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Couple partners up for interactive PMA show

Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe, who met in Maine, open 'Tabernacles for Trying Times,' which includes a tent meant for conversation.

BY **BOB KEYES** STAFF WRITER

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe: Tabernacles for Trying Times”

WHERE: Portland Museum of Art, 7 Congress Square

WHEN: Opens Friday, through June 7

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday

ADMISSION & INFO: \$18 adults, \$15 seniors and students; free 4 to 8 p.m. (207) 775-6148 or portlandmuseum.org



Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe at work at Civitella Ranieri Foundation in Italy. Photo by Marco Giugliarelli for Civitella Ranieri Foundation, courtesy of PMA

“Tabernacles for Trying Times,” opening Friday at the Portland Museum of Art, creates a place where people can congregate as a community and talk about how they want to live.

The exhibition by Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe includes their solo work – Moyer is an abstract painter and Pepe makes sprawling fiber installations – and a collaborative site-specific piece they’re making for Portland, “Parlor for the People,” that will serve as a gathering place for people to consider the values espoused by the artists and their work, including justice, equality and the sharing of knowledge.

In practice, it will be a big tent in the middle of the gallery, made by Moyer and Pepe and a team of helpers from the master’s of fine arts program at Maine College of Art.

“They are creating this big faux tent for all of us to convene under,” said Jaime DeSimone, the museum’s associate curator for contemporary art. “We want this space to be an offshoot of a living room, where we can have a conversation instead of poking each other on social media.”



Carrie Moyer, “Cloud Buds,” 2019. Photo by Steven Bates, courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York, and PMA

The conversations will be both planned and spontaneous. On Thursdays from March until early June, the museum will partner with community organizations to host a discussion series, called the Dream Action Factory, dedicated to specific topics raised in the exhibition, things like feminism and art as activism, that can connect people, DeSimone said. The parlor also will be a place where people can come in, sit and engage in what Pepe describes as improvised crocheting or knitting.

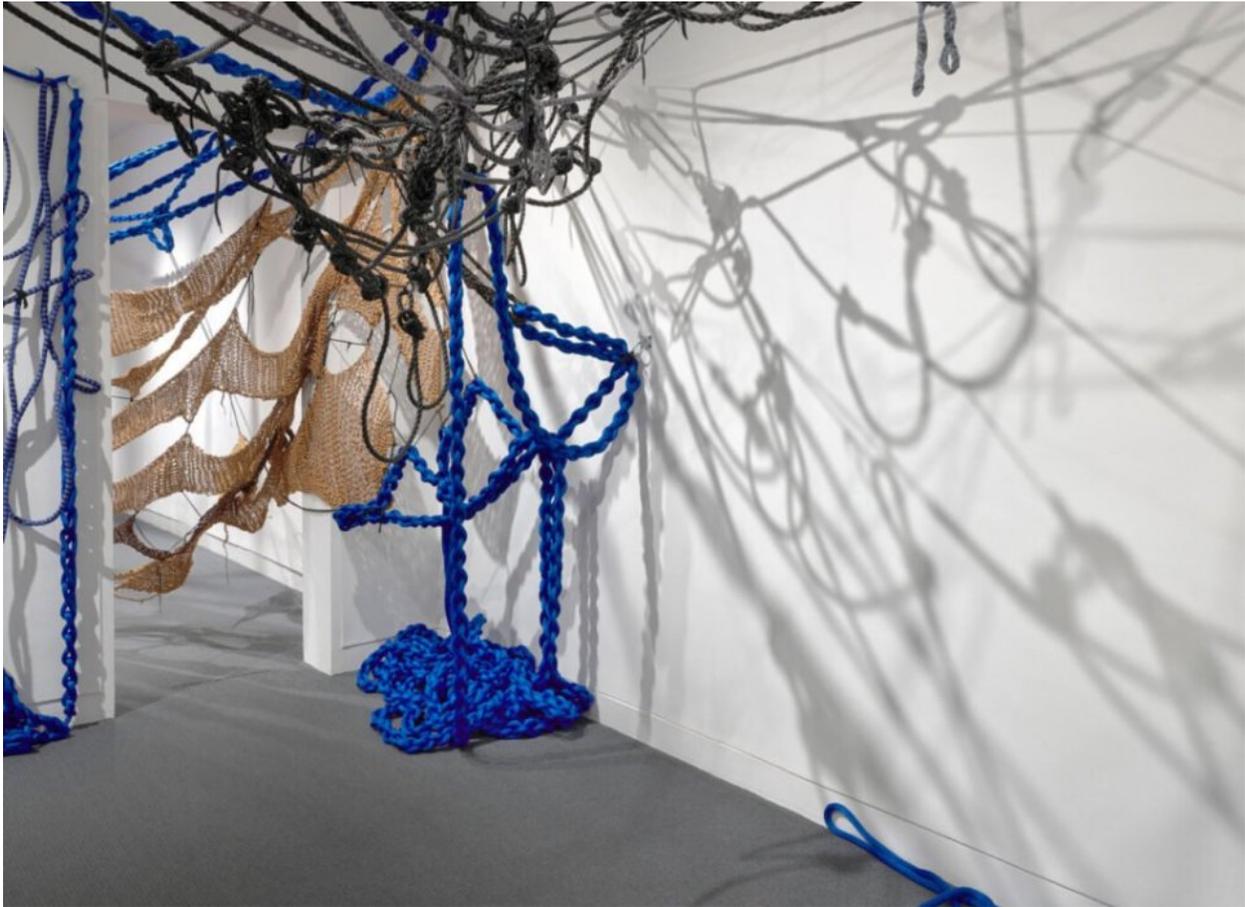
Moyer and Pepe are partners in life, together since the mid-90s and recently married. They live in Brooklyn and have deep ties to Maine arts, individually and as a couple. They met at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1995, and Moyer has served on the Skowhegan board. She is currently a governor of the school. Pepe is deeply involved in Haystack Mountain School of Crafts.

Both have extensive solo careers. Pepe recently had a mid-career retrospective at the de Cordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, and Moyer, in addition to being in the Whitney Biennial and showing her abstract paintings across the country and in Europe, is known for starting the queer interventionist public art project known as the Dyke Action Machine! two decades ago. Their site-specific collaborations are a more recent development of their partnership, growing out of artist residencies they did together in Italy and at Yaddo in New York.

The PMA exhibition is their first large-scale museum show together, and its anticipation has been noted nationally. Artnet, an online art market website, named it among the 21 “highly anticipated, mind-expanding museum exhibitions to seek out across the U.S. in 2020.”

DeSimone said the PMA was interested in mounting this exhibition because the issues the artists explore are particularly relevant at this time and because of the growing interest in their work together. “They have a huge following in their

respective circles, but a lot of people do not know this collaboration is a side practice of theirs,” she said. “This is just very timely for us now. It’s the bicentennial year, the anniversary of women’s suffrage and it’s an election year. We can use all three things as a backdrop to begin some conversations.”



Sheila Pepe, “91 BCE – Not So Good for Emperors.” *By Clements Photography and Design, courtesy of the artist, DC Moore Gallery, New York, and PMA*

The other overarching reason the PMA wanted to host the artists’ first museum show together is because Maine was key in bringing the couple together.

Moyer, an accomplished arts journalist, wrote about her Skowhegan experience in “Living and Sustaining a Creative Life,” a 2013 collection of essays by working artists. She met Pepe on the lake at Skowhegan, and later that day Pepe “rolled into my studio and started talking to me about my paintings (an absolute no-no at Skowhegan, where the privacy of the studio is sacrosanct),” she wrote.

As offended as Moyer was at the intrusion, “I was secretly intrigued to meet another working-class lesbian artist my age. There weren’t many of us out in the art world at that time.”

On the heels of the PMA’s exhibition last year about Haystack, “Tabernacles for Trying Times” is also a little bit of a tribute to Skowhegan and its long history of bringing artists and ideas together, DeSimone said. “Skowhegan has a tremendous legacy in the art world and in Maine as being an unrivaled place for time and space for artists to work uninterrupted. It’s sought after, it’s competitive and it set a standard in expecting a caliber of artist to be there,” DeSimone said. “And if not for Skowhegan, they would not be a couple.”