



Queer Abstraction, Queer Possibilities: An Introduction

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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

1. Carrie Moyer
Jolly Hydra: Unexplainably Juicy, 2017
cat. 22



Fig. 1 Marsden Hartley
(American, 1877–1943)
Portrait of a German Officer, 1914
Oil on canvas
68 1/4 x 41 3/8 in.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949



Fig. 2 Forrest Bess
(American, 1911–1977)
The Hermaphrodite, 1957
Oil on canvas
7 15/16 x 11 3/16 in.
The Menil Collection, Gift of John
Wilcox, in memory of Frank Owen
Wilson, 1992-06
Photographer: Hickey-Robertson,
Houston



Fig. 3 Louise Fishman
(American, born 1939)
ANGRY JILL, 1973
Acrylic on paper
26 x 40 in.
Image courtesy of the artist
© Louise Fishman
Photographer: Brian Buckley

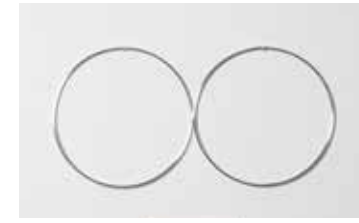


Fig. 4 Felix Gonzalez-Torres
(American, 1957–1996)
Untitled, 1995
Silver-plated brass
16 1/2 x 33 x 5/16 in.
Edition of 12, 4 APs
Des Moines Art Center Permanent
Collections (see page 80)
© Felix Gonzalez-Torres
Photographer: Rich Sanders, Des Moines



Fig. 5 Henri Matisse
(French, 1869–1954)
The Snail, 1953
Gouache on paper, cut and pasted on
paper mounted on canvas
111 3/4 x 113 in.
Tate, Purchased with assistance from
the Friends of the Tate Gallery 1962
© 2019 Succession H. Matisse / Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York
Image: © Tate, London 2019

influential painting *Portrait of a German Officer* (figure 1). Texas artist Forrest Bess rendered tense, internal struggles with gender and sexuality in intimate, mid-century paintings whose personal mystical symbols refer to gender-queer identity (figure 2). Louise Fishman has utilized abstraction—a style she referred to as “an appropriate language for me as a queer” because of its contrast to figuration—in her “Angry Paintings” of 1973 (figure 3), to express her rage and desire during the Women’s and Gay Liberation Movements of the 1970s.² In a conceptual vein, the abstract work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres can be considered a response to right-wing censorship of gay art that culminated at the height of the AIDS crisis. Two rings that hang side-by-side, for instance (figure 4), can be interpreted as a same-sex pair. This reading, however, can easily be missed by those who are looking for more explicit references to queer bodies. Though this art history exists, it has only been within the past decade that queer perspectives in abstraction as a broader trend have received focused attention from curators, art historians, and artists themselves. This stylistic phenomenon goes under the rubric “queer abstraction.”

Perhaps previous inattention is due to the fact that unlike many styles, queer abstraction cannot be identified by specific markers. Moyer’s *Jolly Hydra*, for example, visually appears to be derivative of Helen Frankenthaler (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 Moyer’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. Getsy, “Introduction: Queer Intolerability and its Attachments,” in David J. Getsy, 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.