

By Anne Swartz  
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**Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe:  
Tabernacles for Trying Times**  
Museum of Arts and Design, New York  
22nd May 2021–6th February 2022

by ANNE SWARTZ

This two-person exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, speaks to the idea of home as a space that during our pandemic-related confinement has transcended notions of security to ascend to the realm of the sacred.<sup>1</sup> First shown at the Portland Museum of Art in 2020, it presents the individual and collaborative practices of Carrie Moyer (b.1960) and Sheila Pepe (b.1959). This iteration in New York is one of the first exhibitions shown in the city to reflect on past and ongoing experiences of isolation caused by the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it signifies the continuity of the ways that feminist makers have resisted the confines and constraints of the patriarchal art world. At the Museum of Art and Design the exhibition is shown in a large U-shaped gallery; the works are ordered according to visual and aesthetic complements, rather than in a chronological or thematic arrangement, and solo works are displayed alongside collaborative ones. This space allows for more intimate contact with the work than the Portland showing, where the exhibition took up the majority of the museum, and several replacements from the artists' collections for works that could not travel make this show distinctive. Incorporating a wide range of media, it presents decoration, domesticity, craft and patterning as emancipatory tools and positions art as a method of engagement for possibility and freedom.

Moyer and Pepe have been an artist couple for more than twenty-five years and their work addresses feminist form and abstraction; the potential for historical material to speak through the present; queer activism; and queer collaboration. It is imbued with a simultaneous sense of anguish and psychic protection. In this exhibition, the artists indirectly address life in an era of multiple global

artists who provide personal responses to Knight's work and demonstrate her enduring relevance, particularly in relation to the representation of women. In the catalogue Barbara Walker (b.1964) describes Knight as 'a complicated figure to pin down' (pp.146–47) and in this context the show offers an insightful introduction to Knight and the rich legacy of her production.

1 Pamphlet for *Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Dame Laura Knight, DBE, RA*, London (Royal Academy of Arts) 1965.

2 K. Roberts: 'Current and forthcoming exhibitions' *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 107 (1965), p.483.

3 See E. Knowles, ed.: exh. cat. *Laura Knight: A Celebration*, Penzance (Penlee House

Gallery and Museum) 2021. *Laura Knight* is scheduled to be held at Nottingham Castle Museum from 12th March to 12th June 2022.

4 See S. Beazley-Long: 'Laura Knight on display: book jackets and self-promotion in the 1920s', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 163 (2021), pp.594–603.

5 Catalogue: *Laura Knight, A Panoramic View*. Edited by Fay Blanchard and Anthony Spira. 216 pp. incl. 119 col. + 45 b. & w. ill. (Bloomsbury, London, 2021), £25. ISBN 978-1-7813-0111-1.

6 A. Stephenson: 'From conscription to the Depression: the market for modern British art in London, c.1914–1930' in C. Gould and S. Mesplède, eds: *Marketing Art in the British Isles, 1700 to the Present: A Cultural History*, Farnham 2012, p.62.

7 A. Stephenson: 'Strategies of display and modes of consumption in London art galleries in the inter-war years' in P. Fletcher and A. Helmreich, eds: *The Rise of the Modern Art Market in London: 1850–1939*, Manchester 2011, pp.57–68.

**28. The dressing room at Drury Lane, by Laura Knight. 1922. Oil on canvas, 76.2 by 63.5 cm. (© Estate of Dame Laura Knight DBE RA 2021; private collection; exh. MK Gallery, Milton Keynes).**



crises – from the climate emergency to refugee displacement and persistent gender discrimination, as well as pernicious sexual violence and the exploitation of children. These issues provide a stronger mooring to the lure of the home and studio, and the

desire for increasing opportunities for communal connectivity. Both artists rely on craft techniques and materials alongside more conventional approaches to drawing and painting; their work combines the oft-lauded cultural material of painting alongside less acknowledged ‘minor’ or decorative crafts. Maine is a key part of the origin story for this couple. Moyer and Pepe first met in 1995 at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Madison, which is a renowned nine-week summer residency programme. Nevertheless, the art on view promotes a dialogue that reaches beyond this specificity of place. A number of the works on show were made during collaborative residencies, including ones at Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, in 2011, the Joan Mitchell Center, New Orleans, in 2016, and the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, Umbria, in 2019. Both artists teach in higher education and highlight their ideas about art actively and in various forums. Although the appearance and forms

**29. *Opera buffa*, by Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe. 2019. 26 loose-leaf drawings of ink, gouache and acrylic on paper, each 38.1 by 55.9 cm. (Private collection; photograph Jenna Bascom; exh. Museum of Arts and Design, New York).**

of their respective works have little in common, they consult each other regularly and work in adjacent studios. One such benefit of this arrangement is that Pepe aids Moyer in the naming of her paintings.

Naming too is a crucial aspect of this exhibition, as demonstrated by the title. A tabernacle usually refers to a sacred object, an idea that is recalled in their collaborative work *Opera buffa* (Fig.29), an altar-like installation composed of twenty-six drawings based on Italian churches and castles. The work was made during their two-month residency in Umbria as a form of call-and-response: a drawing completed by one artist prompted reciprocal action by the other. The title refers to a genre of Italian comic opera and highlights the frivolous, double-edged, yet profound play that underpins the artists’ work. The individual components are arranged in order to evoke an altarpiece – an element that defines a space for veneration – and which, perhaps, can also be read as a tongue-in-cheek

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suggestion that viewers will esteem the work itself. In the conventionally masculine space of the architectonic, rigid frame, the artists insert feminist symbols and puns. At the top of the 'altar' installation, a headdress-like adornment resembles a vulva; multiple prehistoric Venus figurines flank the sloping 'roof'; and on the left-hand side the inclusion of the letters 'SPQR' signals the ancient Roman Republic all-male government, which on the right has been altered to the artists' initials, 'SPCM'. Several of these images look up to the bright blue sky via portals or surroundings, giving a hopeful air, and even perhaps recalling the unifying colour of Giotto's frescos.

As part of the radical operations of this show, a cluster of humorous works, hung together on a wall, offer variations on the idea of breaking out of the box – or the constraints

**30. *Parlor for the people*, by Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe. 2020. Fabric, batting, rubber, hardware, plexiglass, paracord, poplar, paint, hardware and leather, overall dimensions variable. (Private collection; photograph Jenna Bascom; exh. Museum of Arts and Design, New York).**

**31. *Carries a soft stick*, by Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe. 2016. Oil paint, wood, cut plastic bag and glitter on canvas, 119.4 by 111.7 by 7.6 cm. (Private collection; exh. Museum of Arts and Design, New York).**



of the canvas. Moyer and Pepe have labelled the action of producing these collaborative works as 'play time' (p.46), the largest of which is *Carries a soft stick* (Fig.31), a multimedia work made of oil paint, wood, a cut plastic bag and glitter on canvas. The work resembles a polygonal painting with an adjacent fabric-wrapped peg leg. Some of the painted imagery transitions into tangible form, for example, a painted white circle extends into white fabric at the left-hand edge of the canvas. The artists passed such works back and forth in the manner of the Surrealist exquisite corpse. The adjacent five, smaller-scale works, *Yvette* (2021), *Dandy's drogress* (2021), *Lardy-dardy* (2011), *Our hump* (2011), and *Freeze pops on the couch* (2011), were made during their Saratoga Springs residency, and they share a common formal feature: they all break out of the box. These pieces demystify the artistic process; and complicate the ideal notion that the art object can contain everything. When boundaries became constraints, feminist makers figured ways around them: augmentation, accretion, obsession and embellishment all became ways for such artists to move beyond formally rigid limitations.

The idea of the tabernacle also refers to a private, intimate and shared space, such as the home. The focal point of the exhibition is the installation work *Parlor for the people* (Fig.30). This 'communal space',

described by the artists as a 'big tent' (p.52), comprises custom-made stools, pillows and fabrics, rugs and chairs together with a series of collaborative webbed sculptures and cloud-like forms, which hang from the ceiling. The particular shape of folding chair the artists have used here – known as X-chairs or Savonarola chairs – originate in medieval Italy and are of particular interest to Pepe because of her Italian heritage and interest in Italian art history. Intended as a gathering space, this work speaks to resistance in the museum to testing the rules or categories of different media. Furthermore, presenting a functional seating area that can be used by visitors as an art installation redefines what occurs in the museum space; it activates the viewing experience, allowing it to include conversation between visitors, who are able to gaze upon, and exist within, the work while engaging in dialogue. Although Moyer and Pepe maintain regular practices as individual artists, this exhibition reveals the potent possibilities when they ally themselves creatively. With the range of captivating prospects set forth here, anticipation builds for their future cooperative efforts.

<sup>1</sup> Catalogue: *Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe: Tabernacles for Trying Times*. By Jamie DeSimone et al. 89 pp. incl. 50 col. ill. (Portland Museum of Art, Portland, 2020), \$29.99. ISBN 978-0-916857-64-6.

<sup>2</sup> The exhibition in Portland was scheduled for 7th February–7th June 2020 but closed early because of the pandemic.

