

Preview

Cutting it fine

As Tate Modern mounts a major show of Matisse's cut-outs, painter MALI MORRIS RA pays tribute to the artist's directness, inventiveness and exuberance



LEFT *Glide*, 2013, by Mali Morris RA
OPPOSITE PAGE *Snow Flowers*, 1951, by Henri Matisse

There is a 47-second film clip on YouTube of a seated Matisse cutting into a sheet of painted paper. The scissors look very big, a curvy shape appears, and he begins to twist the colour yellow around in space. Then he shuffles some cut forms together and lifts the result up to his face, for scrutiny. A few years later, near the end of his life, often bedridden or working from a wheelchair, he produced his huge cut-out works, some around 10 metres wide. The components were by then being pinned up on the walls of his room and moved around to his direction by assistants. The compositions had become environments, the distance from his bed giving the long view.

The lively near-symmetry of *Four-Petalled Flower* (1945-46) probably had an influence on my early work. Its current whereabouts is unknown but I sometimes catch sight of it in books and think 'I did that' – but of course I didn't. It was reproduced in 1978 in John Elderfield's *The Cut-Outs of Henri Matisse* and I was shocked by its audacity. That same year I made a painting called *Spats*, which had blue petal shapes reaching out from the centre to the edges, but months passed before I recognised the connection.

Thirty-five years and many paintings later I am now, in works such as *Glide* (2013, left), building chequered grounds with colour blocks. This is the first stage of a painting process, and its architecture is another echo of what I love in some of Matisse's cut-outs.

The last time I saw the tall vertical *Snow Flowers* (1951, opposite page) I remember not wanting to leave it, feeling mesmerised. It was because of the flux of subtlety and drama; the slow drift of rose into gold in the grid supporting the shapes; a heavy green and a crimson sitting in there too; and the wild white upstanding shapes, all of a family but completely individual, a smaller black one challenging the others, linked tonally with the dark olive.

This chromatic orchestration in and out of pictorial space is inseparable from a literal, collaged layering, as fronds overlap or touch edges, some crisp, some soft. The intricacies of the flat white opaque forms are seen against rectangles of broad directional washes, and this



opens up yet another distance. It is a dance through time as well as space, as the eye keeps returning to these never-static relationships. The strangest feeling, as I remember it, was to locate the white shapes locked safely into the colour grid, but to see them also as free and ready to enter our space, our world. Every time I've seen it – once in New York, once in Paris, and twice in London at the Royal Academy – I have felt addressed directly, the immediacy of this sensation putting me, and keeping me, firmly and vividly in the present moment, even as I notice the handwriting along the lowest cut edge: 'Fleurs de Neige Henri Matisse 1951'.

We read Matisse now with hindsight, and it takes effort to imagine him at the early stage of any of his discoveries, trying something out, working through it, beginning to understand. It will be a revelation to see 120 of the cut-outs gathered together for a major show at Tate Modern this spring. We are more used to seeing them in the company of the earlier paintings, or singly, lucky to have the great *L'Escargot* (1953) in London. But in this show we will be able to concentrate on them as a group, cross-refer them with each other, sift through their variety, recognise their authority.

The conundrum of these masterpieces is that they are decorative without being designs, pictorial without being paintings, heart-stopping in their directness, their economy, their inventiveness. These contradictions might make for strenuous viewing as well as for exhilaration and pleasure, as the compression of a lifetime's work becomes apparent. It is this I am always moved by, being drawn in to what Matisse was teaching himself, as he took those risks and turnings, taking the rest of us with him.

Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs Tate Modern, London, 020 7887 8888, www.tate.org.uk, 17 April–7 Sep
Odelay & Wishpool – Mali Morris and Stephen Lewis: Paintings, Sculpture and Works on Paper Kapil Jariwala, London, 020 7701 5861, 2 May–28 June
Matisse: The Chapel at Vence by Marie-Thérèse Pulvenis de Séigny, £60, RA Publications.

+ To read extracts from the book *Matisse: The Chapel at Vence* visit <http://roy.ac/vence>