

ARTFORUM

Donna Moylan

BOOKSTEIN PROJECTS

The first thing I noticed about the twelve recent paintings in Donna Moylan's first solo show in New York City since 2009 was the extraordinary delicacy of touch with which they were rendered. Her mark-making can be preternaturally light; it somehow seems to approximate or allude to a given work's subject rather than directly describing or presenting it, with the result that whatever is depicted seems substantially unreal and intangible—made of the stuff of imagination and reverie, not of empirical observation. Everything appears to be in some process of transmutation, emerging or dissolving, like phantasmagoric images we might see in clouds that soon change form and disperse.

No wonder I became absorbed in the *how* of Moylan's paintings before the *what*, the mark before the imagery. And yet the paintings were full of content, sometimes even too much. The ones that touched me most deeply were strikingly concise and even—or by Moylan's refined standards, blunt. *The Astronomer* (all works cited, 2024) was a stormy nocturnal landscape, redolent of Salvator Rosa's proto-Romanticism, limned entirely in shades of blue. Toward the bottom, we see a little house delineated with a few yellow brushstrokes as if by a child's hand. In front of it is an equally rudimentary ladder, in light blue, with a sort of stick figure standing at the top, peering up through a handheld telescope. What does this amateur stargazer observe? The instrument points us toward what we may not at first have noticed: a pattern of stars somehow visible in front of the turbulent storm clouds above, a constellation in the strangely natural shape of



Donna Moylan,
The Job, 2024, Oil
and acrylic on linen,
48" x 36".

a recumbent man—a sleeper inside rather than beneath the inky sky. The insomniac surveys an image of the rest he is without.

The Venetian Hotel (Zeus and Venus Watching), likewise spare in both imagery and color, yet again takes on slumber and wakefulness—perhaps the key subjects of Moylan's work in general. In shades of black, white and gray the artist has introduced us into the vast space of an impossibly lofty palazzo with faintly yet dexterously sketched ceiling frescoes; gazing at it, I kept thinking that I could almost make out exactly what they depicted, yet never succeeded. On the otherwise unfurnished floor of an imposing *salone*, a naked couple lies sleeping, entwined, on a bare mattress. Ghostly white outlines around them make it appear as if their repose might be on show in a transparent vitrine their observers, the two gods (strangely, one Greek and one Roman) of the painting's title, are energetically drawn in traces of pink. But while Zeus looks with apparent curiosity at the humans below, Venus seems more fixed on arousing his attention. She's unconcerned by the dozing mortals, who might simply be dreaming of the deities gazing down at them.

Many of the other paintings were far more densely layered, with overlapping imagery in the manner of Francis Picabia's "transparencies." Correspondingly, their content and its significance can be harder to discern. But the ambiguity is often fertile, as in *The Job*, where an endless ladder rises up in front of a dark shape surrounded by sky; it might be either a craggy rise or a crevasse displaying the earth's murky innards. The composition's deepest and highest points are hard to discern. At the top of the ladder, which appears to extend into a liquid firmament beyond the picture plane, stands another stick figure like the one in *The Astronomer*, this time holding a bucket—whether intending to dump something onto the earth from it or haul it up to the heavens (or the land of dreams), we'll never know.

—Barry Schwabsky