

ELEVEN RIVINGTON FOCUSES ON THE LATE MOIRA DRYER

By Emily Warner



Captain Courageous, 1990. Courtesy Eleven Rivington, NY/Charles Benton

Moira Dryer's *Not Titled* (1989) is a looming, 7-foot-tall board of plywood that, despite its height, feels intimate, charming, and almost fragile. Curving over at the top, like the tip of a sled, the bark-thin wood is painted blue and dotted with yellow orbs that stream downward into thinning tails, like floaters or bobbing dandelions.

The show of Dryer's (1957–1992) paintings at Eleven Rivington is magnificent — although that's slightly too grand a word for these down-to-earth painting-objects, full of wit and personality. The artist, who died young of cancer, is presented as forging a promising but never completed path in abstract painting: A pendant show, installed in the gallery's second space around the corner, gathers contemporary artists working in ways departing from Dryer's practice.

Not Titled captures the particular tensions that structure Dryer's best works: There is the feeling of expansive, almost landscape-like breadth (are we looking into a sky? A watery reflection?) but also of a dumber, opaque material (here, the knotty plywood that shows its horizontal grain beneath the casein). Elsewhere, Dryer uses fabric brocade or metal hardware (grommets, handles) to similar effect, punctuating and interrupting the faces and edges of her paintings. These works never take themselves, or the fictive depths they open onto, too seriously.

Dryer's work owes a debt to big-name painters from mid-century and after; to Morris Louis's color fields, to Agnes Martin's rectangular, etherealizing grids (though Dryer builds her foggy expanses up from a far looser grid of washed-in paint), to Frank Stella's shaped canvases. But Dryer's art is both more quotidian and more poised. *The Vanishing Portrait* (1990), a large painting resting on a tree stump and leaning against the wall, is quiet, restful, but never precious. Its surface is like a mirror washed with a sponge and left to dry. Blue swashes, mostly horizontal, overlap one another, while faint drips and splashes stir the surface like passages of local weather. For all its ravishing serenity, it is humorous, characterful: One long, insouciant drip, thin as a flame, extends nearly the entire length of the painting before ending in a perfect teardrop.

Dryer often occasions comparisons with other '80s-era abstract painters who let the world, and its jazzy, incongruous forms, run riot among the formal play of the canvas — artists like Mary Heilmann, Ross Bleckner, Elizabeth Murray. There's also a hint of the Chicago Imagists in her blurry, trompe-l'oeil squiggles and wobbles.

But Dryer's paintings stand out for their economy (spare in means if rich in effect) and their brimming personalities. *The Mathematicians* (1990), two framed plywood pieces, hang beside one another like fraternal twins; the jungle-green *Captain Courageous* (1990) seduces with its giant, raining splotches, while the drawer-like indentation at bottom winks, irreverently. Throughout, Dryer eschews the universal. Her paintings are adamantly particular, evoking familiar and domestic things (valise, vanity table, empty mirror) from the world of people.

Dryer's relative lack of accessibility (she's not on view in many major collections) nearly allows her to steal the show from the younger painters she's paired with. But many here are compelling. Several, like Dryer, experiment with portrait formats or conventions (Mika Tajima, Jackie Saccoccio); Dryer's play with frames (actual wooden ones, as well as the scalloped edges and perimeters she paints on) are echoed in the constructed canvases and door-like frames of Noam Rappaport and Jeffrey Tranchell. Julia Dault's oil on pleather work is a flatter but still sculptural investigation of painting's objectness, while Mary Weatherford comes closest to matching Dryer's flair for color in a painting of layered washes and neon tubes. If Dryer's death robbed the art world of a great talent, her brief career nevertheless helped to reorient the terms of abstraction in ways that are still reverberating today.