

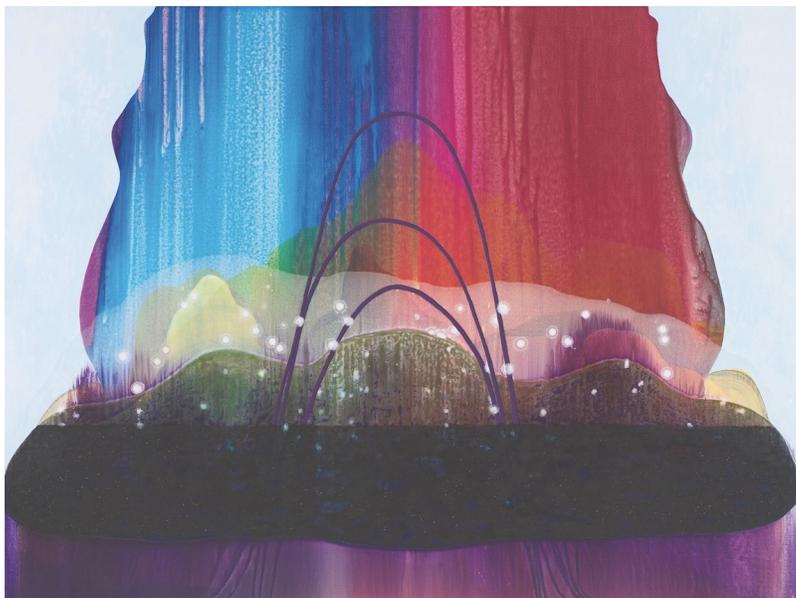
## Carrie Moyer & Sheila Pepe: *Tabernacles for Trying Times*

By Margaret Ewing  
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Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe, *Carries a Soft Stick*, 2016. Oil paint, wood, cut plastic bag, and glitter on canvas, 47 x 44 x 3 inches. © the artists. Courtesy Alan Weiner.

An artist couple for some 25 years, Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe are best known for their queer and feminist strategies in the realms of abstract painting and fiber sculpture. Moyer's shimmering paintings of poured acrylic and Pepe's immersive environments of crochet and related methods occupy most of their working time. But as the Museum of Arts and Design's *Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe: Tabernacles for Trying Times* puts forth, three jointly-held residencies, at Yaddo, Saratoga Springs (2011), the Joan Mitchell Center, New Orleans (2016), and the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, Umbria (2019), have been the germination grounds for a series of collaborative undertakings that reveal new aspects of their creative work. While Moyer's solo practice is rooted in meticulous attention to composition, and Pepe's in history and politics, the 10 works on view made jointly and mostly while on residencies reflect the centering of experimentation and play that can happen when removed from daily responsibility and routine.



Carrie Moyer, *Intergalactic Emoji Factory*, 2015. Acrylic and glitter on canvas, 72 x 96 inches. Courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York. © Carrie Moyer.

*Tabernacles for Trying Times* first opened at the Portland Museum of Art in Maine in February 2020. Now heavily scaled back, most of the institutional and private loans have been replaced with similar pieces, including many from the artists' collections. Moyer's *Intergalactic Emoji Factory* (2015) and *Curtains* (2016) offer a strong capsule of her work of recent years, featuring the luminous overlapping veils of colorful acrylic—in places mixed with glitter—that characterize the best of her painting. For her part, Pepe shows intricate fiber constellations that hang from the ceiling and across walls, as well as a group of small abstract sculptures combining found and handmade parts. *Common Sense: MAD* (2021) revises a site-responsive participatory work in which viewers unravel long, draping strands of purple and mauve crochet to refashion into new forms. Representing an alternative application of her materials, Pepe's *Just This Corner* (for 2020) (2021) is a two-dimensional wall hanging in direct dialogue with painting, with strips of color panels arranged as thick horizontal stripes that feature various types of stitches.



Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe, *New Blue Bontecou*, 2016. Oil and acrylic paint, wood, lamp shade, fabric, aluminum, and flashing on pre-painted canvas, 50 x 42 1/4 x 9 inches. Courtesy and © the artists. Photo: Luc Demers.

In contrast to these independent works, most of the fruits of their collaborations were made much more spontaneously, and not necessarily designated for exhibition. A group of six small, jointly-made paintings dating from 2011 to 2021 highlight the unfinished and provisional qualities of experiments. All made at Yaddo in 2011, the evocatively titled *Lardy-Dardy*, *Our Hump*, and *Free Pops on the Couch* are slightly larger than sheets of printing paper, and combine manipulations of the support—a bulge here and an elongation there—with different paint applications from Moyer's toolkit. Two works from their 2016 Joan Mitchell Center residency in New Orleans, *Carries a Soft Stick* and *New Blue Bontecou*, push those earlier works further by emphasizing their objectness: in the first instance with an appendaged soft stick that leans against the painting, and in the second, an armature that playfully echoes Lee Bontecou's sculpted canvases of the 1960s. In contrast to the extreme precision of Moyer's paintings and the strident occupation of space in Pepe's installations, these objects are about the process of their coming into being more than their existence as finished works. Made outside the concerns, conditions, and, importantly, pressures of the solitary studio, they are the artifacts of a lightness and spontaneity that comes through as a significant foil to solo practice.



Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe, *Opera Buffa*, 2019. Suite of 26 ink and gouache drawings on paper, each 15 x 22 inches. Courtesy and © the artists. Photo: Luc Demers.

Not all of the collaborations in the show are so makeshift, however, and two very recent pieces were made expressly for inclusion in the exhibition. The 26-part drawing *Opera Buffa* (2019) features architectural fragments from Italian churches and castles rendered in ink and gouache, and originated in Moyer and Pepe's two months at the Civitella Ranieri Foundation in 2019. This sole representational work in the show feels qualitatively different than earlier pieces, and affirms the argument for the value of "off duty" making that characterizes the less "finished" objects. Installed as the centerpiece of the exhibition, *Parlor for the People* (2019) was imagined as a space for public exchange. A canopy of cloud-like forms made from materials including brightly colored plexiglass, an eye-catching sequin panel, and mesh hovers above chairs that have been loosely upholstered in turquoise and black leather. In an age of capacity restrictions and distancing, it sits mostly empty. It seems to bear silent witness to collective losses a year and a half into COVID-19, the continuing fight for racial justice, and the urgency of the climate crisis. Even as it is filled with bright and energetic objects about pleasure, connection and collaboration, the exhibition ends up feeling like a memorial to an earlier reality, at the same time offering a hopeful stance for regeneration.

### **Contributor**

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