

BOMB

Carrie Moyer by Bruce Pearson

A studio visit with the abstract painter where she reflects on past and present work and on resisting the conventions of late modernism.

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The Origin of Glitter, 2022, acrylic, glitter, and pumice on canvas, 75 × 110 inches (diptych). All images courtesy of the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York.

I've followed New York painter Carrie Moyer's work for a couple of decades, and it's been exciting to see her ongoing experimentations with paint, different textures, techniques, and references. I've also been taken by how she continuously, in one way or another, brings her feminist and activist politics into her various bodies of work. As a fellow painter, I'm inspired by her radical investigations and her approach to painting as an inquiry.

Many abstract painters tend to actively engage with art history, rejecting or incorporating prior ideas, including their own. I love how artists' works can contain that very conversation with themselves; the next generation will then continue it and that keeps the history moving and fresh. In Moyer's work, for instance, a brushstroke receiving a shadow is one way in which she playfully intermixes abstraction with illusion, thereby subverting the genre's prescriptions.

Visiting my peers' studios is one of my favorite things about being an artist in New York City: I get insight into how others think and explore, and then go to the show that comes out of it. When we recorded this conversation in Moyer's studio this fall, she was in the middle of working on several paintings in various stages of completion. It's a privilege to see an artwork before it receives its final touches. I also got to witness how Moyer's process occasionally involves the computer. She scans her paintings, or creates forms on the screen, then prints them out and moves them around on the canvas, not unlike a Matisse cutout. This was one of several revelations I took away from the studio visit. —Bruce Pearson



Studio view of (left to right) *Love You Tammy Faye*, *The Origin of Glitter*, *Knock Off*, and *Leda Was a Swan*, 2022.

Bruce Pearson

How great to be in your studio.

Carrie Moyer

I'm very happy to have you here.

BP

I'm wondering what's going on with this new work.

CM

I have two paintings that I'm doing that are part of a commission, which are these over here. I'm gonna move the furniture so you can see them. They're diptychs, which is not a form I usually work in but they need to fit into a particular space in some- one's home. I'm thinking of them as Carrie Moyer's greatest hits, since each contains aspects of the work that I've been dealing with for a long time, be it landscape or imaginary place, or an approach to abstraction that buries figuration or imagery in it.

BP

How do you mean, "buries figuration"?

CM

I'm always embedding things that are recognizable into my pours or large swaths of color. Part of it is to create a treasure hunt for the viewer. It's very important for me to slow the viewer down and pose questions, like, What do I know I'm looking at, and what don't I know? And then create this tension that the viewer has to resolve. Asking, How do these things operate? And why are they in the same space? There seems to be this very arbitrary border between "abstraction" or "representation," which is completely porous at this point, and even using the words feels totally inadequate. I don't know what those terms are describing anymore.

BP

I've been kind of obsessing about binaries and wanting to just wipe them out in my thinking because they've gotten us into so much trouble. Right now, there seems to be a wider acceptance of things that don't fit into categories; there's a willingness to redefine things.

CM

One of the joys of this work is using paint to play with the history of illusion, but also talking to all these other moments in painting history. Flatbed planes, staining, monoprinting, tricky surface treatments, impossible light and shadow effects. The stuff in my bones about modernism rejects the things that give us great joy in painting, like illusion. *(laughter)*

BP

This painting on the right seems to invite you in, but there's also resistance—you think you get a handle on something, and then it just slips away. Looking slow rewards the viewer.

CM

That's my goal. I guess I'm interested in cultivating the long view of painting. I'm rejecting the "I spent three minutes looking at your painting on Instagram and now I get it" mode. These over here are new works that I started this summer. This one is finished, that one is in process. I'm interested in returning to some of the work I was making in the '90s that was more blatantly related to posters. I'm using collages and other stuff, mining my own archive.

BP

Over the phone, you mentioned that you felt that you were on the edge of a breakthrough. Has that happened yet? What is it?

CM

I'm one of these painters who is painting to find something out. I go at a picture thinking there're going to be these reference points—for example, some of these collages—that help me set up a structure. Then, the process of making it becomes revealed. I'm always responding to what I'm looking at. With these new ones, I don't know if it's a breakthrough, but it's a definite move because I'm using things that I've discovered about paper over the past two years and trying to bring them into painting. I'm setting up a very complex surface before I even put anything on it: all these canvases have a fiber paste on them, so they actually feel dry and papery.

BP

For a ground?

CM

Yeah, as a ground. It's very textured, and it responds to the paint really differently. So I'm getting results that on paper are quite beautiful, but in a painting, they look gnarly. That is not usually part of my painting vocabulary, and I'm really liking that.

BP

I just love this one on the left, all of it. The texture does feel like a breakthrough.

CM

Thank you. I'm known for experimenting with acrylic paint, but it's like, What else can I possibly do? Of course, there are thousands of things you could do. But it takes a long time to figure things out, and then figure out why they're important, and whether it's more than just a kind of effect. These spectacular moves with the material, they need to reap a reward that's more than just aesthetic.

BP

What would you think that reward is, that is not just aesthetic?

CM

For me, these surfaces, right now, evoke lots of other things, things that I haven't had in my paintings—like burning or scorching or, if you look at this one, *Knock Off*, there's graphite suspended in the medium. I'm getting all sorts of interesting things that look both like a print, and then maybe a colored photograph. I haven't totally digested it yet. It's just a very different approach to using the material.

BP

It also opens up space in a different way than it previously has.

CM

Yes. And my central question is always, Is art political? Or how can art be political?

BP

Another question of mine.

CM

We're in such a dark period. How is the work gonna address that? Is it okay to talk about pleasure? The way politics manifest in my work has definitely changed over the years.

BP

It feels like there's a lot more than just the idea of pleasure.



Chromafesto (Sister Resister 1.2),
2003, acrylic and glitter on canvas,
36 × 24 inches.

CM

Yeah, that's true. But I'm getting such joy—to use a corny word—in the studio from just the process of making work. It's like, "Oh, wow, look at this, enjoy this, come into the space where you get to be transported." I think we are living in a particular atmosphere right now. Perhaps the desire to protect an emotion like joy is more political than ever.

BP

What is the atmosphere that you're feeling? By addressing it and working with it, what are your hopes to be able to deal with that?

CM

I feel the paintings have a kind of urgency that I really loved about political posters when I was a kid. It's not like *Guernica* ever made anybody take up arms. But there's an urgency around different forms of abstraction that I think are very interesting. They're encoded in us. I'm consciously schooled in it, but the world is unconsciously schooled in modernist tropes around visual things.

BP

I love your work from the late '90s and early 2000s with the posters, when you used images in relationship with modernist ideas about paint. In time, you transitioned and dropped overt references to historical graphics and the work became more subtle. Do you feel that your politics carry through in all of your work, even when it's more subtle?

CM

I do, but it's less apparent; it doesn't look like agitprop. My politics are more front and center in my teaching. In the classroom I get to talk about history, the world, and the current events everyone is following closely. This semester we're reading and talking a lot about class and race, the feminist art movement, and queer history.

BP

Do you need to be direct?

CM

Maybe I need to be direct now. When I started making these paintings in the '90s, part of the friction was how could I bring the sentiment of the agitprop I'd made for queer organizations and Dyke Action Machine! into the studio. How does one render it through abstraction? When I was working on the paintings you're referring to, I received criticism for their very overtness. But right now, we're in a totally different moment historically. Even modes of picturing things, like social realism, that were taboo when you and I were younger are back in circulation because of the times that we're living in. And they're totally relevant. It makes me appreciate what I was trying to do in the '90s, and the fact that it was hard. I had a lot of people older than me saying, "Why are you using these sacred symbols?" A picture of a raised fist, for example—they felt I was mocking their generation. But I really wasn't, I was talking to my own history, because I grew up around that stuff, and a longing for change.

BP

Back then, there was a lot of talk about revolution in this country. Change was a real thing and for a long time; there was, as far as I'm concerned, a lot of positive change that happened. And then, suddenly, our hopes got turned on their heads. Now we're in a brand-new place where I feel that we need a new change. Radical new change.

CM

Not to cite the internet—I mean, it's the big boogeyman, always. But how do you circulate an image forcefully, through different populations? When we were younger, there was a lexicon of images that spoke of resistance to a certain class of young people. For example, you'd wear your T-shirt with Che Guevara on it, or whatever. Now we recognize these things more readily for what they are—soulless consumer objects. There's such a broad, random array of images that we all wade through every day. The stakes are just different.

BP

It's so curious because where I work, out in Williamsburg, there's a store for Supreme. And Supreme has used images of María Sabina and also Pharoah Sanders. I get excited seeing these pictures because I think these are amazing beings, but when I ask the wearer how they feel about the artist that they're wearing pictures of, they don't even know who they are. They just think that they look cool. I don't know what that means.

CM

You're wearing the right person on your shirt, but you're not familiar with their work.

BP

It's amazing that they don't even know who they're wearing and what they've done.

In an interview about your most recent show, you said that your process was about material discovery. Can you say more about what "material discovery" means?

CM

I have to try a lot of stuff and see what it looks like, and then reject things. For me, that means adding more water or some kind of additive—literally, the chemistry. My tendency is to make things polished, in a way, and I'm always trying to interrupt that. How do I step away from something that I could so easily overpaint? Because when I see extremely loose, gestural painting, I'm like, Wow, that looks so fun. Maybe I should switch to that! *(laughter)*

BP

To me it seems like you have a lot of gestural moves in your work.

CM

I do. I mean, this is kind of embarrassing to talk about, but the things that get imprinted during the time you're developing your voice are always hovering in the back of your brain. For me, those things are a rejection of abstract expressionism—more precisely, a feminist rejection of it. That rejection is no longer interesting or even relevant to me, but it's somehow still part of my biology and my brain. And I do have tons of things in these paintings that are gestural. They're just not that kind of gestural. It's a different mode.



Meat Cloud, 2001, acrylic and glitter on linen, 72 × 84 inches.



Affiche #12, 2002, acrylic on canvas, 50 × 42 inches.

BP

You have gone against a lot of received ideas of late modernism, such as your use of glitter, illusion, and the scrambling of vocabularies. Can you speak to that more?

CM

Yes. That's been such an inherent part of my work for a long time. It was a kind of arm wrestling match between what I enjoyed making and what sort of things I wanted to see versus the theoretical or historical things that I was aware of. I'm really interested in issues around taste and have been forever. What constitutes taste?

BP

I think we share that.

CM

Yeah. And that is connected to how I think about color, but it's also got this weird sort of aspirational thing like, Oh, if you're really going to be an intellectual painter, you'd get to a sort of Ad Reinhardt place, with the work kind of emptying out. And it just never suited me.

BP

I mean, I love Reinhardt, too. And his way of making work is very far from mine as well, in a lot of ways. Yet at the same time, I wonder who was dictating these critical structures?

CM

Nobody! Part of it is that most of my life, I've been an autodidact. I've always had a big appetite for books on artists and art, biographies, and histories of the twentieth century. My family moved around a lot and, as a kid, I spent a lot of time alone, reading. But back to this issue of taste, I think it has to do with class. My parents went to college after I went to college. I wanted to be an artist, but there was no precedent for this in my family. Not that one needs permission or anything, but you need to be able to imagine how you might do it, especially as a young woman or queer person at that time. Part of me has this relationship to the canon, to studying that, to knowing it, to making sure I know it—covering my bases. It's a protective mode. It's like, I don't want to get caught doing s——. You know what I mean? It's hard to explain. It's got to do with class. When I was coming up as a young painter, Elizabeth Murray was the gold standard for me. She was somebody who was so interestingly engaged with the history of painting, but also injecting all sorts of things into it. I have always thought of painters as scholars in a way.

BP

You've always taken risks. And you've gone outside of a particular time's mode of working, or what you're supposed to be making as an abstract artist. By taking those risks, you've created a body of work that's important to many other artists.

CM

Thank you. From my standpoint, I'm not consciously thinking about taking risks. I'm just like, Okay, well, I'm going to try this and see what it does.

I don't have anything smart to say to that. *(laughter)*



Jolly Hydra Unexplainably Juicy, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 84 × 78 inches.



Analog #8, 2020. Mixed media and collage on paper, 18.4 × 13.5 inches.

BP

Was there an impetus to scramble or break codes, though?

CM

Well, how would you define codes?

BP

Codes, for me, are the dos and don'ts of each genre. You seem to be creating your own vocabulary. And yet, your work is filled with art historical references. It's just very rich in the layers of reference, along with invention.

CM

It's funny that you bring this up because, a few years ago, a curator at some museum was like, "Well, we can't take this painting as a gift from a collector because we don't know what to do with it." I'm bringing this up because what you're saying rings true to me. I think about paintings as historical handshakes. You're talking to the past and the future. It's like a game of telephone where you're responding to stuff that came before, and you're also setting ground for the next person.

BP

A new conversation.

CM

In my mind, I think of how my paintings would look in conversation with other contemporary work and with historical work. But they're very rarely put into that context. My work is usually seen on its own. Although I was recently in a show with my wife—the sculptor, Sheila Pepe.

BP

Terrific show. I saw it both in Maine and in New York City.

CM

Oh, my god, it's amazing that you saw both versions! I want the work to expand its own borders, or reach beyond its borders, and I think it does, but I would love to have more opportunities to actually see my paintings in the same space with paintings that I'm talking to. That's the thing I'm missing right now.

BP

Didn't I just recently see one of your paintings at the Met?

CM

You did. And it is a total thrill to have the painting, *Pirate Jenny* (2012), there in conversation with all this other work that I think about. For instance, the paintings by Etel Adnan, Amy Sillman, Tomma Abts, Huguette Caland. There's a Melvin Edwards sculpture across from my painting, you can stand ten feet back and see both works in dialogue with each other. This is a rare occasion—that's all I was trying to say.

BP

Doesn't seem like it should be rare.

CM

We're painters—we want our paintings everywhere. *(laughter)*

BP

We want them in conversation.

CM

To me, that's the most important thing. That's the thrilling thing about seeing it at the Met. It's like, Wow, there's this rich conversation going on. For me, the poignant and meaningful aspect is the rise of women abstract painters in the last twenty years and being part of that dialogue. And seeing the work in that context and being able to notice how these incursions into something oppressive or patriarchal—how these artists have changed what's possible with abstract painting.

BP

So many of my favorite painters just happen to be women. Do you think patriarchy still has its grip on abstract painting?

CM

There are so many women artists who have totally changed the game in terms of the dialogue with history and a vital engagement with it.

BP

Incredibly vital. I'm curious about the moment when you realized you wanted to be an artist.

CM

I've wanted to be an artist since I was very small, but I've had to rediscover it multiple times in my life. I had a fantasy about moving to New York City, being a lesbian, and being an artist. All of those things were combined for me, by the age of like, eight or nine. *(laughter)*

BP

Eight or nine? Wow, you had clarity early.



Love You Tammy Faye, 2022, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 75 × 110 inches (diptych).

CM

Okay, maybe twelve years old. I was just like, I know this is where I'm gonna go to be free. I was raised mostly in the Northwest—Oregon, a little bit in Washington, California. And it's odd to say this because at that time, in the mid-1970s, that was the place you went to be free.

BP

San Francisco, certainly.

CM

Stereotypically.

BP

Well, New York, too.

CM

My parents moved from Detroit to the west coast to be free. So my version of that was different. I was not around many gay people when I was a child. I latched on to Gertrude Stein at a young age, asking, What is the intellectual milieu I want to be part of? That, maybe, is a little insight into my lingering relationship to the canon. I'm always like, What do I do with it? How do I reject it? How do I absorb it? How do I change it? I was also really interested in modern dance for much of my childhood and teenage years, and then I went to Bennington on a dance scholarship. Bennington is basically where Martha Graham developed her pedagogy around modern dance, and a lot of German dancers were there. There's this rich history around modern dance there.

BP

There's so much movement in your paintings. Does dance still inform your work in terms of how movement is taking place?

CM

It's not something I had consciously thought about. I was in a very severe car accident at Bennington, which meant I was basically out of commission for a couple years. At the time—it was pre-Mark Morris—you still had to be a perfect specimen for a career in the dance world. I didn't see myself returning to dance because I couldn't fully extend one of my elbows. So I left college and moved to New York and started doing the other things I loved besides dance, which was drawing and painting. But movement is incredibly important in my paintings, especially the ones we're looking at right now, these two diptychs. I work on them mostly on the table, moving them around as these flat surfaces. Because of the nature of the paint—it's acrylic, and it dries very quickly—it's very choreographed. What's going to happen first? How fast is that going to dry? I need to get over to this corner. Especially when I'm working on big paintings, I need to move quickly.

They are tweaked later—I'll go in and heighten some of the effects.

So I'm moving around a lot in my studio. I'm pouring and sprinkling. I rarely sit down. I definitely feel that there's a parallel with dance, or some sort of physical vocabulary that goes into making the work. I don't follow contemporary dance anymore. If someone invites me to a performance, I'm excited and interested but it's not a passion of mine. It might have to do with the fact that I couldn't do it for a few years and being a visual artist turned into my life.

BP

I love how these forms here occupy the space of the canvas differently and at the same time.

I was lucky to live with a dancer for a while. I got to get to know some of the stuff that was going on with dance performance. But I've lost touch with that world, too.

CM

Dance is like poetry. It's a very particular world, like a sanctuary with all this knowledge. Thinking about the history of modern dance—which is only a hundred years old—it's interesting to me in terms of how the development of abstract painting parallels the development of modern dance. Modernist abstraction evolved in all fields simultaneously—music, dance, painting, sculpture . . .

BP

With the Bauhaus and also Black Mountain College.

Another question I wanted to ask is about your relationship to technology.

CM

In the 1990s, I was trained on an early version of computer graphic software at one of my many day jobs. Learning how to use software and do graphic design on the computer has had a big effect on my painting. For example, the graphic conventions embedded in Photoshop and Illustrator—like drop shadows under the boxes in an annual report, or gradients in a slideshow—these visual tools make something inherently dull more interesting, or alive. The moves I was making in my work at that time were really influenced by thinking about that rather than breaking rules about flatness, or other tenets of high modernism. It was more like, How do I inject my painting with these visual codes that are so common that we don't even notice them?

BP

Like what?

CM

Cheesy spatial effects that would seem antithetical to something as dry as a pie chart. I still use Photoshop all the time with my paintings. I have all these printouts so I can try things out.

BP

Amazing. The collages and works on paper are very tactile.

CM

Many things that I've made by hand I then scan and use, sometimes just to see what happens. This helps me figure out the scale of a mark or pattern or surface texture in relation to other elements in the picture. I don't want a physical buildup everywhere in the painting, so I need a clear idea of what I'm going to put down. There are places where I'm repainting, and that's part of the content there, but then there are other places where I want the surface to be extremely flat and thin. To make those decisions, I'm using Photoshop practically every day.

BP

I wouldn't have imagined.

CM

Early on, I was unconsciously importing things I knew I could do on the computer into my paintings. That's given rise to the way lots of people are working right now—the reanimation of surrealism, for example. We're imagining them first, often, on the computer.

Bruce Pearson is a painter based in Brooklyn.