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BOLD VISIONS

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STEVE HAYES**

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**THE ACTRESS & ACTIVIST TAKES ON A
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AUTHENTIC VOICE

As She Preps for Her Inclusion in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, Carrie Moyer Reflects on Her Agitprop Activist Projects & the Power of Color in Visual Arts

by Lester Strong

Painter, activist, teacher, occasional curator—New York City-based Carrie Moyer wears several hats, professionally speaking, with one of the peaks of her artistic career certainly being her inclusion in the current 2017 Biennial exhibition of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Interviewed recently about her work, Moyer described the sources of her art and activism, her many professional roles, and how AIDS has affected her activism and painting.

Moyer traces her activist impulses back to her parents. “They did a lot of activism when I was a child,” she said. “Mostly it was around anti-war issues, but it also had a more local flavor. For example, we didn’t eat grapes for my entire childhood because of Cesar Chavez and the California farm workers.” She also traces her artistic impulses back to her upbringing, commenting: “I had parents who—particularly my mother—were very interested in my sister and me learning about art. Eventually one of us became an artist.”

It was when Moyer moved to New York City in the early 1980s to study art, however, that she began to discover her own personal activist causes. During the interview, she pinpointed that discovery very precisely: “I’m a woman, and I’ve known I’m gay since high school. But I really started to feel the effects of sexism and homophobia in art school.” Asked to expand on this, she said: “Let’s start with sexism. At my school in the early 1980s, there were grants and fellowships open to male students only. I’m sure those restrictions don’t exist any more, but I felt the unfairness of it back then. There would also be strange comments from male professors, like ‘There are holes in your paintings because you’re a woman.’”

“As for homophobia, there was an incident with my first partner when I was in art school. Someone broke into our apartment because he knew we were lesbians and tried to rape her. In the 1980s, New York could feel dangerous for young women in

general, and it just got heightened for us by being visible together as lesbians.”

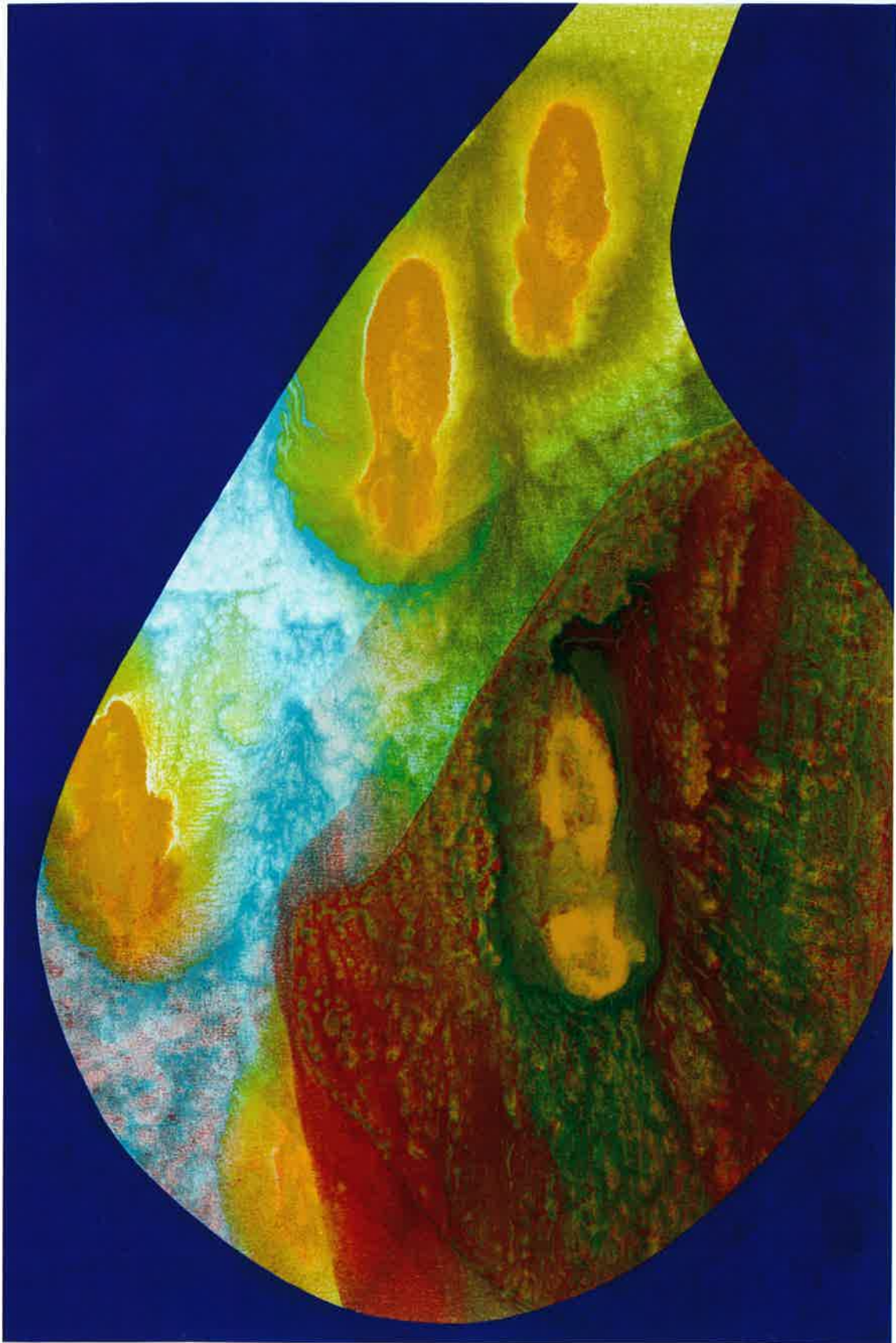
Moyer did meet feminists on the faculty of her school, and women who were connected to *Heresies*, a groundbreaking feminist journal of art and politics founded in the 1970s, where she became an intern. So she discovered a way to express her upset at the sexism she encountered in school and to feel the support of sympathetic women faculty members. But it was still frustrating as a woman artist. Even though the feminist art movement had been around since the 1970s, it was not yet recognized as important by the mainstream art world, which was still steeped in “neo-expressionism and certain kinds of really macho artwork” (Moyer’s words) that notoriously marginalized women artists.

Her activist impulses in New York, curiously enough, were first stimulated by her awareness of ACT UP. “At the time I didn’t have any close friends affected by AIDS, and I was never a member,” she said. “But AIDS was the main activist cause in those days. I went to a number of ACT UP events, and you could feel the energy. I was—and still am—friends with Avram Finkelstein [*A&U*, December 2015] of Gran Fury [an artist collective that arose out of ACT UP in 1988; famous for many of the catch phrases and images associated with AIDS activism]. Being around people like that, with the kind of discourse they generated, was incredibly energizing, and not just about AIDS. The space they provided and their tactics provided locations and new ways to talk and agitate about two issues that affected me directly—homophobia and the lack of lesbian visibility in the arts and mainstream culture generally.” (It should be noted that Moyer did one project directly related to AIDS: In 2005 she produced a “safe sex postcard sticker” titled “Follow Your Nose But Cover Your Johnson” for Visual AIDS to be distributed for free at LGBT Pride events in June.)

Over the years, Moyer worked with a number of organizations involved with lesbian and gay issues: Queer Nation, the Lesbian



The Green Lantern, 2015, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 72 by 60 inches. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York.

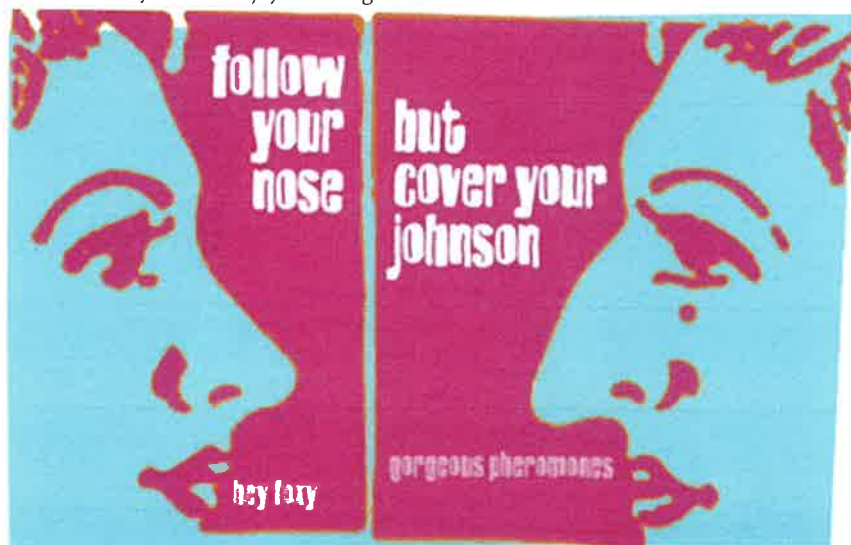


Maiden Voyage, 2015, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 36 by 24 inches. Private Collection. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York

Avengers, the New York City Anti-Violence Project, and the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization. But in 1991, she and photographer Sue Schaffner founded their signature activist group Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!), which from 1991 into 2008 dissected and critiqued mainstream culture from a lesbian point of view by inserting lesbian images into mainstream cultural contexts. A very public form of art, it usually involved wheat-plastering around 5,000 posters in New York neighborhoods known for their high-density and diverse pedestrian populations.

Aside from what Moyer calls her “Agitprop” art, there is also her painting. In an *Artforum* review of Moyer’s 2016 exhibition “Sirens” at DC Moore Gallery in the Chelsea section of Manhattan, Rachel Churner wrote: “Since the early 2000s, Moyer has been making paintings with stains and pours that evoke...the work of female painters from Georgia O’Keeffe and Helen Frankenthaler to Elizabeth Murray.” Indeed, like the work of those three, her paintings are vivid explosions of color that dazzle the eye. And while they may fit the category of abstract art, the often biomorphic shapes they embody also caress the eye in a way that can feel at one and the same time sensual yet very mysterious.

Asked during the interview to discuss her relation to color, she said, “I feel like color is basically a kind of joy. It’s magical.



follow your nose but cover your johnson, 2005, postcard size (safe sex poster sticker created to support gay pride, queer politics, and the fight against AIDS). Courtesy Visual AIDS

And because a lot of my paintings are poured, it feels like I’m pouring liquid color onto this surface that is white, so that

can use something visual to get people to have a feeling or thought they may not have had before. I want to slow viewers down so



Intergalactic Emoji Factory, 2015, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 72 by 96 inches. Private Collection. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York

they pause before the work and feel invited to enter a space—the space of the painting—that doesn’t exist anywhere else.”

Moyer commented in the course of the interview that she feels “this really strong desire to make something that will effect change.” This is clearly one of the impulses behind both her Agitprop work and her paintings. And clearly it lies at the heart of her teaching as well. During the interview she stated: “I was just made a full professor of art at Hunter College [part of the City University of New York system]. I like teaching, and feel like I represent a different point of view in academia than much of the kind of education I had myself. What I try to elicit from all my students is how to make art based on their own authentic voice. In that sense, I view my teaching as a form of activism.”

And so it is. It should be added that Carrie Moyer brings her own authentic voice to everything she does. It’s not the only value of her work. But it truly is at the heart of everything she does as an activist, an artist, a teacher.

For more information about the artist, visit: www.carriemoyer.com. The Whitney Biennial is on view through June 11 in New York’s Greenwich Village.

Lester Strong is Special Projects Editor of *A&U*.