

**Moira Dryer's art of expectancy, at the Phillips Collection and Greater Reston Arts Center**

By Kelsey Ables | Feb. 27, 2020



"Suburbia," a 1989 painting by Moira Dryer, is on view in the Phillips Collection exhibition "Back in Business." (Collection of Michael Straus/Estate of Moira Dryer)

Of all the superfluous structures in suburbia, none cries for purpose quite as loudly as the garage. Whether used as an office for the someday start-up billionaire or as a rehearsal hall for the aspiring rock band, the garage has taken root in the American imagination as a stage for the performance of a fantasy of self-made stardom.

At first glance, "Suburbia," a 1989 casein-on-wood panel by Moira Dryer, seems to be more about the color blue and organic form than the contained freedom of the garage. But as in many of the ostensibly abstract artworks on view in the Phillips Collection exhibition "Moira Dryer: Back in Business," here she offers a token of reality to hang on to: a hidden handle. Inside the contours of the "door" that handle might open, the shades of blue are electric; outside, ever-so-slightly dulled.



"The Stripe," by Moira Dryer, is on view at the Phillips Collection. (The Marc and Livia Straus Family Collection/Estate of Moira Dryer)

References to Dryer's job as a theater designer for the avant-garde company Mabou Mines recur in her art, like ruminations, most evident in gestures to curtains and frame-like proscenium arches. Intoxicated by the tension before a production begins — seats filled, actors absent, stage set — Dryer came to see props themselves as provocative performers. That handle in "Suburbia" — as useless as a prop telephone — as well as the ambiguity within her trompe l'oeil frames, as in "Portrait #124," preserve this feeling of bated breath indefinitely.

But there is another way Dryer's work echoes those anticipatory moments. Sitting before a stage in the dark, you might find your eyes following shadowy forms, trying to synthesize shapes into recognizable objects. As the lights rise, your imagination dissolves: a mannequin reveals itself to be a coat-rack, a plate becomes a clock. Dryer, who studied the science of perception, understood the way the mind clings to representation, even as vision slips toward abstraction. Floating between the familiar and the alien, Dryer's work captures the looming uncanniness of sight.

As interested in the art of the Renaissance as the contemporary, and mentored by both Elizabeth Murray — an abstract painter known for her cartoonish shaped canvases — and the conceptualist Joseph Kosuth, Dryer assimilated multiple points of reference, only to disavow them. In her short but prolific career, the artist, who died in 1992 at 34, was a student of many, and as a result, derivative of no one.

Dryer abandoned modernism's staunch fidelity to the flat canvas, painting the sides and backs of her works and sometimes allowing images to continue onto other adjacent panels. In "The Power of Suggestion," on view in "Yours for the Asking," a contemporaneous show of Dryer's work at the Greater Reston Arts Center, magenta polka dots reverberate from one panel to a smaller one below. In "The Stripe," a panel's shadow creates a luminous green glow, posing the question: Is the art in the physical structure? Its shadow? Both?

While abstractionists renounced representation, Dryer leaned into the serendipity of association, unapologetically describing her work as "teeming with imagery." Zombie green and eerie, "Close-Up" fluctuates between abstraction and representation with a kind of visual rhyme, at once conjuring a head of curly hair and the folds of a curtain.

Dryer's fixation with the stage reflects a kinship with the surrealist René Magritte, whom Dryer cited as an inspiration. In Magritte's "The Treachery of Images," he captioned a painting of a pipe with the disclaimer, in French, "This is not a pipe."



Moira Dryer's "The Signature Painting" is part of the Phillips Collection exhibition "Back in Business." (Collection of Susan Hort/Estate of Moira Dryer.)

"Suburbia's" literal handle is similarly contradictory. It incites the same sense of frustration that swells around the puzzling indentation at the bottom of "Captain Courageous," that persists at the metal rod atop "NBC Nightly News," pinning together the partially rolled sculpture, suggesting a story that, literally, never unfolds.

Like Magritte, who playfully mislabeled images, Dryer scrutinizes the way we assign meaning to art. In her two-part work "The Signature Painting," she placed — where wall text might otherwise be — a second abstract painting. It's as if she's tugging at the curtain of the museum, asking: Why seek language to explain the visual?

Dryer's paintings function like highway signs seen from back roads: mere reference points to venture out from. Turning the corner of an untitled 1990 painting, for example, you discover a striped edge. Beneath the slightly curled wood lip of a 1990 piece, you'll find an electric orange backside. Why, you might wonder, have you spent a lifetime consuming artworks in sealed units, like house shopping in a real estate development?

Dryer's works might look like paintings, but like the shape-shifting suburban garage and its starry-eyed performers, they ache to be something more.