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Claire Moore

SHARYN FINNEGAN

Claire Moore has been painting, making prints, and writing prose, all prolifically, since the 1930s. This blending of the verbal and visual is only one manifestation of an open artistic attitude which seems unconfined by traditional art world boundaries. She works in both abstract and figurative modes; a charcoal sketch peers through a painting; her drawings can be made completely of words; her prints take on new and inventive forms. Any material is fodder for her work. This diversity in no way reflects confusion—her clear, honest voice always comes through boldly.

The periods in which she has lived and the influences to which she has been exposed fortuitously have contributed to her ever-widening sense of freedom and helped develop her audacious style, without eliminating the personal and intimate from her work. Hers is the story of an independent woman emerging from the fiercely male New York art establishment and making its lessons her own to the point of their becoming quite “other.”¹ Therein, perhaps, lies a partial explanation for the slight critical attention given her work.

In the 1970s, there were more possibilities for women and figurative artists. Some recognition has come: Moore has had several one-woman shows in New York, including one at the New Museum (1979); and has been in group exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of Art, Downtown. She has received grants from the New York State Council on the Arts (1976) and the Tiffany Foundation (1979). Encouraging, yes, and yet, in seeking a permanent dealer, she has been told more than once (and from women dealers, too) that artists over 40 need not apply.²

Clair Mahl was born in New York City in 1917. She remembers knowing she was an artist even before starting school. Her earliest specific memory is of sitting on the floor next to her mother who was at work on the sewing machine. She drew the machine, but experienced frustration because she could not make her drawing “do” what the machine was doing. This desire to get everything observed and experienced into her work eventually led to the incorporation of words into her mature painting. She refers to her labeling as “words conveying bits of information I would like to remember but which for the most part cannot be drawn.”³ Yet her drawing is clearly a strong talent and showed itself early. A pencil cityscape done at age 10 shows

remarkable ability, as well as some of the impulses still operating 50 years later—every surface is given texture and energy by being filled with lines going in different directions. Her drawings today are packed with scribbled, marching strokes now bursting with experience, giving the works density and a timeless substance.

Her Russian-born father, a factory production supervisor, was a socialist and supporter of women’s rights; Claire was encouraged to express herself in whatever form she chose. At ten, she studied pottery painting at Macy’s, the New York department store. Her mother described Claire’s hands as “being precious like gold” because of what they could do, and this loving pride provided the foundation for a long, purposeful career.

While in high school, the young artist attended free evening adult education art classes. Her teacher was Werner Drewes of the Bauhaus; he recognized and encouraged her gifts, and was the first to buy her work when at 17 she showed at the Washington Square Outdoor Art Exhibit. From these early efforts under Drewes’s influence, she sensed that a painting had its own life and evolved from its own internal logic. Her teacher urged her to respect the integrity of the picture, and this mystical experience continues to guide her work process today.

As her involvement with art deepened, she found that her family’s appreciation of her talents did not extend to entertaining seriously the idea of her becoming a professional artist. She agreed to enroll in a liberal arts program at Hunter College, but before the end of the first year she returned to her art studies. She received a scholarship in 1935 to the Art Students League, where she studied with Harry Wickey and Charles Locke. Wickey, especially, was helpful to her; he stressed a direct, honest approach to work and again emphasized the integrity of the picture. Wickey and Drewes contributed to her no-nonsense approach to the construction of a work of art.

At the end of that first year at the League (during summer vacation), fellow-student Jackson Pollock interested her in apprenticing at David Siqueiros’s atelier on 14th Street. The summer extended into a year. Siqueiros was creating art for working-class organizations and political rallies. Although Moore did not share his politics, she found him a “lively character” and especially respected

his incorporation of any and all matter, including industrial materials and found objects from dump sites, into his art work. She remembers particularly a float for a May Day parade when Siqueiros put some old mattresses, their springs exposed, on the back of a flat-bed truck and then covered them with a large blue cloth with white caps to create the effect of a moving sea. Moore's contributions to the float were a mule and an elephant—representing both political parties—made of chicken wire, which were placed in the outstretched hands of a large, drowning *papier maché* "capitalist" with a ticker tape head. All was delicately controlled from the cab to move about in wild desperation.

The legacy of these collaborations for Moore was a healthy irreverence for art and the freedom to experiment. She did not ally herself with the belief in the irrational that was emerging from the atelier at this time. Although a realist, Siqueiros, found inspiration in the shapes suggested by the accidents of poured paint, an idea that obviously interested Pollock. Moore had no use for chance effects and has remained committed to an underlying, felt structure.

An anecdote from this period illustrates both Moore's spirit and the resistance shown toward women artists. At the atelier, she found Pollack generous and helpful. But one



FIG. 1. Claire Moore, *Hail* (1965), 60" x 36". Collection of the Artist.

evening, while having a few beers in the Jumble Shop on 8th Street and discussing the "woman question," Pollock announced, as he did pointedly to many women artists over the years: "You have to have a penis to be a great artist." Moore, in a fury, leapt to her feet and in a loud, angry voice replied: "If you could do what you're supposed to with your penis, you wouldn't need it for a paintbrush!" Her independence continues to be a beacon for younger women artists. Painter Pat Passlof remembers her as "one of the very few women weathering the windy dialectic of the Waldorf Cafeteria in the late Forties."⁴

During World War II, Moore went to Washington, D.C., to contribute to the war effort; she worked for a time on maps for the Coast Geodetic Survey. She overworked, became ill, and went to live in a convent on the Papago Indian Reservation in Arizona. Here she started painting landscapes and Indian portraits, using the loose, broad-stroked, simplified style she still uses today, although her palette was darker then.

When Moore returned to New York (1945) with her considerable body of work, she was again faced with the problem of how to paint and live. She applied to the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire and found that two recommendations were required. She discovered that Ferdinand Léger had arrived in New York from France and thought that his recommendation would need no seconding. She asked the master to look at her work, but when he saw her dark palette he declared he could not possibly recommend her. He proposed instead that she tell him about her stay with the Indians and, in turn, he would tell her about painting. He was a didactic teacher, and it took Moore several years to find her own voice again. But he underscored the value of boldness and his imaginative figurative work was something that stayed with her, albeit submerged during a period of abstraction, but resurfacing several decades later. (She finally went to MacDowell three times—in 1945, 1977 and 1979.)

It was in the charged atmosphere of New York's Abstract Expressionist movement in the late 1940s that Moore did her most abstract work. Ultimately she found the vocabulary of the gesture inadequate and the philosophy of the irrational unsatisfying. Her large, totally abstract work from these few years was stored in California shortly after she moved there in the early 1950s, but she was unable to keep up the storage payments and most of this work was lost. What she took with her from Abstract Expressionism was an energized gesture, but with a deliberateness that became structure.

She married, briefly, another artist, and then, in 1950, married David Moore, a medical engineer. Neither husband took her career seriously, but as they did not interfere, she continued to work. With the second marriage came the move to California and the birth of her daughter, Nellie, in 1953. While bedridden for several months during the pregnancy, she founded an unusual magazine, *Artists View*. Seeking a way to put images and words together, she invited artists or poets to produce an issue, and would work with them, editing and suggesting. She enjoyed provoking artists to use words and poets to use images. Sculptor Jeremy Anderson, painter Hassel Smith, and poets Madeleine Gleason and Robert

Duncan were among those involved in the eight or nine issues that appeared between 1951 and 1953.

Like so many creative women with families, Moore began working while the family slept. She also directed, and taught at the Marianne Hartwell School of Design in San Francisco. (She now teaches part-time at the College of Staten Island, CUNY.)

As she turned more to her own life for subject matter, the figure began to dominate her paintings again. She never abandoned abstraction, however, and it remains the separate, second stream of her work. The abstract does not evolve from the figurative—neither mode depends on the other. In the late 1950s, when her mature style began to emerge, the abstract work (playful, graphic work on paper) was dominated by words. She drew inventively, often quite humorously, with letters and words. The paintings are filled with images of her growing child, herself, their landscape, and their house (which she had designed). Her palette is vivid, filled with the light of the sun and sea; the early darkness is gone. The brushstroke is narrower, almost a scribble, and very visible. Its urgency contributes to the impression of spontaneity in her paintings, which are in fact thoroughly planned.

When her marriage ended in 1962, Moore and her daughter returned to New York. Becoming independent was a struggle, but an exhilarating one. Her work blossomed. From 1963 to 1967, she did a series of sexually oriented nude figures, predominantly men—one of the first women to use this subject freely and explicitly. In *Hail* (Fig. 1; 1965) a frontally positioned, large, muscular male nude with arms upraised and legs akimbo, postures with pride. His pink fleshiness bursts beyond the dark contour lines of his torso; the painterly image confronts the viewer with immediacy; there is no illusion of space. It is a raw, almost flagrant, celebration of life and paint. *Mask and Man* (1966) shows the heads and shoulders of two figures facing away from each other; one is masked. Again bright skin tones are contained within the heavy dark contours, and a light blue, opaque background surrounds them. As the two figures pass by each other obliquely, one feels the chill of avoidance and isolation. The simplified composition and expressive drawing enhance the emotional power.

In the last decade, Moore has both experimented with new media and solidified her style. The paintings are more formal, with greater inner tension, as if with age reality is stripped to its essentials. For Moore, "painting is pleasing because it's difficult. The risk-taking is about being alive." She continues to challenge herself. Words now enter the figurative paintings; they are part of the composition, and serve to enlarge the concept. Through gesture and labeling the figures have an identity, but their generalized features give them a timeless, universal quality. One series of recent paintings is based on a long-dead brother now known only to her, so she could recreate him as she wished; another is based on saints, who, outside a religious context, have become highly personalized. The "Brother" series uses words evocatively, suggesting fragments of memories. Some words are stenciled in various colors, others are written in caption form. In *He Talked With His Hands* (1979), Moore splits the



FIG. 2. Claire Moore, *The Artist is a Saint* (1980), 50" x 26". Collection of the Artist.

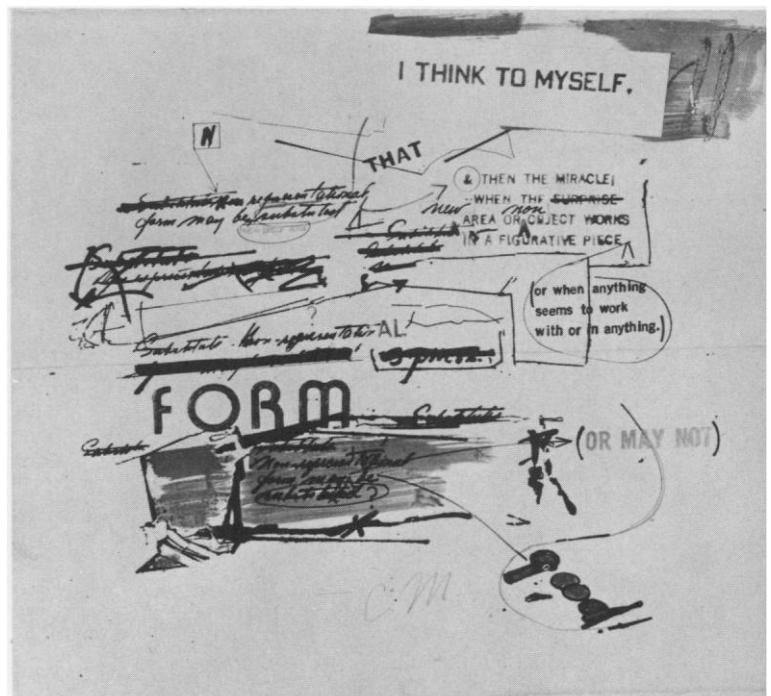


FIG. 3. Claire Moore, *Good* (1976), mimeograph print, woodblock, stencil, acrylic and rubber stamp, 14" x 15". Collection of the Artist.

canvas into two images of the lower half of her brother's face; there is a large gesturing hand before each image and the title written across the bottom ties the two together. Subdued pastel colors with subtle variations make these oversized images approachable.

The Artist is a Saint (1980; Fig. 2) (from the "Saint" series) has the solidly seated saint reaching toward the edge of a fragment of a mirror image. Hovering around the head is written "the saint is an artist, the artist is a saint." In *Sour and Disapproving, Therefore Graceless* (1980), two large totemic "saint" heads positioned like mug shots, one frontal and one in profile, have broad, somberly arranged features. The delicate coloring softens the heavy heads, and the vigorous brushwork energizes them.

In much of her recent work there are sharp divisions in the composition. For emphasis, Moore sometimes sews disparate pieces of canvas together. (She also sews, crochets and knits her own imaginative clothes.)

The thickness of the paint on her canvases gives way to a dense, vigorous scribbling in the drawings, where every space is given life. These sketches are more particularized than the paintings; they are like intimately detailed pages from a journal. Her ironic eye chronicles her experiences: a teaching stint and her stay in a faded Chicago hotel, or a brief, intense hospital visit seen from the strange perspective of the supine patient. The narrative dimension comes both from her integration of extensive written notations of observations and impressions and from her visual descriptions. The words are used visually yet with respect for their meaning, as in the scrolls of Chinese script writers.

Moore's current abstract work indicates a lyrical and delicate side of her style. On long sheets of pieced-together Japanese rice paper she floats small handmade, tinted, cut paper shapes interspersed with stenciled and written words in various colors. They gently evoke feelings which need not be made specific by reading the words. Indicating the multiple aspects of the words for her, Moore has written: "There are small variations of tone in a single letter. There is also my emotional response to that letter. . . . I cannot write the letter 'A' or even make an accidental mark on a piece of paper without drawing. To write is to draw."⁵

Some paper works are purely word pictures—long scrolls which Moore calls "manuscripts" (Fig. 3; 1976). Manuscript in this context has two meanings. First, she refers to medieval scriptoria, especially those made by women, which she found more intimate and less self-conscious than the men's, and which became a source of inspiration to her. She

was impressed with these aesthetically pleasing pages composed purely of words. She is also referring to a manuscript as the original draft of the writer, with corrections and notations in the margins, because in her word pictures corrections and changes in the words are a part of the image; the thought process of the artist is shown. Unlike those of 20 years ago, these current word pictures are looser, more personal and less dependent on the cleverness of the words used. They refer to the artist's thoughts on art, herself, and those around her.

Moore has been involved in printing since her Art Students League days, and has always written prose (sometimes children's books). To print both her images and books cheaply, she altered a mimeograph machine to make it produce prints that have the quality of lithographs. Photographs, rubbings, oil crayons, glue, and anything that comes to hand are transformed into timeless pictographs. Five "mini-fictions" and other small book editions are distributed by Printed Matter Inc., and she has given classes in her unique mimeograph technique.

Despite occasional doubts as to why more sustained support did not present itself during her long career, Moore describes herself as "compulsively an artist." Perhaps she has been neglected because she cannot be easily categorized. Her figurative paintings do not fit neatly into the ascendant realist movement. The poetry of her abstract work has wide appeal, but she refuses to be defined only by this work. The diaristic drawings and other word-art relate to work done by a number of women artists, including Pat Steir, Elinor Antin, Dottie Attie, Nancy Spero, Alexis Smith, among others. Perhaps in the pluralist art world of today there will be room for pluralist artists.

Moore knows only that she must work, and she continues to do so prodigiously. •

1. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), xvi.
2. All information and quotes are drawn from interviews with the artist in her New York studio, November 1980, unless otherwise noted.
3. Quoted in Deborah Perlberg's review of Moore's 1979 exhibition at Robert Friedus Gallery, New York, *Artforum* (January 1979), 32.
4. Pat Passlof, "Claire Moore" *Arts Magazine* (December 1979), 78.
5. Claire Moore, "The Word-Art Women," unpublished, 3-4.

SHARYN FINNEGAN, a realist painter, exhibits at the Prince Street Gallery, New York, and teaches painting and art history part-time at the College of Mount St. Vincent's, Riverdale. She met Claire Moore while both were artists-in-residence at the MacDowell Colony, Summer 1979.