



## Figure and Ground

By **DANIEL KUNITZ** | March 20, 2008

THE BRITISH ARTIST **KATY MORAN (B. 1975)** EMPLOYS A PALETTE out of Turner, brushstrokes borrowed from de Kooning, and the press release of a lesser Gerhard Richter or some other conceptual painter. Yet without supplemental information, a visitor to her first solo show at Andrea Rosen Gallery would likely assume the small paintings on view were merely gestural abstractions.

Take, for instance, "Nature Boy" (2007), in which broad looping strokes of turquoise, brown, and black cavort with thin, calligraphic squiggles and lines of tan and gray amid an atmosphere of drier, wide passages of white and pale yellow. Like all the canvases here, it is a rectangle of 15 by 18 inches, with generously applied acrylics. One might never guess it was based on a photograph.

Ms. Moran tries to free herself from the current of nostalgia, which seems to pull her work back in time, by alerting us, in the press release, to the fact that her "source" imagery is bracingly modish: snapshots, as well as images culled from the Internet and magazines. In a sense, this approach puts her in a line of artists who have tried, explicitly or not, to reconcile figuration and abstraction, a line that reaches back to Turner and would include Richard Diebenkorn as well as her countryman, Howard Hodgkin.

The most immediate perceptual clue to Ms. Moran's approach is the fact that, for the most part, these paintings retain the figureground relationship of traditional representational painting. In other words, the painterly incidents here cluster, like wrestlers on a mat, in the center of the canvases, surrounded by calm strokes of a dominant background color. If, however, we accept the press release at face value — a dicey thing to do without hearing from the artist herself, it seems to me — then we should be able to discern content or imagery "embedded" in these apparent abstractions.

As in clouds, I do and I don't. The ochre and yellow spikes erupting out of the central, squirmy mass in "Big Wow" (2007) could, I suppose, be geyser jets or sails. And certainly the earlike, central swirl and rounded, multi-hued haunches, and stiff brown lines of "Shycat" (2008) might, for some, coalesce into a curled corporeal figure, be it human or feline. But I must admit, such literal figures are not the first or second associations I had looking at these pictures.

I did, in fact, see the small face peeking out on the left-hand side of "Lenny K" (2008). Though, frankly, such an obvious figure materializing out of what is otherwise a totally abstract work — sturdy white and green vertical marks supporting a writhing ball of curving whites and pale olives and browns on the right-hand side, for instance — seems disconcerting, even a little cheesy. And that would be fine, if Ms. Moran were making jokes out of a style long associated with high-minded spiritualism and earnest

emotional explorations, yet the overall tone here — not to mention the dour tones — feels quite serious. Indeed, the sooty whorls and foreboding, malignant yellow polyps of "Smoker's Junction" (2007) seem as serious as a terminal prognosis.

More diffuse and with brighter yellows, "Wasabi Without Tears" (2007) is certainly on the lighthearted end of this spectrum, despite its bloodstained central moment. And again, I couldn't help seeing a little snail emerging from its yellow and green horseradish fumes — though I think it would go better with garlic and oil.

Still, the pervasive solemnity of the work on view here remains all but impossible to escape, and that, I think, has to do as much with the imagery as with the peasoupy palette. In almost every case, the artist concentrates the energy of these works in the center of her canvases: They feel biblical, as though primordial gases and elements were slowly congealing into something not yet formed. Happily, their diminutive sizes undercut the grandiosity of their gestures. That said, the peekaboo figuration hidden amidst deftly miasmic, abstract brushstrokes begs comparison with the work of another Englishwoman, Cecily Brown, who tends to be more jubilant in tone, more rococo in subject matter, and more all-over in her approach to abstraction. Ms. Brown's big, sexy canvases also preen and strut more. Yet both women share an evasiveness that, to me, seems more to do with indecision than seduction.

Consider Ms. Moran's "Orton" (2008), among my favorites here. Something bold is happening in the center, a series of wonderfully showy marks — feathery oranges, skidding reds and blues, a sturdy bit of violet — all made to feel centripetally concentrated by a series of curving lines that define the bowl-like edge of the "image." But it also looks as if the artist has tried to paint over the entire canvas with off-white paint, as if she were going to start over again, leaving only parts of an underlying painting visible. The result could be gorgeous or tentative, depending on one's mood.

I have no problem with work that asks the viewer to take in some information along with its visible presentation. Ms. Moran's relationship to her source material and to the conceptual basis of this work seems as unresolved as the imagery she purports to find within these abstractions. Then again, I applaud the attempt to rough up the smoothly worn road of abstract painting, and Ms. Moran has done so with verve and considerable skill. It will be fascinating to see where this road takes her.

*Through April 23 (525 W. 24th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-627-6000).*