



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

CONVERSATION

Carrie Moyer WITH PHONG BUI

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PHONG BUI (RAIL): Like Amy Sillman, who decided to go back to graduate school rather late—she graduated from the School of Visual Arts in 1979 and went back to Bard for her MFA in 1995—you graduated from Pratt Institute in 1985, and did not go back to graduate school, also at Bard, until 1998. With one exception in that you also have another graduate degree in computer graphic design from the New York Institute of Technology in 1990. We know Amy went back to graduate school partly because her work habits were not as efficient, as she told me so candidly in my conversation with her in April 2006.

CARRIE MOYER: We all had been there [laughs].

RAIL: Yes, and partly because the prospect of being a painter was becoming more serious for Amy. What was your reason?

MOYER: I had a period where I was very disillusioned with painting right after I graduated from Pratt. I painted for a few years but it was in total isolation. Suddenly there's no one paying attention to you anymore, and you are trying to figure out how to make it as an artist in New York—an impossible task on your own, to say the least. But it was also during that same period, the early 1990s, that I became involved with gay civil rights activism, participating in ACT UP demonstrations and later joining Queer Nation and the Lesbian Avengers. My political life became far more important to me than my life in the studio. Even though I'd never taken any design courses, I started producing posters and different kinds of agitprop for the groups I was involved in. Politics were very real and very urgent. Suddenly it felt like my work had some kind of tangible and immediate result, which was very fulfilling. I actually stopped painting for a good five years. And when I started again, I just knew that I would only be able to go so far on my own. I was already showing a little bit in the '90s, but to move forward, I needed to be in critical dialogue with smart people. I knew Nayland Blake and Cecilia Dougherty and so was familiar with the program. It occurred to me that if I was going to graduate school, Bard was the first and only choice.



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CARRIE MOYER IN THE STUDIO

WITH STEEL STILLMAN

CARRIE MOYER IS A SELF-PROCLAIMED "painting believer," whose history of political activism gives backbone to a body of work that can stand up without it. The visual delights that her paintings offer—congeries of strange, suggestive anthropomorphic shapes layered between rippling, iridescent veils—are so manifest that learning anything more about the artist and her means might be unnecessary. True beauty, however, rewards the curious.

Moyer was born in Detroit in 1960 to young parents who, in the spirit of the day, were searching for themselves. When Moyer was 10, the family moved, first to California and then to a succession of towns throughout the Pacific Northwest, sustained by blue-collar jobs and back-to-the-land values. In 1978, Moyer headed east, first to Bennington College in Vermont, and then to Pratt Institute in New York, where she received a BFA in painting in 1985. She then earned an MA in computer graphic design from the New York Institute of Technology (1990) and later an MFA from Bard College in upstate New York (2001). From 1991 until 2004, Moyer and a friend, Sue Schaffner, constituted Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!), a two-person agitprop operation that promoted lesbian awareness through public art projects.

Now at midcareer, Moyer has been making acrylic paintings on linen or canvas for nearly 20 years, often using pours and fingerprints and adding glitter. From the mid-'90s to the mid-'00s, her paintings reflected her design experience, and featured legible imagery and flat, posterlike space. Then, in 2005, Moyer began inventing ambiguous figural subjects and placing them in shadowy, stagelike worlds. Since 2010, she has plunged deeper into abstraction, attenuating her references to bodies and spaces while amplifying shape, color and texture. Moyer's politics have long directed her choice of subject matter, leading her early on to incorporate into her paintings revolutionary figures like Karl Marx or Mao Zedong. As time has passed, such decisions, like her means, have grown more subtle, and her work has become more enigmatic. It is a measure of Moyer's current confidence as a painter that she's found a way to subordinate polemics to esthetics.

Since 1993, Moyer has exhibited her paintings in a dozen one-person exhibitions and over 100 group shows in the U.S. and Europe. Her other pursuits include teaching and writing. This month she joins the faculty of Hunter College's art department as an associate professor, after having previously taught at RISD. She has been writing about art for more than a decade and is a regular contributor to this magazine. Moyer and I talked early this summer, over the course of two warm afternoons, in her studio—a modest 250-square-foot space carved out of the Brooklyn loft she shares with her partner, the artist Sheila Pepe.

STEEL STILLMAN What are your memories of Detroit in the 1960s?

CARRIE MOYER My father and members of my extended family worked on Ford assembly lines, and we lived in a working-class neighborhood, not far from the site of the 1967 riots, which we could see from our apartment. My parents were still teenagers when I was born and they became swept up in the activist spirit of the decade. I remember being taken to civil rights rallies and peace marches, and I still have a copy of Mao's *Little Red Book* that was given to me by a creepy-looking guy on the National Mall. Though I attended public schools, my mother was passionate about alternative education, and she idealized artists. She set up a room in our small apartment for my younger sister and me to use as an art studio, and on weekends she would take us to the Detroit Institute of Arts to look at the Diego Rivera murals.

STILLMAN Did you study art in high school?

MOYER I took a few painting classes, but by then my primary interest had become dance. In 1978 I went to Bennington on a dance scholarship, but was in a bad car accident that first year and had to drop out. I'd shattered my elbow and couldn't dance anymore. So I moved to New York, and, after a year of physical therapy and taking classes at the Art Students League, I enrolled at Pratt as a painting major.

Being in art school was like being in heaven. I got to make things all day long, every day. The paintings I made at Pratt were a mix of the modernism of people like Dove and Hartley and the cartoonish abstraction that Elizabeth Murray, Bill Jensen and others were practic-

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Carrie Moyer, "Canonical,"
at CANADA, New York,
Sept. 14–Oct. 16.

ing in the 1980s. Though I wouldn't have admitted it at the time—for fear of sounding corny—I identified with the transcendental aspirations of the early modernists, and specifically with the spiritual values of artists like Kandinsky and Malevich. But I was also feeling nostalgic for the rural Northwest, and making art provided me some distance from the chaos of urban life.

STILLMAN Was the feminist art movement on the curriculum at Pratt when you were there?

MOYER It was beginning to filter in, and I had some strong women teachers. One of them, Amy Snider, helped me get an internship at the feminist art magazine *Heresies*, where I met tons of people. It was an exciting time to enter the art world. Art history itself was in flux. Every month, it seemed, a young scholar would discover yet another forgotten woman artist, and my pantheon would shift.

Feminism permeated my personal life as well. In the mid-'80s I was

coming out and questioning everything. But as I became politicized, I began having trouble justifying the relevance of painting, especially abstract painting; I couldn't figure out what it was good for. All the politically and conceptually motivated art being made at the time seemed to employ other media. So, around 1988, feeling somewhat discouraged, I stopped painting altogether for several years and began funneling all my energy into activism. In the early '90s I joined Queer Nation and the Lesbian Avengers and experienced my first real sense of community.

STILLMAN How did Dyke Action Machine! get started?

MOYER I met Sue Schaffner in Queer Nation. We were both freelancing in the advertising world. Sue was a photographer and I was doing graphic design on early Macintosh computers. We were determined to put our "work" skills to use making agitprop. Inspired by the artist collective Gran Fury and by the work



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Top, Dyke Action Machine! revealed their identities with this postcard campaign, 1998. Left to right, Carrie Moyer and Sue Schaffner.

Right, DAM! poster wheat-pasted in Lower Manhattan, June 1997.

of people like Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, Sue and I established DAM! in 1991, resolved to insert lesbian imagery into public spaces. DAM!'s earliest projects recast Calvin Klein and Gap poster campaigns with obviously lesbian models and wheat-pasted the very authentic-looking results all over downtown New York. It was thrilling to see our message on the street.

STILLMAN And yet activism wasn't enough. What led you to resume painting in 1993?

MOYER I discovered I missed the solitude of the studio and the freedom to develop ideas without the constraint of a collaborator. I knew, then, that I missed making things by hand; but, in retrospect, I'm aware that I also missed the pleasure of not making sense. DAM!'s projects were relatively straightforward, designed to punch through the confusion of the street. They took well-known assumptions and images and turned them on their head. I didn't want to always be that blunt or clear.



Carrie Moyer: *Meat Cloud*, 2001, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 72 by 84 inches. Artists' Pension Trust.

STILLMAN How did you overcome your hesitations about abstraction?

MOYER At first I avoided it and experimented with readymade content and materials. I painted on photographs and printed fabrics and made collage-based work, seeking out structures that were strong enough to frame political and cultural questions without being overwhelmed. I was looking for layered themes and multiple readings.

In the early '90s, there had been a good deal of overheated debate in the media about whether there was a gay gene. Was homosexuality the result of nature or nurture? Taking the biological determinists

at their word, I transformed a series of banal storybook vignettes by intermingling images of knowing, predatory little lesbians among the "normals." I painted several of these on photographs ripped from the catalogue of MoMA's iconic "Family of Man" exhibition. During that same period, I also made graphite drawings based on photographs of my own family, in which I dramatized an assortment of funny, darkish scenarios—in one my father resembles Christ. Basically, I was doing what many young artists do: I was using visual language to analyze my own experiences.

STILLMAN Why, in 1996, after beginning to exhibit in interesting

group shows, did you decide to go back to school for an MFA?

MOYER Despite being surrounded by artists, I felt I hadn't had enough hardcore conversation about painting, and I wasn't sure my work would move ahead without it. Enrolling at Bard helped me tremendously. I finally got the message that it was okay to combine what I'd learned working on the computer with my art practice.

STILLMAN You have cited as influences the agitprop graphics of Emory Douglas, Sister Corita and Atelier



Above, *The Stone Age*, 2006, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 60 by 84 inches. Private collection.

Right, *Ballet Mécanique*, 2008, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 84 by 60 inches. Private collection.

Populaire, the French group that created many of the May '68 posters. Did you learn about them at Bard?

MOYER Yes, and I was blown away by all that work. Seeing Sister Corita's prints, for example, and appreciating their melding of beauty and message, pointed the way to my own hybrid. I wanted to marry the flatness of poster space to the more sensual signifiers of painting. For most of my undergraduate education, beauty had been cast as a bourgeois value, not to be pursued for its own sake. But in the '90s, thanks, in part, to Dave Hickey's book *The Invisible Dragon*, and to what felt like the enfeeblement of conceptual art's removed, bureaucratic esthetic, beauty became viable again.

STILLMAN By the time you left Bard, you were making paintings like *Meat Cloud* [2001], which features profiles of Marx, Lenin and Mao, arrayed as if on a communist Mount Rushmore.

MOYER *Meat Cloud* was one of the first of my paintings to successfully incorporate political content. It led to a group of flattened landscapes that riffed on the kind of leftist imagery that had been popular when I was growing up. Several viewers assumed that *Meat Cloud* was about Communism—that it was a history painting. But I was less interested in those men as historical figures than I was in the phenomenon of their return—as icons—in the counterculture 1960s.

STILLMAN Was the title *Meat Cloud* a deliberate reference to Carolee Schneemann's 1964 performance *Meat Joy*?

MOYER It was. Carolee was teaching at Bard when I was there, and often described painting as a performative act. As I began using pours of acrylic paint—in order to bring more bodily, nonlinear elements into my work—her words were on my mind.

STILLMAN In 2003, these landscape-like paintings came together in

"Chromafesto," your first solo exhibition at CANADA. There, in what seemed like a nod to agitprop, you papered the walls with posters of a human skeleton blaring the show's title through a megaphone.

MOYER "Chromafesto" was something of an homage to the Lithuanian painter Rudolf Baranik, who'd been an important teacher for me at Pratt. Baranik, like Ad Reinhardt, produced polemical texts and abstract paintings. He referred to one series of the latter, the atmospheric "Napalm Elegies" [1967-74], as "socialist formalism." I wanted to see what kind of political discourse my own paintings might provoke. Reading Naomi

Klein's critique of globalism, *No Logo* [2000], I wondered whether painting itself could become an act of resistance in a world increasingly overtaken by corporate messaging. I borrowed the skeleton image from a 1960s Polish poster and invented the term "chromafesto" to announce that color was the means by which viewers would be radicalized.

STILLMAN I've heard you describe painting as a pile-up of sign systems—what do you mean by that?

MOYER In the late '90s, I began treating painting techniques and gestures as a kind of language system, borrowing my approach from graphic design, where cutting and pasting between styles is second nature. When it dawned on me that someone like Sigmar Polke was doing the same thing, art history suddenly became an immense, vital resource. Once I start painting, other artists show up. I'll notice something that looks like Max Ernst or Helen Frankenthaler, and will

have to decide what to do about it. Sometimes I play along, but often I won't. The party line, in the aftermath of modernism, is that it's impossible to do anything original in painting; but negotiating the friction between its historicized moves provides plenty of room for invention.

STILLMAN For your second one-person show at CANADA, "The Stone Age," in 2007, you reached beyond the Western canon for source material.

MOYER Beginning in 2005, my work evolved away from recognizable symbols and took a figural turn: references to particular images or sources became slippery. I wanted to make things that looked vaguely familiar, but strange. I spent a lot of time at the Met, admiring and puzzling over objects from Papua New Guinea in the Rockefeller wing. Were these artifacts masks, totems or tools? Did they represent humans or animals? I loved the fact that it was often unclear whether these

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categories applied or even mattered. At the same time, I began looking closely at ceramics, particularly the Japanese pottery of the Jomon period. With all these objects, I was intrigued by shapes that resembled featureless aliens one moment and prehistoric goddesses the next.

While working on the "Stone Age" paintings, I was deeply affected by two shows: "High Times, Hard Times" at the National Academy Museum, in New York, and "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution," at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, in Los Angeles. Feminist artists and their fellow travelers had recuperated an array of processes—sewing, embroidery and glazing—and had used them to create abstract forms that challenged late modernism's antidecorative prejudices. Living with an artist who makes enormous crocheted installations, I was especially attentive to the use of craft strategies to question painting's historical preeminence. I began wanting, among other things, to make my acrylic pours function like ceramic glazes.

STILLMAN Can you describe your painting process?

MOYER It's a kind of performance. I usually start out on the floor, pouring several layers of thinned gesso on an unprimed stretched canvas, all the while moving the painting around to create a foundation. Next, I map out a structure of flat shapes—worked out, these days, in small cut-paper collages—to create a scaffold for what will sit on top of the pools of white paint. From there, the fun is in honing color and spatial relationships, deciding what goes in front of what, subverting visual expectations and obfuscating the narrative of how the image got made. I like taking things that were done intuitively—or by accident—and making them look as though they'd been premeditated,



This page, Moyer's studio, 2011. Photos Paola Ferrario.

Opposite, *The Tiger's Wife*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 60 by 48 inches.



and vice versa. But occasionally, I exert too much control and have to destroy the whole thing. Even if I can't always put my finger on it, I'm looking for something quite specific. Once a painting is dead, I can't bring it back.

STILLMAN From "The Stone Age" through your 2009 solo at CANADA, "Arcana," many of your paintings have called to mind the erotic, disorienting photographs of Hans Bellmer and Raoul Ubac. *Shebang* [2006] and *Ballet Mécanique* [2008] are two examples taken almost at random. Has Surrealism been a conscious influence?

MOYER Surrealism has been a guilty pleasure since I was an undergraduate. I love the paintings of people like Ernst, Remedios Varo, Kay Sage and Leonora Carrington.



In recent years, Surrealism's main influence on me has been procedural, in the abundance of techniques or devices it offers for accessing the unknown. Pouring acrylic paint is like creating inkblots; surprising images show up. In a sense, my entire painting practice is like a game of exquisite corpse that I play by myself. Layering the result of one activity on top of another, I arrive at unforeseeable consequences.

STILLMAN One outcome, evident in your newest work, is that figurative elements are now less conspicuous.

MOYER Maybe that has to do with turning 50! When I was younger I was intent on establishing my own identity—as a lesbian and a painter. I wanted to demonstrate and critique the ways in which I'd been shaped by society. These days, I'm less preoccupied by my social condition, by the boundaries, as it were, around my body. In other words, I'm more focused on the textural implications of painting itself than on the textual aspects of any particular image. As a practical matter, this means that, starting with works like *Fiamethrower* [2010], I've become obsessed with ambiguous scale and want fewer iconlike motifs.

STILLMAN Not long ago, in an essay, you wrote that you now enter the studio with less language. What did you mean?

MOYER I find, increasingly, that language is a sort of parallel construct that sits next to an image. Of course, there's no such thing as an autonomous work of art—you can't separate the finished object from the narrative of its ideas or cultural surround. But, when you're actually painting, those words need to go away. Like most activities, if you think too much about it while doing it, you're probably not doing it very well.

STILLMAN Is your activist spirit still alive and well in your work?

MOYER I hope so! Politics and art tend to have many, often subtle connections. Who can separate the populist upheavals of the 20th century—notably the Russian Revolution and May '68—from the idealistic impulses of modernism? My paintings may have become less explicit, but my ambition to seduce viewers into reflecting on their own conditions—optical, physical, historical and otherwise—remains undiminished. Painting is a very intimate delivery system. ◻



Moyer's solo show is on view at the Worcester Art Museum from Feb. 11-Aug. 19, 2012.

STEEL STILLMAN is an artist and writer based in New York.