Carrie Moyer’s *Jolly Hydra: Unexplainably Juicy* (plate 1) seduces us at first blush. Its candy-colored palette whets our appetite; thrusting, biomorphic shapes crackle with energy. Flat areas of color intersect regions of poured paint, generating the illusion that the picture plane is fluctuating between two- and three-dimensional space. The organic form that extends throughout the work is composed from a pair of matte, tangerine-hued breasts and exuberant rubbery phalluses. Though created from symbols associated with male and female anatomy, the form reads as one subject. Moyer produces this site of slipperiness as a specific, visual strategy enhanced by her fusion of artistic means (flattening the picture plane, hard-edged brushwork, and staining). These multiple levels of allusion lend the work a queer sensibility: it possesses, as David J. Getsy would say, moments of resistance to our instinct to make sense of the image, and moments of capacity that “make room for the otherwise” (see page 71). In this case, at issue is the artist’s visualization of gender fluidity.

Moyer’s embrace of abstraction as a vehicle to implicitly represent queerness is not without precedent. Since abstraction itself appeared in the early twentieth century, many artists have favored the style to visualize queer difference, as abstract art’s opacity allows for the messiness of gender identity and sexuality to be fully explored without recourse to legible imagery.1

American modernist Marsden Hartley depicted his love, Karl von Freyburg, constructed of flat planes, symbols, and expressionist marks in his...
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Oil on canvas
Portrait of a German Officer, 1914
(American, 1877–1943)
Fig. 1 Marsden Hartley
New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949
68 1/4 × 41 3/8 in.
Hydra (1928–2011) or Henri Matisse (figure 5), so its queer undertones can easily be missed. As Getsy maintains, such resemblance is intentional and strategic. Since the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1970s, queer visibility has been viewed as a form of pride. In effect, however, this visibility prolongs society’s dependence upon recognizable stereotypes that indicate queer difference. It ensures the separation of “other” from the “norm,” and heightens vulnerability for queer individuals. The photographs of BDSM sex acts between men by Robert Mapplethorpe (1946–1989) are well-known examples of contemporary overt queer imagery, which was famously censored by the conservative right. In Moyers’s case, however, the queer subject matter has been camouflaged in the guise of modernist abstraction, and can easily slip under the radar.

The fifteen contemporary artists represented in this exhibition address aspects of queerness in their work through various modes of inquiry. The exhibition offers a capacious overview of the structures queer abstraction can inhabit. Alternative identities, desires, and communities are explored through the artists’ manipulation of materials and spaces in abstract works that frequently defy the categories of painting or sculpture. Underlying the disparate works is a fundamental and defiant commitment to pushing the limits of abstract art’s capability. These objects visualize space for the “otherwise.” All viewers are invited to leave preconceived perceptions of the world behind, and discover abstraction’s queer possibilities.

1 “Queer” is used here as a reference to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities, unless noted otherwise. “Queer” was reclaimed in the 1980s as a symbol of resistance for the LGB and T communities, but its use as an umbrella term is not without problems. For the transgender community especially, “queer” has been a point of debate, and many refuse to be included under the label. For an overview of this history, see David J. Getts, “Introduction: Queer Intolerability and Its Attachments,” in David J. Getts, ed., Queer (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 12–23.

2 Louise Fishman quoted in Holland Cotter, “After Stonewall: 12 Artists Interviewed,” Art in America 82.6 (June 1994): 60.