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rachel uffner

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IN CONVERSATION

SAM MOYER with Alex Bacon

On the occasion of her solo exhibition at the Rachel Uffner Gallery (through June 22) Sam Moyer invited Alex Bacon to her Bushwick studio to discuss the conceptual and formal evolution of her work to date.

Alex Bacon (Rail): How did you come to make art?

Sam Moyer: My mom was a painter, and my dad works in the movie business—he’s a lighting designer, so it’s kind of the family business. In grad school I was very conceptually driven. I’d have an idea and then I’d be like, “Okay let me find the stuff I need to make this happen.” I was never a great builder or maker of things, so it was all very appropriated and slapdash. There was a quickness to it. I had an idea, and I wanted to make it as fast as possible. I had so many ideas, and while I was there I was so many different styles of artists. But a lot of it was about the polarities of interior and exterior, trying to bring the outside inside, or the inside outside, and about the domestic environment versus the natural environment. My M.F.A. thesis show was of these photographs of a fog machine and a 10k light in a field, and it was the idea of turning the camera around on the elements that actually built the scene.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

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Rail: The props?

Moyer: Not the props, but the equipment that provides the atmosphere—making the equipment the subject. And that's where I was when I graduated: trying to combine sculpture and photography, and make sculptural objects, and photograph them, and have the photograph be the end result, or figure out how to take photographs and turn them into a building material that went into a sculpture.

Rail: In a way it seems related to the work that you've been making more recently, in the past few years, because it's that same idea of a certain reflexivity to process, both conceptually and materially.

Moyer: I think that because I wasn't a great maker of things I started having more of a relationship with materials themselves. I needed the support of a great material, or a great find, or whatever, to carry the weight for me. I depended heavily on the material being the star, or at least the work's subject.

Rail: Because you were never someone who was traditionally skilled, as a painter or as a craftsman, say.

Moyer: No, but I could do *enough*. I'm not a great mold-maker. I'm not a great stone carver. I'm not an amazing welder. Yet I can do about 20 percent of each of those things.



Installation view: Sam Moyer, *Night Moves*, August – September 2008, Cleopatra's,

Rail: You know how they work, and you can do them if necessary, but your work is not about that kind of virtuosity.

Moyer: It's more like I know them enough to know when I need them. I'm not limited by not having a concept of how they work. But at least if I had a project and I needed something welded together, I'd know that much. [*Laughs.*] But, yeah, I was always more idea-driven than craft-driven.

Rail: So you graduated with these photographs, and then how did your work progress?

Moyer: I moved to New York, and was trying to figure that out—how to have a studio practice, and discovering how hard that was—and I think I had about seven jobs my first year, and like three different apartments, and I couldn't quite find my legs. I worked as an art handler. I worked as an artist's assistant. I worked on movies. I did the windows for Barneys for a while. I did a lot of stuff. I was working with all these moving blankets as an art handler, helping my friend Mika Tajima install for the 2008 Whitney Biennial, and they had these amazing moving blankets, and I was like, "What are they?" They were just so beautiful.

Rail: I didn't realize there was a hierarchy of moving blankets.

Moyer: I didn't either! The ones at Home Depot are very traditional, and there's nothing exciting going on, but there are these ones they make that are so messed up and so quickly produced, made from these scraps, and they look like gorgeous paintings. So I was actually on a job at Nicole Klagsbrun, working an install—I don't remember whose show it was, but I found out the source for those moving blankets, and they were two blocks away. I took my lunch break and I went and bought like 20 of them, and then I had to take a taxi the two blocks back to the gallery because I couldn't carry all of them. [*Laughs.*] But that was the beginning. And I stretched them like paintings. The first solo show I had in New York was at Cleopatra's, in Greenpoint, and I wanted to do that as an installation. This was when I was still really into lighting and environment and the larger view of the piece. I still wanted it to be an installation. I never thought of them as individual paintings or pieces.

Rail: Right. So in the same way that you had been doing those photographs of things like fog machines, these tools that create the atmosphere of a scene, in a way a moving blanket is a device by which the artwork moves from a storage space to one of exhibition. Most people are obviously not aware of them and how they're intimately and centrally involved in the business of putting on a show, taking down a show, etc.

Moyer: Absolutely. I transferred the moving blanket onto stretcher bars and made it the artwork.

Rail: But did that idea happen immediately?

Moyer: Yeah, because I thought, "These look like beautiful paintings, I'm going to stretch them like paintings." But then I was also like, "I'm not going to treat them like paintings because they're moving blankets." I wanted them to be stand-ins for paintings. They were painting props, essentially. I

installed that show by leaning them together, and stacking them, and only some were on the wall. I wanted it to feel like something that was in progress, either there was a show that was about to be installed, or there was a show that was coming down. I wanted it to mimic the feel of a studio, and that activeness that an artwork experiences when it's in the studio, where it just gets stacked up; it lays around, it leans against the wall, it doesn't have that preciousness of presentation yet. And so that's what that install at Cleopatra's was about—then I added the lighting because I had this flair for drama, shadows, and lighting. Also, the gallery was closed all the time, and I'd been making these windows for Barneys, so by having it be this permanent light installation with these moving blankets, you could see it from the street as you were walking back and forth; so it was open 24 hours, essentially. And you didn't need to go and look at the paintings as individual, special objects. I just wanted them to feel like a stack of abstract paintings. But then the more I worked with them, the more I was like, "Oh, these actually can hold up aesthetically."

Rail: So perhaps at the beginning it was a productive tension for you. Like in a way maybe the tension was weighted at that point toward that facet of installation, that sense of the whole scene, the drama that you're creating with the lighting, and how you've arranged all the materials. Perhaps, though, on the other side, painting, with its own particular history and, probably even more, its own particular way of putting a certain material into a very particular formal and conceptual space, because there's something about when a given material gets wrapped around a stretcher and put up on a wall where, as much as we might know about its mundane origins, say, the status of that object—which is to say how we consider it, read it, make meaning out of it—changes. We start to look more closely at every little line, idiosyncrasy, and nuance in ways we probably never would have in observing the original moving blanket while it was being used for its typical, banal, intended purpose.

Moyer: Exactly, you're taking it out of its context and elevating it.

Rail: So you like that tension?

Moyer: I love that tension. And I also feel like the thing that I was failing at was that when I was stretching the blankets and working them, I really was deciding what was good, where it should be, the position it should be in, what the crop should be, and where the line should be, and there were a lot of aesthetic decisions going into every single one. Then I was taking that

power away from it by throwing it in a stack, or making it behave like a stand-in, or a prop, when actually I was caring. So that was kind of the arc. I had to learn to allow that care to come through, to learn that I didn't need to just prove a point, or make a statement, or close the circle conceptually for everyone. I had actually worked hard on the objects themselves, and cared about them, and they had their own importance.

Rail: Which seems really significant. I mean we are talking about 2008. Today, nobody really questions the relevance of painting anymore. It has become a non-question. But I feel like even those few years ago, it probably seemed a lot harder to imagine how one would convincingly create a conceptually rigorous painting, especially in an era where the most visible painters were people like Dana Schutz, whose work was about a certain hybrid attention to figuration and gestural, or at least highly worked, abstraction.

Moyer: It was a lot about *painting*.

Rail: It was painterly painting, you see the marks and the artist's activity. It was almost another breed of neo-Expressionism. So, it must have seemed, at that time that maybe situating these objects in the larger context of



Installation view: Sam Moyer, NADA Miami Beach, December 6 – 9, 2012.

an installation was a way to validate the work in a climate that wasn't perhaps super hospitable to a brand of straightforward materialist abstraction. But, like you said, there was nonetheless something more, something aesthetic, that you intuitively saw in the work. This was perhaps the more significant lesson—that aesthetics could *mean*, *ordo*, something.

Moyer: Yeah, and it was accidental. I was doing it without intending to, and there was a voice inside my head being like, “Shutup!” [*Laughs.*]

Rail: Right, “I don't want to be an aesthetic artist, I want to be rigorously contextual and conceptual.”

Moyer: Yeah, “I have this point to prove, and it's about the space, and it's

about these bigger ideas that are actually really boring.”

Rail: This kind of pedantic, didactic aspect of an artwork, which I think comes out of an academic art education.

Moyer: Also, there’s this self-esteem issue. I always wanted to cut the legs off of a piece, “Oh no it needs to make fun of itself. Oh no it can’t take itself that seriously, it’s got to be talking about something bigger than itself. Itself is not enough.” And that might just be an age thing, or it might have been the timing in the artworld or whatever, I just felt that there was no way I was going to let this object think it’s so important, it’s just a part of a bigger idea.

Rail: But your intelligence really seems to be that at that moment you understood, despite thinking all those things, that when you looked at the work, as much as you were trying to cut its legs off, you nonetheless felt that that’s not what you should be doing to it.

Moyer: Yeah. So that was the growth for me, to acknowledge that it’s okay—that I did work hard on it. I did make choices. [*Laughs.*]

Rail: So how did you work off of that realization? How did the work evolve after that show?

Moyer: The thing is that I was still kind of stuck in that mindset of thinking about the next project. It wasn’t like, “oh now I’m into the aesthetics of this minimal, found object, presented as formal painting.” I wasn’t there yet. I couldn’t think that way yet. I’m trying to think about how I got there. In a way it’s hard to think about your own history. Let’s see, I was given this residency in Switzerland, and at that time I was still really into the poetics of the found object. I was making these book sculptures, they started off sentimental, like “I actually care about this book and now I’m going to stick a rock on it, and put a rubber band around it, and now it’s a sculpture, but every single part of it is some kind of concrete poem about things that mean something to me.” And then that led to the importance of a given object in somewhat aesthetic direction, ending up with me picking up books where I just really liked the cover, or I just really liked the graphic design, or ones where I could make a poem out of the words. So they became formal objects with which I would make a new shape. I kept starting off with “I have this purposeful idea,” and moving this into a decision-making brand of formalism that I couldn’t escape. And while I was out there I dyed a piece of fabric, and the rest is history. [*Laughs.*]

Rail: You kept coming back to the problem of aesthetic value, which I think is very interesting because, as a historian of 1960s Minimalism, one of the things that frustrates me about the discourse on work that's happening now, especially so-called process-based abstract painting, is how a lot of these terms get taken out again and people like to just think it's a redux. I think part of this is a market thing since, for better or worse, there hasn't yet been much intellectual discourse.

Moyer: The other day I was doing a walkthrough at my current show at the Rachel Uffner Gallery and the woman who is the head of the group said, "Sam's part of this



Sam Moyer, "Untitled," 2013 Ink on canvas mounted to wood panel, 84 × 120

group of process-based artists, etc., etc." And I said, "Actually I'm not," because when I make my work I'm not thinking about how I want everyone to visualize me in my overalls dying this fabric outside. It's not about that. When I hang the piece on the wall I'm not trying to get you to imagine me making it. I'm really trying to make the piece on the wall provide a surface that's subjective, that you can bring your own stuff to.

Rail: This is one of my big whipping posts. It's a fundamental misreading of historical process art. In the 1960s the idea of a process-based work was that you look at a Robert Morris scatter piece, for instance, and you can reconstruct the act by which he made it; you imagine him tearing up the fabric and scattering it. And that becomes the subject of the work. Now, in this context there's no more process in your work, or in that of a lot of other young artists who get thrown into this process-based thing, than Michelangelo's, right? Because every artist has a process in the sense that they have to both conceptualize and then materialize the idea, even if that act is as simple or non-object-based as typing out a notecard.

Moyer: It's all about the action behind it. The action behind my work is referential to printmaking and photography, and that helps to see there is a process to it, but it's not about my performance of the process.

Rail: Exactly, it's just a means to an end that is aesthetic and experiential. It's funny because in the '60s most people couldn't even "see" abstract art. It was felt to be intellectual and difficult, so most people couldn't easily engage with it. But now people use process as a kind of narrative for the work, and a point of access into it, fetishistically imagining the creative activity of the artist. They essentially use it in the same way that with Renaissance art people will discuss a work's iconography, as in, "the blue cloak references the Madonna, etc." It's a way to save people from actually having to encounter the work. Because looking at it you're just supposed to think she went out into a field and dyed some fabric.

Moyer: It's women's work, it's fabric.

Rail: Right! And then you feel like, bam! you understood it. But really, you didn't even look at the work. You didn't have any experience, but you feel like you did simply because you were told how it was made. It's a really facile, superficial way of dealing with the work. And it's hard because, yes, it's true that it's a part of how the work comes into existence, but the sole purpose of that process is getting you to the point at which you can have a particular kind of encounter with the work.

Moyer: Yeah. The thing with the fabric dying is that I feel like in most interviews and ways I've talked about it in the past, is so much about talking about how it's done, and how it's made, that I feel like I've failed to say that I'm just making raw material. I'm not out there like an Abstract-Expressionist painter thinking, "and now I will splash some black in this corner." I am just out there making product, piles and piles of it. I'm doing a ton of work out there, which is the labor portion of it, and then all that fabric comes into the studio, and that's where it actually becomes part of a traditional art-making process of me looking at my raw material and asking where it has to go. It's not that fascinating to talk about. I think that it's good to say that there's a ton of fabric in the studio because that way you know there isn't a preciousness to it until it becomes the piece, or the painting, or whatever you want to call it. It is really just a raw material until it makes it onto the panel.

Rail: Right. How did you come up with the marble pieces in your current show at Rachel Uffner?

Moyer: I started to introduce the marble because people were saying they

saw all these natural patterns in the dyed fabric, they saw water, or they saw marble, or they saw land, or they saw wrinkled bed sheets, etc. The marble came in as a concrete example of earth making these patterns. So when you bring the marble in it's more about asking what the marble needs, what partner I can seek for it, how I am going to make it stronger, or take it down a notch, or balance it out, and all of a sudden all of the scraps in here were on a level playing field. I had to quit the system I had created of rejection and acceptance, and now all the materials could participate again.

Rail: In a way, you're just expanding your vocabulary.

Moyer: I'm just expanding my vocabulary. The process for me right now is that I get the stone and I complete the shape. The first thing I do is try to figure out the shape I want the piece to be, so it goes to the wood shop and I make multiple cuts. I'll make, say, a shorter one and a larger one, and I'll try to find the shape. Once I find the shape I come in here and I start just

dragging fabric over, and it's like putting an outfit together. Is this t-shirt going to work with these pants? Maybe it's the pants that are the problem? What is going to work together, you know? Maybe I'm really attached to this piece of fabric and this piece of stone actually isn't good enough. Maybe I just need to wait for the right piece of stone, so then that fabric goes to a special place in the studio for "great pieces of fabric waiting for mates," and then I'm back into the pile trying to find something for this piece of stone, because it is a great shape, and I've already cut the wood, so let's see what I can do.

Rail: You're kind of like the matchmaker, so to speak.

Moyer: Yeah. The *yente* [laughs].

Rail: And the first work using marble was when you made these marble benches for an art fair booth?

Moyer: Right. It was problem solving. I had this booth, and I wanted to do



Sam Moyer, "Zola," 2014 stone, ink on canvas mounted to mdf panel 80 x 69 x 75 □ Courtesy of artist and gallery.

these three giant paintings. I wanted it to feel environmental, and when you have an art fair booth you have to provide tables and chairs and a place for someone to sit and put their laptop, and I didn't want to make this installation and then have a random piece of furniture in there. So I thought it would be a nice correlation. And I kind of missed making objects and so I made this big marble bench where I matched the marble to the paintings, and made it geometric, and kind of the opposite of the looseness of the paintings, but it was very excessive in its marble-ness, in its aesthetics. That was the first time I made a direct line between what there is in the paintings and what people say they see in the paintings. It was a natural progression to connect them in a single piece.

Rail: Where did you encounter the marble scraps?

Moyer: Because I was making the benches I was going to marble yards and I noticed the scraps. It's funny because no path is a straight path, so just when I started to not need any outside stuff, all of a sudden I'm there were these are scraps left over from people designing their kitchens and their bathrooms. They come with all of these marks of other people's plans, and all of a sudden there was that external anchor that I had walked away from, but which now I'm bringing back into the work. But bringing it back in with all of this other internal aesthetic and subjective work that I've been doing.