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McGlynn, Tom. "Katy Moran: I want to live in the afternoon of that day." *brooklynrail.org* (*The Brooklyn Rail*), 29 March 2019.

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



Katy Moran, *I like your rainbow 3*, 2018. Acrylic on board with found frame, 22 1/8 x 30 1/8 inches. Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York.

If one were tasked with coming up with a phrase that would roughly characterize Katy Moran's way of painting, then "aggressive diffidence" might suit. In her case, however, it's a stance that projects a deeply powerful, perhaps even anarchic, energy. Another term that might be used to describe her approach to palette, gesture, surfaces, and supports might be "subversive effacement." Although Moran would appropriately be labeled an abstractionist, her imagery sometimes does allude to the pictorial, to landscape or still-life space specifically. She has this abstract/pictorial hinge in common with the late, great British painter Howard Hodgkin who self-labeled his work as "associative abstraction." Hodgkin also described himself as "a figurative painter of emotional situations." In contrast, one could characterize Moran's approach as much more dissociative than associative and herself as an abstract painter of figurative mood.

The exhibition is roughly divided between older works on the second floor of the gallery with newer ones on street level, an opportunity to see slight changes in Moran's fairly consistent working method of expressionist brushstrokes folding back on themselves as they obscure a particular found painting or frame.

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Moran favors readymade and found supports (similar to Hodgkin) for her paintings, gleaning a wide variety of old frames, prints, and paintings from second-hand shops and flea markets. All of the paintings in the show approximate a traditional easel size.

A particularly “tough” painting is titled *on the way to somewhere else* (2018). Its dominant chalk-powder blue obscures what seems to be an original landscape painting tipped on end. The resultant combination of overall pictorial effacement and physical disorientation creates a tense stand off between a representational lack and an obdurate, sculptural presence. Two adjacent paintings *I like your rainbow 2*, and *I like your rainbow 3* (both 2018) share a more nascent abstract pictorialism than *on the way to somewhere else*, since a determined set of gestures organize each painting. The latter painting begins to form into a roughly still life format while the former resides in a nether space between a flatly painted surface and deep landscape space. Moran plays with these associative pictorial genres yet she retains them on a grittier liminal threshold. This is her dissociative move, or poetic evasion that allows for a lack of content to be more easily fulfilled by the viewer. Harold Bloom, (speaking in a literary context though applicable as a transposition here), would wonderfully term this an “achieved dearth of meaning (via) strategies of exclusion.”¹ The seemingly second-thought symbolic presence of a gestural rainbow in each work leavens this pictorial lack or exclusion with a bit of generic lightness.



Katy Moran, *pleasure seeker 2*, 2018. Acrylic on Perspex with found frame, 28 1/2 x 20 5/8 inches. Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York.

The majority of the following works become much more actively expressionist in their gestures: shades of Willem De Kooning and Hans Hofmann are atavistically summoned, respectively, in such works as *pleasure seeker 2* and *Minnie Battye* (both 2018). Both paintings present overlapping and interleaving arrays of brushwork in highly saturated color counterpoint, which, in the context of this show of works executed in a primarily muted palette, make them stand out. The dominant pinks and oranges in the former painting form the base notes of the composition overlaid by accenting green and blue gestural improvisations that approximate the space of a tipped up, cubist still life. Here again the artist references a pictorial genre as painterly trope. The latter work is a more vertical orientation, composed of stacked masses of red, violet, and orange accented with deep cobalt blues. The energetic color in both these paintings offer a glimpse of sensual abandon and colorist capacity that Moran keeps on a slow boil in most of the other works here. Her discretion in keeping this potential excess in check is a clear indication of her understated intentionality to promote a larger discussion of the breadth of potential still to be extracted from expressionist abstraction.

In a few paintings the found object and readymade scenarios of Moran’s chosen supports are allowed to peek through. One of the larger works in the show, *Mole*, (2018) relates to the more materially present and abstractly contingent painting tack of *on the way to something else*. Its found support is a glass encased,



Katy Moran, *Mole*, 2018. Acrylic on glass on found painting, 36 1/4 x 28 3/8 inches. Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York.

offset-printed reproduction of Monet's *The Artist's Garden at Vétheuil* (1881) overpainted in a wash of semi-opaque white with flourishes of wan blue and black. Since it is painted on glass, the white overpainting appears to be flaking off, a process (I was told) intentionally accelerated by the artist. Just a peripheral fringe of tall sunflowers from the original painting hedge the upper right hand corner, yet they are so removed in mechanical reproduction and glass entombment that they appear like a dream dimly recalled.

Since some genealogies of Abstract Expressionism trace its roots back to French Impressionism (Clement Greenberg, for one, after visiting Monet's late masterpiece *Nymphéas* series in 1954, wrote that artists such as Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko may have been influenced by the older artist) one is tempted to say that this piece is a present trope of such a historical inheritance. Considering the originality in concept and re-description of gestural abstraction in the show taken as a whole, however, this type of theoretical reduction would do an artist of Moran's subtle touch a disservice. Instead, one gets a more visceral impression that this just happened to be the next found surface that the artist grabbed in the moment.

Where intentional or not, Moran implies (in her painterly alteration) that imposing any academic historical discourse onto it is as chance an operation as accidentally finding such an image moldering in a thrift store. A less exalted reference is found in the heavy impasto of a kitsch mountain landscape that the artist has repurposed for her composition, *I could get out of the car and climb into them* (2019). Here she maintains, to a large degree, the planar recessionary space of a mountainous landscape originally executed in that peculiar shorthand that the televised avatar of the artistic Bob Ross promoted. Typically, in this commercially cranked-out method the nearest foreground is patently represented by dense impasto thickets of craggy brushstrokes: spatial proximity literally touchable. Moran picks up on this generic conceit by blending in her own brushwork in a mimetic operation that's quite funny. The title of the piece makes allusion to such a facile transference of proximity, making clear that there is a mischievous visual dialectic at play here. Moran playfully retrieves such an attenuated form of associative expressionism from its banal destiny by expressionistically making it *more so*. It is yet another example in this show of how the artist stays anarchically mobile, striking guerilla-like at the heart of generic assumptions in both high and low art.

Notes

¹ Bloom, Harold, "The Breaking of Form," p.15 in *De-Construction and Criticism*, 1979, The Seabury Press, NY, NY.