESY MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN, NEW YORK

“Tabernacles for Trying Times” at the Museum of Arts and Design was a drifting survey of the work of painter Carrie Moyer and sculptor Sheila Pepe, among the most high-profile queer couples in the contemporary art world. Friends since 1995, partners since 1998, and legal spouses since 2015, Moyer and Pepe are well known for their individual practices: the former for radiant paintings in which abstract forms transmute into suggestive bodily shapes, the latter for enthralling fiber-based installations that recall spider webs. But they employ complementary formal languages and share a longstanding engagement with feminist and queer politics in their art and activism alike. The exhibition intermingled the two artists’ works, allowing viewers to pick up on the correspondences between, for instance, the navy-blue curvy lattice of Moyer’s painting *Curtains* (2016), set against a fiery backdrop of reds, oranges, and yellows, and the dark loops and knots of rope that comprise Pepe’s hanging work *91 BCE Redux* (2020); or how the rich blue, purple, and orange fibers that compose Pepe’s droopy, amorphous weaving *Just This Corner* (for 2020), 2021, might be a direct response to the shapes and hues present in Moyer’s *Cloud Buds* (2019), which evokes a tree limply attached to nipple-like clouds.

Carrie Moyer: *Intergalactic Emoji Factory*, 2015, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 72 by 96 inches. COURTESY MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN, NEW YORK

Besides elucidating some of the powerful formal synergies between Moyer's paintings and Pepe's sculptures going back to the early years of their relationship, "Tabernacles for Trying Times," which originated at the Portland Museum of Art in 2020, emphasized their collaborative works of the past decade. The show's centerpiece, *Parlor for the People* (2020), is one such project: a gathering space filled with brilliantly patterned stools and cushions set beneath a tangle of colorful abstract shapes descending from the ceiling. As the wall text indicated, this parlor also functions as a tabernacle—a multivalent term that can refer to a place of worship, a receptacle for holy wine and bread, or a portable tent. Encouraging visitors to sit down and talk, the work was intended to help participants "gain sustenance as a community with naturally occurring differences," according to a quote from Moyer in the wall text. Perhaps the most urgent form of collaboration, the artists propose, is having a conversation with someone different from you. Yet how exactly can such an experience inherently provide sustenance and connection, I wondered, waiting for someone to take a seat on a nearby stool (alas, nobody ever did). While the artists developed the work before the pandemic, when talking to strangers in an indoor setting was a less nerve-racking experience, this is clearly wishful thinking in these "trying times."

But even without that complication, the work conveys a didactic and naive way of thinking about community, which distracted from the show's more compelling nonparticipatory works that illustrate an aesthetic dialogue between the artists that has deepened with the passage of time. Pepe's *Common Sense: MAD* (2021), a crocheted work of purple yarn, rope, and shoelaces with stalactite-like formations that stretched across a corner of the gallery, reflected a similarly sentimental ethos of participation: at select times during the show's run, viewers were invited to engage in an act of "collective unmaking," disentangling the artist's intricately woven pieces and, in theory, repurposing the materials to create something new. While there is a hazy beauty in the collectivizing gestures of *Parlor for the People* and *Common Sense: MAD*, such "feel good" artworks, suffused with vague, low-stake frameworks of social practice, are outmoded and a bit tired, even if they come from a place of earnestness.

The exhibition honored Moyer and Pepe's relationship and insisted on its centrality to their practices, but, perhaps because of the insularity of coupledom, the show seemed anxious to prove that their works are outward-facing and socially engaged. What I appreciated most about the show was sitting in on the artists' own fascinating dialogue—not the prospect of debating current events with a stranger.