

## A painter's take on the literature of the north

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Kristine Moran at Clark & Faria Gallery

\$2,500-\$12,000. Until Jan. 10, at 55 Mill St., Building #2, Toronto; 416-703-1700.  
<http://www.clarkandfaria.com>

A cursory, incautious look at the lush paintings of Kristine Moran - at Clark & Faria in Toronto - may at first suggest a rhapsodic abandon in the artist, a pigment-fuelled fervour that simply valorizes the large, expansive gesture. Her paintings are gestural - almost operatically so.

A quieter, second look, however - plus serious consideration of the title she has given the exhibition, *Hidden In the Shore Maze* - helps to open her pictures to the ideas than animate them.

And in that regard, she says on the phone from her studio in Brooklyn, N.Y., it is useful to note the degree to which these wild, chromatically intense paintings are rooted in literature. (Raised in Montreal, she graduated from the Ontario College of Art & Design in 2004 and went on to earn a master of fine art degree at Hunter College in New York.) "I guess you could say that my starting point," Moran says, "was Margaret Atwood's *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. It sums up writers who deal with motifs of northernness."

Northernness soon led her to works such as Marian Engel's *Bear* and Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*. Even Northrop Frye's canonical *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* hovers, Moran agrees, somewhere behind the sensuous writhing out of which her paintings come to fruition.

"There's a line in one of the Munro stories," she says, "to the effect that deep caves were paved with kitchen linoleum. You can see how I've used this image almost directly in *Trick Door*." You can. Whatever else that robustly painted entity is doing, front and centre in the painting, it is decisively located on or in front of an orange-and-white tiled floor (shown here).

The fact is, the more time you spend with Moran's work, the less chaotic it seems. She says she constructed a kind of narrative that helped inform the paintings that make up the exhibition (the works have titles such as *Departure*, *Into the Water*, *Immersed*, *Undress* and *Swallowed in Tiny Bits*).

It's not a specific, detachable, usable narrative, of course. But you can certainly see how Moran's subtle and obviously displaced "tale" seems to begin in a sort of cabin (which

is offered, almost without abstract interference) in *Departure*: “There is no figurative element here at all,” Moran says, “which means that the viewer can easily place himself, herself, inside the narrative.”

Similarly, in *Into the Water*, the bottom of the painting is all structure, part of Moran’s mysterious cabin perhaps, or the edge of a dock, while above it a huge painted miasma of supine pinkness (a naked body?) seems to lower itself into the rest of the work. In *Undress*, there is a suggestion of curtains over at the left of the painting, and perhaps a mirror. The figure itself is a writhing of fleshly grey knee- and elbow-like things - as if Moran had painted a frame of an out-of-focus film.

“The big gestures in my paintings,” Moran adds, such as the big gesture that seems to be the protagonist of *Trick Door*, “are about shifting, transformation. This past summer I was making paintings about marriages, carnivals and other festivities, and the sweeping gestures came to represent swirling dresses, that sort of thing. ...

“Now,” she says, “the big gesture is more about coming apart, about the unravelling of the self.”