

ARTFORUM

BEST OF 2010

Dianna Molzan, Blinky Palermo, Los Angeles group shows

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The best show of the year that I saw was hands down Dianna Molzan's "The Case of the Strand" at Overduin and Kite. The unresolved strangeness and dry-but-goofy formal humor of her meticulously dressed and undressed sculpture-canvases have stayed with and thrilled me for the past 382 days, since it opened its two-month run in November 2009. Abstract painting gets subtly processed through the aesthetic logic of midriff-baring crop tops, revealing cutouts, piping, pigeon droppings, 1980s wrapping paper, coffee-table legs, ceramic flecking, chocolate cake, and Southwest adobe—unexpectedly and thankfully, laughter is Molzan's mode of transcendence.

OPENINGS

Dianna Molzan

BRUCE HAINLEY

*Place: A drawing room.
Time: Right about now.*

CYRIL: Ekphrastically, before taking up some of their core concerns (frame/picture, support/color, individuality/variety, expressiveness/reiteration—although they trouble any rote opposition suggested by the forward slash): Molzan’s paintings launch into a rousing version of “Dem Bones” as if covered by Bryan Ferry.

VIVIAN: Ekphrastically, really?

CYRIL: Why not? They eschew anyone else speaking for them. Like most compelling art, they’re already in advance of the broken arm of any possible philosophical systemization, which often ends up hobbling, crutches for a fit sprinter. Do I mix metaphors? Do I miss metaphors? Yes and yes. The paintings “articulate” quite particularly but also nonchalantly: vogueing their structure, how they’re put together, their constitutive parts. For example, in *Untitled* (all works *Untitled*, 2009), the decision to hem the linen intensifies the bottom edge of the frame and the confluence of “painting” and its structural “supports.” Yet the affective move—akin to the moment when, reaching for a book (remember?), a shirt shifts to bare midriff (say, the much beloved iliac furrow) and you glean a smiling exposure (in the painting’s case, of stark wood)—eludes the flaccid category of “theoretical painting.”

VIVIAN: By which you mean?

CYRIL: Laboriousness passing as painting. Theorizing with stand-ins for paintings. *To the chagrin of theory*. Instead, Molzan spontaneously, haphazardly arranges a bouquet of paintbrush-cleaning dabs (Parfum d’Odilon Redon, with its top notes of self-consciousness), some of which drip to freak the otherwise unadulterated frame. The result beguiles rather than beleaguers because she somehow activates the unassimilable.

VIVIAN: Dude, sometimes the entire thing’s situated on legs, raised away from but hanging on the wall,

loaning it a breakfast-tray-like aspect, regardless of the vantage. Sometimes it juts out, ledgelike. The chestnut thoroughbred number with teal detailing (great brown paintings occur too rarely) sports a protruding forehead.

CYRIL: So: the Ferry spiritual of skeletal structure—of order and revivification—but glammed by the relief of color, precision stylistics, and wry personal tweakiness.

VIVIAN: The artist finds a way to be hard alee from the battering winds of *anything goes*. Her tacking . . .

CYRIL: . . . rather than tactics . . .

VIVIAN: . . . navigated in part by her invention of an ongoing dialogue between Georges Seurat’s *La Grande Jatte*, 1884–86, and Eva Hesse’s *Hang Up*, 1966—both key, even iconic, works at and of the Art Institute of Chicago, where Molzan spent her formative years.

CYRIL: Ah, the Windy City, where I spied you as runner-up for International Mr. Leather. Intrigued by the absence in almost every reproduction of the white moderne frame Seurat designed for *LGJ* (despite the fact that he’d painted a portrait of his painting in its bespoke outfitting in *Les Poseuses*, 1887–88, a back-ground before which bare models arrange them-



selves), Molzan noted that “Hesse’s frame can never be edited out of photographic reproductions as is done with Seurat’s painting. The frame can never be denied as part of the content of the work.” Perhaps the frame or framework takes on such importance because parameters that once defined medium, among so many other things, have been jettisoned?

VIVIAN: That’s a rather long leap into, how you say, allegory.

CYRIL: Do I have to spell out how it’s not? If one response to the quotidian situation is that kid whose party you’re so into . . .

VIVIAN: Ryan Trecartin!

CYRIL: . . . his ferocious shuffling off and reembodyment of the digital coil . . .

VIVIAN: . . . his multiplatform extreme assault in a hacker’s patois that you might brand, um—since his world’s so Mac and in no way PC—Shakespeare Snow Leopard?

CYRIL: . . . then another would be material insistences like Molzan’s. Notice the uniform size and scale of the works, their mirrorlike verticality. Some notion of portraiture revamped through abstraction, let’s call it. Kiddo, if you’re going to text the entire time, I have cucumbers to slice, crusts to



This page: Dianna Molzan, *Untitled*, 2009, oil on linen, 24 x 20".
Opposite page: Dianna Molzan, *Untitled*, 2009, oil and wax on canvas, 24 x 18 x 4 1/4".

trim, preprandial obligations, i.-fucking-e., things to attend to, and won't bother with how the body, as figure and haunting, troubles both projects.

VIVIAN: C'mon. Multitasking's like crunches for me. Stretchers and/or frames, painting's bondage toys. OK. But she's also doing stuff with the support—canvas or linen—as well as the modes of application. They're every bit as much subjects, content: unweav-

I've been rereading Harry Mathews's *Cigarettes*, so I'll put it this way: A quasi-Oulipian, rule-inflected procedure leads to (paradoxical?) freedom. Each part (frame, stretcher, support, pigment), if removed or repressed, somehow returns.

ing the linen, strand by strand, so that what support remains appears frayed, draped, like the worn area of a great pair of jeans; pulling, folding, posing, cutting, jauntily relying on the tension of stretched material to make the canvas into a forehead or—see, I do pay attention—to whip up those hems; italicized brushwork, encaustic-like smoothness, untaped straight

lines, flecked splatters. You know, the kind of nuanced thing that causes Tim Gunn to quiver.

CYRIL: I've been rereading Harry Mathews's *Cigarettes*, so I'll put it this way: A quasi-Oulipian, rule-inflected procedure leads to (paradoxical?) freedom. Each part (frame, stretcher, support, pigment), if removed or repressed, somehow returns. Indicative, this bisque painting, which despite its demonstrative excision I'll refuse to call Fontanesque since any art-historical nod remains only an acknowledgment of possibility, of potential energy accessed—not, thank God, "critiqued" or "subverted" or "defaced." So, bisque: The peekaboo ellipse refrains from Protestantism—e.g., from preaching, "Neutralizing any illusions, I expose my materials, structures"—and instead revels in sexiness, perhaps borrowing moves also from YSL . . .

VIVIAN: Oh, so much to be learned! How do you think Deneuve knew to carry that sheaf of green wheat to YSL's funeral? Hours of atelier chat?

CYRIL: Let's agree to agree—unproven—that the sly spring verdancy of the ellipse which emphasizes, sutures, and counterbalances the excision echoes Deneuve's semigloss mourning poise. She pulverizes any botched gropings at relevance. Molzan's elegant economy: The piece of fabric cut out, creating the negative silhouette, is not only reused but also trans-

formed (bandage, strap). [*Sigh.*] I'm thinking old-fashioned now. Really, don't your thumbs get tired?

VIVIAN: N-o-o-o-o . . . I can go all night, as you know. In another work, most of what makes up the painting could be misunderstood as "frame": Such a structure is encrusted . . .

CYRIL: . . . ensorcelled . . .

VIVIAN: . . . by the strands, unwoven, from the linen that usually makes up the entirety of a painting's ground—the natty, knotty surface of it all painted salted-butter yellow—except for a snug tube top of unprimed, unpainted linen, hugging and wrapped around the top of the work. While the outer sides of the painting are yellow, the interior edge of the work is seashell pink. Molzan's edges, the views from the side, excel at surprises.

CYRIL: I admire how Molzan invokes and uses elements of fashion and chic without becoming beholden to any citation. She recognizes the difference between reference and citation. It's the police who give citations, and ours is an age of citationality run amok. I won't digress on the, how you say I say, allegorical connection of reference with possibility, even communal generosity, and citation with facticity and limits—limits accepted as liberation. Rather, how witty the inversion: The cloth is unadorned while the structure sports a pastel getup—usually



This page, from left: Dianna Molzan, *Untitled*, 2009, oil on linen, 24 x 20". Dianna Molzan, *Untitled*, 2009, oil on linen, 24 x 20". Opposite page, from left: Dianna Molzan, *Untitled*, 2009, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 x 3". View of Dianna Molzan, "The Case of the Strand," 2009, Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles.

it's clothes hitting skin and bone that provide the color, the flair. Here, constant vice versa.

VIVIAN: I see why you nodded to body trouble earlier. Invoking whodunits, Molzan called her solo debut "The Case of the Strand." The announcement had fancy Maggie Smith from *Murder by Death* as the works'—and the artist's?—representative. I love Dame Mags in the Harry Potter movies!

CYRIL: The paintings can act as "types." Thus the artist's précis on Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* in a text she sent to her gallerists.

VIVIAN [reading]:

Each character is presented in a highly stylized and contrasting manner—a dowdy introverted woman is seated in the same dining car as a glamorous aristocratic couple and a crude businessman—each character countering and balancing the next. In the convention of a whodunit, "types" are further accentuated by limiting the number of characters introduced, usually by secluding them in a controlled setting, be it a ship, remote estate, or as in *Orient Express* an elegant train stopped on a snowy mountain pass. Through limitation, each character remains singular, distinct, and weighted.

Because we know the convention of a murder mystery, we also know that the characters will be revealed as interconnected in numerous and unexpected ways. But no matter how far-fetched and

intricate a mystery plot becomes, it must be convincing and hold up to logic in the end.

... I want to offer individual works that perhaps appear stylistically opposed to each other but create a dynamic counterbalance that works as a whole.

Don't you find it refreshing to consider characters rather than characteristics, to have the controlled setting of the gallery become a potential murder scene?

CYRIL: Artists, writers—we all have enabling devices that allow us to do what we wish to do. I can't count the times I've wished to kill someone in the vicinity of art.

VIVIAN: Perhaps that brings us back to Seurat and *L.G.J.* T. J. Clark sees things blown to smithereens in the point of pointillism.

CYRIL [quoting from memory]: "It planted a bomb in the middle of the bourgeois idea of freedom—and order, and individuality, and Art-ness, and taste, and 'touch,' intuition, variety, expressiveness. All the aesthetic categories of the nineteenth century, including most of the modernist ones, disappeared down the black hole of Seurat's technique." No one does ominous better than T. J. If I didn't have to prep our coffee enemas, I'd go into greater "deets," as you're prone to put it, about not only how all of that resonates but also how the black hole sunshine of that painting has long since been the obliterating

light in which, like it or not, any artist worth the designation must work.

VIVIAN: I feel your parry, sir. You wish to discuss what some have referred to as the "Quiznos" painting.

CYRIL: Yes. Seurat's anarchy, his pointed annihilations, arrives as a peach surface, flecked. Whatever its unimpeachably high-1980s interior decorating cachet, its effects exude a restroom countertop in a Quiznos. Many might assume we arrive too late even to watch the last dregs of Seurat's rowdy history shooting down the drain, but I'd claim that with the Quiznos vibes, Molzan is tracing, backward, the lineage of the countertop manufacturer's design-team work—straight through the Memphis Group—to its unconscious (?) source: She returns what's now a vernacular to its radioactive seedlings.

VIVIAN: Am I supposed to cry?

CYRIL: Of course not. Partially, that's what the green "velvet" ribbon around the waist of the painting accomplishes, cinching one possible tale of devolution with something leading somewhere else entirely. It would be a waste to fret about our belatedness. With disarming aplomb, Molzan shrugs it off. Shrewd recognition of the situation alleviates any whiff of nostalgia or regret.

VIVIAN: Coffee's ready. □

BRUCE HAINLEY IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF *ARTFORUM*.

