

# THE DAYS OF YORE

## Carrie Moyer

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**Carrie Moyer** is a prominent American painter who began her career of powerful visual expression as one half of the public art duo Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!) – an early and influential queer agitprop powerhouse that was founded in the nineties and was active for seventeen years. During that time, Moyer also designed graphics, posters, and agitprop for numerous gay and lesbian activist organizations, including Queer Nation, the Lesbian Avengers, and the New York City Anti-Violence Project. Moyer has been represented by CANADA Gallery in New York City since 2003. Her writing on art has been published in *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *Modern Painters*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*, and her essays have been featured in a number of anthologies, including *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Spaces and Sites of Resistance* and *To The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists*.

Moyer has a BFA from Pratt Institute, a MFA from Bard College, and has been a student at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. She is the recipient of many grants and awards, including a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant, an Anonymous Was A Woman Award, the Elaine de Kooning Memorial Fellowship, and the National Studio Program at PS1/Institution for Contemporary Art in New York. She has been awarded residencies at Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony and has taught at a long list of universities, including Yale University, Pratt Institute, and The Cooper Union. In 2010, she was named to the Board of Governors at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. She is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Art at Hunter College.

*The Days of Yore* sipped hot apple cider with Moyer at an outdoor café on an unseasonably warm winter afternoon in New York City. She was generous with her stories and her friendly, crooked smile.

**When you were a child, did you have an idea of what an artist was?**

I did, because I had a mother who wanted me to be an artist.

**Really? That's not always so common.**

She was very romantic about artists, and she did certain things to facilitate that. My parents were working class, but she would buy these big rolls of paper for us to draw on. Instead of toys, she'd give us art supplies.

**And did you dive right into that?**

I was always the kid who was good at art, definitely. I won little grade-school prizes, stuff like that. My parents were hippies when I was a child, so they wanted us to do Something Else.

**That is interesting, because many people that I speak with experience resistance from home, or some form of family discomfort about their decisions to be alternative, which inevitably going down an artistic**

path can be. But you almost had a pressure to go there!



Carrie Moyer, "The Tiger's Wife," 2011. Acrylic on canvas. 60 x 48 inches

Well, as I grew up my parents—especially my mother—didn't understand that nobody wants to be a starving artist. She had a romantic idea about what it would be. When I graduated from art school and I told her I was going to learn word processing because I thought that would be a good way to support my studio, she got very upset. She was like, "Don't go into office work! Just eat pasta every night!" She thought I was going to become a secretary.

**She didn't understand the actual reality of choosing an artist's life. But you did?**

I did, because I was an art student in New York, and you get sophisticated very quickly here. If you want to do this, you learn what's going on and how it's going to work. I knew that was a job I could do to support myself.

**Let's go back a little. When you graduated from high school, you went to college and majored in art?**

I had a full scholarship to Bennington College. I was a dancer then, and that was one of the places where modern dance got its legs in the United States. But I was in a very bad car accident at Bennington and couldn't dance at that time, so I went back to visual art.

**Dance had been your focus?**

Yeah. I always tell this story about how I decided not to learn to drive because I knew I would move to New York. We lived in a small town in Oregon, and getting your driver's license was your badge of honor; it was going to be the way you escaped your parents. But I was like, "No, I'm moving to New York, so I don't need to know how to drive." I still don't know how to drive.

So I did know I was going to be an artist. I didn't know what type exactly. I had a lot of ideas. And being in this car accident sealed my fate in a funny way. Because I was like, "Okay, I can't do this. I'm 19. What do I do?"

Very shortly thereafter, I focused on visual art. I lived in New York with my girlfriend, and we were very broke, and I went to the Art Students' League and—

**This was after college?**

No, I went to Bennington for a year, I was in a car accident, and then I dropped out.

**And then you moved to New York.**

Yes. And I just lived with my girlfriend in this funny—I don't think they exist anymore, but they were called SROs, Single Room Occupancy. It would be where old women might live.

**I spoke with another artist who lived in one of those. It was run by nuns, and it was all women and you had to check in on a curfew.**

Yeah. So my girlfriend and I shared a room. They just thought we were nice young ladies. We were on this floor with ten elderly women or women who didn't have a lot of money. It was a safe place to live, and yes, you did have to check in. It was partially because my girlfriend was from New York but her parents were shocked and kind of homophobic, so we arrived here and didn't know what was going on.

**Your girlfriend came from Bennington as well, and dropped out with you?**

Yes. We were both in this car accident. That's how we met. We were both students at the school, and we were in a car accident together, not knowing each other. We were driving to town in the same car and both of our best friends were killed in this accident, and then we became girlfriends. It was very emotional, obviously, traumatic. Not to be a downer. But when you're that age, everything is very difficult. In my life, it felt like everything was very [makes a growling, small roaring noise]. One of those cosmic times.

**I'd say that situation was objectively very difficult. It's not a whiny teen thing—it's a big event.**

Yeah, it makes you grow up fast.



Carrie Moyer, "Down Underneath," 2011. Acrylic on canvas. 54 x 72 inches

**So you moved to New York and then began school at Pratt. But with a gap in between?**

There was about a year in between. I was going to the Art Students League and taking drawing classes, because I wanted to go to art school but didn't know if I could get in.

You arrive in New York as a 19-year-old, and the only thing you know about it is what you've read. The Art Students League was where the artists went in, like, the '40s. Now it's this weird anachronistic thing. Their relationship to the art world is nominal. But it was still good. It's all part of it.

**How did you support yourself at that time? Did you have a job?**

I worked at Barnes & Noble. I was a clerk. Part-time. I have had a million shitty jobs. A million. But that one wasn't so bad, because we were surrounded by books. I have to admit: I did some minor shoplifting as an

employee of Barnes & Noble. So I had a really nice book collection by the end of it. I worked in the art section, so I was looking at art books all day.

### **And then you decided to go back to school, to Pratt?**

I applied to Pratt and Parsons and decided on Pratt. I went there for four years. But because I was in this car accident and had gone to Bennington for a year, I felt like I was 97, even though I was only about a year older than my peers. And I think going to school in New York is so different than going to school elsewhere. I just started teaching at Hunter, but I've also been teaching at RISD for four years, on a little tiny campus where everyone knows each other. If you go to school in New York, you might know your classmates but not socialize with them. It's a gigantic city and everybody's too cool for school.

But I went to Pratt for four years, and it was great; I loved it. Spending all of my time learning how to make art seemed luxurious to me in a way that I hadn't imagined. The foundation year there was based on Bauhaus stuff, all this traditional, modernist stuff. This was a long time ago, the early '80s. In retrospect, it's probably not the best art school ever, but I didn't know that, so it was a mind-blowing experience.

### **When you finished, there were many years between Pratt and going on to graduate work. Did you set out to navigate the New York art scene? What was your first move?**

I left school thinking I wanted to be a painter, to show my work and be part of the discourse. But I also had a lot of fear about how to do that and what it meant. This was '86 or something like that, when there was a huge boom in the art market. The East Village thing was coming up. There was—and I think there still is—this idea that there's art, and then there's money, and it's dirty to mix them. Even though we need to make money to live on. It took me a long time to sort that out mentally.

## **Because you began from a purist place?**

Totally. I had these idealistic parents and very traditional ideas about what art is: that it's not touched by commerce, that it's where all the free people live, it's somehow not part of the world yet commenting on the world. It's completely nonsensical. And coming from a working-class family, I had a lot of class issues around how the art world works.

I didn't know how to build a community for my painting. That was the beginning of the Williamsburg thing, and I was sharing space with an artist who was a lot older than me. He was probably in his thirties and I was like 23. And I had this thought of, "Do I want to have my work owned by a corporation? Do I want my painting to be in the lobby of a Saatchi?" And of course you don't! How offensive! But then, of course you do.

I had a lot of ideas and judgments about what the art world was. Some of them were true and some of them weren't. It was not helpful. It made me opt out for a little while. I was confused. On one hand, I felt like this was a higher calling—I'm saying all this stuff in quotes, of course—and yet, what if it only gives you pleasure, personally? What's the point? What is it going to do for the world?

I've taught for a long time now, and I think this is a valid trajectory to go through mentally: What is the function of this thing that we're doing? We're living in a culture that valorizes and also punishes you for being an artist. At least for the first twenty-five years, if you have the stomach to stand it. It's hard to come to terms with that.

## **What do you mean when you say that you "opted out"?**

I thought I needed to learn how to do something useful. And I didn't think I had the personality to promote myself, even though I didn't know what that meant. Also, I was incredibly impatient. I decided to go back to school and learn computer animation, because that was a new field then. I was working at—it wasn't an ad agency, but it was like that. I learned this program that

was one of the first standalone digital production software packages, before Macintosh. So, I did that.

**How did you navigate that place of saying, “I don’t want to commit to making art because what if Saatchi buys it, yet I’m willing to work for an ad agency?” These are the contradictions I find fascinating.**

That’s a smart question, but I don’t know. I guess I come from a family where the most obvious thing to do when you don’t know what to do is work. So this was learning how to do something so I could have some kind of job.

**It was a graphic design job?**

This was the Dark Ages of desktop publishing; we don’t even call it desktop publishing anymore. This was the early ‘90s or late ‘80s, when it started to become obvious that this stuff was going to change the world of print. Because I was an artist, had gone to art school and knew word processing, I got trained in this graphic software that other people in the company were not being trained to use. I thought it was interesting. It was new, and it wasn’t painting.

Painting felt irrelevant at the time. The people painting were all neo-Expressionists like Julian Schnabel. Why would you want to be that? I was very involved with identity politics and feminism, and the people expressing those ideas in art were not doing it through painting. It was Barbara Kruger or Silence Equals Death, the people who designed the ACT UP logo, and a lot of street-based interventions. Painting felt even more like a bourgeois pursuit, like I was disconnected from my time.



Carrie Moyer, "Filly Dollop," 2011. Acrylic on canvas. 72 x 72 inches

**So you still felt the desire to paint, but you felt it wasn't the right impulse.**

I was doing other stuff. I started doing agitprop and taking advantage of my access to multimillion-dollar equipment. It was always collaborative. I formed this thing called Dyke Action Machine with one other person. Since we had access to all this equipment and knew people in the business, two of us were able to make campaigns that looked very high-end. It sounds hokey now, but at the time it felt radical, because people were taking control of a process that nobody had really had access to previously.

**So you were doing this in secret. Did it ever come out at work?**

I don't know if they ever knew about it. There used to be this saying in ACT

UP: because a lot of the people who designed the graphics for them also worked at, like, Avon and Vidal Sassoon, there was a joke that all the graphics in New York, whether they were underground or in magazines, were being made by the same people.

**That's funny, compared to today, or even just a few years after that, when there were 'zines on every corner and production stuff happening all the time. So you said you've had hundreds of shitty jobs, but this one was a good job, right?**

It was a good job. Some other jobs that I had were not. I cleaned houses for wealthy people, like someone who had a hundred orchids, and each plant had its own humidifier and you had to clean the humidifiers. Or someone who was bulimic. Imagine cleaning their house. Or certain kinds of bachelors who'd never cleaned for three years. That was the job I had right out of Pratt, before I learned to type. Typing changed my life.

**Typing meant you didn't have to clean disgusting bachelor pads anymore!**

Right. But I needed a job and didn't know how to do anything. That's the thing: you graduate from art school and you actually have no marketable skills. It's a shock. You're like, "Well, I can match these color values..."

**When did you start to feel the calling of painting again?**

I decided that I didn't want everything to be mass-produced. I needed to make something by hand, very anti-new-media, very low-tech. I wanted to make a separation between this form of communication that was very fast and of the moment, and something I viewed as being—not old-fashioned, not traditional; I almost want to say meaningful. One day I woke up and thought, "I need a studio. I can't have everything I make disappear or be able to change a hundred times." That's something you can't do with a painting, because if you change it a hundred times you ruin it.

**Getting a studio in New York, even though real estate was cheaper then, was a commitment. What did you do?**

Doing freelance graphic production ended up being a smart thing to do. It was totally lucrative then. Now there are so many people who do it that it's like being a photographer—what's photography when everybody's a photographer? At that time, you could work at that 15 hours a week and be fine, as long as you lived frugally.

**So you rented a studio.**

Yes. Well, at first I converted my living room to my studio, which didn't work that well, and then eventually I got a studio.

**Where were you living at the time, and where was your studio?**

I lived in the East Village, and my studio was at the Lorimer Street station [in Williamsburg], behind Kellogg's Diner. It was nothing like it is now.

Once I started painting again, I picked up on the things that I'd abandoned. I applied to Skowhegan, which is this fancy art camp—

**You went to Skowhegan before graduate school? I was just talking to an artist who was telling me how special Skowhegan is compared to art school, because it's a democratization of the artists—there can be some super talented person who hasn't gone to school there, along with people from grad school or mid-career artists. It's a very specific environment.**

It was. It's hard to get into, so prior to quitting painting I had tried two times and not gotten in. You want to go as an undergrad because your school pays for it, but when I came back to painting and applied and got in, it was intense.

Now I'm a governor at Skowhegan, so I'm on the other side of it. But there used to be this director there named Barbara Lapcek, and on the first day, as everybody was assembled in the barn, she would say to you, "You are the crème de la crème." Everybody was simultaneously frozen and beside themselves in ecstasy. I hadn't been in school for a long time, and I don't think I'd ever been to someplace that was so competitive. I had a fear of competition, and I didn't think I could hack it. So I freaked out when I got there. But it was a great experience: difficult, eye-opening, it was everything.

I realized this is what is required if you really think you have something to say. It's not only about making great art and being committed to your work. It's also about having an intellectual presence in the world in some way. It's not about staying in your studio and hoping someone finds you.

**This is the other thing that I wanted to ask you about: navigating what is, after all, a very political and hierarchical and layered and complicated world. You had felt as though you weren't in it—did this experience change that?**

It changed me a lot. First of all, I realized this was something I had to do. I quit and then came back and didn't know if I could do this—but there's always this secret part of you that's like, "I'm going to kick butt." It's taken me a long time.

This might sound corny, but the work has to be extraordinary. All the things I imagined when I was younger—that I'd need to know the right people and go to the right school—those things are a factor for some people. It's hard for me to quantify how I got more confidence.

The thing is, I went to Skowhegan, came back, and was like, "Alright. I have to go to graduate school. For myself." I mean, I'd had work included in somewhat important shows about queer identity. There was a show at the museum at U.C. Berkeley called *In A Different Light*. It was one of the first shows that had identifiable queer content, and the work had gotten reproduced and a lot of good things had happened to me.

## Before Skowhegan.

Sort of in conjunction with it. And still I was a split personality; it felt like it must be a mistake.

**I've always wondered about that feeling of being a fraud. Apparently there's a whole school of thought about that. There are so many of us who are always wondering, "When will I be found out?"**

Or thinking someone is going to say, "You only know how to do one thing, and we're not interested in that thing anymore."



Carrie Moyer, "Belladonna," 2011. Acrylic on canvas. 40 x 28 inches

## **Do you remember the first time you showed your work, and how you got that show?**

A lot of the stuff that I had done for Dyke Action Machine, posters and agitprop – people started showing them as soon as I made them. Not only were they on the streets in New York, but people wrote stuff on them, they were in magazines. I think the first show that I was in after I went back to painting was at ABC No Rio, which was this famous place on the Lower East. It was a show called No More Nice Girls. I might have seen a poster for it or something, and I sent them an image. It was real old school.

## **Do you remember what it felt like to have your work on the wall, being seen?**

It was pretty great, and I don't think that I totally grasped it. It was gritty, this total dump, almost like having a painting in a squat. But it's the typical New York story where now that it's in the past, people think of it fondly.

I thought it was amazing, but I am one of those people who will do something and then forget about it and be like, "Alright, what's the next thing I want to do?" I want to move forward, but there's also something frightening about enjoying success. It doesn't really make sense, and I've spent many, many, many hours with my therapist discussing it. It's getting better. But I can't just sit around and enjoy it. I'll be like, "What's the next thing?" I won't read my own reviews for months afterward. Sometimes I'll have my girlfriend, Sheila, read them to me. It's kind of stupid, actually, to behave that way, but whatever.

## **It's not that unusual a way of reacting to success, I think. But let's go back to right after Skowhegan, when you'd set your sights on graduate school.**

Bard was the only school I applied to, because I had a life in New York and had built up a collection of freelance production contacts. I couldn't see going someplace else for two years. I wanted to be here, and I was starting to show a little bit, but I had a lot of other interests that weren't being satisfied

by this discourse around political art. I wanted to make art about other things, I wanted to read stuff, I wanted to be around people who were really good artists and have conversations with them. It was less about meeting people to help my career than about growing as an artist.

I worked hard to make myself a student. Instead of viewing everybody as a stepping stone, I was looking to people who could give me some ideas.

### **Was graduate school what you hoped it would be?**

Bard is a brilliant program, like this secret trove of the coolest artists in New York.

**So many people that I've interviewed have—without my realizing it beforehand—had Bard connections: Lisa Sanditz, Tim Davis, Sigrid Sandström, Daniel Mendelsohn, all these people. It seems like such a hub of ideas.**

It embodies some kind of quintessentially New York art culture. A lot of people who teach in Bard's MFA program there also teach at Columbia, but Bard is a third the price. It's like this secret society: you go up there for the whole summer, you go back to your own life—

### **It's a summer program?**

Yes. It's three summers. The students tend to be a little bit older, they've already started their careers, and it's a different level, like going to camp with really cool people. It was hard but wonderful. The best school experience I've ever had.

And I did make very long connections. People I'm still friends with. In fact, one of the founders of the gallery that I work with was my next door studio neighbor. And because I was older, I knew some of the faculty, too. There was more overlap between faculty and students than at other schools. It was the right environment for me.

**And then during the rest of the year, you were able to still have your New York life and freelance gigs? Did you also become more serious about studio time?**

The thing about Bard was that I would go there for three months, and when I got home I'd have to freelance 24 hours a day for two or three months to catch up. My goal has always been to reserve three or four days for the studio. I don't have weekends; I work every day, unless I'm teaching. That started at that time.

**So during graduate school was when you started to cement your work habits?**

Yeah. I was fortunate enough to have freelance jobs that allowed me to make my own schedule. I was a perma-lancer, so I wouldn't get laid off but I could take a month off. So I went to a lot of residencies at that time, too, besides going to Bard, as a way of being able to work every day.

**Looking back, is there something that you think would have benefitted your younger self, something you wish you could whisper in her ear now?**

A million things. One of them is: don't be so impatient, even though it's profoundly uncomfortable. One of the things that fucked me up as a young artist is that at Pratt, I had teachers who were extremely dogmatic about studio practice. They would say, "If you don't go to your studio every day, you're never going to make it." Well, that's just not possible, but because I wanted it so much, I took it to heart. I would say, "What am I doing? I haven't been to my studio in a week." And I tend to make snap decisions, so instead of floating along for a couple of years, I said, "I guess I'm not cut out for this." So I would say to my younger self: no snap judgments. That's where the patience comes in.

The other part is building community for your work. If your practice is more traditional, you're spending a lot of time alone. It's very competitive, and there aren't that many things for people to apply to. It's almost a necessity

that you have people to talk to about what's going on—not only what's going on in the studio, but in your life experiences.

**A community of people who are going through the same things and can be sounding boards for each other.**

Yeah. Also, my main life mantra is: figure out the way to work as little as possible and make the most amount of money.

**You did the New York young artist thing at a time when it was more feasible, economically.**

Often I say to my students, “Go to New Orleans. Go to—” I don't know where. But go with ten people, and come back in three years. Go somewhere cheap. But then, I don't know if I would have done that.

**Do you think it's important to be in New York?**

I think the odds are so stacked against people here. There's something like a half a million painters in New York.

**Daunting.**

And it's so punishing to live here in terms of the economy, if you don't come from money. You have to set a timeline for yourself: “In five years, I need to be able to be in my studio for half of my time.” You have to set up something so that you don't get sucked into the black hole of This Is Never Going To Happen. I don't know if New York is the right place anymore. I'm teaching at Hunter now, and these kids are tough: much more sophisticated about how things work than I was when I went to Pratt. It's interesting watching them negotiate this.

For me, it's less about getting the first couple of shows than it is about building a long career. How do you make sure that you can do this for the rest of your life? How do you build something that you can keep a sustained

interest in? In grad school, people learn how to talk about their work, and it works well: a lot of people show in those first couple of years out of grad school, when they're new and nobody knows them and they're on it. Then you have to keep it going.

### **What was the best advice that was ever given to you?**

Hmm. I'm not a good person to ask about that. I know that people helped me a lot and gave me good advice, but I never digested it. I always felt like nobody was helping me, which was not true. I had a hard time hearing it. I think people always want a mentor, but some people make themselves open to it, and some people don't. I didn't.

### **Do you regret that?**

I do regret it. A lot of older artists know how hard this is and are willing to talk to younger artists or help them, even. And I think people did that for me—I just sort of ate it up and forgot about it. You have to be ready to hear the advice.

### **Your mother wanted you to be an artist. How do your parents look at your career at this point?**

They're very proud of me, and probably a little bit incredulous. Looking at it now, twenty years later, I think my mother was being unreasonably idealistic. Her ideas had no grounding in anything except for having read Allen Ginsberg. The world isn't like that any more. It's funny, I think they're kind of shocked at how long it actually took. They're proud, but they're also like, "Man, you are *persistent*."

### **Since the first time that you gave up painting and then came back to it, have there been other moments when you felt you should be doing something more stable or predictable?**

No. When I went to grad school, I knew I'd found the thing that I could be very interested in for a long time. There's no end here that I'm going to run up against and say, "Okay, I know everything I could want to know about this." That feels resolved for me: this is what I'm going to do forever.

**That question, "Is this what I should be doing?" takes a long time for most people to figure out.**

Yeah. When I first started teaching, about ten years ago, I was like, "Wow, I *do* know something about painting. I'm not a fake!" And it keeps unwinding. At the risk of sounding like a cheerleader for art, it goes very deep. There's no lack of either artists from the past or contemporary artists to be in a dialogue with.

My girlfriend jokes that I could have been a great creative director for a design firm, and we could be living in Chelsea in a huge loft. The things you didn't choose to do are often interesting to think about.

**No regrets, though?**

God, no. The whole thing just keeps unfolding in this interesting way.

It's hard, and people need to know that, to choose it consciously. Take your poison. People know that. Their teachers are always saying shit like that to them, but they don't really *know* it. The world is filled with artists. We don't need any more unless you're completely committed to it. There are enough mediocre artists. But there is room for more really brilliant people who can do the thing that we want art to do for us, which is to give us some insight that we didn't see before.

***Interview by Astri von Arbin Ahlander***

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