

# Two Coats of Paint

## Donna Moylan's Egalitarian Eclecticism

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Donna Moylan, *The Angry Madonna*, 2024, acrylic and oil on linen, 36 x 30 inches.

Contributed by Elizabeth Johnson / "Recent Paintings," Donna Moylan's first exhibition at Bookstein Projects, collects works finished over the last year in her Kinderhook studio. In our email conversation, Moylan said that "sometimes paintings take years, as if they had to go off and think." In addition to making paintings that carry time in the process of their production, she forgoes committing to a serial style, allowing her paintings to differ drastically from one to the next. "When I started doing that, in the nineteen-eighties," she wrote, "I understood that what I wanted was to equalize, or make equivalent, many different styles of painting, and to refer to different cultures or eras with specificity but without differentiation or emphasis, without focusing on 'styles.'" She has achieved this goal with considerable aplomb.

*The Angry Madonna* integrates Giorgione's Madonna and child from *The Tempest*, a.k.a. *Rest on the Way to Egypt*, with a second, larger transparent child at breast, a female face woven with ribbon shapes, trees, branches, and a distant landscape, all anchored by rectangular building forms. The embedded vignettes are arranged in a balanced pattern. By eliminating any visual hierarchy, Moylan highlights different levels of completeness, from which multiple narratives arise and compete with respect to point of view, sensual impression, and emotional subject. For Moylan, "the woman breastfeeding is not a pretty girl, is not a happy girl. I always noticed the annoyed look on her face, seeing the painting in reproduction over the years or in Venice in person. If she's The Madonna of course she's angry: she knows what's coming." I attribute her anger to the stasis of her environment. Both accounts can flourish in Moylan's impartial composition.



Donna Moylan, *My Elephant*, 2010-24, oil on panel, 60 x 72 inches.

A tiny figure and child in a transparent, cartoon house hugs the bottom left corner of *Siesta*. The single, structural vignette is the taproot for the expansive, chromatically layered garden of sunlit washes and loose drawing above. Apparently a fresh, exploded view of Titian's *Venus with Mirror*, *Siesta*'s house presents Venus and Cupid as if in a vitrine that reflects and refracts the rainbow light of golden gods. *The Job* features internal quest or ambition by way of a cartoon artist climbing a gossamer ladder at night, exploring structures a tenuous, overlaid, see-through concept. The artist's palette floats in a dreamscape in an optical trick of moonlight. *The Astronomer* employs the vitrine structure for scale in a nocturnal park setting, enlisting night and outer space in a humble search for self.

Patterning vignettes and layers that compose deep space, interiors, and exteriors together, Moylan mixes Renaissance space, art historical references, abstraction, symbolism, and design. *West* and *The Forest Floor* go a bit farther in exploring Asian Art tropes. *The Forest Floor* tracks blue light inching through darkness to subterranean earthiness, like the skies in the prints of Hokusai or Hiroshige. The aura of light behind a cloud-like array of floating

A large, deliciously textured pachyderm in *My Elephant* carries a misty city on its back, with feet and head in a Babar cartoon. Organized by repeated shapes as *The Angry Madonna* is with rectangles, small, oval scenes of more elephants frame the foreground and dot the sky, that shape suggesting the sensitive end of the animal's trunk. Larger renderings of the beasts help me imagine loud trumpeting and elephantine caresses. As the rectangles in *The Angry Madonna* moor visual space through separation, the ovals in *Elephant* open and perpetuate directed vision.



Donna Moylan, *Siesta*, 2024, acrylic on linen, 36 x 30 inches

botanicals, a mushroom, and Chinese-style tree branch suggests a dream or hallucination, indicating that her vignettes can also be dimensional designs. Composed in a vertical Asian format, *West* combines a cloud design, a night sky, a Tuscan cliff, and a flat citrus sun atop raw linen, inflected by milk or water dripping from a nipple or terra cotta urn, two small figures, a floating branch, and the Big Dipper. These two paintings encapsulate the show's



Donna Moylan, *The Forest Floor*, 2024, acrylic on cotton canvas, 40 x 48 inches

mixture of style and its avoidance of series with an Asian sensibility, using a sense of speed and fluidity to compress Moylan's shared experience of many paths and layers.

"Donna Moylan: Recent Paintings," Bookstein Projects, 39 East 78th Street, New York, NY. Through February 21, 2025.

About the author: Elizabeth Johnson is an oil painter, art writer, and curator based in Easton, PA. Her reviews and interviews have appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Artcritical*, *The Artblog*, and *Delicious Line*, in addition to *Two Coats of Paint*.

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