



JILL MOSER

Works on Paper

Sightlines

In her new works on paper Moser's characteristic mark is a fluid, circling line. The velocity of the line's spin varies as do the colors in which it is executed. Lately, these have included high-intensity orange and white, reversing, or at least disturbing, conventions determining the distribution of light in drawings; black lines appear only occasionally. The medium is casein, historically used for panel paintings, and originally bound with an emulsion derived from milk. In its present, synthetic formulation, casein is a water-soluble paint that dries matte, but can be rubbed to a glossy sheen. It remains workable for several days, making it leaner, more fleet, less greasy than oil paint, but significantly slower — heavier and more yielding — than most kinds of drawing. Casein permits languor, but welcomes decisiveness, and perfectly accommodates Moser's distinctive gesture, which is graceful, assured, and unhurried, but capable of considerable force and speed.

Graphic and painterly, incipiently descriptive and serenely solipsistic: Moser's drawings embrace a multitude of oppositions, several of them evident in *Charm*. Its title names a force of attraction and also the state it induces in its target; a magical spell, and the object, whether gem or trinket, with which such a state is invoked. In physics, charm is a quality of a recently discovered quark, specifying its mass and electrical charge, and offering, as contemporary physics so prodigally does, another apt metaphor.¹ All these associations lurk in *Charm*, in which an oscillating orange

line spins fast around a quartet of oval courses, taking wider turns on some of its laps than others; the smallest track banks hard against the paper's surface. The milky ground, faintly veined with vertical marking, provides a yielding ambience, accepting both the line's heat and its precision.

Titles come after the fact in Moser's work, but they are carefully considered. Often, as with *Charm*, they are nouns that double as verbs. *Louisa's Charge*, for instance, in which a physical act and its electrical valence are both suggested, names a drawing in which a bluish-gray linear figure dances over a shocking red ground, the colors nearly flashing with complementary intensity. This potency (charge) is a quality of the drawing's space, just as the line that sets it in motion is almost violently aggressive (charge!). Less hot-wired, but equally energetic, the line thrown across the silted, dusty-red surface of *Lasoo* is effortlessly exact, creating volumes as buoyant as balloons, and as athletic as the rope-tossing skill it invokes. In *Buoy*, a field of supple gray is circled by bobbing white line, which seems to rise and fall with a mobility that is itself liquid, but replete with the gestural assurance its title promises. *Hover* and *Trill* are big, glowing, orange-on-gray drawings, their lines bowed long and full of vibrato. In *Trill*, the image resonates too with overtones produced by ghostly white figures that shadow the orange ones.

The looping line that unites these drawings, and the paintings to which they relate, is Moser's signatory mark, both because it is unmistakably hers, and because it is akin, in its linear flourishes, to the details that identify a personal signature. Of course, any line purposefully committed to paper inclines toward meaning, whether it tends to form the profile of an implied volume, or leans

toward the abstract symbolism of which written language is composed.² In Moser's work, both these inclinations can be felt, and neither prevails; the particular character of her line is shaped in part by their cross-currents, and its trajectory is to independence from both.

But the repeated linear figure is not just an artist's fingerprint, it is a set of sightlines, guiding the viewer through an active field. The space inscribed by this work is not simply drawn on, it is drawn open. The closest thing Moser's drawings have to a literal subject is the act of seeing. David Sylvester has said of the work of Alberto Giacometti that its "content is not only the what but also the how of visual experience: ... In representing what he has seen, Giacometti objectifies the conditions under which he has seen it — the fact that it is seen in space, the fact that it is uncertain where the boundary is between solid forms and space, the fact that it is no sooner seen than it becomes a memory...."³ That the description serves Moser's work too is especially evident in *Viewer*, which includes, at the top, the contour of what might be a viewing apparatus (diving mask? goggles?). This ambiguous figure, like similar forms in other drawings, could be said to stand for the act of looking, as practiced by any subject, artist included — the meandering trace of vision crossing and penetrating the image surface.

The connection to the work of a sculptor may seem a stretch, since Moser is committed to work in two dimensions. In fact, though, this body of drawings and related paintings was preceded by a series of three-dimensional studies called *Fixtures*, made with light bulbs that were bound in clusters with loosely wrapped wire and hung, unlit, on the wall. These assemblages were a unique interlude for Moser; they came after the establishment of her current linear vocabulary, but

allowed her to see it new, in three dimensions, and to explore its conceptual implications with greater clarity. The sinuous, freehand progress of the wires circling the bulbs, tightening into spirals at their necks, and twisting tornado-like at points of contact and attachment, are all prefigured, and reflected, in recent work on paper and canvas. Perhaps even more helpfully, the assemblages, and photographs derived from them, offered visualizations of the kind of reversals between contour and volume, illumination and darkness, with which Moser is most deeply engaged. Even in the most challenging recent drawings, such as *Underbelly* and *Russian Doll*, where the surface is uncharacteristically dry, the



line reads as light, both luminous and weightless. Though its quality varies, in some cases slender as a wire filament, in others strong as a lariat, the line in Moser's drawings is always conductive, alive and illuminating.

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¹ Not just the terminology but the experimental procedures of modern physics provide analogies: "Using ever more powerful technology, physicists have continued to slam bits of matter together with ever increasing energy, momentarily recreating conditions unseen since the big bang. In the debris they have searched for new fundamental ingredients to add to the growing list of particles. Here is what they have found: four more quarks — charm, strange, bottom, and top...." Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe* (New York: Vintage, 1999), p. 8.

² There is one plainly legible (and nearly universal) symbol that might be read in Moser's work, especially as they share an essential duality: "Zero — balanced on the edge between an action and a thing (and what are numbers, when it comes to that: adjectives or nouns?) — perplexed its users whenever they stopped to think about what they were doing." writes Robert Kaplan in one of two recent books devoted to this figure. *The Nothing That Is: A Natural History of Zero* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 26.

³ David Sylvester, *Looking at Giacometti* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), p. 15