Momus

The Politics of Color in Kristine Moran

It's tempting to consider Kristine Moran's most recent work as a pivot-point in an ascendency from abstraction to figuration. Figures, indeed, are emerging from within the scaffolding of her signature vibrant and complex design and color; and, with the help of her current exhibition's title, *The Boss, The Queen, The Secretary, and The Henchman*, at Daniel Faria Gallery, we're encouraged to seek out its corresponding characters from within the folds and washes of arcing chroma.

However, it's a bit dull to be perpetually pursuant of the line between these two – the abstract and the figurative – and not very contemporary, in a moment of dissolving boundaries in painting. I mention that we could spend our conversation navigating her orientation towards this binary, but that I'm not too excited by it, and Moran laughs, agreeing. The New York artist would rather discuss Frank Stella, Josef Albers, the narrative qualities of color grouping, and the schoolyard politics that brought this series about.


We can begin with the latter. *The Boss, The Queen, The Secretary, and The Henchman* takes its title from a society of four that Moran's daughter, 7, and her friends formed during breaks at school. "I'm the boss," her daughter said as she listed their assigned roles. With interest, and some concern, Moran volunteered for recess supervision to observe the dynamics of this first-grade quad. They were, in fact, acting out their roles, with the secretary taking notes, and "the enforcer" (the henchman) playing thug. They had even graffitied a wall in chalk, staking out their version of Verona – or, more aptly, their island in the Pacific. ("It was like *Lord of the Flies*," Moran reflects.)

Though Moran – who was trained as an architect before pursuing her art practice – often roots her painting in personal references, she was working more intuitively in the past, she says; this exhibition came about more deliberately. You can see it in the smaller canvases, which served as studies for the larger, more ambitiously-scaled ones. (There is a tetraptych – a four-panel work – that holds the center of this show, both in terms of aesthetic power, and narrative function). However, with her archetypal rubric in hand, Moran was conscious to maintain that aforementioned "line" between modes of description: "I like to tell stories. They fall flat if the figure is too representational."

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Frank Stella reflected on an untitled painting he made as a student at Princeton, in 1957: "At the time, I think I might have thought of it as a still life, an abstract still life, but that wasn't the relevant thing. The important thing was the space the marks suggested. It was a space within a space." As Michael Auping, curator of the touring *Frank Stella: A Retrospective* that was recently on view at the Whitney (where Moran saw it, and felt its effects), notes:

This would not be the last time the artist would unexpectedly relate abstraction to traditional painting genres such as still life, landscape, and even portraiture. He would name his abstractions after cities and people, perhaps more to connect them to the pictorial history of painting than to the subjects themselves. More importantly, the concept of a space within a space, often taking the form of a circular or concentric motion, would be a central theme running through his works over the following decades, as would his increasingly methodical investigation into the complexities of how we interpret a painted object.

"The space within the space" is where I find Moran doing her most interesting work. In the apogee of this series – the fourfold painting that depicts, in order of left to right, and tallest to shortest, her exhibition's nominal figures, the boss, the queen, the secretary, and the henchman – we can see narrative cues (a Tudor ruff collar on the queen, a martini on the back of the secretary for the queen to reach for, a scepter in the hands of the henchman). However it's the interstitial, volumetric, or "background" space, just beyond these figures or their props, where Moran is especially working through the practice of painting with intuition, intelligence, and a deep regard for art history.
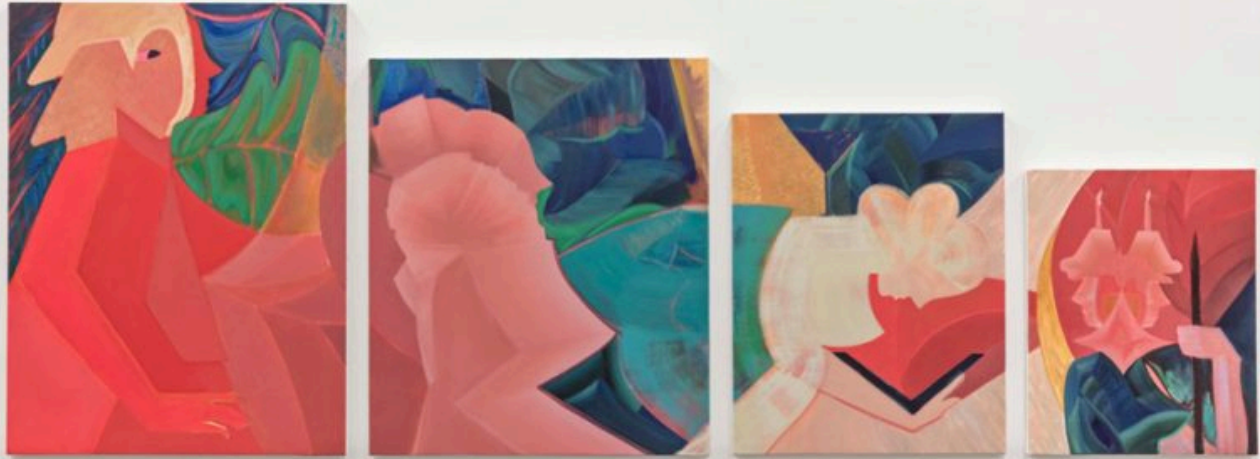
Kristine Moran, "The Boss, The Queen, The Secretary, and The Henchman," 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery.

In these liminal moments, we find a more useful binary than "abstraction vs. figuration." The early twentieth-century art historian Heinrich Wölfflin made a distinction between "linear" painting and "painterly" painting: the first was "exemplified by the crisply delineated, lucidly organized pictures of Renaissance and Florence," and the latter was "embodied by the turbulent, broadly brushed, theatrically lit images of the Baroque," for example. (Wölfflin would position these "alternating extremes" throughout art history, a patterned appreciation for the canon's narrative function that is, now, more or less indoctrinated in the discipline.) Even if we can agree with Clement Greenberg that, "the dividing line between the painterly and the linear is by no means a hard and fast one," this duality is broadly at play in Moran's recent work.

In the fanned collar of her Queen we see Moran's skilled brushwork on display, an appropriate moment for "peacocking" her ability, given the proud and regal profile of her subject. In what appears to be a narrow palette of dusty pink Moran affects the shadow and depth of a folded piece of fabric by switching the direction of her brush's grain, one against the other. It's a masterful moment in an exhibition full of these rooted, fortified gestures.
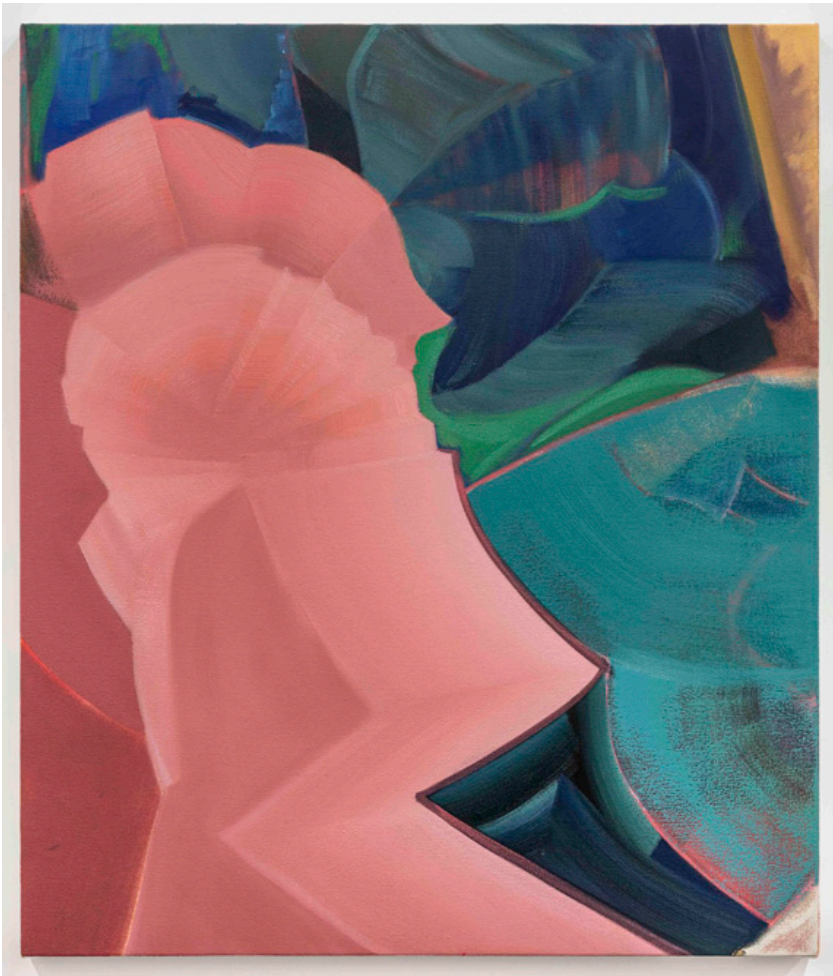
Detail from "The Boss, The Queen, The Secretary, and The Henchman," 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery.

I think of Josef Albers in Moran's collateral and confident layering of color (Albers compared color theory to constellatory forms, writing "colors appear connected predominantly in space"), and in her design – arching shapes, layered washes that produce hues whose parts you can count – I can see László Moholy-Nagy. There are some of David Hockney's 1980s pool paintings in Moran's free approach to wiggling lines and saturated poolside pinks and blues; and Emily Carr in Moran's textured brushwork, and the forested areas of her backgrounds (which assert themselves aggressively at the front, all the same, like a wall of tropics). These qualities help to underscore Moran's reference to *Lord of the Flies* (the lush, equatorial, and crowded vegetation), but also get at something essential in her painting: the way that color, when divided up among the subjects, affects a politics of its own.

Kristine Moran, "Falling Out," 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery.

Given Moran's underlying references to groupthink versus individuality, and the patterning of archetypes and allegories that root themselves in social organization, it's interesting that the artist favors a sleeper hit, titled *Falling Out*, for its comment on social divides. Within its matrix of broad-stroked form and a partite palette, Moran points out how "color interacts to push space that could position figures in a hierarchical way." She distinguishes three figures in the painting – all in profile and depicted with the utmost economy of line: "two whites" reaching forward, she says, and "one green (maybe in trouble); the green one is ahead or separated." The inherent question she asks herself is, "what happens if I switched those colors around? What are the social implications?" She pauses, and then concludes, "I see it as a dark painting."

I am reminded of this exhibition's start on the playground. In his short essay, "A Child's View of Color" (1914-15), Walter Benjamin wrote, "The world is full of color in a state of identity, innocence, and harmony. Children are not ashamed, since they do not reflect but only see." Moran is both observing and reflecting, of course. Moving her brush along social fault lines and counting hierarchies. She is troubling the spaces within the space, the parts we need the most help to reflect on.