

INTERVIEW: ROSS BLECKNER ON MOIRA DRYER

James Barron: What was Moira Dryer like?

Ross Bleckner: She was a combination of restraint and wild thing. She was the Katherine Hepburn of abstract painting. She was beautiful and wind-swept and fierce and intelligent and she made things look very easy. There was a youthful mastery. Is that an oxymoron?

JB: I don't think so.

RB: You can't get your head around the emotion in her work. It's rare that the brush, mind, hand and object are so intertwined that they seem inevitable.

JB: Do you see a connection with Morris Louis?

RB: She liked the process of layering on and having things run together. But they are always well constructed, like Morris Louis. Chance -- up to a point. Very controlled chance.

JB: And yet she was of her moment.

RB: She was really a Conceptual painter at a time when Conceptual abstraction wasn't really being considered. She was ahead of her time. Using the tropes of Minimalism and Conceptual art, she created work with a kind of presence. Her work had what I call a "vernacular soul". Her paintings were about the construction and re-construction of seeing. Of playing. It was soulful. It had energy, light, sensuality, wispy strokes, an ephemeral touch. She liked washed-away color. Color between color.

JB: She went to Italy and was moved by Giotto, Fra Angelico, and Piero.

RB: You look at Piero and see the delicacy of surface, openness and light. Simplicity of the formal construction.

JB: Take away Piero's figures and you have an altarpiece. A structure. An object. Moira's paintings are always objects.

RB: She played off the illusion and the object. The reality of the thing and the illusion of the thing. Her work was about the perception of where things are, how we look and remember. It related to theater; It all felt so natural, yet staged.

JB: Did she ever talk about what it was like to be a woman painter in the man's world of the 80s?

RB: She saw herself in opposition to many of the male artists of the 80s. She was doing well and she was happy. She had no anger. She had persistence.

JB: Do you think of her often?

RB: I did a painting a few weeks ago and I thought, You know, I think I'm finally Moira Dryer here.

JB: Maybe that's part of what you do: extend some of the ideas that Moira had begun but wasn't able to do because her life was cut short.

RB: That would be nice. I would take that as a compliment. She was the real thing. Obviously.

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