

Portland Press Herald

**Art review: Activist artist couple's PMA exhibit both playful and provocative
New York-based Carrie Moyer, a painter, and Sheila Pepe, a fiber-based installation artist,
who met in Maine, return with 'Tabernacles for Trying Times.'**

By Stacey Kors
March 8, 2020



"Common Sense; Portland, Maine," by Sheila Pepe, with "Swiss Bramble" by Carrie Moyer in background. Photos by Luc Demers

Activist art often gets a bad rap. The term can conjure images of in-your-face, fist-pumping political protest, the loud and angry rebellion against the establishment that dominated the late 1960s. For many contemporary artists, however, activist art is about social engagement, a call to conversation, to fostering community, rather than a revolutionary rallying cry. "Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe: Tabernacles for Trying Times," now at the Portland Museum of Art, is a captivating overview of the work of two such artists.

Moyer and Pepe, a New York-based couple who first met 25 years ago at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, have spent their careers creating a more inclusive space for feminist, lesbian and queer voices within the art establishment with work that is visually rich, playful and nuanced while still being provocative. Although they use different materials – Moyer, 59, is a painter, and Pepe, 60, a fiber-based installation artist – both women employ the language of abstraction to push the boundaries of their chosen media, turning the practice of artmaking into an act of reclamation.

Raised by counterculture parents in the 1960s, Carrie Moyer spent her childhood steeped in radical politics. In 1991, as a young artist in New York City, Moyer co-founded Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!), a public-art project that blanketed the city with clever agitprop posters inserting lesbian images into mainstream commercial contexts.

In Moyer's abstract paintings, process – more than politics – defines the work. Her large-scale compositions are sumptuous experiments in the material and textural possibilities of acrylic as a medium, her canvasses filled with sensuous pours of vibrant color, layers of opaque paint and transparent glazes, gentle waves and hard edges. "I'm going for beauty, seduction, and play – a physical experience, an optical experience," Moyer has written.

Indeed, Moyer's artwork has a visceral effect: "Four Dreams in an Open Room" is a dazzling tower of bright, planar shapes and translucent washes that play with spatial sense. "Swiss Bramble" covers an undulating abstract landscape with a two-dimensional, electric-blue overlay full of amorphous, Swiss-cheese-like holes. As viewers strain to glimpse the intriguing textures underneath, black dots peppered throughout the piece cheekily return their gaze.

But amid the lush layers of paint also lie a wealth of references – and some subtle subversion. "Intergalactic Emoji Factory" is a stunning canvas awash in multiple layers of jewel-tone paint pours in the style of 1950s Color Field painting, with a dark, spaceship-style form emitting shiny swaths of bubbly, glittering smoke at its center. Overtly, it is a commentary on contemporary culture and the rapid creation – and equally rapid acceptance – of our new pictorial language. Yet the work's glitter, which can be found in virtually all of Moyer's paintings, is not simply a decorative element but an ingenious means of "queering" the history of abstraction, an artistic style associated with hyper-masculine painters like Pollock, Kline and de Kooning.



"Midtown," by Sheila Pepe, with "Vieni Qui Bella" by Carrie Moyer in background.

Sheila Pepe also uses unconventional materials to convey her artistic message. Describing her technique as "improvisational crochet," Pepe creates elaborate fiber installations that marry the personal and the political, challenging the patriarchal notions of "domestic crafts" and "women's work."

In "Midtown," a floor-to-ceiling partition of patterned grids evocative of central Manhattan's streetscape is woven from tulle and shoelaces (the latter an homage to Pepe's Italian-born grandfather's shoe-repair stores in New York) and anchored by nautical towline, symbolically weaving together the neighborhood's high-style exclusivity and the blue-collar economies that helped construct it. The tension between the airy ornamental and heavier industrial materials is palpable, highlighting the work's powerful message about class.

For "91 BCE Redux," named after the Roman Republic's Social War on several Italian cities, Pepe employs tarnished chain mail to create a sagging abstraction of the 48 contiguous United States, which is flanked by complicated constructs of knotted yarn. In the government's current crackdown on immigration, Pepe foresees a troubling repetition of history; again, material play exacerbates the work's inherent tensions.

Despite their large scale (many of the installations had to be reduced in size for this show), there is an intimacy to Pepe's three-dimensional creations, the delicacy of her hand-wrought crochet work an invitation to human connection. In "Common Sense; Portland, Maine," a massive, immersive crocheted structure of black and purple yarns in the center of the exhibit, Pepe takes the invitation further, allowing viewers to slowly and collectively "unmake" the work at select times over the course of the exhibition. The "work-in-progress" is only completed after it's fully unraveled, the materials brought home by others for their own creative purposes.

A very different kind of "play" occurs between Moyer and Pepe when they collaborate, a practice begun at the Yaddo artists' community in 2011 and continued at subsequent residencies. The couple's experiments in cross-pollination are often quirky: "Carries a Soft Stick," which features a two-dimensional wall assemblage of a silhouette with a soft-sculpture baseball bat leaning up against it, is a witty twist on both an old adage and Moyer's first name. "Opera Buffa" hangs 26 drawings based on Italian churches and castles in the shape of an altarpiece, its impish irreverence — big-breasted gargoyles adorning columns, a sexually suggestive "jewel-in-the-lotus" at the altar's crown — as much for their audience as for themselves. While less artistically important to their oeuvres, these collaborations offer a delightful glimpse into the pair's playful personal relationship.

With "Parlor for the People," a site-specific work commissioned by the PMA for this exhibit, Moyer and Pepe have taken collaboration to a different level. In their most ambitious joint project to date, the couple have reimagined the religious tabernacle — in Christianity, a sacred meeting place for worship, in Judaism, a portable tent used as a sanctuary for the Ark of the Covenant — as a communal space where visitors can, explains Moyer, "gain sustenance as a community with naturally occurring differences."

Under a sculptural cover of delicate webs and colorful, floral clouds, a gathering space decorated with handmade stools, pillows and rugs will play host to Dream Action Factory, a series of community programs exploring some of the exhibit's overarching ideas and how they connect us as a society. It is a space for dialogue, for listening, for being heard — social arts that have been sadly absent, and sorely needed, in these trying times.



"Opera Buffa," by Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe.

Absent an event, "Parlor" is a place to pause and reflect, and bask in the vibrant work insightfully installed by PMA associate curator of contemporary art Jaime DiSimone. Sitting on one of the stools inside the piece, I caught a glimpse of Carrie Moyer's ravishing "Vieni Qui Bella" on the back wall of the gallery. The work, whose title means "come here beautiful" in Italian, is Moyer's "obvious love letter to my wife," a shock of passionate red paint pours and scalloped shapes suggestive of Pepe's crocheted installations.

Of all the glorious and enlightening spaces into which "Tabernacles for Trying Times" welcomes us, this one is by far the most important and sacred of them all.

Stacey Kors is longtime arts writer and editor who lives on Peaks Island.