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SAM MOYER STUDIO VISIT

Wall Sculptures

By Olivia Murphy
Photographer - Clément Pascal



I met Sam Moyer in her Bushwick studio to discuss process, flat-sculptures and being a lady with a man's name. Her newest works, photographed here by Clément Pascal, are now on view at Rodolfe Janssen Galerie, Brussels.

OM: Tell me a little about the works photographed here.

SM: Those are just rags on the floor! These are the rags turned into paintings. [Showing images of the show installed in Brussels.]

OM: So these photos are mid-process, before they were ironed and mounted.

SM: Exactly. They are large scale, around 7 x 10.

OM: Do you call these works paintings?

SM: I fought calling them paintings, but everyone else does, so I have kind of given in to it. And in the middle of the gallery there is a marble bench. I'm really into making these marble benches right now; it's the newest edition to the body of work. I made the first one for a solo booth with [Rachel Uffner Gallery] at Nada Miami [2012]. I really didn't want to deal with furniture in the booth, so I designed this bench as a place for them to keep their laptop and materials.

OM: So they are functional objects?

SM: Yes, they are functional furniture objects. I made them out of marble because I felt that the marble really reflected the patterns in the paintings. I love looking at the marble because it's like looking at my paintings that I haven't had to make! I'm also a trained sculptor so I missed just making objects, a lot!

OM: Are they stand-alone pieces, or do they go with the works they are shown with?

SM: Because they're functional objects, I don't have as much dictatorship over them. The one from Miami was actually sold with a piece, which was nice because that's sort of what the idea was, to have a meditative place to sit and view.

OM: Sort of like the benches in front of the water lilies at MoMA?

SM: Exactly, the whole idea was actually kind of based on the Rothko Chapel, to a certain extent, although I'm not trying to take myself too seriously.

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OM: *And the two-dimensional works, what would you prefer to call them?*

SM: Well, (laughs) I have the really obnoxious thing of calling them 'wall-sculptures' because the process is very physical. I do it outside, and it's 30 ft of fabric at once. I'm folding it and manipulating it. I don't own any paintbrushes, there's no paint involved. It's a dyeing and folding process of manipulation. They feel sculptural to me. At the same time they're photographic in nature, because I make them outside and the dye is very dependent on the weather and light.

Then it comes in here and gets flattened out and put on the wall so it looks like a painting. But I have deliberately decided not to stretch them. I put them on these panels, which become like a plinth or a pedestal for the fabric. And the panels are huge—they're close to 200 pounds, so rather than a stretcher, it's a giant over-built furniture piece for this thin piece of muslin.

OM: *Coming back to the actual manipulation of the fabric, can you talk about the dying process?*

SM: With dye, the more you work with it the more you understand it, even if you're not trying to. You learn by accident. For instance the newer pieces I have begun to incorporate collage. Sometimes I'll use the ink on the back of the fabric to create depth.

OM: *It's amazing how those tiny decisions like, 'let me turn it around,' can open up a whole new aspect of the work.*

SM: The thing is you have to be willing to sacrifice, make it a little less precious, rather than this magical thing. Because maybe you're going to have to glue that magical thing down to a piece of wood and no one's ever going to see it again. I also try and use the seams of the collage as a horizon line, so that there's a place to associate yourself in space.

OM: *That's very generous.*

SM: Well when it's solid pattern it's hard to enter. When there's a horizon line it's a point of entry. I grew up on water and thought a lot about where the body of water meets the sky, and the differentiation of those blues. All of a sudden you have a line and you know exactly where you are on earth. It helps. You put a line through anything and you have a landscape.

OM: *The newer works do feel much more organic, where as there seemed to be more of a geometry, or loose geometry in your earlier works.*

SM: The new works are also a little more hardedge; they have a rough and tumble quality that feels really aggressive to me. And that

gesture is really hard to achieve in a non-aggressive way. You know usually, this type of mark is achieved by a physical gesture or brush stroke, but this is just the material behaving in the way it wants to behave, and me choosing the section it occurs in.

OM: *So you are letting the aggression come out naturally in a process that's not necessarily aggressive.*

SM: The process is hard. But it's not me making slashes and dashes. I'm always trying to create scenarios where the material can do what it does. With gentle nudges and negotiations, of course.

OM: *I think that comes through, and also brings up the push and pull between the 2D/3D aspect of the work.*

SM: Absolutely the illusion is what brings it back to photo. It was once a three-dimensional object, but the crinkle effect, or the not quite understanding how it's made, ends up peaking people's interest. People don't quite know what they're looking at.

There is an instant relationship that happens when you're trying to figure something out.

OM: *And how open are you about revealing your process?*

SM: I used to be really open about it and now I'm just tired. I don't know if it's that important anymore, I'm more interested in the object. I tend to kind of sound like a washer woman when I describe the process, which takes it back into this kind of woman's arts, weird fiber thing.

OM: *Female artists working with soft materials tend to get thrown into that ring.*

SM: Then [I] take [my] soft material and throw it on a 200-pound panel.

OM: *Is that your way of fighting against the woman's arts, fiber thing?*

SM: I'm not fighting against it. I do have a domestic twist to a lot of the work I make, but I don't really feel like participating in that conversation with these works because I don't feel that they are about domesticity. It's not about taking women's laundry work and elevating it. It's about the Abyss.

OM: *However in a way, just by employing women's laundry work in an art process elevates it.*

SM: I hope it does. I hope it does without me having to champion it verbally.

OM: *I think it does, but at the same time the color and the weight of the pieces tend not to read as feminized objects. Is this intentional?*

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SM: No, I'm not necessarily avoiding anything; I'm just doing what pleases me aesthetically. My favorite part about art making is the decision making. I think you're either really good at knowing where a couch goes in a room or not. Sometimes you have an instinct for decisions. So I'm not trying to make them more masculine or more feminine, it's really just a decision-based process, guided by what I think looks good and what I think is important for the piece. But I do know that they have a masculine tendency to them, and people do think that I'm a man because of my name, and that they are giant black paintings, but sometimes when they find out I'm a woman, they see it.

OM: *Right, it's the immediate, 'Oh yeah, fabric = woman'.*

SM: Yeah, the Feminine edge. But that doesn't occur to me while I'm working. I have tomboy qualities, but I'm never trying to push an agenda. I think it's more important to make decisions for the sake of the decision.

OM: *That is actually a nice analog to the in-between of the illusionary space and the*

sculptural space in your work. In the same way that the piece exists in both and neither, it also has male qualities and female qualities, putting it outside of that duality.

SM: But I'm totally about the duality! I'm in to anything polar, and I think the balance of two parts or two contradicting pieces is where stuff happens; the high/low, masculine/feminine, all of that. I'm always trying to create little contradictions, or have the work be a contradiction in itself. It is this third that is created outside the two parts. That also goes back to not quite being able to put your finger on it, which is what makes it interesting and makes you want to know, or opens the door to imagination. Not knowing lets you create your own view, which is what letting your viewer have an experience is all about.

Sam Moyer is represented by Rachel Uffner Gallery in New York. You can see her work at the upcoming two-person show with Mika Tajima at Halsey Mckay gallery in June, and Bob Nickas's "Creature from the Blue Lagoon" (Bridgehampton, NY) opening in July.



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