



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Carrie Moyer,
2020 August 20

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Carrie Moyer on August 20, 2020. The interview took place at Moyer's studio in Brooklyn, New York, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie interviewing Carrie Moyer at her studio in Brooklyn. It's August 20th, 2020, and this a Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Carrie, could you tell me how your life and work have changed since March of this year?

CARRIE MOYER: Oh, my God. Um, It's kind of amazing. Well, as the director of a grad program at the Hunter College for the—in the MFA area, the immediate effect of March 13th was total chaos, scrambling, um, uh, you know, I have—or we 125 students in the program, so it's very large, and the loss of studio space was—I mean, it was very like closely felt. Luckily, for my—my studio is in the Brooklyn Army Terminal, and the city which owns this site was like, "Well, you can't come until the quarantine is raised in town," but we would sneak in here anyway, so—but the students were not able to do that. So, I mean, I think everything is just, um, you know, it's been this weird situation of, like, the intertwining of boredom and anxiety, it's sort of profound. And I always think of myself as a—even though I deal with a huge student population and many faculty colleagues, as a kind of a loner, it's like, oh, my God, I really, uh, I really do look to those social interactions with my friends. You know, so, it's been very intense. And my wife, who is the artist Sheila Pepe, had COVID in April, so that was super frightening. So, yeah [laughs]. Should I just keep talking or—

BEN GILLESPIE: If you want. I mean, I'd love—so, what was that like in April, what was it like to care for yourself and to care for your wife?

CARRIE MOYER: It was—you know, the thing—I was born in Michigan and I have a real sort of Midwestern—even though I grew up on the West Coast and primarily in Oregon, I have this real Midwestern, like, okay, it's an emergency, I'm going to, like, put on my big girl pants and just shut everything out. So, that was what happened when Sheila was sick, and, um, it's sort of been over the summer now that she's recuperating, and it takes a really long time that I'm kind of, um, absorbing that fact she was so incredibly sick, but at the same time in April in New York the hospitals were completely overwhelmed. So, she was not sick enough to be taken to the hospital. So, I basically cared for her, you know, like really intensely for a couple for a couple of weeks, and then more not so hovering, shall I say, more or less and after that. But it was very scary, actually. It's scary just because you don't know so much about it, and she only had one or two of the symptoms that was on the sort of CDC list of symptoms. So—and then, it turned out I was tested and I had it and it was completely asymptomatic. So, the difference, all of that stuff, trying to figure it out, not seeing doctors, et cetera.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, following from that episode, have there been any changes in your own work and your own artistic practice during this time?

CARRIE MOYER: Um, it was interesting because Sheila and I had spent the year preparing to do a collaborative show up in Portland, Maine, actually, at the Portland Museum of Art called *Tabernacles Were Trying Times*. And we'd spent—I mean, first of all, it was this amazing invitation, that, um, you know, many artists are partnered with other artists, but it's so rare to be able—to be given the chance to show together. And we have had this sort of sideline where we've collaborated on things over the years, starting at a residency at YaDo about 2011, I think it was.

[00:05:24]

So, we had conceived of this shows as this sort of space for the community to negotiate difference. Like, we literally made this, um, centerpiece in which, you know, Sheila designed these chairs and we designed a kind of, uh, tent form, and there was going to be all this

programming around immigrant rights, racial justice, all sorts of things, lesbian issues, feminist, and within, you know, maybe three weeks of the show being opened it was closed. So, there was this real poignancy to, um, the fact that we had spent all this time thinking about how a museum could function as a place to bring people together. And then, the fact that all of the programming had to go online and, um, I still think—although the show is moving to the Museum of Art and Design in January of 2021, it still feels like it was—it's going to be a much smaller show, um, but the sort of sadness and irony of the whole situation kind of blows my mind. And then, after—so that opened in February, and then I was supposed to come back and get ready for a solo show and get ready for Frieze Art Fair, a solo booth there. Which it ended up that Frieze actually happened, so I had to, like, sneak to my studio and paint during the pandemic, which was interesting and, um, it was kind of a relief actually because it was, like—it felt like even though the art fair had gone online, it felt like, um, there was some normalcy in a way.

Because so much of—I think in the first couple of months there was so much fear and just really sort of the unknown factors around how this would impact, you know, like my students. I mean, 60 percent of my students are unemployed right now, which is incredibly frightening. Luckily, we were able to raise money to help them with tuition this year, so—but the whole landscape, you know, from the New York real estate to, um, you know, how a college would function to how the art market would function, all of these sort of structures that are so important to being part of this organism that's the city, are altered and impacted by this thing. And it's, you know, it's almost like you don't want to think about it too hard because it, uh, it feels like a bottomless pit.

So, and then, you know, all the—I think in the beginning I was like, "Oh, good, it'll go back to being like it was in the '70s." I never lived here in the '70s. I moved to New York in 1980, so, and it was pretty still scary and just, you know—I was going to say destitute, but decrepit is the better word. Um, and in a weird way, I would never want to go back to that, but, um, I guess I was trying to find some kind of silver lining around the economy and how it sort of, you know, affected artists in terms of, um, you know, the reason that art—New York was this, um, bastion of abandoned industrial lofts because it was failing economically. The minute it starts to do well, we're all squeezed for studio space. So, it's an interesting conundrum. And everything is connected, but I'm going on and on. [Laughs.]

[00:10:09]

BEN GILLESPIE: It's great. I was—so, thinking of a couple points where you were just talking about the interconnection and being in New York where everything feels so interdependent and the proximity does make you really aware of the presence of others. But we're also in a moment of profound isolation.

CARRIE MOYER: Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: But we're seeing some of the power of the that interconnectedness through uprisings and the social justice movement, and I guess I was wondering—thinking about your amazing tabernacle show, are things from that—like, how would it change in light of what's happened over the course of 2020?

CARRIE MOYER: I mean, I think that, um, you know, Black Lives Matter movement and the uprisings and the, um, you know, days of marches and protests have been, um, both amazing and really surprising to me. I think because a lot of the issues that are being brought up about parity, about racial diversity, about equity across all—extended to all marginalized people, including women and queer people, and whatever, um, are things that have been part of my way of being. Like as a faculty member it's been something I've worked with my colleagues on on getting more students of color, and—but at the same time, the sort of urgency that is coming from the generation of my students, primarily, um, made me really aware of how institutions move so slowly, and how little—I mean, we can do a little bit inside of an institution. And I think as somebody who was very active as a young artist, or even into my 30s, I think the goal in my mind was, like, okay, I need to get inside an institution and see if I can change it from there.

But now I look at the things that we've tried to do and I feel—they seem very inadequate at this moment because there's such a, um, outpouring of emotion, and, um, you know, everything feels like it's—like there's stone left unturned. We're looking at everything from museums to colleges to libraries to everything. How are social—how we relate to each other, what we can expect of each other, how soon things need to happen, and then part of me because I'm now 60 years old, it's like well, those things are feelings, but they're not facts. It's like a lot of this stuff that feels so urgent is—if it happens at all, it's going to take a much longer timeline. You know

what I mean?

So, part of me is like, yes, this is an amazing kick start that shows how inadequate the last, um, you know, I guess 70 year—if I start from like the '60s, sort of left movements—it shows how inadequate the changes have been or the distance we need to go, but at the same time just being inside a very slow moving behemoth, like Hunter College is just like, oh, my God. [Laughs.] Those two things side up against each other are very intense.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, as someone now who is in a stable position and sometimes sedentary institution, what advice would you give to your younger activist self?

[00:14:50]

CARRIE MOYER: Um, I think—I mean, this is such a cliché, but I'm finding it in my—as I get older, it's like I've become much more—I've become less exacting about how people—about what people are capable of. Like, I feel like right now—and I get it, I get that level of anger and the level of—I mean, I think if I were in my 20s or early 30s right now, I would just be like out of my mind because there's so many aspects of our culture right now that are in serious disrepair. And I think that we have been taught to believe in—and I mean, like everything is suspect at this moment. But I also feel like having these really rigid, um, bars that must be met for types of sort of ethical purity and stuff is not going to—and I participated in that as a younger activist. You know, it's like, this isn't good enough. I mean, I think we're going into an election right now where it's going to be on white people to vote for Biden whether they don't like him or not because they are—how do I say this? It's like if they don't help the Democrats get in, basically it's four more years of subjecting people of color to incredible racism. So, you know, I just—it's like, again, this is this kind of purity situation. It's like, I don't—he's not my candidate, but, anyway—so, all of this stuff that's happening, between the Post Office and the—[laughs]. Speak to me, Ben. [Laughs.]

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, I guess—so by means of wrapping up, I was wondering what sort of—what message would you want to convey for students and artists in the future, say 50 years from now in reflecting on 2020 and making it through so far, knock on wood for the rest of it. What would you—what feels urgent or compelling to say in this snapshot?

CARRIE MOYER: I mean, I think the—you know, we're not in this moment, and we haven't been for a long time, where the avant-gardes, you know, even that term is kind of a relic. But there was a—you know, in the 20th Century, I was born in 1960, the avant-garde had a politic. You know, it was—so, these two—like, the avant-garde and the word radical might go together. Do we think that artists are these change agents in the way that like, um, you know, Malevich or people in the Russian Constructivist movement did, or even, um, you know, like the futurists who were much more conservative, in fact, is it—I guess the point that I'm trying to make is like—and this is something that most artists are going to recognize. It's like one of the things that is and has been sort of critical to art school is the fact that even if one doesn't become an artist ultimately, it becomes a tool for learning how to think in a kind of dialogic and critical way about how things are functioning. And I feel like instead of, um, sort of burying ourselves, even though this is the impulse and we're being told to stay home, it feels really even more necessary to sort of expose ourselves to things and information and participate in the best possible way we can.

And not just by making a painting. Like painting is one aspect of it but being like a full citizen is—just feels really critical right now. So, you know, my personal instinct is I want to just stay in my studio and making paintings, but it's like—and part of that is important, but it's also really, really essential to stay involved with the communities, be aware of what's going on, you know, participate in it. So, that's my message for the day. [Laughs.]

[00:20:42]

BEN GILLESPIE: I think that's wonderful. We've got a—despite being quarantined and learning to take care of one another from a distance, we've still got to stay connected and find new ways of maintaining and building those connections to keep this all grounded and together. So, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

CARRIE MOYER: Thank you, Ben.

[END OF moyer20_1of1_digvid.mp4]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

