

MALI MORRIS IN BIRMINGHAM BY KAROLINA ALBRICHT

...there is an enveloping force of visual sincerity, of rigour and tenderness. Morris' methods are unpretentious and clear. She demonstrates a constant, agile appreciation of what is currently at stake in painting. And there is a lot at stake.

When walking into Mali Morris' recent solo exhibition *Calling* at the Ikon Gallery, I felt an immediate sense of recognition. I knew – I intuited – the world I was about to step into was one that would offer a sensory familiarity, and yet it would be a world I had not yet seen, or at the very least one that I was to see anew. I was reminded of what Mali said when we had met in her studio: “*Painting is very strongly related to the fact that it's one's experience of the world and it's almost a great surprise to me that there is that in painting. Because how could there be or why should there be?*”

Circulating around her show, I felt that I could identify a general vocabulary, but the moment that I faced her paintings themselves and tried to name its words, their meaning would dodge, would sidestep, would slip away. Semantic connotations would relocate, confound, and tirelessly unlock further strata of configurations. I realised that the paintings were no longer mere objects hanging on the walls but that they projected forward; filling the entire

gallery space with unabating vibration.

In the first room of the gallery, I catch sight of *Degrees of Freedom* (2003-04) – a small painting. I start thinking of constellations, what they signify, what they allude to as signs. A swift internet search on my phone verifies that my notion of a constellation is correct: “*any of certain groupings of stars that were imagined – at least by those who named them – to form conspicuous configurations of objects or creatures in the sky.*”

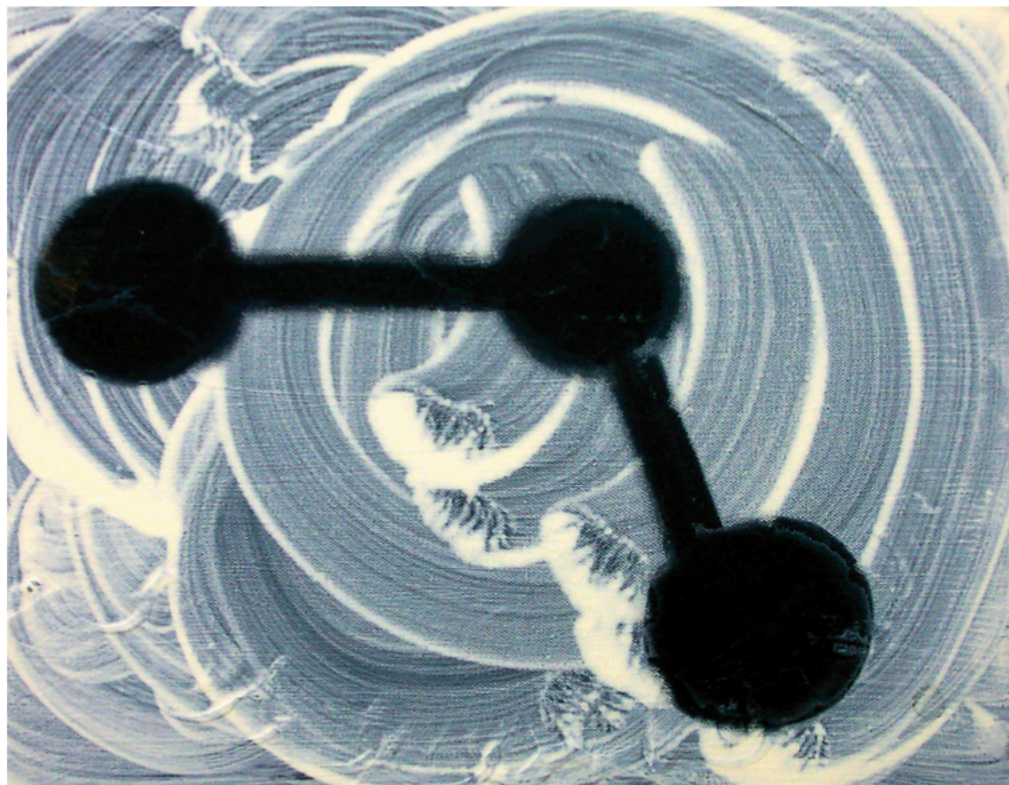
It feels a satisfying, and oddly relevant, definition. It is a scientific definition doubling as a para-scientific allegory of Morris' *Degrees of Freedom* or indeed, as an allegory of painting itself. This, of course, opens up a whole set of ideas pertaining to both the infinite universe and to Morris' painting; to ideas of entities suspended and rotating in space, of structures and sub-structures, of systems where each particle has its own spatial significance and force field. In *Degrees of Freedom*, Morris proposes a reduced visual apparatus in which the figure/ground relationship seems overt, but upon close inspection it becomes a relationship that begins to multiply into oscillating planes. The ‘figure’ is in fact the ‘ground’, but one projecting forward. Somehow, the heavy, silvery-black shape floats, unexpectedly buoyant and light, rotating its arms. It pulls in the cosmic matter of the surrounding milky-way-white swirls. The pictorial depth is achieved with seemingly minimal means resulting in what Morris calls ‘a fresh look’ – a painterly quality that feels effortless and that circumvents any sense of the ‘hard-won’. This ‘fresh look’ shows a modesty of making that affords space for the viewer. It is a generous modesty.

The exhibition traces a structural shift which started creeping into Morris' paintings in the late 1990s. This change came to her “*as if in a dream.*” One could certainly apply the term ‘vision’ to describe the intensity and clarity of this visual experience – to this visual thinking,



Second Stradella
2016
Acrylic on canvas
198 x 214 cm

Courtesy of the artist



urging the painter “to just put the colours next to one another.”

A form of a grid was introduced at that time, what Morris would rather describe as a ‘lattice’ or ‘checkerboard’. Lattice infers an interlaced rhythm; it infers movement. Light comes in and out of the gaps between this lattice form’s strips. It has a function that implies that there is an outside and an inside. To determine which is which is often difficult; the longer one peruses it, the more kinetic and disorientating it all becomes. Similarly, the external and internal registers intermingle in Morris’ work. The checkerboard, like a scaffolding, holds the colour, so that

it – uninhibited – can take the lead in the pictorial developments at work.

Something of a visual mathematical theorem seems to be presented in *Second Stradella* (2016). Only this time everything has gone awry. A circle inscribed into a checkerboard of twenty rectangles starts to split into an ever-shifting, self-tuning machinery, rendering its apparent geometry inapplicable. This pictorial space is deeply syncopated: thrusting and recoiling; collapsing and engulfing. Like a Rubik’s Cube, individual planes seem to be tirelessly pivoting, although in *Second Stradella* the efforts must be doubled so as to result



in a resolution of both colour and shape. The painting’s spatial complexity recalls the work of Elizabeth Murray, whose shaped paintings Robert Storr compared to a jigsaw puzzle that is “being recut as it was being solved, right until the moment when the final piece fell into place.” While Murray’s fracturing of space operates through associative patterns of shape, Morris prefers a plain set of quasi-geometric

structures. A sense of initial disorientation is followed by an immense sensation of space opening up: pulsating, comforting, raising the temperature with a gentle but resolute motion. The colour is disciplined: sliced and unfussy. As is the case with most of Morris’ work, a close inspection ungirds the precision of fine-tuned segments of colour, each segment opening into its past, belonging and

Degrees of Freedom
2003-04
Acrylic on canvas
36 x 46 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Spinning
2007
Acrylic on canvas
198 x 214 cm

Courtesy of the artist

responding to the other. The activity and the relationship of these segments bring to mind Jean Hélion's comparison of a painting to a complex living organism, with its simple cells that multiply in all degrees achieving varying stages of development and rhythm.

Morris' colour lifts, bends, moves: forward, backward, sideways, in all possible directions and dimensions, possibly reminiscent of childhood memories that she describes of seeing figures travelling through landscape. It is a use of colour that also recalls the singular sense of sign language and its use of space that neurologist Oliver Sacks describes in his book *Seeing Voices*, which Morris read in the early 1990s. In it, Sacks elucidates signing as not "a succession of instantaneous 'frozen' configurations in space, but as continually and richly modulated in time, with a dynamism of 'movements' and 'holds' analogous to that of music or speech."

So, signing's syntax uses not only three-dimensionality of space but also the dimension of time – we are dealing with a language of space-time relying on the specificity and fluency of locus; in subtleties of movement and time. All of this speaks strongly of the space shaped in Morris' paintings. One could imagine the spatial inflections of a suspended hand, or of a body, travelling through the formations of colour in order to form a point of simultaneous contact with all its zones. Something not unlike an astronaut's body floating in space – weightless – slowly rotating in all possible directions. Weight, or in fact the lack of weight, is a significant property of Morris' work. The paintings seem to be defying the force of gravity; they always appear to be poised above the ground, never pointing downwards.

To assert that Morris' painting relies on a rotational motion would be reductive. The term 'rotation' itself seems a misguided one, implying a fixed orbit, and there is nothing fixed about these paintings. However, the particular

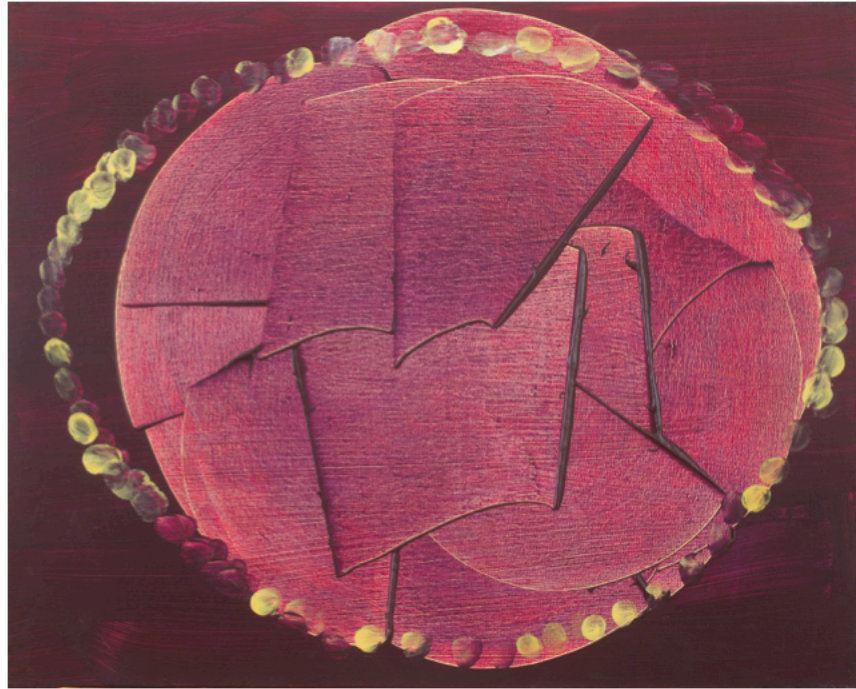
motion of rotation is conditioned by the motif of a 'circle' and Morris has been working with a circle motif for decades. Even when she doesn't use the aforementioned movement overtly, one can slowly discern its rotational pathways. Ironically, *Spinning* (2007) is a painting where the title rather than the image signifies or specifies the type of movement we are looking at. The activity of spinning is obscured, the definition of it spun on its head so the viewer is forced to search for clues. A circular clearing of cadmium red in the bottom left corner is the entry point through which the formal narrative unfolds – the eye latches onto it to travel through six other clearing openings. The centre of the painting is left empty, allowing the eye to unknowingly spin around it. You only realise it when you've done a few 'laps' around the painting's spectral centre. This sense of movement resembles that of the arms of a clock whose machinery has been tampered with. The arms follow their own logic unknown to the viewer: forward, backward, backward, forward, etc. Spinning conjures up a sense of a misty, industrial cityscape, in which a Turner-esque fog thickens around the town, and only the beams of light manage to pierce through the veil; light that marks the surface in the form of circular openings.

The dislocated checkerboard toughness of *Impeller II* (2023) is ferociously questioned and broken down: cut open in a kaleidoscopic array of what appears to be a circle of rotating rectangles. There is attentiveness at play here; readiness to acknowledge and respond to every shift of colour, space, shape, time, and light, shifts that are locked in continuous reciprocity. Centripetal spatial forces amass around the centre where the rectangles appear to be rotating like razor-sharp cutting blades. In between these blades, one can sense the circulation of air at a molecular level: moving from slow-flowing



Impeller II
2023
Acrylic on canvas
200 x 220 cm

Courtesy of the artist



currents, to thickening, compressed zones, a movement of expansion and contraction. Density, speed, and pressure are modulated to achieve a kind of self-regulating entity.

I realise that I've been experiencing a detectable presence of air pulsating within the paintings all along, the very same air slowly diffusing into the gallery space. The colour, and subsequently the entire pictorial space, is aerated. If one were to think of meteorologists collecting observational data, formulating predictions, and communicating them to the public – of learning weather patterns and their matter-of-factness – this strikes me as a parallel process to that of looking at these paintings, the urge to grasp their mystifying mechanics. I'm reminded of a story about a painting of Morris' that had gone missing. The painting, wrapped in a black bin bag, had come back from a show and was in the hallway of her house. The door must have been

left ajar and the painting was nowhere to be found. Mali decided to report it at a local police station. A young policeman working there proceeded to ask questions:

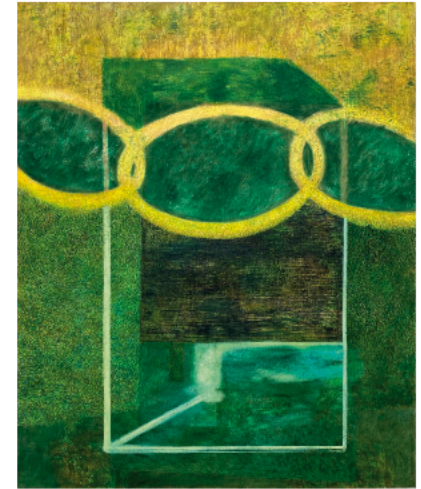
"Name?... Address?... Can you describe the painting?" (It was an abstract painting about 3ft sq.)... "What was the predominant colour scheme?" (A kind of creamy pink), "Were there any discernible shapes?" (Yes: there was a large circle in the centre). Then, not missing a beat, he asked: "Would you call that a disc, a circle, or an orb?"

I have now made a full circle of the gallery and I'm standing back in front of *Lap (Maroon/Yellow)* (1998). It is the first and the last painting you see when entering and leaving the space. The visitors look at this painting and then, as if instructed by it, lap the gallery space to be summoned back to it. *Lap (Maroon/Yellow)* marks a shift in Morris' oeuvre: an unfolding of what she calls the '*Clearing paintings*'. At the point of making it, between 1998 and 2000, she

referred to it as a '*non-painting*', something that had just happened in the studio as a by-product of experiment. It was something that didn't really mean, or deserve, to be a painting yet until it had gradually proved its place. It contains a central oval figure framed by a field of deep maroon. The visual conundrum of the '*dance of space*' – what's on top and what's underneath, what is the figure and what is the ground, of what is positive and what is negative space – is crucial. It is crucial as this dance is to become part of Morris' painting morphology. The '*top*' shape is achieved by '*clearing*' – removing the paint, thus inverting, or subverting the relationship between '*top*' and '*bottom*'. Overlapping sub-planes within the painting advance and recede into spatial paradoxes. The mechanical motion of scraping the paint sediments' lines of congealed paint in a rhythmic *ostinato*. The workings of these inner musical rhythms are then sabotaged by a garland of bright primrose fingertip marks, hinting at a buried yellow, marks that return us to the world we know.

What I am left with is an enveloping force of visual sincerity, of rigour and tenderness. Morris' methods are unpretentious and clear. She demonstrates a constant, agile appreciation of what is currently at stake in painting. And there is a lot at stake. Morris isn't interested in the description of the world. What she is interested in is how the world we are accustomed to visually can exist within two-dimensions as something at once inextricable and autonomous. Painting is of this world, but it is not the world. Painting a world that one sees seems like a good enough ambition, but painting a world that one feels, and that others can, in turn, feel is a brave pursuit, an out-of-the-ballpark-ambition.

Irreducibly and inexhaustibly, Morris paints the world inside out.



Karolina Albricht
Neuro-Fuzzy Premonition
2022
Oil and mixed media on jute
220 x 180 cm

Courtesy of the artist

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