

Frank Moore MATRIX 280: THEATER OF HUMAN MELTING

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM AND PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

This exhibition represents a small portion of the vast body of creative work by the late Berkeley-based artist and teacher Frank Moore (1946–2013). Over the course of more than five decades, Moore used painting, performance, public access television, and an extensive writing practice to explore the unlimited capacity for humans to connect. This relentless pursuit was necessitated by the fact that Moore was born with a visible disability and could not walk or talk.

Moore described his early life:

My art is rooted in breaking out of isolation. Until I was 17, I did not have any way to communicate except through my family members. For a couple of my teenage years, I was very hard of hearing. My hearing cleared up. I invented my head pointer when I was 17. My communication isolation was then dispelled. But it took me another ten years to shake off the isolation caused by my attitudes and self-image. This early isolation allowed me to observe life and people as an outsider. I always wanted to break physical, emotional, and spiritual isolation—first for myself, but then, for other people.¹

After his childhood and college years in San Bernardino, California, Moore spent formative periods at the Brotherhood of the Spirit commune in western Massachusetts and among radical communities in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he wrote articles for progressive publications under the pen name Unicorn. But it was in Berkeley that Moore thrived, producing a vast and varied body of work. While living in various communal households, he drew inspiration from a range of influences, including the durational performances of Joseph Beuys, the art-as-life philosophy of Alan Kaprow’s Happenings, and the unrefined do-it-yourself strategies of punk music. Moore’s confidence and productivity, however, were hard-won. As he described, the biggest challenge was his own internalized sense of inadequacy:

No matter what I accomplished, no matter how smart or warm or giving I was, I would still be an ugly black hole always taking more than I gave. I was stuck in that piece of the cultural frame that I had accepted. The cultural expectation had won. I and everyone had lost because I bought into it. But there was a point when I was around 28 when one day I decided that I did not want to be in a reality where I was

ugly, where I could not give all I needed to give. It simply was not how things should be, not just for me, but for everyone. So I decided to act and think as if I were beautiful. I did not tell anyone of my decision. But within two weeks people started telling me that I had physically changed. I used this feedback, this sign, to deepen the reality shaping. This new reality opened up new possibilities for everyone.²

If you were to cross UC Berkeley’s Sproul Plaza in the late 1970s, there’s a good chance you would have encountered Moore sitting by himself in his wheelchair, a long pointer attached to his head of unruly brown hair. From a colorful board of letters and words on his lap hung a sign that read, “Talk to me.”

He explained:

My body gives me a tool that other artists spend years to create. Most artists are not as lucky as me. They do not have the built-in advantages and shields that I have. They need to resist the real world, the normal world, more than I do. They need to be more sneaky to avoid being seduced by the business and politics of art.³

In 1978 Moore converted a storefront space on Bancroft Avenue into The Theater of Human Melting, a performance and workshop site where he developed performances, wrote screenplays, and mentored students in his philosophies of connection. The performances were participatory, durational, challenging events that synthesized his work in poetry, performance, painting, and collaboration. These works also included paintings—on canvases as well as bodies—to create an utterly immersive experience.

The impetus for *Frank Moore / MATRIX 280* was the recent acquisition by BAMPFA of two of Moore’s paintings: *Mariah* (1977) and *Patti Smith* (1979). Although Moore actively rejected categorizations of all kinds, we have decided to focus on his lesser known contribution to painting as a means of introduction to his large and complex archive (housed at UC Berkeley’s Bancroft Library). And not incidentally, painting, a distinctly physical medium, affords us the opportunity to contemplate the essential questions that all of Moore’s work proposes about our bodies in relationship not only to objects and materials (canvas, paint, a computer keyboard), but also to each other as subjects and viewers, artists and models.

The exhibition includes twenty-nine paintings on canvas and paper that Moore executed from the mid-1960s through the early 1980s. Although the artist was often engaged with abstraction, many of Moore's paintings are figurative, depicting friends or collaborators or drawn from the contemporary pop culture lexicon. Never one to be confined to categories and always on the lookout for new means of connection, Moore was an early adopter of digital painting technologies, eventually forgoing paint and canvas altogether and using programs such as Corel PaintShop Pro to make his work.

Although Moore is credited as the director, the video *Let Me Be Frank* was produced posthumously by his family as the opening sequence for a series of videos based on his autobiography, *Art of a Shaman*. This segment serves as a provocative, boisterous, and joyful introduction to Moore's complete creative enterprise, complicating and conversing with the selection of paintings on display and encouraging deeper, embodied connections in a world of increasing fragmentation and isolation.

Vincent Fecteau and Keith Wilson, Guest Curators

Frank Moore / MATRIX 280: Theater of Human Melting is organized by BAMPFA staff and guest curated by Vincent Fecteau and Keith Wilson, with BAMPFA Curatorial Assistant Claire Frost.

The MATRIX program is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis.

Sources:

1. Frank Moore, *Art of a Shaman*, 2nd ed. (CreateSpace, 2011), p. 5.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

FRONT

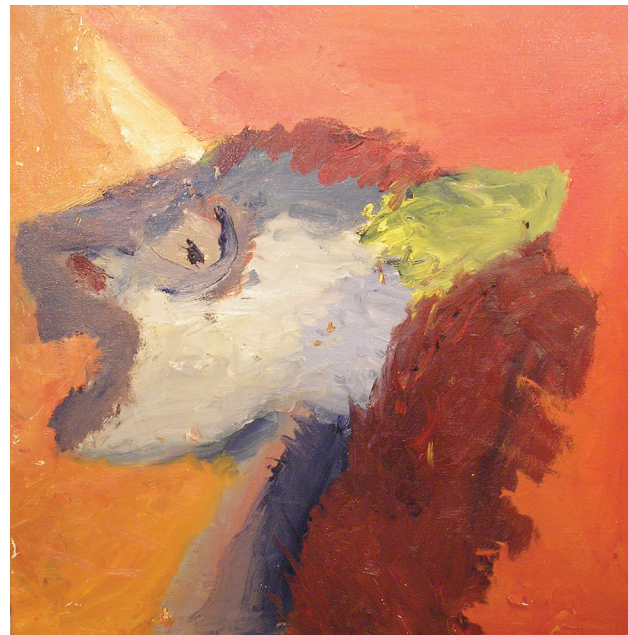
Frank Moore: *Patti Smith*, 1979; oil on canvas; 34 x 38 in.; BAMPFA collection, gift of Linda Mac and Michael LaBash, Inter-Relations.

BACK, TOP

Frank Moore: *Mariah*, 1977; oil on canvas; 40 x 34 in.; BAMPFA collection, gift of Linda Mac and Michael LaBash, Inter-Relations.

BACK, BOTTOM

Frank Moore: *Unicorn*, 1975; oil on canvas; 30 x 30 in.



Related Event

Curators' Talk

January 25, 2023, 5:30 PM

Biography

Frank Moore (1946–2013) received his Master of Fine Arts from the San Francisco Art Institute in performance/video in 1983. He was the creator of the cabaret show *The Outrageous Beauty Revue* (1979–82), which melded performance, music, and a do-it-yourself mise-en-scène into an anti-beauty contest and punk spectacle. His variety show, *Frank Moore's Unlimited Possibilities*, has aired weekly on Berkeley Public Access since 2001. Moore was voted Best Performance Artist by the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* in 1992. His archive is housed at UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library, and two of his paintings are in the BAMPFA collection.

Checklist

All works by Frank Moore and from the collection of Michael LaBash and Linda Mac, Inter-Relations, unless otherwise noted.

<i>Ball</i> 1960s Oil on canvas 12 x 14 in.	<i>Seascape</i> 1965 Oil on cardboard 10 x 13½ in.	<i>Koala</i> 1975 Oil on canvas 30 x 22 in.	<i>Woman with a Boa</i> 1976 Oil on canvas 36 x 36 in.	<i>Sea Nude</i> 1980 Oil on canvas 40½ x 28½ in.
<i>Untitled</i> 1960s Oil on cardboard 14 x 1½ in.	<i>The First Rebel</i> 1966 Oil on canvas board 12 x 15 in.	<i>Rabbit on a Scooter</i> 1975 Oil on canvas 36¾ x 36¾ in.	<i>Mariah</i> 1977 Oil on canvas 40 x 34 in. BAMPFA collection, gift of Linda Mac and Michael LaBash, Inter-Relations	<i>Innocent</i> 1981 Oil on canvas 36 x 36 in.
<i>Untitled</i> 1960s Oil on cardboard 9 x 11½ in.	<i>Abstract Face</i> 1970s Oil on canvas board 12 x 16 in.	<i>Unicorn</i> 1975 Oil on canvas 30 x 30 in.		<i>Midnight</i> 1981 Oil on canvas 34 x 34 in.
<i>Untitled</i> 1960s Oil on cardboard 14 x 1½ in.	<i>Self-Portrait</i> 1973 Oil on canvas 28 x 30 in.	<i>Ape</i> 1976 Oil on canvas 12 x 16 in.	<i>Batman's Face</i> 1979 Oil on canvas 40 x 40 in.	<i>Mother and Baby</i> 1981 Oil on canvas 30 x 40 in.
<i>Untitled</i> 1960s Oil on cardboard 14 x 10¼ in.	<i>Frankenstein</i> 1974 Oil on canvas 30 x 36 in.	<i>Batman #2</i> 1976 Oil on canvas 36 x 36 in.	<i>Patti Smith</i> 1979 Oil on canvas 34 x 38 in. BAMPFA collection, gift of Linda Mac and Michael LaBash, Inter-Relations	<i>Let Me Be Frank</i> 2016 Video; sound, color; 4:26 min.
<i>Untitled</i> 1960s Oil on canvas board 12 x 16 in.	<i>Frank & Wendy</i> 1975 Oil on canvas 40 x 40 in.	<i>Darth Vader</i> 1976 Oil on canvas 36 x 36 in.		
<i>Untitled</i> 1960s Oil on paper 8¾ x 11½ in.		<i>Silver Surfer</i> 1976 Oil on canvas 30 x 30 in.	<i>Corpse Lover</i> 1980 Oil on canvas 36 x 40 in.	