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THE BRIEF, GREAT CAREER OF MOIRA DRYER,
AT ELEVEN RIVINGTON

By Jerry Saltz

As a noxious cloud of anemic abstract painting and sculpture continues to blanket the art world — and junior postmodernists churn out handsome harmless knockoffs, all involving scraping, scribbling, silkscreened images, spray paint, stenciling, staining, and some drips — a small survey of the late Moira Dryer is a quickening pick-me-up. The day Dryer died from cancer in 1992, at just 34, the art world lost a great gritty painter. Starting in 1986, her work startled the art world, then stuck in a similar rut of cool formalist abstraction. This eight-painting show couldn't be better timed.

Dryer used stripes, drips, dots, and squiggles, tropes and motifs that even then were a half-century old. (And are the configurations painters today are still using.) Yet her shaped, strange paintings, sometimes with wavy edges, indentations, bumps, drilled holes, and panels propped against walls or set on logs, have an energy that doesn't just piggyback on older abstraction. Her casein-on-plywood brushwork has a dry, frictionfilled fluidity to it. Skewed and skittering marks are set just so, auroras of iridescent color pulsate or go rogue, surfaces feel invented but also recovered from patterns already there. All this gives Dryer's work visual juice — something that makes it feel flaunting,



present, and not false.

That flaunting not-falseness is evinced at Eleven Rivington. For viewers unfamiliar with Dryer's art, note the visual and literal physicality of her work — how things are built, made, manipulated, textured. Dryer said she wanted her paintings to be "constantly transmuting into a new identity." That means she didn't see painting as a noun — a thing just to be contemplated — but as a verb, something that does something, that *happens, to us*. She's anti-Platonic this way; nothing cool and conceptual here. Embrace this insatiable satyrlike impishness, and you're halfway there. Her color, light, and touch will take you the rest of the distance.

As seen at Eleven Rivington, Dryer's constructed shapes, pieced-together diptychs, and propped panels are antecedents to much

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of the better literalized, concrete, physical abstract painting being made well now by artists like Haley Tompkins, Wendy White, Keltie Ferris, Katherine Bernhardt, Ulrike Muller, and Sarah Crowner. All these artists are pushing and expanding the form in ways that almost makes the word *painting* feel inadequate. *The Signature Painting*, from 1987, has a faux wood surface of concentric rectangles and the artist's initials rendered in elaborate looping letters. The initials are a place from which to make forays and return, something like text melding into doodle, decoration, nest, and autobiography. Beneath this is an angled shelf painted in the same faux-wood pattern. This turns into a perch or lectern that draws on much older latent pictorial energy, transforming into a predella — a painting beneath a painting that comments on both. It's wild to have a quasi-formalist painting get this wonky and break free of formalist discourse. Are you listening, all you locked-in postmodernists?

A casein-on-wood piece from 1989, *Not titled*, is an almost-monochrome stained plywood, like a bed mounted on the wall that curls outward at the top. The whole object becomes like a body, board, or semi-geometric hide — maybe an animal-like piece of geometry. *Captain Courageous*, from 1990 and seen above right, a stained drippy monochrome, has a drawerlike indentation or

divot in it. The thing is like one of Donald Judd's "specific objects." Not quite a painting, not a sculpture or piece of furniture, it's something different and specifically itself, something that can be taken in at one glance. This is painting breaking free, maybe even escaping the word.

Dwyer's painterly path was cut very short. This makes it all the sweeter that in the gallery's nearby annex at 195 Chrystie Street, you can see work by a number of artists like Mary Weatherford, Mika Tajima, Julia Dault, and Jackie Saccoccio, all of whom are making good on ideas that Dwyer put so masterfully into play twenty years ago. *Vita brevis, ars longa*, indeed.