

ARTFORUM

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MOIRA DRYER | ELEVEN RIVINGTON

When a cherished artist dies young—and Moira Dryer died at the age of thirty-four, in 1992, after a five-year struggle with cancer—it is unsurprising if the writing on her verges on hagiography. Everyone who met Dryer seems to have admired both her painting and the artist herself, and if there was anyone who didn't, he apparently kept his opinions to himself. This recent exhibition—the first New York show of Dryer's art in nearly twenty years—seemed to me something to be approached both eagerly and a little warily. The sadness of her early death could not but add its own color to the work, making the warmth of the response to the show predictable to the point of inevitability; I myself went in wanting to like it, remembering how the work had impressed me in the late 1980s. The desire to be delighted often misleads, but in this case, my only problem with the show was that it was too small.

Dryer was an abstract painter who studied with Elizabeth Murray, then became her studio assistant, and you can see traces of the older artist in her work—perhaps incidentally in her allowance of a sense of humor into her pictures, more crucially in her sense of the painting as a physical object. If Murray made shaped canvases and eventually three-dimensional wall pieces built up of layers of plywood, Dryer, too, liked carpenters, designing carefully crafted structures on which to paint. She usually worked not on canvas but on wooden panels, which she often fitted out with accoutrements of different kinds: the doorknob-like balls that ornament the sides of *Not Titled*, 1989, for example, subtly tucked under the edges of the work's curved wooden frontal plane, or the painted shelf that slants out from the wall in the two-part *Signature Painting*, 1987. Only one piece in this show, *Part II of the Tourist*, 1990, uses cloth as a support, and that cloth isn't canvas but brocade, perhaps salvaged from a curtain or a yard of furniture upholstery, and embroidered with a Rorschach-like floral pattern that Dryer selectively embellished and filled in. And here, too, there is an accessory: a metal handle at top center, winkingly turning the painting into a suit case—a portmanteau of meaning to be picked up and taken away. Understanding the painting as a solid, physical thing, Dryer also knew that it was socially

conditioned as the shelf in *The Signature Painting* implies in suggesting the didactic displays occasionally used in museums. The literal signature in this work's main panel—the letters MD, which the lines of its Frank Stella-like nest of orthogonal boxes at one point divert themselves to form, throwing in a couple of decorative loops—also overtly inserts the social and personal into an already woozy geometric abstraction, wittily sabotaging any purity or idealism it might have. (Surely Dryer noticed that she shared her initials with Marcel Duchamp.)

Moves like these undercut the role of the painting as illusion, its camouflage as a transparent window whose substance must recede so as to allow us to see through it. Yet Dryer was interested in illusion, and tipped us off to that interest through her occasional use of *trompe l'oeil*—the sleight that may make us imagine, for example, that one of the two panels in *The Mathematicians*, 1990, is painted on softly tipped fabric when, in fact, being painted on wood, it is absolutely flat.

Nor does Dryer's intellectual insubordinancy prepare us for the emotionality of her painting, conveyed mainly through its color and through its sense of embedded history. While *The Mathematicians* shows how polished Dryer's color could be—it actually shines—*Not Titled*, *Captain Courageous* and *The Vanishing Portrait*, both 1990, seem more typical of her, with their mottled, sparse, weepy monochrome surfaces whose color seems on the point of washing away. *The Vanishing Portrait* is particularly poignant, the border marked around its edges seeming to want to frame an image—a face or figure, presumably, given the work's title—that the thin, attenuated paint is unable to sustain.



Moira Dryer, *The Signature Painting*, 1987. Casein on wood.