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Carrie Moyer's arts of seduction

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Carrie Moyer's "Frieze" (2009), acrylic and glitter on canvas, from "Interstellar" at the Worcester Art Museum. COLLECTION OF EVELYN AND SALOMON SASSOON

WORCESTER — Many people don't know what they are supposed to think of contemporary art. They assume it's some kind of conceptual gamesmanship that they are not in on.

Don't worry about not getting Carrie Moyer's paintings. Moyer's paintings get you. They blow in your ear. They run a fingertip down your arm. Not literally of course, but these abstract paintings seduce. They undulate, simmer, and glow; they seem to inhale and pull you in. They are gorgeous.

Her show "Interstellar," now at the Worcester Art Museum, is actually loaded with concepts: about history, feminism, graphic design, and painting. There's substance along with the sugar here. Moyer invokes ancient art with crisp-edged forms that suggest helmets, vessels, friezes, and prehistoric figurines. Then she nods to Color Field artists such as Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, with pours of paint that caress those forms.

Moyer deploys a dazzling array of technical effects. Acrylic paint, already versatile, is remarkably elastic in her hands. Sometimes it's glossy or sparkly; sometimes it's gritty and cracked. Works on exhibit from her series "The Stone Age" tend to reference figures, and the tactile quality of these paintings provokes a sensate response that pulls you into relationship with them. Pieces from her series "Arcana" suggest landscape. These canvases are as technically impressive, but they miss the erotic charge of "The Stone Age" paintings.



Carrie Moyer's "Barbute."

This artist knows about seduction. She is a graphic designer as well as a painter, with a background in agitprop, working in the 1990s with activist groups Queer Nation and ACT UP, and cofounding Dyke Action Machine, which promotes lesbian awareness through public graphic art projects. Graphic design is all about getting a particular message across in a seductive way.

Painting is more open-ended. A good painting doesn't pin a viewer down, it opens a viewer up. It's a question, not a sales pitch. Moyer, at heart a painter, applies strategies of graphic design to her canvases, ramping up the come-hither quality. But she also leans into uncertainty with her passages of poured paint. Clarity of intention braces against the unpredictability of the material and the dance of the artist as she pours.

"Numina," from "The Stone Age" series, starts with a dark implication of space: a flat gray ground arcing over a brown floor. Out of that space pop the clean, joined silhouettes of three women. Well, abstract marks — but their curves suggest three women. Black lurks behind them, like shadows or dark haloes. They themselves rush with streaks of white, gray, and beige.

Moyer's silhouettes bollix the eye. They look cut out of the gray behind them. Were they painted first? Was there a stencil? These questions matter, because the figures seem to at once recede into, and arise off of, the canvas. Do they describe empty space, or corporeal forms? The artist leaves us hanging. Perhaps they are the Three Fates of Roman mythology.



Moyer's "Numina" (2007).

Over these forms, she pours veils of color, hot and red at the top, with vaporous pendulous passages tickling and swelling over the pale Fates in blue, yellow, and green. The colors are glossy and occasionally gritty. The blue crinkles. The colors pull you right into the heart of the painting, and the bosomy form at the center.

"Frieze" is almost comical. A chorus line of four helmeted figures — again, abstracted — dances against the flat gray ground. Like the forms in "Numina," these are streaked in white and beige. They molder with a steamy, glittering aura of red, green, yellow, and more. Except here, these poured colors stay within the lines, so the piece feels less messy — or the mess is confined. A final, nervy detail: A single red string, painted with a piece of twine, loops around the neck of each dancing soldier. It pulls the composition together, and adds an element of threat to the narrative.

It's hard to choose a favorite. "Barbute" has no suggestion of background space, and the painting feels more confrontational. A pale helmet — a stand-in for a figure — is outlined in black. Voluptuous passages of glittering yellow, breathy violet, and copper engulf it. Then there's a crackling electric blue at the center that envelopes two black lumps on a stalk. This blue is so tactile it looks crusty, yet it also holds light, and it also seems breathable. How did she do that?

