

Moira Dryer : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 30-November 16, 1993

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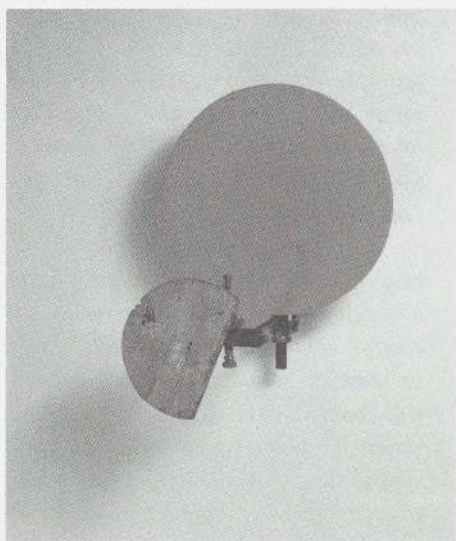
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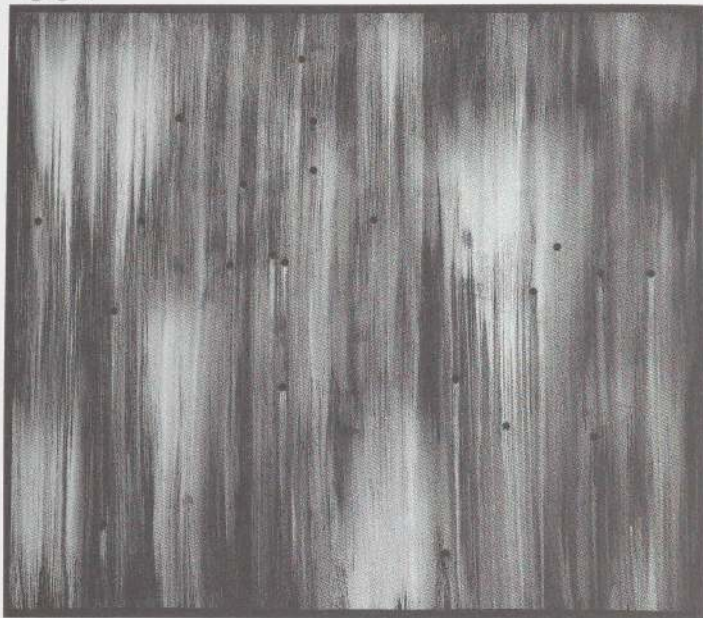
moira dryer

projects



The Museum of Modern Art
New York

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Damage and Desire. 1991. Acrylic on wood. 84 x 96". Collection of Phil Schrager

There is a time in the life of every young artist when it all just happens. Often this decisive concentration of energy and confidence is dispersed into strikingly dissimilar works. Under these circumstances, the only clear resemblance among them is a particular freshness and assurance never before experienced by either the viewer or the maker. Anyone lucky enough to have seen the recent exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg's early paintings, collages, photographs, blueprints, and objects will recognize what I mean; these protean experiments brought the inventiveness of the artist into such sharp focus that it seemed as if, for the second time in his life, Rauschenberg was the brightest new talent in town.

When the development augured by such lively beginnings is cut short, the artist's surviving work takes on a quality at once sad and strangely hopeful. I am not, of course, referring to those who burn out early or succumb to romantically self-destructive fates; alas, their production soon tends to become morbid memorabilia, even when it merits better. Instead, I am thinking of artists whose time simply ran out while they were busy making everything of it they could. Such was the case with the prematurely ended careers of Eva Hesse and Ree Morton, two contemporary sculptors whose creations are less the cherished relics of arrested lives than provocative expressions of promise still outstanding. Such is also the case of Moira Dryer, whose formally eccentric, keenly intelligent, and emotionally resonant paintings are the subject of this miniretrospective.

Born in Canada in 1957, Dryer came to New York in the late 1970s. Here she attended the School of Visual Arts and worked with Elizabeth Murray, whose healthy irreverence toward the official Dos and Don'ts of formalist painting plainly struck a sympathetic chord in her stu-

dent's imagination. After graduating with a B.F.A. in 1980, Dryer made the usual rounds for a painter of her generation, exhibiting in group shows at clubs, galleries and alternative spaces such as White Columns, the Limbo Lounge, and the New Museum. She also turned her hand to the kind of stopgap jobs with which artists at that stage generally support themselves, briefly breaking plates while a studio assistant for Julian Schnabel and then, with greater consequences for her own work, making props for Mabou Mines and other downtown theater companies. It was not until 1985 that Dryer fully committed herself to her own painting, and a scant seven years remained to follow through on that decision. The impact of her rededication is immediately apparent in the change her work underwent. Having for several years previously concentrated on small panels in a murky, quasi-symbolist mode, after 1985 she endowed her paintings with characteristics that set them apart from anything being done around her.

Large or small, they are usually thinly painted in dry but vivid hues on wooden supports sometimes cut into odd shapes or mounted at odd angles to the wall. Their designs often seem whimsical, the touch light to the point of casualness, and their color, whether bright or somber, is moody. Beyond that, however, one can hardly say that anything like a "typical" Dryer exists. Adroit anomalousness is the works' essence. Identifying her paintings—and they are readily identifiable—is much like spotting a friend in a crowded street at several intervals during the day, each time recognizing them from the back by their distinctive if slightly awkward gait, even though the friend, whose taste runs to bright but unusual patterns and homely tailoring, has changed outfits several times.

Although Dryer liked keeping several bodies of work going at once, over the years her paintings did show noticeable shifts in facture and effect. Early on she generally favored highly saturated opaque colors. Frequently they were tertiary hues reminiscent of those in Indian miniature paintings; greens and red-oranges were especially common. Although she later turned to Flashe, a more durable but still scuffable matte-finish vinyl paint, casein was then her preferred medium. A milk-derived, water-based pigment, it is much like gouache but even more vulnerable to surface damage, and that vulnerability determines how one approaches the paintings, which seem subliminally to say, "Look, but do not touch, however much my delicacy may tempt verifying contact."

In contrast to this fragility were the makeshift pipe-and-clamp armatures that Dryer devised to thrust panels away from the wall, or the absurd fixtures she attached to several works. The floating planes she thus projected toward the viewer were sometimes painted on the back in such a way that the hidden color reflected onto the wall behind them, creating a diffuse aura around the works that added a new, apparently spatial, but fundamentally optical dimension. On other occasions, the paintings' visible mechanics served a narrative rather than literal function, as in *Perpetual Painting* (1988), where a static fan belt seems to drive the hot wave of color across the horizontal picture plane like a theatrical machine generating thunder and lightning. Combining offhand fabrication and off-base placement on the wall with unusual formats and medium-to low-tech hardware, Dryer's initial experiments arrived at an

unforeseeable synthesis of Richard Tuttle's preoccupation with the ephemeral and Robert Ryman's involvement with the relation between paint and painted object.

These concerns persist in Dryer's subsequent work, particularly on the Ryman side of the equation, although she pursued her structural options with a decorative flair quite at odds with Ryman's greater austerity. Already in 1986, she had begun to place cantilevered shelves or boxes under the main painted unit; eventually these forms, sometimes resembling tool kits for old roadsters, became signature plaques. By 1990, her increasingly expansive panels featured perforations, grommets, rubber stoppers; and elaborate jigsawed arabesques, like the f-holes in the face of a cello, while their outer edges were often scalloped or, reversing the pattern, indented like postage stamps. Still given to a brilliant, even exotic palette that now also included more muted admixtures, Dryer applied her color with increasing refinement. Matte, watery transparency is the norm, with the bursts, bleeds, washes, and rivulets of dilute pigment mimicking and eliding the whorls and wavering grain of the plywood over which it spreads. As far as her handling and choice of hues go, Dryer's nearest neighbor is Ron Gorchov, an artist who, like Dryer but before her, has also been interested in painting on unconventional, curved surfaces.

With the affinities to other artists already cited occupying the background, Dryer's compositions foregrounded more widely known precursors: stripes were the signature device of Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland, targets were that of Noland and Jasper Johns, whose *Souvenir 2* (1964), with its side-view mirror and frontal disk, was also prototypical of Dryer's abstract *bricolage*.

The overriding question Dryer raised by this deliberate and deliberately off-key recycling was, how do artist and audience incorporate an awareness of such imposing antecedents into their thinking about work superficially similar in composition but obviously different in affect? If unprecedented originality is impossible, by what means does the "new" come about? Speaking for her art-savvy generation, Dryer affirmed that "an artist who is versed in history, and most are so educated, cannot approach their work in a way that eliminates their education." Awareness of the past was the problem; combined with a teasing frankness about itself it was also part of the solution. Rather than avoid codified styles, the key was to mix them in ways that would liberate them from their set formal or historical associations, then put their dismantled and decontextualized components back into play.

Dryer's various experiments with name-boxes and fingerprint imagery were a self-aimed version of this play with signature icons. Around 1989, her paintings often featured arcing, striated designs based on blowups of her own prints—they look like FBI records dissolving in ink—and in 1991 and 1992 she stamped the borders of several works with her paint-covered fingertips. Hip games with authorship on the surface, in retrospect these paintings have a special poignancy, since, unbeknownst to the public who first saw them, her illness had lent urgency to her compulsion to leave a mark, however discreetly expressed.

The point of Dryer's sly quotations of canonical modernism, meanwhile, was not to outsmart the masters, nor to

assume the role of star pupil to postmodernist theoreticians. At a time in the late 1980s when alternately disrespectful and academically overly respectful forms of appropriation had finally fixed upon abstraction, Dryer's head and heart were elsewhere. Irony, a primary and avowed element in her work, was the artist's means of eliciting complex reactions to hybrid painting, rather than a weapon for coercing predictable responses to art ideology. She thus took her distance from the calculated coolness of most Neo-Geo art, while at the same time calling into doubt the inflationary heat of Neo-Expressionism. Explaining her position, she said:

I have utilized the tradition of reductive geometric painting but I've never been interested in it as a pure form of abstraction. Instead I thought of it as a language to combine with other painting languages. . . . For instance I wanted to suggest portraiture, landscape and still-life but

NBC Nightly News, 1989-90. Acrylic on wood. 85 x 43 x 22½". Estate of Moira Dryer, courtesy of Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York



I used geometry as a framework to do it so that one set of preconceptions would erase another. That way I was able to use minimal means to convey, I hope, real feeling. All this was partly a reaction to Neo-Expressionism, which I felt lacked true emotional content. Bravado and big gestures don't necessarily mean you're feeling anything with any intensity. . . . I thought of [my paintings] as emotionally specific. Maybe that's why I don't feel kinship with what's being called the new abstract painting; it seems completely absorbed in a dialogue with art history in and of itself. . . . A lot of new work is based on closed systems and illustrations of personal theories, or is just trying to have sociological impact. That's very limiting . . . my work is more open-ended, more directly involved with life.

In short, Dryer set up stylistic contradictions to stir up affective contradictions. Her habit of working simultaneously on disparate types of paintings and of showing them together is consistent with Dryer's implicit trust in inconsistency. This direction was encouraged and informed by her experience in the theater. The artist's jottings describe paintings as being actively engaged in dialogue; with an ear attuned to the ordinary she calls these exchanges "chit-chat." The notion of treating paintings like props pushes this approach still further. Referring to such work she said:

It has none of the element of Serra's work in danger or monumentality, but it is helter-skelter, the work is leaning on one corner, fitted with one foot. The drunk clown. It is a fragile vaudevillian production, rough and immediate. The painting is coming down or away from the wall. It steps into the world. . . . [The props] give [the paintings] a quality, not of artificiality, but of a theatrical situation. . . . They are becoming, just by the nature of their physicality, figurative. It's almost a criterion for me to feel a painting is somehow alive and animate. . . . Once an installation is together, then the contrast of one piece to another brings in another element. I don't control that too much, I find it exciting how it evolves. . . . When I say theatrical . . . I'm not necessarily referring to classical theater. I'm referring to an activated kind of viewing space. A painting that is just on the wall has one relationship to someone who looks at it. A painting that becomes more sculptural enters into its own physical arena. . . . So the pieces are performers themselves, and that's what I mean about being animated.

Animated they certainly are, but also fragile. Life's fragility and brief duration were the subject of several drawings made during the artist's hospitalization, but in the filigree patterns, not-quite-pretty colors, and apparently flimsy construction of her paintings, Dryer also made an issue of another kind of fragility. Refusing to assume the formal postures of aesthetic seriousness or to employ the materials generally associated with durable artistic quality, Dryer made the most of what are commonly described as—and deprecated for being—feminine

things. Witty, visually seductive, although curiously dry, and above all unburdened by doctrine, hers was a fully conscious artistic femininity. Her confidence in that sensibility's power to rescue painting from bombast or smart-aleck one-upmanship was total. Many of her paintings seem to quiver at the edge of pictorial irresolution or physical coherence, thus exactly realizing the artist's intention. Hoping to capture "images in mid-formation," Dryer elected a zone of operation far outside the realm of certainty, and in time her net became as loose and fluid as the figments she pursued.

One naturally wonders what course Dryer would have taken had she lived. Her interviews and notebooks contain many tantalizing ideas, and, just as she wished, her production points in many directions. Like Eva Hesse, Dryer liked to tinker with words, and she left behind a list of titles for unmade paintings. Some are funny or visually provocative: *Backwards Sunset*, *Blabber Mouth*, *Mistaken Mystique*, *Farewell to Ernest Hemingway*; some, with hindsight, are very disturbing: *No Harvest*, *Hour of Need*, *Dizzy Life*, *Big Bruises*, *Black and Blue All Over*. While no one can duplicate her particular verbal knack or her idiosyncratic way with materials, it is tempting to think that some kindred spirit will eventually pick up where she left off and flesh out this unused catalogue. Barring outright mimicry, that would be entirely appropriate, since painting is always unfinished business. "The tradition of the new," as Harold Rosenberg called it, is perpetuated by people who generously provide options to others, as much as by those who have the sense to make their own way down roads glimpsed but not taken by peers and predecessors. Despite her illness, Dryer was convinced that the path ahead lay wide open: "Of course, painting no longer serves the same function it did when it was the main way of creating images of the world, but maybe that's part of what's so exciting: the old restrictions are off. It used to be that to look at a painting was automatically to assign it to a particular school or a particular tradition, but now painting is involved in such a range of issues that stylistic typing is not only irrelevant but contradictory. Painting has become more intelligent than that: it feels stronger, more versatile."

The 1990s will test this view of painting's long-term prospects, but whatever the future holds, in the time she had, Dryer acted on her conviction with innovative results that remain fresh and remarkable.

Robert Storr

Curator

Department of Painting and Sculpture

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All quotes are from notes found in the artist's papers.

biography

Born, Toronto, Canada, 1957.

Studied at the School of Visual Arts, New York;
B.F.A. 1980.

Died, May 1992, of cancer, after several years
of illness.

one person shows

- 1986** John Good Gallery, New York.
- 1987** Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston,
brochure essay by Elizabeth Sussman.
Hoffman Borman Gallery, Santa Monica.
- 1988** John Good Gallery, New York.
- 1989** "New Work: Moira Dryer," San Francisco Museum
of Modern Art, brochure text by John Caldwell.
- 1990** Mary Boone Gallery, New York,
catalog essay by Peter Schjeldahl.
- 1991** Mario Diacono, Boston,
brochure text by Mario Diacono.
- 1992** Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

selected bibliography

Moira Dryer, "An Emotive Identity,"
Tema Celeste (October 1991), p. 82.

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "Beyond Absence,"
Arts Magazine (October 1988), pp. 53-61.

Klaus Ottman, "Artists Speak,"
an interview, *Journal of Contemporary Art*
(Spring/Summer 1989), pp. 50-57.

Lily Wei, interview in "Talking Abstract, Part Two,"
Art in America (December 1987), pp. 112-13, 126-27.

Cover: *Short Story*. 1986. Casein, metal and wood. 16 x 11½ x 9¾".
Collection of Dr. & Mrs. Steven Gross, courtesy of John Good Gallery,
New York

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