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HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Jagged Strips of Paint, Two LES Shows

by Hrag Vartanian on March 16, 2011

Serendipity often plays a role in gallery going. Occasionally you come across two shows at unrelated galleries that suggest a connection that couldn't possibly have been planned. You could argue such occurrences have the makings of a zeitgeist — though two examples are hardly enough to justify a universal claim — but sometimes they are simply coincidences that reveal common interests or goals among a few artists who make work in different places.

I am constantly looking for connections between things and when I saw Kristine Moran's *Protean Slip* at the Nicelle Beauchene Gallery and Gianna Commito's self-titled show at the Rachel Uffner Gallery I found the makings of my latest visual connection making. It is also fortuitous that both painting shows at these Orchard Street galleries also happen to be two of the best exhibitions up at the moment.

These painters create richly colored works that are consumed by shallow spaces and fragmented surfaces. They sometimes fold in on top of themselves and often contain strips of color that vibrate and hum. Their central forms — when they exist — feel like they are on a stage bathed in light from many directions.

Commito's stripes and shapes have the feeling of wrapping paper that visually reveals shapes of all kinds. Parts of her panels are roughly finished — or seemingly unfinished — but the facets of color give them a contemporary feel. Their small scale — the largest ones are 30×24 inches — draws you in and invites you to get lost in the ridges of color that dip into the even shadows.

Unlike Commito's geometry, Moran's work is more surrealist in tone, and the forms have an emotionality that Commito shies away from. The central form in Moran's "Speechless Midnight Fear" (2011) floats like an iceberg — surprisingly reminiscent of the work of Canadian artist Lauren Harris — on a pool of frigid gray and against a sky with a curtain of cool colors. In "Somnanbule" (2011), she is painting what feels like an interior but refuses to give us much more than an obvious leg and the sense of a wooden floor. Everywhere there are hints of recognizable things, but she resists giving us more than a suggestion. In "Slow Wave 2" (2011), the forms are smashed up against the surface of the canvas, then in the next work in the series, "Slow Wave 3" (2011), the sense of space disappears almost completely, and we are left with disembodied swirls and colors on a red ground.

In Moran's work you can recognize an affinity for the luscious swiped forms of Leslie Vance, the strokes of Josh Smith and the rhythmic swirls of Karin Davies. In Commito's work you see allusions (though less obvious) to modern art movements, like the fracture of synthetic cubism. I should mention that I found it hard to look at Commito's work without being reminded of beach umbrellas on the French Riviera — in my mind this association gave them a Mediterranean glow that was emphasized by their warm palette and strong light.

If I'm over emphasizing all the references I see in each body of work, it is simply because I found them easy to lose myself in as each work represented an inviting but elusive world. What I found most curious about these two exhibitions was the way they seemed to relate and mirror one another. While Moran's palette could often feel cool (though always with flashes of warmth), her touch was hot and sensuous. In the case of Commito, her colors brought the heat (though sometimes subdued) and her compositions feel more coolly planned and less intuitive.

Give yourself a visual treat and try to see these two shows on the same trip.



Left to right, Commito's "Boro" (2011), an obscured "Roque" (2010) and "Crain" (2011).

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