

MOIRA DRYER

NEW WORK

DECEMBER 21, 1989

THROUGH FEBRUARY 11, 1990

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM

OF MODERN ART

A SERIES OF RECENT

WORK BY YOUNGER AND

ESTABLISHED ARTISTS

Born and brought up in Toronto, Ontario, Moira Dryer attended college in Montreal before leaving for New York in 1978. There she studied at the School of Visual Arts, receiving her degree in 1980. After graduation, she worked for an Off-Broadway theater company, Mabou Mines, building and sometimes designing sets for five years before taking up painting full-time in 1985. After that, recognition came very quickly; she participated in six group shows the next year, six more in 1987, and eleven in 1988. She has been having one-person exhibitions on a more or less regular basis since 1986.

Walking into the artist's studio or a gallery filled with her work is an odd experience. Immediately one feels in the presence of a formidable intelligence; yet it is not so much admiration one feels as a curious exhilaration. Dryer breaks all the rules — paintings, after all, never have wheels and belt drives attached to them, but *The Perpetual Painting* does, and it looks somehow as if it were made by the odd, unworkable machine affixed to its right edge. Partly, of course, Dryer uses this work to express her own amusement at what has become of the conventions of modernism; in this particular work, for example, she mocks the ideals of constructivism, and the endless paeans to the machine in art during the early years of this century. Yet her irony is deeper, as is her wit. Looking at the absurdly curving ribbon of red paint, we feel something akin to "Well, why not? Why not make a painting with such a handy device, especially if the result can be so radiant, so seductively beautiful, and so effortless in the making as this painting appears to have been?"

For Dryer, "art history is a dictionary of styles that I utilize in my work."¹ If she takes up the ideas of constructivism in *The Perpetual Painting*, in *Portrait of a Fingerprint* she gives us the stripes of color-field painting with several odd twists. Again she breaks the rules: the painting is too small, really, and too complicated to have anything to do with the rigorous formalism that critics found in the work of Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella in the 1960s. For them, the physical structure of a painting and especially its edge had become something of a shibboleth, so important as almost to define the form and content of the work. Dryer, by contrast, dematerializes the physical structure of the work by painting on the thinnest possible sheet of wood, which seems to float a few inches away from the wall. For her the edge is arbitrary, seemingly a matter of whim. She explains her method of supporting the painting invisibly as making it "more dynamic" as if it were "flying off the wall."²

If Dryer literally makes light of her predecessors' formal preoccupations, she contradicts as well their devotion to pure abstraction. *Portrait of a Fingerprint* is exactly that, an enlarged rendering of the patterns of the artist's skin, making the painting literally, if somewhat absurdly, a self-portrait. What looks like the purest, almost random abstraction is



Long Voyage, 1989

thus really its opposite, and what seems to be the timeless objectivity of sixties painting is actually a literal depiction of the artist's own individuality, perhaps a pun on the concept of a signature style, which was until recently an indication of artistic authenticity. Now a facsimile imprint of the artist's physical body is but one of the many identities she assumes, as she reflects back on her, and our own, broader cultural heritage.

Despite her acute analysis of the art of the 1960s and the sometimes brilliant reversal of its terms, to some degree Dryer shares one of its major preoccupations: the making of beautiful paintings. Although like Noland and Morris Louis she produces paintings in extraordinarily intense colors in surprising combinations, her work is entirely without their characteristic reticence and austerity. Because Louis poured paint onto his canvases, the resulting visual attractiveness could be attributed to accident rather than a conscious effort to produce purely decorative effects. Noland's paintings, on the other hand, were always deliberately composed, but their sometimes ravishing color was typically restrained within the rigorous boundaries of stripes or circles. In Dryer's work, by contrast, the color is clearly the artist's choice, deliberately, even provocatively made. The artist's statement of her aim here is typically direct: "I like the paintings to have a lot of visual pleasure to them."³ Perhaps without realizing it, in this too, Dryer breaks one of the cardinal rules of most recent art: she makes beautiful paintings whenever she wants. Yet, curiously, because of her wit, her total avoidance of sentimentality, and her extraordinary intelligence, Dryer's work is rarely pretty or even lyrical. Her paintings are too smart, too constantly subversive of the pieties of abstract art for the viewer to be able to relax with the purely visual pleasures they offer. They are, instead, a constant challenge, always threatening to contradict their own existence and barely containing the energy of the artist's ideas and strategies. Coming as she does at the end of a remarkable period in the history of art, in which all the possibilities of abstract painting have been thoroughly explored, Dryer has taken a new tack. Rather than mourn the end of an endeavor, she has grasped all its accomplishments, all the while questioning and undermining them, and has used its multiplicity of styles to construct her own vocabulary. Not surprisingly, perhaps, to witness the free play of such a remarkable visual intelligence in this new field is an exhilaration indeed.

John Caldwell
Curator of Painting and Sculpture

NOTES

1 Interview with the artist, November 20, 1989.

2 *Ibid*.

3 *Ibid*.

MOIRA DRYER

Born in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 1957

Lives and works in New York City

EDUCATION

School of Visual Arts, New York, B.F.A., 1980

INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

1986

John Good Gallery, New York

1987

Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

Hoffman Borman Gallery, Santa Monica

1988

John Good Gallery, New York

1990

Mary Boone Gallery, New York

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1980

Group Material, New York

Proposal Gallery, Baltimore

1981

Visual Arts Gallery, New York

1982

White Room, White Columns, New York

YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto

Visionary Landscape, P.S. 122, New York

1983

John Weber Gallery, New York

1984

Limbo Lounge, New York

New Work, New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York

1985

New American Abstraction, John Good Gallery, New York

1986

Cash/Newhouse Gallery, New York

Recent Abstract Painting, John Good Gallery, New York

Paintings/Objects, Postmasters Gallery, New York

A New Abstraction, New City, Venice, California

Supermannerism, Davies/Long Gallery, Los Angeles

Selections, Artist Space, New York

1987

Jennifer Bolande/Moira Dryer/Annette Lemieux, Lawrence Oliver Gallery, Philadelphia

True Pictures, John Good Gallery, New York

Five Abstract Artists, New York Studio School, New York

Grand Design, Proctor Art Center, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

Finer Distinctions, Rosemary C. Erpf Gallery, New York

Stimulation, John Good Gallery, New York

1988

Ironic Abstraction, University of South Florida Art Galleries, Tampa

Pat Hearn Gallery, New York

School of Visual Arts Alumni Exhibition, Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Four Corners of Abstraction, International Gallery Invitational, Jacob Javits Center, New York

In Side, Barbara Krakow Gallery, Boston

Out of Order, Anne Plumb Gallery, New York

Tom Cugliani Gallery, New York

The Image of Abstraction, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

The Other Painting, Royal Academy of Arts Gallery, Toronto
Lawrence Oliver Gallery, New York

1989

Abstract Options, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara; Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois; de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara, California

Diagrams and Surrogates, Shea and Beker Gallery, New York

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bonesteel, Michael. "My-o, Me-o, Neo-Geo!" *Evanston Review*, April 13, 1989, p. D-6.

Burkhart, Dorothy. "Abstract Is Back in Spotlight in de Saisset Show." *San Jose Mercury News*, July 14, 1989, p. 14-E.

Gardner, Colin. "The Art Galleries: Santa Monica." *The Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1987, part VI, p. 12.

Gilbert-Rolfe, Jeremy. "Nonrepresentation in 1988: Meaning—Production Beyond the Scope of the Pious." *Arts Magazine*, vol. 62, no. 9 (May 1988): pp. 30–39.

———. "Beyond Absence." *Arts Magazine*, vol. 63, no. 2 (October 1988), pp. 48–51.

Indiana, Gary. "Recent Abstract Painting." *The Village Voice*, February 11, 1986, p. 70.

Lublin, Mary. "Visionary Landscape." *Arts Magazine*, vol. 57, no. 4 (December 1982), p. 16.

Muchnic, Suzanne. "Two Views of the 'Revival' of the Abstract." *Santa Barbara Times*, January 24, 1989, part VI, p. 5.

Murray, Elizabeth. "Painters and Writers." *Bomb Magazine*, no. 4 (September 1982), p. 64.

Ottmann, Klaus. "Supermannerism." *Flash Art*, no. 127 (April 1986), pp. 59–61.

———. "True Pictures." *Flash Art*, no. 132 (February/March 1987), p. 90.

———. "Jennifer Bolande/Moira Dryer/Annette Lemieux." *Flash Art*, no. 133 (April 1987), p. 94.

Ostrow, Saul. *Diagrams and Strategies* (ex. cat.) Shea and Beker Gallery, New York, 1989.

Perl, Jed. "Winter Notebook." *The New Criterion*, vol. 4, no. 8 (April 1986), pp. 57–58.

Plous, Phyllis and Frances Colpitt. *Abstract Options*. (ex. cat.) University Art Museum, Santa Barbara, 1988.

- Schwabsky, Barry. "Moira Dryer." *Arts Magazine*, vol. 61, no. 4 (December 1986), p. 118.
- Siegel, Jeanne. "Moira Dryer." *Arts Magazine*, vol. 62, no. 10 (Summer 1988), p. 95.
- . "Meta-Abstraction." *Arts Magazine*, vol. 64, no. 2 (October 1988), pp. 48–51.
- Smith, Roberta. "Moira Dryer." *The New York Times*, April 29, 1988, p. C-17.
- Temin, Christine. "Dryer's Abstract Mix of Crispness and Fog." *The Boston Globe*, October 1, 1987, p. 78.
- Wei, Lilly. "Talking Abstract, Part Two." *Art in America*, vol. 75, no. 12 (December 1987), pp. 112–129, 171.
- Weinstein, Matthew A. "Moira Dryer." *Artforum*, vol. 27, no. 1 (September 1988), p. 142.
- Wes tfall, Stephen. "The Synthetic Sublime." *L.A. Weekly*, August 15, 1986, p. 22.
- . "Moira Dryer at John Good." *Art in America*, vol. 75, no. 1 (January 1987), p. 134.
- Woodard, Josef. "Contemplations of Quiet Strength." *Artweek*, vol. 20, no. 7, February 18, 1989, p. 1.

CHECKLIST

- Fingerprint #2643*, 1987
 casein on wood
 48 x 63 in. (121.9 x 160.0 cm)
 Collection of Ross Bleckner, New York,
 courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York
- The Signature Painting*, 1987
 casein on wood
 48 x 63 in. / 9 x 60 x 14¾ in.
 (121.9 x 160.0 cm / 22.9 x 152.4 x 37.5 cm)
 Collection of Susan Hort, New York,
 courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York
- The Perpetual Painting*, 1988
 casein, lacquer on auto parts and wood
 36 x 83 in. (91.4 x 210.8)
 Collection of Arlene and Barry Hockfield,
 Pennsylvania, courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery,
 New York
- Portrait of a Fingerprint*, 1988
 casein on wood
 48 x 63 in. (121.9 x 160.0 cm)
 Collection of Barbara and Eugene Schwartz,
 courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York
- Sister Sadie Too*, 1988
 casein on wood
 48 x 63 in. (121.9 x 160.0 cm)
 Collection of The Progressive Corporation,
 Cleveland, Ohio
- Untitled, 1988
 casein on wood
 26 x 33¼ in. (66.0 x 84.5 cm)
 Collection of Ronald Low, New Jersey,
 courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1988

casein on wood

25¾ x 27½ in. (65.4 x 69.9 cm)

Private collection, courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery,
New York

Joy Boy, 1989

acrylic and enamel, grommets, and handles on wood relief

96 x 48 in. (243.8 x 121.9 cm)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Charles R. Schwab,
Atherton, California

Long Voyage, 1989

acrylic on aluminum and wood with found hardware

48 x 46 in. / 16 x 24 x 9½ in.

(121.9 x 116.8 cm / 40.6 x 61.0 x 24.1 cm)

Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York

“New Work” is generously supported by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s Collectors Forum and the National Endowment for the Arts.

© 1989 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
401 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco, California 94102-4582

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is a privately funded, member-supported museum receiving major support from Grants for the Arts of the San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund and the National Endowment for the Arts