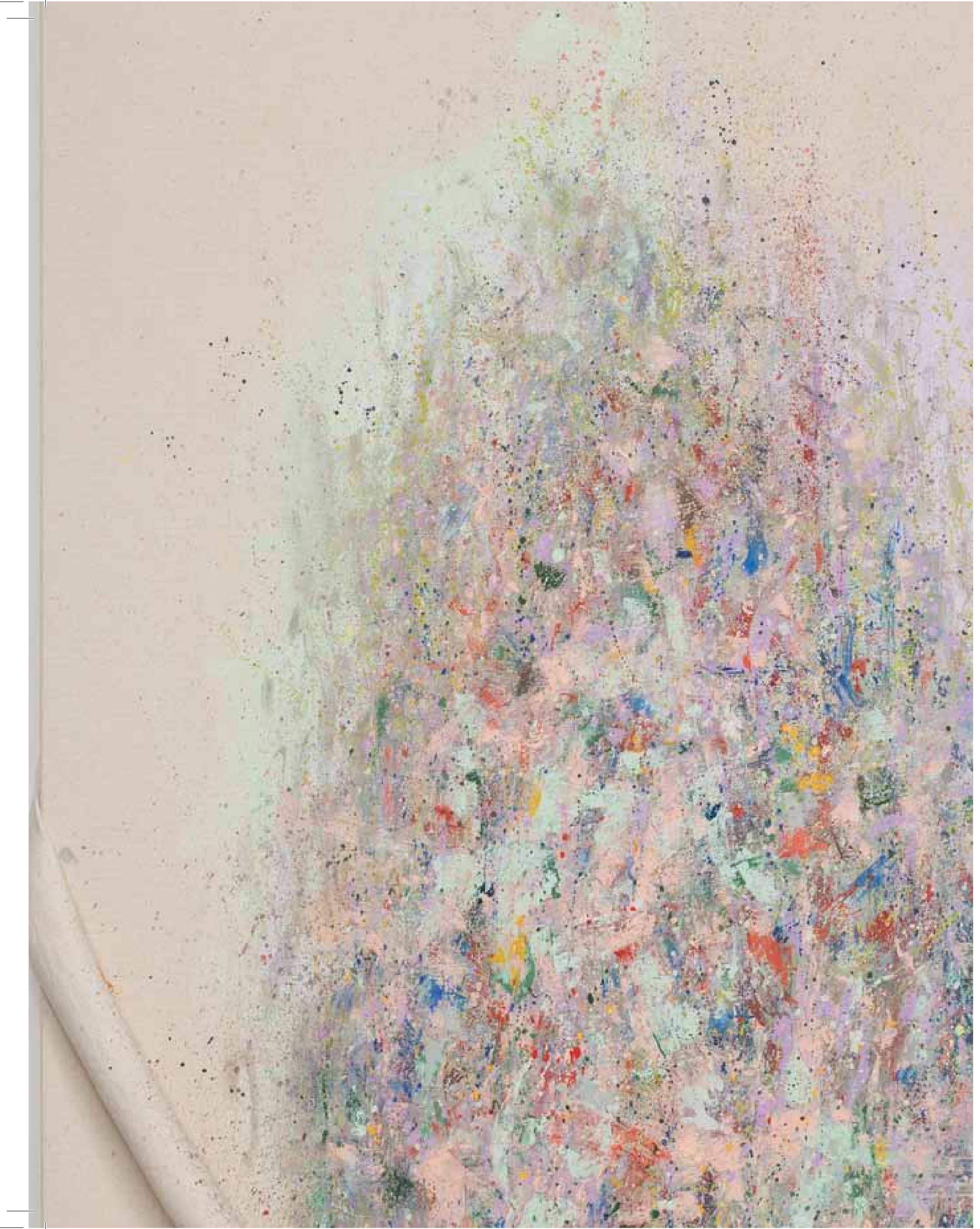

Dianna Molzan was born in Tacoma, Washington, in 1972; she currently lives and works in Los Angeles. After attending the Universität der Künste Berlin in 2000, she earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2001 and her Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Southern California in 2009. Molzan's work has been shown in numerous group exhibitions, including *All of this and nothing* at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, in 2011 and *How Soon Now* at the Rubell Family Collection/Contemporary Arts Foundation, Miami, in 2010. She had her first solo exhibition at Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles, in 2009. *Bologna Meissen* is Molzan's first exhibition in New York.

Bologna Meissen is organized by Whitney curatorial assistant Margot Norton.

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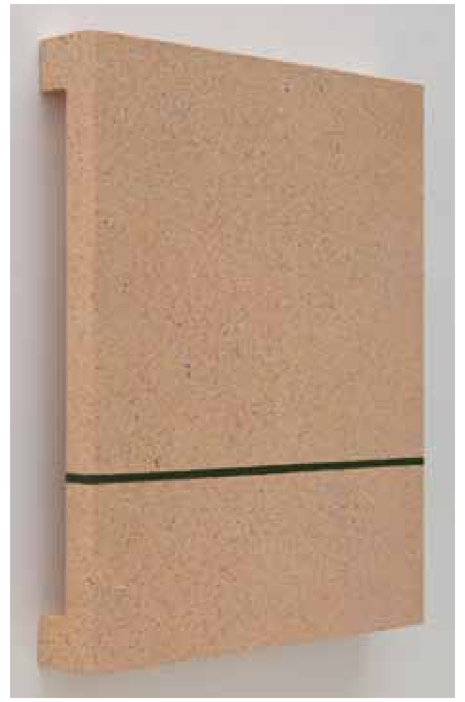
3 *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on canvas on fir, 55 1/2 x 48 in. (141 x 121.9 cm). Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; courtesy Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles

4 *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 x 3 in. (121.9 x 91.4 x 7.6 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles

Dianna Molzan

Bologna Meissen

April 8–June 2011
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



1 *Untitled*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 x 3 in. (61 x 50.8 x 7.6 cm). Private collection; courtesy Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles

2 *Untitled*, 2009. Oil on canvas on fir, 24 x 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm). Collection of Rosette Delug; courtesy Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles

Margot Norton: In the development of your recent body of work, you have considered the importance of framing devices throughout the history of painting. Could you tell me about what propelled your focus on the frame and how you continue to think about these ideas in your practice?

Dianna Molzan: The idea of a painting as a contained space, or a container of space, has been present in my work for some time, though it took me a while to fully realize it. The hierarchies and assumptions about painting are fascinating and revealing; for example, a painting is usually described as oil on canvas, but rarely is it listed as oil on canvas on wood, despite the fact that the frame support is a fundamental part of most paintings. Once I started exploring the physical possibilities of traditional painting materials and began activating elements that are typically marginalized—such as the framing support or the textile properties of canvas—my ideas about inside and outside (physically, visually, and categorically) became more pronounced.

MN: You choose to work with traditional materials—oil paint on canvas or linen, with wooden supports. Could you elaborate on the significance of this choice?

DM: I limit myself to traditional painting materials because I want to show that it isn't the materials that have changed over the centuries, but the thinking about the materials and the philosophy behind their application. Oil paint and linen and the wooden support are all inherited materials that date back to the Renaissance and continue through modernism and all the other styles of painting that are radically different from one another but use the same stuff. I love that I can paint-splatter a canvas and make it look like hard plastic by using more or less the same materials Rousseau used to depict the forest of Fontainebleau in the nineteenth century.

MN: You manipulate these age-old materials in your work and push against their conventional usage. I sense a similar impulse in your treatment of surface, as in your paintings that give the impression of being composed of hanging strands draped from one side of the frame to the other (3). Could you walk me through the process of constructing these paintings?

DM: For me, unraveling the face of a canvas into string was like finding something hiding in plain sight. To create those works, I make a clean incision into the canvas and then unravel and remove the vertical threads, leaving the horizontal strands intact. The resulting form is visually dynamic without any paint, which makes the job of painting it very challenging—the paint has to really bring something to temper the form or else it becomes incidental. This is fundamentally true of all my paintings—that the paint and form be mutually justified—but it is especially true of the draping-string works.

MN: And the paintings that have protruding shapes extending from the stretcher bars—how are those constructed?

DM: All of my paintings begin with a standard rectangular wooden frame as a rule; however, I occasionally add wooden blocks to the back of the frame (before stretching canvas over it) to make the painting appear as if it is defying gravity by hovering over the face of the wall on points or latching on to the wall like a confused coffee table (1).

I'm doing this to draw attention to the fiction of a painting located on the wall—the painting that appears effortlessly and miraculously suspended at eye level, its underpinnings hidden from view. I like to playfully address that illusion by inviting the viewer to investigate the back of the painting but still not be able to tell how the work is attached to the wall—the fiction becomes even more pronounced.

MN: Some works have incisions in the canvas that incorporate the wall itself into the composition. How do you consider the presence of the wall behind your work, and what are your thoughts about inviting the architecture supporting the painting as a compositional element?

DM: The wall is acknowledged and becomes a feature in a number of my pieces. Just like there is a dependency of paint on the form, there is a dependency of the painting on the wall. The characteristics of the wall, the shadows cast from the cutout spaces and hanging material, all of these variable elements contribute to the painting and will change depending on where it hangs.

A major element of the painting with the partial covered canvas and paint droppings on the lower stretcher bar (2) is the gap between the canvas and the wooden support. I want the viewer to question what is primary to the work: Is the "real" painting the truncated yet purposefully painted canvas area? Are the paint droppings on the stretcher bar of equal status or peripheral? What about the wall space between the areas activated by paint; is it incidental or incorporated? Is the wall space revealed within the stretcher bars different from the wall space outside the frame? Of course I don't want to dictate what the viewer should think—I am interested in making it a pleasure to consider the possibilities.

MN: "Possibilities" is an idea I think of as central to your work—in relation to the forms of your paintings as well as the motifs and techniques that you use, many of which appear to reference the lexicon of twentieth-century abstraction. The work with the partial canvas you mentioned contains sections of Jackson Pollock–esque splatter and drip. Other works might suggest the hard edges and bright colors of Ellsworth Kelly or the minimal line of Barnett Newman. What is it about these painting genres that interests you?

DM: I absolutely love and admire many divergent styles of painting; when I incorporate different kinds of recognizable gestures in my work, it is always coming from a place of appreciation, while also purposeful and strategic. I guess you could say that I'm trying to avoid promoting any one legacy of painting as better or more truthful than another. Joan Mitchell is amazing, and so is Richard Tuttle, and so is Matisse, but I would never want to rank them in importance or carry the baton for just one—they are so different and yet they all inform what I'm aspiring to do in painting, and that manifests in various styles. I should also say that when creating a body of work for exhibition, I always try to make each painting distinct from one another, like an ensemble cast, to accentuate and balance what I consider equal but maybe opposite qualities—light to loud, plastic to earthy, full to empty.

MN: You also incorporate design elements from objects in popular culture—those that may have taken their own inspiration from avant-garde painters. Could you describe how these quotidian designs play a part in your work?

DM: I would say that this merger of everyday designs with former avant-garde radicalism flows in both directions. For instance, regarding the styles we've been discussing, I like the idea of invoking purposely banal designs like drab Formica laminates or assembly-line abstract paintings from Ikea and infusing them with gesture and tactility and eccentric color so that they exist in this confusing space of appearing both "authored" and "anonymous." These pieces also acknowledge that many of these visually dull objects are the watered-down version of once radical and idealistic energies. Take a paint-splatter Pollock pattern, for example; it has become a kind of vanilla shorthand for edgy urban studio activity, maybe a visual equivalent to gentrified "loft living." But then there is another aspect to my interest in design: I also spend a lot of time looking at Art Nouveau and Art Deco and Shaker designs and the Memphis Group, and all of these amazing Arts and Crafts movements that took everyday objects seriously and made stunning and strange things that influence my work in a hopeful way.

MN: Why did you choose the title *Bologna Meissen* for this exhibition?

DM: I wanted a title that demonstrated my ongoing interest in form and transformation and identification. The title is a combination of two cities that are the origins of two big influences of mine—Bologna, Italy, for the painter Giorgio Morandi and Meissen, Germany, for Meissen porcelain ware. The two names, listed plainly together and out of context, seem to take on another identity, maybe no longer a place but something else altogether. This confusion occurs despite a straightforward presentation of language, and I think this is similar to what happens in some of my paintings when the basic materials, like the stretcher bars or the string of the canvas, are exposed. If I remove the vertical strings from the face of a stretched canvas, it takes on a whole new character and becomes hard to identify, though the remaining horizontal strings are materially the same and were always there. It is not meant to be deceiving, but can perhaps be perplexing nonetheless.

MN: Would you elaborate on how Morandi and Meissen ware have informed your practice?

DM: The title's reference to Morandi and Meissen porcelain alludes to the connections that I'm making between ceramics and painting. Antique china and ceramics from all centuries and cultures have interested me for a long time; in fact, several paintings in the show are directly influenced by clay objects and porcelain forms. I have often thought how ceramics and paintings are similar: Both are fragile forms that host an applied color which either responds to or imposes on the structure underneath. Clay and paint and canvas are transformed into culturally valued and fetishized objects, though they remain the same inexpensive material.

Morandi assembled generic objects such as simple porcelain vessels and tins in muted colors and turned them into fascinating and peculiar still lifes. To me, his work is first and foremost poetic; I find his paintings deeply moving because they at once transcend and embody their humility and economy, not just in subject matter but also in the material of the painting. Meissen ware is, in sharp contrast, a hyper-refined confection of hard porcelain paste fused with shiny candy-color glaze—yet it is also an impressive transformation of earthen material because it looks anything but natural.

These connections I am making between painting and ceramics also relate back to the idea of inside versus outside space—the notion of a surface that is primary yet completely dependent on the concealed and confined space underneath and within.

Interview between Dianna Molzan and Margot Norton, February 2011