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# REBECCA MORRIS

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Time Out New York

# REBECCA MORRIS

## An artist who believes in Painting with a capital P.

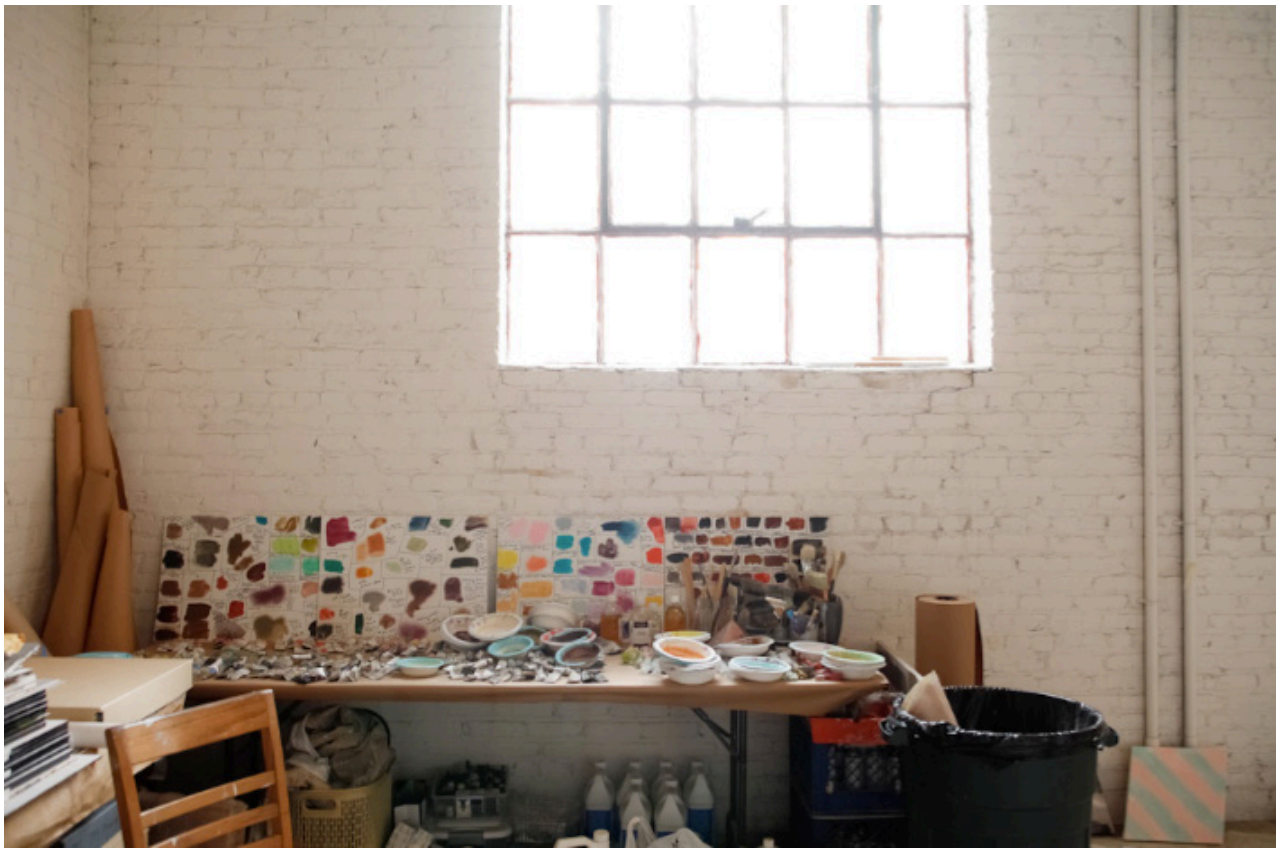
Rebecca Morris makes abstract paintings that run somewhat against the grain of current fashion. They are heartfelt, as opposed to drenched in that comforting, cynical, isn't-it-all-such-a-gas attitude called irony. Morris believes in Painting with a capital P, and moreover, in Abstraction with a capital A. She's even written a manifesto with lines like, "Whip out the masterpieces" and "Abstraction never left, motherfuckers!" Morris's newest paintings find her reveling in the pleasures of geometric shapes, arrows and sweet nothings. Sometimes, these are outlined with paint on an all-white or mottled canvas, and then filled in with stripes, brushstrokes or daubs. Morris paints on the floor atop a tarp, and the best thing in the show features pieces of that splattered studio drop cloth cut into shapes on top of a gold background— a move that accentuates the striking negative-positive effect of the composition.

In these offbeat, folksy, messiness-meets-modernism works, Morris displays her unequivocal investment in a personal pictorial language. Still, though her paintings radiate charm and earnestness, they don't quite repudiate the mechanics of abstraction today. She actually follows many of the same rules as other painters of her generation—which is to say that she references art history as much as she breaks from it. But she is fearless in laying bare her flaws, even as she displays her talents. So hurray that she allows her paintings to exist as they are, without qualifications.

IN THE MAKE
*Studio visits with West Coast artists*

# REBECCA MORRIS

**"In general I've found that people respond to my work over time, so the highest compliment would be if someone wanted to spend lengthy and repeated time with my work."**



We drove to Rebecca's studio on a Sunday morning, with a yellowish-grey almost dusty looking sky overhead and both Klea and I wondered how this visit, the first in our LA adventure, would go. Being in a new city had us feeling less sure about what to anticipate and we just hoped to get off to a good start. As soon as Rebecca greeted us and took us up to her studio, I knew our morning was going to turn out just fine. She instantly felt familiar and easy to talk to, and she had fresh croissants waiting for us! Rebecca paints large, open paintings in vibrant hues and utilizes a series of shapes, lines, and gestures to create a singular visual vocabulary within abstract compositions. We talked about how she finds the lack of specificity and the openness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in abstraction appealing, and she likes that a viewer can come to her work with their own set of associations and leave with a very personal interpretation. Rebecca's generosity regarding how her work is decoded and interpreted is a testament to her hard-won confidence. She's put in enough years working at her art to figure out what's right for her, and she doesn't seem all that concerned with proving anything to anyone but herself. I was struck by Rebecca's sense of self and her total commitment to her own beliefs and aesthetic choices despite what others might think. She calls it "a stubbornness." I call it true grit. In her 2004 manifesto, Rebecca's gutsy, no-nonsense attitude comes through in lines like: Don't pretend you don't work hard… Be out for blood…and, Abstraction never left, motherfuckers. She's self-possessed, but there's no chip on her shoulder. I guess because when confidence is real, it's not complicated or loud— it's just a simple, quiet thing. It's inspiring to encounter a woman who has unapologetically taken a hold of her life, and is making choices based solely on what she truly believes in, artistically and otherwise. Visiting with Rebecca reminded me to recognize the weaknesses in the rules that were written for me, and to do something about it.

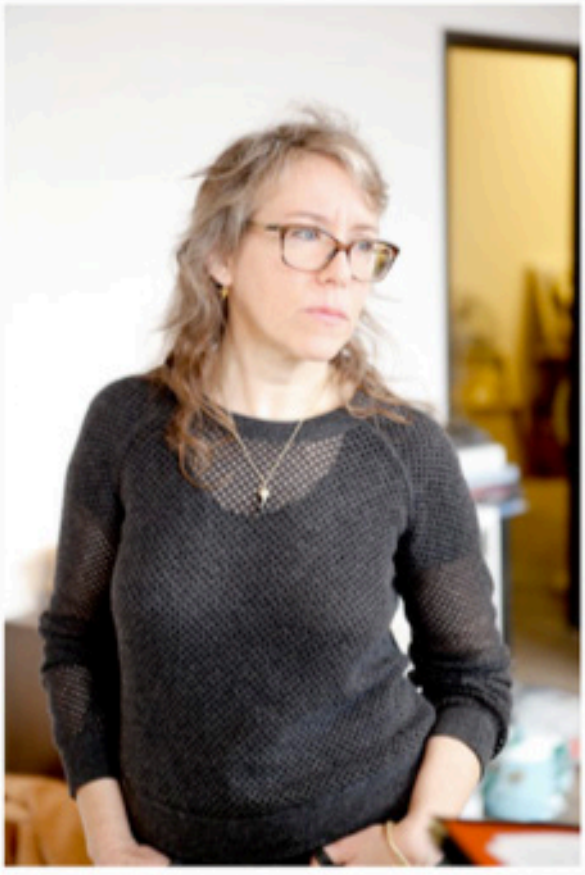
**When people ask you what you "do", how do you answer?**
I say that I am an artist, that I make paintings.

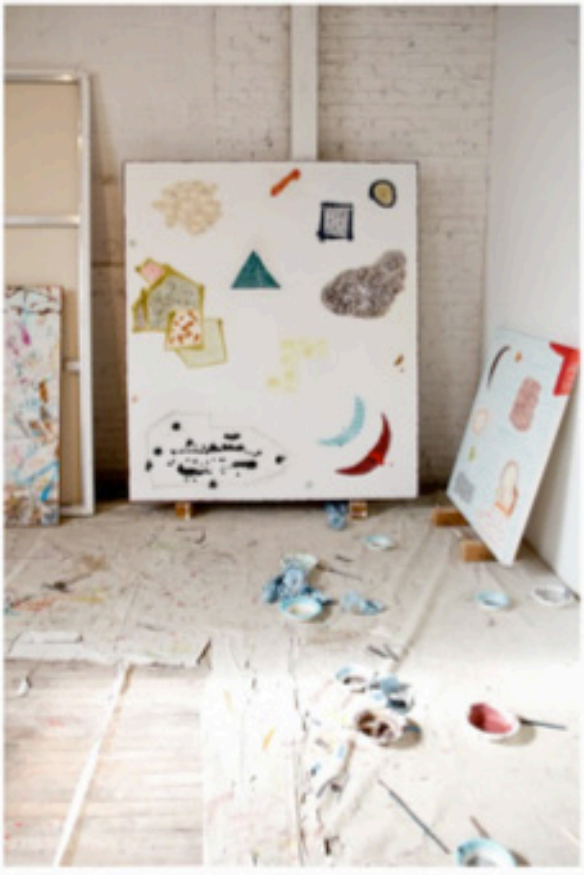
**Do you have a day job? What is it? What does it mean to you?**
I am a tenured Professor at Pasadena City College where I teach painting and drawing. I've been teaching there since 2000, and the job gives me financial infrastructure, which has been invaluable to my practice. I'll also be teaching a graduate seminar class at UCLA this coming spring quarter.

**What mediums do you work with? How would you describe your subject matter? What themes seem to occur/reoccur in your work?**
I make oil paintings on canvas, sometimes using spray paint when I want metallic colors or a certain effect or sheen. I also make works on paper and collages. Over the last two years my work has gone through a more minimal phase. But that has started to revert on itself. The paintings are now filling back up with marks and shapes, but in different ways.

The issue of subject matter is tricky for me to address because I don't want to dictate or imply what the viewer's experience of my work should be, or should include. But I can say a few general things.

There is always a mix of intentional/ articulated moves, along side more accidental and spontaneous areas. Also, I'm obsessed with composition and think about the edges of the picture plane a lot. I use a range of pictorial strategies in effort to visually contain the elements within the painting. I like the idea of defining a world within the painting. Sometimes it's a large





shape, which then houses and organizes other smaller shapes inside of it, or it's a more literal frame-ic edge of crusty paint applied around the perimeter of the canvas. Color of course, plays a big part in subject matter. I get ideas for paintings after seeing certain colors or color combinations and I think the experience one has with color is very loaded and interesting. Color triggers emotional responses in people that are often very personal, and I include myself here. I go through different color periods— there was a time when I used darker colors, lots of blacks, browns and grays, because I wanted the work to be devoid of any possible coded identifiers of gender and these colors seemed to escape that, to be more neutral and abstract. These days though, I've moved away from working exclusively in that palette and I'm really into a full range of color, especially a certain washy aqua-turquoise and this great peachy hue.

**What are you currently reading, listening to or looking at to fuel your work?**
I am very slowly reading the Joan Mitchell biography, Lady Painter. And even more slowly, I'm reading Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the 1960s by James Meyer. In the studio I listen to all kinds of music, lately a lot of Atlas Sound. But I also love Terry Riley's "in C" for hardcore painting days and I can listen to Fleetwood Mac's "Tusk" for weeks on end without break.

**What are your biggest challenges to creating art and how do you deal with them? How do you navigate the art world?**
It is always an issue of time. I want to do so many things, I have so many ideas, stuff I want to do in a day, in a lifetime! And I just feel like there isn't enough time. I started waking up early on a regular basis a few years back, to get the most out of my day, and now I feel incredibly guilty if I sleep in past 8 a.m.! But I have also found that morning light is really my favorite light to paint in, be in, and think in, so I hate to miss it.

For the most part I try to engage in the art world, see shows, go to lectures, readings, and openings, exchange studio visits with other artists when I can. I do these things because I really enjoy them. Which is not to say that I am out all the time at every opening, because I am certainly not. But I am seriously interested in being a part of a dialogue, feeling an energy larger than myself. Last summer, two artist friends, Mari Eastman and Jill Newman, and I organized a series of panel discussions called "Talks on Painting". (We are transcribing the recordings of them now.) I was very heartened by how many people came out for them. Panels are a tricky format but it helped that this series was driven by artists for artists. My hope is that this discussion series will be an ongoing thing, in a fluid and seamless way. It's hard to balance everything— my own work, professional responsibilities and community engagement, but all of it is important to me, so I try my best to stay involved on many fronts.

But in answering this question about the art world, I think it is also important to say here, in total honesty, that there have been times (long times) when I have felt things have been hopeless and pointless, when it felt like very few people understood my work or were interested in what I was doing. And I guess in those periods, I just tried to reverse that energy by redoubling my commitment to my work and soldiering on. It's probably a strength of mine that I can do this because I'm independent and stubborn. I try not to concern myself with what other people think, and just to stay focused and believe in my work. Ultimately- and I'm not saying this in a dejected way- you only have yourself. In a very literal way we can only depend on ourselves, and that's empowering. Luckily right now I feel like I have a strong support system around my work, and that's great, but I recognize that can change again, that it's not fixed.

**What does having a physical space to make art in mean for your process, and how do you make your space work for you?**
Having my living space and studio space separate is a great combination for me, especially as an oil painter. Plus I appreciate the mental transition that happens on the drive here. At the studio I am removed from everything except my painting—I am faced with it. It is a place where I can freely experiment and enjoy the act of discovery in total privacy. You can file this answer under Virginia Woolf's credo of having a room of one's own!!

**Has there been a shift or change in your life or work that has led to what you're making now? Do you see your work as autobiographical at all?**
I may have just gone through some sort of change, but it is still too close for me to fully make sense of it yet. One effect is that I made less work in 2011 than I have in previous years. I just did not want to make decisions in paintings; I didn't want to commit to anything abrupt. I just wanted to think, mull over what could be done. I was content just being in my head. It was as if for a majority of 2011 I went into slow motion or something. I didn't force myself to make work, and I didn't panic, but I did question why this phase was happening. Weirder still, is that this was not a bad thing at all. The work I did make is very strong. I'm totally into it. It feels important. You know, painting is just one of the hardest things. I have joked about it in artist lectures, how difficult it is to make a good painting. Because that's really it, isn't it? Not to just make a painting, but a GOOD one–a really, really good one.

Is my work autobiographical? I believe in the power of the unconscious, so I will err on the side of yes here. But my work is not about "me" in a self-referential sense.

**Is there something you are currently working on, or are excited about starting that you can tell us about?**
This fall I was interviewed for series called Maker's, "in-depth interviews with women who are inspirational and impacting America and the world". It will come out this spring 2012, on Makers.com. I am really excited and proud to have been a part of it.

**What are you most proud of?**
My independence.

**What do you want your work to do?**
I want my work to be a dynamic presence, to create visual and physical impact in a space. In general I've found that people respond to my work over time, so the highest compliment would be if someone wanted to spend lengthy and repeated time with my work.

**What advice has influenced you?**
Be generous.

**Are you involved in any upcoming shows or events? Where and when?**
I am giving a lecture on my work on February 8th at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. In March I will have a solo show of works on paper at Harris Lieberman Gallery in NYC and I will be in a group show at Galerie Barbara Weiss in Berlin called, "Text Textile

Texture." An interview I did as part of the series Makers.com should come out soon and I will have work in The Frieze Art Fair in New York in May. Next year in early 2013 I will have my third solo show with Galerie Barbara Weiss. Currently, I have work in a group show curated by artist James Hayward called, "California Abstract Painting 1951-2011" here in Los Angeles.

The New York Times

# MADE IN SPACE

If much of the work in this sprawling, energetic two-gallery group show looks fresh and unfamiliar — and as if it might not come from New York — there's a reason. Everything on view was made in and around Los Angeles, fairly recently and often by artists who are either young, unknown in these parts or both. The show's title, "Made in Space," connotes the City of Angels, where, the thinking goes, studio space is cheaper and more plentiful and the general horizontal openness gives everyone more time and privacy to develop.

Certainly the work there often seems looser, brighter and generally more at ease with itself compared with what is found in New York. There's a greater tolerance for painting of all kinds, even full-on or diluted, and less of a mania for minimal austerity.

"Made in Space" was first seen in Los Angeles at Night Gallery, which is overseen by Mieke

Marple and Davida Nemeroff, a young photographer- dealer formerly of New York whose large color close-ups of horses are represented here. The show is probably less a snapshot of the Los Angeles scene than of the ecumenical tastes of its organizers: Laura Owens, an established painter who decided against including her own work in the show, and Peter Harkawik, a younger sort-of painter who favors decals on clear vinyl at Gavin Brown (and who has his New York solo debut at Knowmoregames, a gallery in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, through Aug. 30).

The younger set gets solid backup at both galleries from older artists like Rebecca Morris and David Korty (both especially impressive), Derek Boshier, Jim Isermann, Jorge Pardo, Allen Ruppersberg and Peter Shire, a well-known ceramist-sculptor and founding member of the design group Memphis, whose Memphis-y bench-sculpture brightens the entrance at Gavin Brown.

But it is mostly works by artists in their 30s with little or no New York exposure that steal the show. These include Laeh Glenn's small, quirky paintings; Patrick Jackson's handsome bucket-size ceramic cups; John Seal's stylistically varied paintings (as well as Aaron Wrinkle's); and a charcoal rubbing on canvas by Joshua Callaghan of a Ford Focus. The efforts of Vanessa Conte, Lucas Blalock, Gabrielle Ferrer, Josh Mannis and Max Maslansky also reward attention. Still, the show's surprises are not all from the young. Marcia Hafif, the New York abstract painter who now divides her time between the coasts, is the oldest artist here, and she weighs in with an anomalous work: a wall-size handwritten text about women, aging and sexuality that makes its presence felt.

*Correction: August 3, 2013*
*An art review on Friday about "Made in Space," at the Venus Over Manhattan gallery and Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Manhattan, misstated the given name of one artist in the show and misspelled the given name of another. They are Josh Mannis, not John, and Laeh Glenn, not Leah. The review also omitted a co owner of Night Gallery in Los Angeles, where the show was first seen. Besides Davida Nemeroff, the gallery is run by Mieke Marple.*

ARTFORUM

# REBECCA MORRIS

LEFT: REBECCA MORRIS, UNTITLED (#06-13), 2013, OIL ON CANVAS, 87 X 80". RIGHT: REBECCA MORRIS, UNTITLED (#09-13), 2013, OIL AND SPRAY PAINT ON CANVAS, 67 X 65".

Los Angeles–based artist Rebecca Morris is known for her paintings and sharp compositional wit. Here, she discusses her approach to abstraction and the impulses behind her upcoming solo exhibition, "Party Cut," which is on view at Corbett vs. Dempsey in Chicago from September 6 through October 19. Morris's work is also featured in a solo exhibition, "#18," at Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin, until October 5, 2013.

Chicago is where I began as an artist; I had my first solo exhibition at Ten In One Gallery in 1996. The title of my latest show, "Party Cut," refers to a certain way pizza is cut into a grid so that there are more pieces per pie. I grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, which is famous for its pizza, and the party cut is pretty much an abomination for a real pizza lover like myself. It means that with some slices you'll never get a piece of the crust, as opposed to when it's in triangular cuts, which guarantees you'll always get the full spectrum of the pizza.

Back in 2005 at the Renaissance Society, one of the curators at my third solo show in Chicago looked at a painting of mine—a construction of shards interpieced together—and mentioned that it looked like a pizza sliced into "crazy cuts." It's a comment that for whatever reason has been stuck in my mind ever since. The way of dividing out a painting has a lot to do with how one cuts up its entire surface; the grid is something I've been using in a more foregrounded way at the moment, but it's an aspect of my work that's always been there. The grid is a linear, somewhat analytic structure that nongeometric elements can be anchored against—a great way of breaking up the otherwise normative picture plane, while providing a grounding for improvisational elements that affirms their relevance.
When I reflect on the term abstraction, I think of it as something that isn't literal and can't be looked at to know what it is immediately. There are various levels to this: In my own work, I am noticing that the abstractions are looking more like things, though they aren't representational exactly. There's a shape or mark—like this dashy gesture I've been employing right now—that will be new to me when I first use it. As the work progresses, I will sometimes see it pop up a few more times. It then becomes recognizable to me as a type of reappearing language and I become curious to see where it is going to go. The mark won't necessarily mean the same thing every time; it instead continually shifts.

The process of painting involves a sense of what one wants in their internal world and how they come about putting whatever that is out there. I can have a sense of what I want, but it's never overtly crystallized when it's still in my head. Once it emerges, I give myself plenty of room to accept how it may be different than what I had initially thought I wanted. I don't like planning too much in advance, because I want to be fully open to that moment—to that transition from the inside to its manifestation in the outside world. The trick is to keep a real fluidity within the practice. The title of this show seems to have that embedded within it too, the "cuts" belonging to songs one might play when throwing a party. All of this—the pizza, grids, and music—captures what I think is the essence of the works in this exhibition. It is this feeling of joy that is the most important part for me in painting. I don't know how to put that into a neat, little paragraph, but that's where "Party Cut" comes from.
— As told to Zachary Cahill

**REBECCA MORRIS**

**Born 1969 in Honolulu**
**Lives and works in Los Angeles (Lincoln Heights)**

**Education**
**MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago,1994**
**Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME**
**Postbaccalaureate studio certificate, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1992**
**BA, Smith College, Northampton, MA, 1991**

**Selected Exhibitions**
**2013**
***Southafternoon*, Kunsthalle Lingen, Lingen, Germany (solo)**
**2012**
***Phantom Limb: Approaches to Painting Today*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago**
**2010**
**Harris Lieberman Gallery, New York (solo)**
***Ambigu: Contemporary Painting between Abstraction and Narration*, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, St. Gall, Switzerland**
**2006**
***For Abstractionists and Friends of the Non-Objective*, Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin (solo)**
**2005**
***Rebecca Morris: Paintings, 1996–2005*, Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (solo)**

**Selected Bibliography**
**Smith, Roberta. "Rebecca Morris." *New York Times*, January 7, 2011.**

**Westfall, Stephen, and Diedrich Diederichsen. *Rebecca Morris: Paintings, 1996–2005*. Chicago: Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 2005.**

**Wilson, Michael. "Rebecca Morris, Harris Lieberman." *Artforum* 49 (February 2011): 228.**

Rebecca Morris:
Some Observations

The watercolor paint that Rebecca Morris uses to make her drawings is fugitive, requiring great attention and control, assuredness and an economy of means, the exacting and decisive nature of an expert calligrapher. Each drawing is refined, like a letter in an alphabet. How long did it take for the letterform R to emerge fully formed, with its lanky vertical, its graceful curve, and its sassy kick to the side? How many manuscripts were illuminated before the twin summits of the letter M unveiled their stately peaks? The first time Morris showed me her drawings, I looked at each one and had the same thought over and over: for this one that I am holding here, how many were made and thrown aside? Each one seemed elemental, crystalline, and reductive. Her drawings breathe a palpable energy, the result of the combination of tremendous skill and immense desire in a great exhalation of strange beauty through improvisation.

There is a casual vibe to Morris's paintings, but it's important that I qualify what I mean by "casual." The paintings are not superficial or noncommittal. Not in the slightest. And they aren't informal or messy either. But they do privilege personal expression over convention and conformity. They are cool. They have the kind of cool, casual feeling that signals mastery. They are cool in the way that only something that is so totally itself and unlike anything else can be. This kind of cool comes from tending to details with limitless fascination, from repeating gestures over and over. It's not to be mistaken for mannerism, though. What I'm talking about here can't be achieved through mimicry. What I'm talking about here can come only from a long journey into one's calling. It has to be earned.

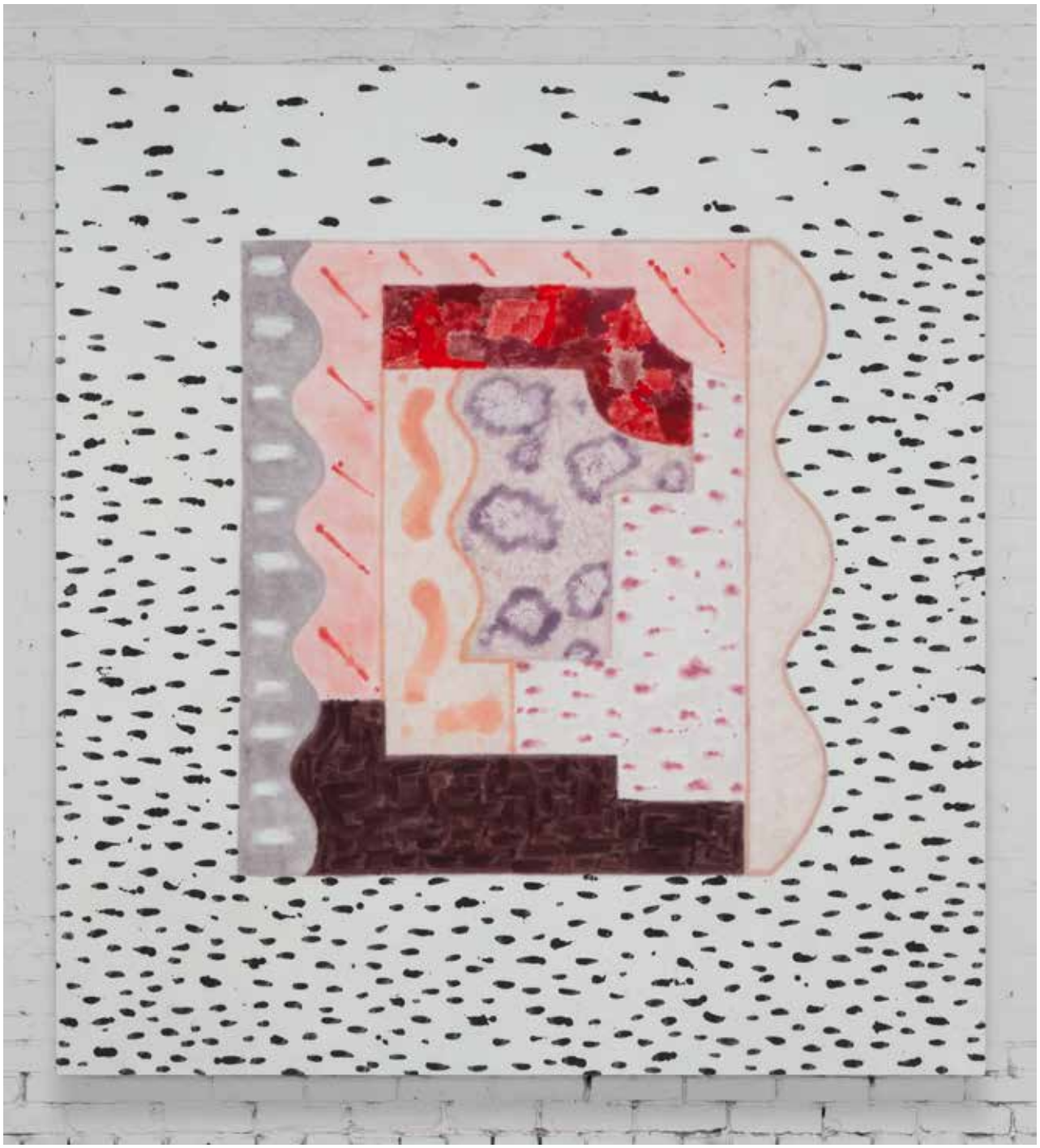
Abstraction is not an esoteric or rarified language; it is all around us, all the time. The palette and vocabulary of marks and shapes in Morris's paintings have a direct relationship to contemporary life, suggesting that painting exists within rather than outside of or adjacent to the mundane. The space of painting is not immune to the forces of the world beyond it. Paintings are not above, outside of, or separate from the rest of the world. They are part of the conversation. Morris's paintings are a peculiarly articulate voice in this conversation. As an amalgam of gestures, meaningfully arranged, they present themselves to us in an articulate way. They are assertive and plainspoken. They state their case clearly.

And they are articulate in another way too. In Morris's paintings, spaces within their spaces are articulated by outlines, or perhaps a shape is underlined, or maybe a space is delineated by a clean metallic glimmer overlaid on a dingy, paint-spattered canvas. These demarcations are not structures laid bare, nor are they merely marks; they are subjects unto themselves with all the richness and history of a letterform in an alphabet. In proximity to one another, strung together in contiguous patchworks, leafed together and interwoven, these utterances take shape and make meaning. Grids drawn with a wobbly freehand, intentionally dripping and bleeding: these are a grammar. Outlines and underlines are punctuation, defining and completing ideas. Color is poetry, but when it really sings, it becomes even more intimate: it is timbre. The gestures are letters, and the composition is the story they tell.

Corrina Peipon

REBECCA MORRIS

UNTITLED (#07-13), 2013; OIL ON CANVAS; 80 X 82 INCHES



UNTITLED (#06-13), 2013; OIL ON CANVAS; 87 X 80 INCHES

UNTITLED (#05-13), 2013; OIL ON CANVAS; 79 X 79 INCHES

UNTITLED (#02-13), 2013; OIL ON CANVAS; 106 X 80 1/2 INCHES

HYPERALLERGIC

# BEER WITH A PAINTER: REBECCA MORRIS

INSTALLATION VIEW, "REBECCA MORRIS: FANTASTIC L.A.", LA ART, LOS ANGELES, MARCH 2014 (ALL PHOTOS COURTESY CORBETT VS. DEMPSEY, CHICAGO)

I heard Rebecca Morris speak earlier this year in Chicago, and was struck by how she discussed becoming an abstractionist at a time when both abstraction and painting were under attack. Morris was personal and direct, but also confident, almost nonchalant. She talked about being in Berlin and writing, as a motivator for herself, the "Manifesto: For Abstractionists and Friends of the Non Objective."

Barbara Weiss Galerie, Berlin, published the manifesto as an Artforum advertisement for her 2006 exhibition there. It struck a chord in the art world with such brazen but humorous lines as: "Never stop looking at macramé, ceramics, supergraphics and suprematism," "Whip out the masterpieces," "When in doubt, spray paint it gold," and "ABSTRACTION FOREVER!"

Like her manifesto and her way of speaking, Morris's work is deliberate, but never precious or ornate. She makes small paintings on paper, several of which were shown in a group exhibition this summer at David Zwirner, and large-scale oil paintings, two of which were included in this year's Whitney Biennial. The work on paper often plays off of a grid, evocative of an urban topography, made irregular by Morris's hand and the textural effects on the paper. The large

REBECCA MORRIS, "UNTITLED (#04-13)" (2013), OIL ON CANVAS, 58 X 58 INCHES

paintings juxtapose shapes, forms and loose patterns of marks that suggest diverse visual influences from popular culture —street fashion, food, domestic objects—to high modernism. Morris also often combines oil painting, applied in thin, pale washes, with spray paint.

Morris lives and works in Los Angeles. She received her BA from Smith College in 1991 and an MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1994. She is represented by Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin, and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago. She has exhibited in New York with Harris Lieberman. Solo exhibitions of her work were held at The Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2005; the Kunsthalle Lingen, Germany, 2013; LAXART, Los Angeles, 2014; and the Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht, 2014.

We met over brunch at Schiller's Liquor Bar when Morris was on a visit to New York. Morris noted, amused, that my plate of eggs and fries was a fantastic yellow monochrome, as we began to talk about the light of different cities, rainbows of similar hues, paleness and contrast.

Jennifer Samet: You were born in Honolulu and grew up in New Haven, Connecticut. I know your father was a composer. How did you become interested in art making?

Rebecca Morris: I remember going to museums: The Yale Art Gallery and the Peabody Museum – a natural history museum, with its dioramas and fossilized animal displays, and a giant squid suspended from the ceiling. These were some of my first encounters with art.

At the Yale Art Gallery there was a room with several Rothko paintings, and a bench. My parents tell a story where they found me sitting in there when I was four, and so they joke that this was the sign I would be an artist. There was something about the bench. I understood it was a social space: you were supposed to participate by sitting there and hanging out with the paintings. I have always loved museums.

The architecture in New Haven was also inspiring to me. From the 1950s to the early 1970s, there was a lot of new construction and urban renewal. My father taught at Yale, so I spent time there and liked the Yale School of Art by Paul Rudolph and the Yale Center for British Art by Louis Kahn. There was also Earl Carlin's Brutalist Fire Department Headquarters. My dad used to take my sister and me to the Claes Oldenburg lipstick sculpture near Morse College (designed by another great, Eero Saarinen), and my mom took us to the Beinecke Rare Book Library. I still love revisiting these places when I am "home." I also remember going out for pizza at George and Harry's, which was right under the Yale music school

REBECCA MORRIS, "UNTITLED (#02-12)" (2012), OIL ON CANVAS, 106 X 80 1/2 INCHES

REBECCA MORRIS, "UNTITLED (#16-13)" (2013), OIL ON CANVAS, 95 X 95 INCHES

where my father taught.

JS: You mention architecture, and it makes me think about the use of the grid in your work. How did you start working with the grid?

RM: I was always interested in creating systems and plan-type drawings. As a child, I drew floor plans of split-level houses, and plans for cities and towns. I also drew imaginary family trees, which were based on a grid-like system, but they featured cat families instead of people families.

I became interested in the grid again as an adult, when I was shifting from making realist paintings to abstract ones. Going back to the grid, seeing it as a kind of realistic thing, which had implications with the analytical, helped me.

There was a great Mondrian retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1995. I also remember my mind being blown by a Russian Constructivist book exhibition there. The Constructivist work is not a grid per se – but it is geometric and based off a grid system.

Seeing the simple grids in Robert Ryman's work was a big deal to me, and so was seeing Mary Heilmann's very casual grids. There is a Ryman painting at Dia: Beacon; it is a grid drawn with charcoal on raw canvas. It's a small square, and the charcoal drawing continues around the sides of the canvas. Everything else fell away when I was in front of that piece – a sublime moment. It is elemental; it is about the simplicity of the means. The charcoal is beautiful on the canvas: dark but soft.

I realized that the language I was trying to get to was simple. I had been over-thinking it. It was really helpful to see what a pared down drawing you could do, how you could reduce everything.

JS: Can you tell me more about your transition from realist work to the abstraction?

RM: In college and at the beginning of graduate school, I was making super-detailed paintings based on still life arrangements: things like cupcakes (in fact, I painted cupcakes for an entire year), or rooms in dollhouses which I set up with a light source. These had a narrative content and were perhaps more autobiographical, but the making wasn't satisfying. It seemed not enough like my work. There are aspects of my paintings now that are like still lives: things on display, a presentation of things within a fixed format. But when it was all about painting something realistically, it became drudgery.

In between the realistic and abstract paintings, I made work without paint. I used glitter, I stapled-on drawings, and stickers. I was exploring the language of painting without paint –

REBECCA MORRIS, "UNTITLED (#15-13)" (2013), OIL ON CANVAS, 119 X 97 INCHES

a foray into thinking about placement and formalism. In the end it drove me back to painting harder.

I had never made an abstract painting before, so I didn't have it as an internal option. But when I started doing it, it felt so natural, like a huge sigh of relief. It was immediately clear on a gut level. I knew that if I had a painting problem I would be able to figure it out.

JS: Are there specific motifs or landscapes that inform your paintings? How do you go from a visual encounter to a painting?

RM: Yes, the color is often inspired by visual experiences – everything from another painting to something in the world. Particular color combinations will influence me. The Red Rock Canyon area near Las Vegas is stunning – a rainbow of the paint color Mars red/ red oxide.

At a party in Los Angeles a couple of years ago, the artist Violet Hopkins, who has great style, was wearing knee-high vintage red boots with a salmon-colored jumpsuit. It was the kind of peculiar color combination that you might see, but not normally in clothing. It was amazing. I knew I wanted to use it in a painting. But I forgot about it until recently. Right now I am making a painting that is red and fleshy-pink and I suddenly remembered Violet. So it can be somewhat random – both natural and urban.

JS: You have lived in several different cities: the New Haven of your youth, Chicago as a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute, a period of time in Germany, and now Los Angeles. How have these cities affected different aspects of your work?

RM: In Los Angeles, the sun is so bright that things become bleached out; you can't see as clearly. I do feel like my work has been going through a pale stage, getting lighter and lighter. But I am longing for more contrast. I know that when I lived in Germany, or places with a winter, the color was darker and higher contrast. I think gray light is very beautiful. It causes color to pop. I am so excited when it is gray in Los Angeles. It is great light to paint in.

JS: I saw your work on paper in the summer group exhibition, "Paintings on Paper" at David Zwirner. Can you talk about some techniques you use to achieve the varied marks, textures, and the masked-out areas and reveals?

RM: I work on blocks of watercolor paper where all four sides are glued together. Because it is a block, the paper stays smooth as you work. However, as you get lower in the pad, there is less

stability; the paper doesn't stay as flat and straight. The paper starts wiggling when it gets wet. So a lot of the interesting marks that happen are related to the paper wrinkling. The ink pools up in different areas and I let it dry like that. I let the material do what it does.

To get the reveals in the work on paper I use Frisket, which has flow, but in the paintings, I mask areas, which I truly deplore. I do not like fussy work or making precise things, and partly that is because I'm not able to. I am terrible at sewing; I can't cut wood well. I am an additive person. I can lump and add things on, but I can't cut. So I have my own systems. In the paintings, the T-square or a straight edge is great. But I don't measure things. I might make a mark or repeat a length. In the works on paper everything is totally freehand and I love that.

JS: What kind of time or duration is involved in your painting?

RM: The paintings take a long time because I work in bits, here and there. I make a move, and then think about what goes in relation to that shape or color. The activity of painting itself isn't time consuming, if I know what I want to do. But I need to consider whether the painting needs something prescribed or linear or organized. There is a lot of thinking between painting moves. There is a combination of random or intuitive moves with more decided elements. I work on the floor, and after I paint an area I put the painting up against the wall. Then I bring it back down. That's a day or two right there.

There is a leanness that I am interested in. But there are also times where I have to go back into a few places for the whole of the painting. That aspect of work makes me nervous, because I don't want to lose the freshness. I try to just touch once and get out.

JS: Despite this, your work feels very intentioned and not related to the contemporary movement of provisional painting.

RM: The part of "provisional painting" that interests me is not the arrangement of quick things, but the gravitas. I feel that to be a real master provisional painter, you have to be really old, so that when you make that simple lone mark, it is a boiled down reduction of fifty years of marks. You can't just make something look boiled down. That is why Matisse's late works, like the cut-outs, are so powerful.

JS: Do you abandon paintings if those moves don't work out?

RM: I try not to. Instead, I will turn a painting around to face the wall and wait on it. I am actually waiting on myself to catch up to the painting. I can erase things, but I need to decide to do that immediately, to really remove it and its trace. I want to be careful though, because every time you do something new and weird, the gut reaction can be to decide it's not good. It is the "shock of the new" element. So, instead, if it's really weird, I will try to leave it. I leave a lot of stuff that makes me uncomfortable.

There is something exciting about making a choice and having to stick with it. I think that painting is all about this idea of regrouping. How do you incorporate your mistakes or your failures? It is endemic to painting: learning to live with those experiences, or engaging your process to figure out what is working. It is shifting all the time. I love the feeling of potential – of not knowing what I'm going to do, how to solve the problem, how it's going to turn out.

# SKOWHEGAN

## #01: REBECCA MORRIS

SKOWHEGAN CLASS OF 1994

**Don Edler:** We are building an archive of artist interviews that we hope to make available through the Skowhegan library, the concept for these interviews is to allow artists to speak candidly about their practice or otherwise. We hope to create a more interpersonal archive through which contemporary artists can represent themselves in their own words, through conversation. The format is open, so if there is anything you would like discuss, feel free to do so, otherwise, I have a few questions prepared, we can start from there and see where the conversation goes.

**Rebecca Morris:** Great! Thank you for inviting me.

**DE:** Do you mind talking about your time at Skowhegan as a participant in 1994? And is there anything in particular that you remember learning during your time at Skowhegan that is still

part of your life or practice today?

**RM:** I went to Skowhegan right after I got my MFA, and I think that was perfect timing for me because when you get out of graduate school, you can get a little depressed and overwhelmed, and you lose the community that you had while in school. Attending Skowhegan really opened up my community at a crucial moment—I met people from New York, LA, and places in between. It was exciting to have conversations with people that were in the same place I was, but with different backgrounds and having come out of different schools across the country. I was living in Chicago at the time, but meeting all these fellow artists that summer helped me begin to make decisions about what I wanted to do next. It was empowering to open up those kinds of possibilities. It was at Skowhegan that I met and became friends with people from Los Angeles, whom I later visited. Soon after, I began thinking that I wanted to move to LA. That was pretty huge in terms of where I am now, having lived in LA for 16 years and counting. Looking back, Skowhegan was very stimulating in this way.

**DE:** Let's move on to your work. Do you see a relationship to photography in your work?

**RM:** When I was in undergrad at Smith College, I was doing equal parts painting and photography. At some point, I started working primarily in painting. I don't remember any sort of a specific moment that caused this shift, it just happened. I know I was getting sick of all the darkroom work, I liked taking pictures, and I liked working with contact sheets, but after a while, all the chemical processes became too tedious, and working within photography lacked immediacy. It felt too distant from the hands-on aspect of making an image and working with materials that you get with painting.

Photography is still incredibly important for my work in the sense that I have always taken tons and tons of photographs. One of my graduate advisors was the Chicago Imagist painter Barbara Rossi—she had this slide collection of ice cream cones that she had taken, basically signs for ice cream shops. A lot of them were taken in India, and you would think that ice cream cones would be a pretty steady format, some variation of a circle and a cone, but these are so charming and surprisingly inventive. She took hundreds of pictures like this. If you were a very lucky graduate student of hers, she would bring in a slide carousel and show them to you. It made a huge impression on me—this idea of taking a picture of a single type of thing over and over and over again and capturing all the different permutations, and thus creating a personal typology. I have always been interested in a kind of vernacular photography (that so many people are interested in now with Instagram and Pinterest) so it is not very novel at this point. But I think seeing Barbara's ice cream cone pictures in my early twenties really made an impression on me. It encouraged a directed start to documenting the normal and weird things around me like signs, architecture, parking lots, van art, whatever. This is interesting to me still, but I see people who can capture these same things I'm photographing doing such a better job and putting all of their effort behind it. So it doesn't feel as important to me to reveal that part of what I do right now. But it's definitely there.

**DE:** It is interesting to hear that you have also made those connections between your paintings and contemporary modes of image making. I don't really know why I was thinking of those things when I was going through your catalogues but the idea of casual photography just came to mind somehow.

**RM:** That's nice actually. The thing that I really do take pictures of all the time is my studio.

I'm constantly taking pictures. Each time I go, I maybe take 20 pictures of what's happening in there. The paintings change so much, I take pictures because I want to remember what something looked like before and after certain moves. It's helpful.

**DE:** Do you think subconsciously you might be incorporating the collapse of dimensionality or the flattening of the image plane that happens in photography—taking that flatness into your mind and using it as a resource for coming up with the shapes that you paint?

**RM:** Yeah, maybe, I mean no one has ever said that before, but I could see it. It is totally possible. I am a strong believer in the unconscious. There's a painting I made recently that's going to be in a show in Los Angeles in March. I'm not going to bore you with explaining it too much because explaining abstract paintings can get really kind of stupid, when you start hearing back what you say. But it's a painting that has a similarly painted background area and center area, so the center area seems to reveal back to that background. But I changed the marks in the center so it's not a one to one match. It ends up doing that thing in filmmaking, I don't remember what it's called—maybe you do, where you pull back and zoom in with the camera at the same time.

**DE:** I don't, but it's a weird sort of warping effect where the subject matter stays still but the background shifts.

**RM:** Yes, exactly, and it's a way to really create drama and it's almost that feeling when your heart starts beating faster and freaks out for a second and the camera can kind of capture that sensation.

**DE:** It emulates vertigo, right?

**RM:** Yeah, it's like a hyper focus? Anyway in this painting that I'm describing, I had to think for a long time about whether I would make this center area a direct reveal to this outer border. In the end I decided not to, and change them a little, and to me it creates that cinematic effect I'm talking about. It was "the big decision" in the painting and I'm very happy I did it. To me it feels cinematic. So I think you're right about that. There's something conscious or unconscious or whatever.

**DE:** Weirdly enough I hadn't thought of this but now that you mention it, it becomes very loud in my mind - Do you find yourself thinking about the perceptual implications of your paints? How the viewer perceives the paint?

**RM:** I do--sometimes it has to be pointed out to me, someone will say "oh this is doing this space-wise for me" and I'm like "oh, right." So although I know I am doing it, I may not be aware of how much I am doing it. I also think there is always a sort of question about the space I am painting, it is never a very assertive gesture where: this is the foreground and this is the background etc. There is always a bit of ambiguity as to whether I am painting the background, or the foreground, or painting the flicker between these two possible spaces. I like that in-betweenness more than deciding. Some paintings will have very similar formats, but the way they work spatially will create very different impressions. Some will be very layered and go back into space, but others will feel like the space is side by side on the same plane. I am not overly aware of these things while I am painting, but maybe subconsciously I am accepting that picture space, and going more towards it. I don't set out thinking 'this painting's going to be very

flat' but I am making decisions and moving in one direction or another, but without a set idea of making a specific type of painting.

**DE:** How do you feel about that creation of space, and maybe we can actually use this as a transition to speak about one of your paintings in the Biennial—Untitled (#14-13). I was looking at that painting, and I noticed you are using framing devices and scale to create depth and distance in a vaguely architectural sense. Without getting into a conversation about defining what is or is not abstraction, I am curious if you could talk about the depiction of space and how that relates to abstraction because I feel like establishing figure-ground relationships you're starting to undermine pure abstraction in a sense.

**RM:** For a time, I was making paintings that were more field-based, meaning the abstraction was more about an all-over composition that continued, perhaps, beyond the edge of the picture plane-- embracing the idea that the painting was capturing a smaller portion of something larger. I was concerned with how to make something go back or forward in that space, or how to articulate the literalness of the canvas itself. I made those paintings in the early 2000s and then there was a definite switch to a very frontal, splintered-type space. So instead of having a single field, now there were many pieces of things coexisting together. That was a big shift and I haven't really gone back to the field paintings since. I will say that the way I'm handling the borders around the paintings right now is more field like and what's happening inside the borders is more like after that break I made probably around 2004-2005. The one at the Whitney is like this. It is a blue painting with a grid around it, and the grid is a field. If you look at how the grid ends at each edge of the canvas—it's not even.

**DE:** It's off-center. I see it.

**RM:** It's off-standard. In all honestly that wasn't something I was trying to do on purpose—it's literally because I wasn't measuring things, I'm just thinking of the basic shape I want. I wanted an internal shape of a square with two scalloped/ wavy edges and two straight ones. When I put the grid in around it, I was free-hand measuring. I was a little worried that the grid not meeting the sides of the canvas the same way at each edge would be distracting, and feel too much like content. But I think that there is so much happening in the painting, that I don't think it does. In the end, I wouldn't mind if it did function as content, whatever that content might be.

**DE:** Do you think the grid functioned as a sort of support mechanism or structure that gave you support or security to try different things within the composition?

**RM:** Absolutely, I think it is a very stabilizing force. In that painting there are a lot of wavy, free form shapes happening, so the grid, which is a cool, dark blue has a more clinical character, that is non-sentimental and functions as a structured back-drop. It may not even be an actual back-drop, but it is a bracing character, and it is a border too, containing everything, holding it together, so yes, the word support is definitely accurate.

**DE:** The grid is a type of repeating form or pattern, it makes me think of repetition, and the notion that the repetition of an object, shape, or sign has the effect of obliterating meaning, do you think that applies to your grid?

**RM:** There was a period of time when I thought about that idea a lot, repeating something to make it banal, but I haven't been concerned with those ideas for a long time. I think now when

I repeat something, I only repeat it when I feel it is being used in a different way. I am not repeating something because it is the same thing each time I am using it. When I am repeating something, it has some different association for me, so I can repeat it. I am only interested in repeating things if they have a different function or resonance from iteration to iteration.

**DE:** You've alluded to this in other writings, but are you familiar with the term "paradoleia?"

**RM:** No.

**DE:** It's a psychology term, but it's the psychological phenomena for seeing recognizable things in patterns or objects. When you see an animal in the clouds or something, that's paradoleia. It comes from the Greek word "Dolem" which is Greek for "form." "To perceive form" is the Greek translation.

**RM:** Yes, I am interested in that idea without having known the formal word for it...that's how I see the world a lot. It's funny--when I listen to music and really like something, I'll hear the lyrics based on how they fit in with the music but I'm very rarely listening to the lyrics for meaning.

**DE:** I can relate to that. Are you good at remembering lyrics to songs?
**RM:** No, only if the song is playing at that moment might they come back to me. The words don't translate to meaning for me. My dad who is a composer comments that I often refer to the sounds of music as "noises" -- I don't say notes -- and I think it's something funny about the way I'm perceiving it - sounds as noises.

**DE:** I can totally relate to that, and I sort of have the exact same relationship to music and lyrics as you just described. Maybe it's how our minds work–why we're drawn to abstraction in general, or image making, or why we're visual people.

**RM:** I'll also look at things and never question what the image could be about—like strange shapes or something. There's sort of a literalness that I notice, but that's not to say I'm not detail oriented, or not able to experience nuance.

**DE:** Are you speaking to looking at images in painting right now or in general?

**RM:** In general. Though I've done studio visits with grad. students, and I'm looking at their work and talking about it and realize after an embarrassing amount of time that this thing I've been talking about the whole time was an abstracted figure and I had no sight of it. I think it's because I'm just so prone to looking at shapes and forms that I just don't feel this urge to make them make sense. I can exist for a long time without this necessity to make things cohere, and I'm perfectly happy to exist in that state, but I know it drives other people crazy.

**DE:** I think that's an invaluable tool for you as an abstract painter though because it allows you to fully explore shape and form in that regard without having to deal with any sort of additional informational hang-ups associated with those things.

**RM:** I think you're right about that. You stay more baggage free.

**DE:** I'm interested in your relationship with mixing materials or experimenting with textures and also I'm really curious about your use of white in your paintings-- are you painting white or are

you leaving the canvas gesso white? How do you deal with that background whiteness you seem to leave in a lot in your painting compositions?

**RM:** I sometimes leave the white of the gesso as a white and I sometimes paint-in the white. I like using the white of the gesso because it's such a neutralized surface and I enjoy that. For example, with the painting at the Whitney, Untitled (#14-13), the blue grid sits on white gesso and there's no white oil paint there. But inside the central shape, there are lots of different painted-in whites. I love seeing white on white, especially when it's kind of a bisque-y dirty white next to a very warm white. I think it looks really beautiful and it's very subtle. I do a lot of light paint handling—a lot of turped out oil paint, so everything gets very transparent, and you're very aware that the paintings are painted on a white ground because of this transparency. The transparency also highlights the quality of oil paint itself, which can change so dramatically given what color you're using, and what brand you're using.

Williamsburg Paints—some of their blacks and browns have this really earthy chunkiness so when it turps out you see the paint's granulation. I really like that. I'm making the paintings with oil paint and not acrylic because I like this sort of stubbornness and the irregularity that happens with oil paint. I really love this quality in oil painting, so I'm always trying to highlight different aspects of it—with certain brushstrokes, or by painting something quickly. Sometimes I purposefully fill-in an area in specific way because I want a motion or direction left in the paint. Due to it being so thin, that motion is captured. It's a way to make everything look vibrating and different from itself.

I'm also quite dedicated to color and color relationships for textural shifts. Specifically relational color. I have a friend (Mary Weatherford) who's so gifted at layering colors and building washes on top of each other and creating entirely new color situations because of that layering. I'm always attracted to that because I don't do that so much. It is a different textural look.

**DE:** Now that you've spoken about it a little bit, and I'm looking at this painting in the Biennial, and it almost feels collaged. It feels like you have different moments or shapes that are all collaged together as opposed to like painted in a transparent way that would sort of layer them in the way you're talking about that your friend does.

**RM:** You know when I was talking earlier about making that break from the more field-based paintings to the work I'm making now, I see it as coming out of an intense period of making collages back then. That sort of did it—collage is incredible.
Rebecca Morris (A 94') lives and works in Los Angeles.

Art in America

**Exhibition Review**

# REBECCA MORRIS

REBECCA MORRIS: UNTITLED (#11-15), 2015, OIL AND SPRAY PAINT ON CANVAS, 87 BY 80 INCHES; AT 356 MISSION.

In their visual convolutions, the compelling canvases in Rebecca Morris's exhibition "Rose Cut" allude to the title, which she adopted from the rose-like, multifaceted style of diamond that appears in her engagement ring. The show smacked of a campy bygone era, perhaps the misty- eyed, mawkish 1980s, with its Cosby sweaters and scent of Love's Baby Soft. The gallery's expansive building, in its former lives, has been a printing press, a storage facility for baby grand pianos and an artist's studio. Hung across two long opposing walls, the artist's nine new massive abstract canvases succeeded in the daunting feat of hold- ing the space.

In 2006, Morris published a manifesto of sorts in an Artforum advertisement for her show at Galerie Barbara Weiss in Berlin. A list of 21 concise statements, at times sanguine and earnest ("Don't pretend you don't work hard," "You are the master of your own universe") and at other times sarcastic ("Whip out the masterpieces"), ended with an affirmative proclamation: "ABSTRAC- TION FOREVER!" The ideas she outlined there are still relevant to her work.

Morris's paintings stem from a playful stream- of-consciousness approach yet are also grounded in a strict formalism ("Strive for deeper structure"). Grids and borders prevail. There is

method to the madness of her color. Taboo combinations—pink and red, neon and pastel—are often found in her works ("Black and Brown: that shit is the future"). The canvases in this show teeter between formal opposites—evoking, by turns, the precise abstraction of Agnes Martin and the sloppy, spray-painted depictions of contemporary trap- pings by Katherine Bernhardt, the modernist tapestries of Alexander Calder and Fernand Léger and domestic yarn-art hangings ("Never stop looking at macramé"). Untitled (#04-15) would fit right in amid the Miami decor of "The Golden Girls." Its chaotic layering of wavy triangles ("Triangles are your friend"), dots and grids painted in no less than a dozen colors, many of which clash, is contained by a flecked salmon pink border. Untitled (#01-15) intensifies such patterns and colors by hemming them into a large circle on a black ground.

Other works are more open and have a less finished quality. The meandering S-curve brushstrokes in Untitled (#11-15)—one vaguely resembling a caterpillar, another a piece of bacon—appear holographic or sculp- tural against the striped, spray-painted background, the effect recalling that of Roy Lichtenstein's works por- traying enlarged brushstrokes on fields of benday dots. Untitled (#05-15), with its splotches, daubs and droplets of paint, could be mistaken for a drop cloth were it not for the thin gold grid ("When in doubt—spray paint it gold") carefully hand-painted around the perimeter of the canvas.

At times, it seems as if Morris grabs any and all colors within her reach. Some works are so wildly discordant, in hue and form, that they are akin to nails on a chalk- board. The ability to elicit such a strong reaction from the viewer, however, is something to celebrate. And, in fact, after being given a visual break by way of the mel- lower Untitled (#03-15), which features a white rectangle divided into patterned stripes in subdued hues, one yearned for the blitz.
—Jennifer S. Li

ARTSY

# ARTISTS AND RODENTS DESCEND ON THE PIT IN "REVEAL THE RATS"

REBECCA MORRIS, UNTITLED (#516-15 - 524-15), 2015 THE PIT

The Pit's modest exhibition space is satisfyingly compact. Located in Glendale, California, the young gallery rejects the idea of a hangar-sized hall and instead offers a clean, well-lighted space that provides enough room for the work to breathe, even as the space remains intimate enough for a healthy cross-pollination of dialogue.

Artists founded the gallery, which may help explain an emphasis on art-making in the current exhibition. "Reveal the Rats" presents a refreshingly multigenerational roster of artists, from Anna Betbeze and Despina Stokou to more established figures such as Rebecca Morris, Sterling Ruby, and Lara Schnitger. As the artists joyfully express their shared affinities for processes of negation, destruction, and deconstruction, the show's connecting theme is a characterization of the rat as an industrious scavenger, a prolific creator misunderstood as a destructive creature—a definition that reflects back onto the artists and the art-making process.

For Morris and Ruby, this involves elevating studio detritus to the status of art object. Morris' misshapen paper cutouts, for instance, are the results of a masking process she uses to make large-scale canvases. Ruby puts a perfectly pristine bronze frame around the filthy, stained fabric from his studio. A Calvin Klein logo asserts the work's awareness of its own commercial status.

Elsewhere, Betbeze burns and blemishes colorful wool textiles to form a distressed composition, while Stokou and Schnitger playfully work with collage and quilting. Regardless of medium, an artwork here is a rat-race of consuming, regurgitating, and repurposing material. Making a work becomes a self-generative act, with the waste and scraps of one step becoming the foundational crux of the next.

ARTFORUM

# JESSICA JACKSON HUTCHINS AND REBECCA MORRIS

This exhibition, displaying two of Rebecca Morris's paintings and four of Jessica Jackson Hutchins's sculptures, feels perfectly tuned. Morris's signature forms, such as steps reminiscent of a household staircase or front stoop along with blotchy patterning suggesting bacteria or leopard print, are deployed forUntitled (#09-17) (all works 2017), a large canvas glowing in soft salmon pink. The imagery here feels more biomorphic than usual for the artist. Her use of gauzy edges, staining, and pale hues paired with blacks and grays causes the painting to move in and out of focus, a wondrous effect when one is standing directly before it. In keeping with the references to architecture and grids in much of her oeuvre, Untitled (#10-17) resembles a window frame through which nothing can be seen but snow and fog. Together, the works embody Morris's polar interests in congestion and emptiness.

Of the four Jackson Hutchins works, two represent an entirely new direction the artist embarked upon last year. Writing Not Writing and Presence place her ceramics on steel shelves that grow from armatures framing colored-glass panels. Jackson Hutchins's technique harkens back to traditional stained glass but produces results no one could mistake for antique. Using a fused-glass method, she creates pieces featuring painterly, abstract pours as well as spattered, animated line work. These new pieces convey a lightness that contrasts with the massive presence of the artist's well-known found-furniture sculptures, demonstrating her adventurous pursuit of an unexplored language. These two artists are not resting on their laurels.

— Daniel Gerwin

Frieze

# CRITIC'S GUIDE: THE BEST OF THE GALLERY-SHARE SHOWS ON NOW IN NEW YORK

REBECCA MORRIS, UNTITLED (#04–18), 2018, OIL ON CANVAS, 3.3 X 2.6 M. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND CORBETT VS. DEMPSEY, CHICAGO

## Bortolami
## Hosting Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

The Los Angeles based painter Rebecca Morris is a champion and perverter of the grid. It appears plainly and then obliquely in two untitled paintings here, both from 2018. In its more straightforward iteration, Untitled (#01–18), the grid functions as ground for the milky lavender and white striations of spray paint that pool behind interlocking lines of thin silver. The grid then serves as inspiration from which to diverge, splendidly and with aplomb, for a larger canvas whose main thrust is movement. For Untitled (#04–18), Morris has taken familiar points of experimentation from her previous work – geometric shapes shaped like sails or fins, patches of colour patterned in distinct yet amorphous

fields – and thrust into them a dynamism and energy that feels both unprecedented and yet entirely in character. Here, composition becomes something less learned and more willed: a force to fit within the confines of the canvas. Walk into an adjoining gallery and witness this break from the canvas in a more literal sense, in Ed Flood's Diamondback (1980). A cluster of curved acrylic-on-wood components, the installation reflects the post-minimalist approach that Flood, who was an initial member of Chicago Imagist group Nonplussed Some, made after moving to New York in the 1970s.

# INHERENT STRUCTURE

MAY 19–AUGUST 12, 2018

AT LEFT

*Untitled (#08–16)*, 2016 (detail)
Oil on canvas
122 x 96 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago
Photo: Lee Thompson

ALSO IN THE EXHIBITION

*Untitled (#13–16)*, 2016
Oil on canvas
70 x 69 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey

*Untitled (#07–16)*, 2016
Oil on canvas
85 x 101 in.

*Untitled (#05–17)*, 2017
Oil and spray paint on canvas
98 x 101 1/4 in.

*Untitled (#07–17)*, 2017
Oil on canvas
98 x 88 1/4 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin



# Rebecca Morris

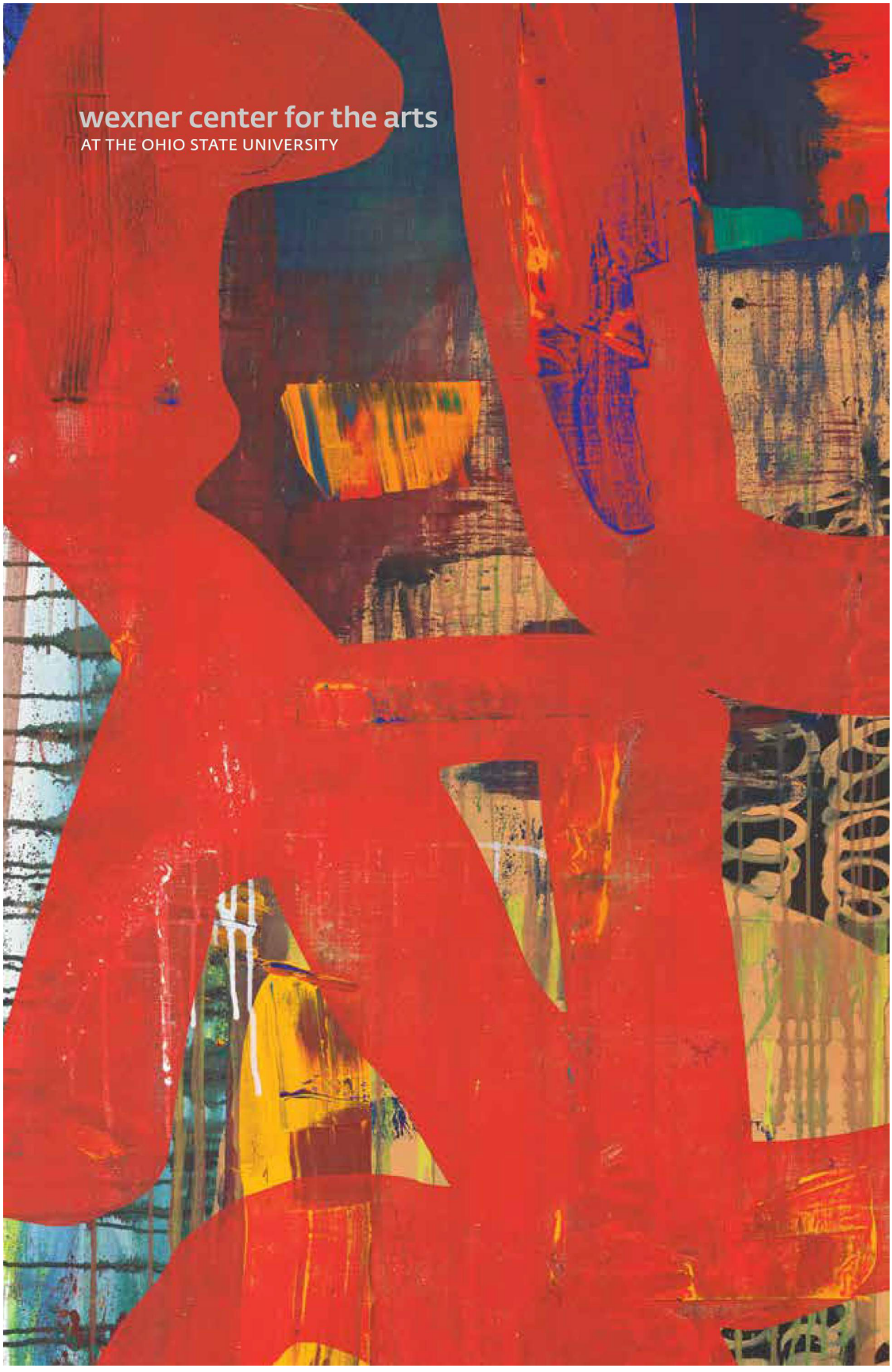
b. 1969, Honolulu
Lives and works in Los Angeles

In an *Artforum* ad for a 2006 exhibition of her work at Galerie Barbara Weiss, Rebecca Morris published the 21-line "MANIFESTO (For Abstractionists and Friends of the Non-Objective)." It was playful and buoyant ("You are greased lightning," "Whip out the masterpieces"), but also sober and clear ("Strive for deeper structure," "Don't pretend you don't work hard").

The dynamic between these poles of the impulsive and nearly mischievous and the disciplined and rational is paramount in Morris's painting, with the latter qualities acting as the catalytic elements that consistently push the work to formal and conceptual fruition. This balance between being open to impetuousness while driven by the linear and organized (with the added grace of pluckiness, of not being afraid of the color brown or of gold spray paint) gives Morris's paintings an undeniable air—utterly confident, but also self-effacing.

In essence, Morris's works are consciously well built, predicated on the strength needed to withstand this sway between fearlessness and precision. These works look deeply at the history of not only abstraction, but of painting generally, while also declaring their autonomy from that history. They allow for the idea of abstraction as a way forward for painting.

—MG


wexner center for the arts
AT THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Art & Education

# REBECCA MORRIS: THE ACHE OF BRIGHT BLAFFER ART MUSEUM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

ABOVE: REBECCA MORRIS, UNTITLED (#03-18), 2018. OIL ON CANVAS, 101 X 92 INCHES. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CORBETT VS. DEMPSEY, CHICAGO. PHOTO: FLYING STUDIO.

The Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston is pleased to present Rebecca Morris: The Ache of Bright, a new exhibition of paintings by the American artist Rebecca Morris.
Since the early 1990s, Rebecca Morris has explored the vast visual language of abstract painting. Inventing an extensive array of original forms, compositional rules, and improvisational associations, Morris creates highly considered images that simultaneously construct and disassemble themselves. Varying widely in scale and density, her works are both unpredictable and precise, often featuring an ebullient cacophony of hues, patterns, layers, and gestures.

Rebecca Morris: The Ache of Bright—Morris's first United States solo museum presentation since 2005— features a selection of ten major paintings made in the last four years. They represent the full range of her recent practice, including both evolving ideas and newly conceived constellations of color and texture. In characteristic fashion, these compositional elements are often at odds with each other and with themselves, creating a compelling commingling of painterly strategies that alternate between off-kilter

and systematic. The exhibition's title comes from a poem by the writer Martha Ronk, in which she describes the affective qualities of sunlight in Los Angeles. This light, too, has played an ongoing, integral role in the production of Morris's paintings since the artist moved to the city in 1998. Much like the sensation of being overwhelmed by sheer brightness, Morris finds inspiration in the nuances of optical overload.

The daughter of an experimental music composer father and an arts-focused mother, Morris was interested in systems, grids, and structured forms from an early age. She received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1994, where she studied with a number of Chicago Imagist painters known for their energetic palettes and eccentric figurative style. One of them, Barbara Rossi, encouraged her to use a camera to take note of her everyday experiences. Morris became interested in how the dailiness or mundanity of her photographs could capture a kind of visual desire—a way of "seeing something in the world I need to absorb, a longing for something I can't have." Expressing this complexity, the pictorial elements in her works are often juxtaposed and intermingled, with forms and patterns seeming to emerge and then zig-zag away from the flatness of the canvas. Indeed, for Morris, abstraction becomes the means to more fully engage with art and life.

Rebecca Morris's work is held in a number of major museum collections worldwide, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, among others. Since 1994, she has been the subject of more than 25 solo exhibitions and has been included in over 145 group exhibitions at museums and galleries, including the 2014 Whitney Biennial; Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, Netherlands; LAXART, Los Angeles; Kunsthalle Lingen, Germany; The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago; 356 S. Mission Road, Los Angeles; Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin; and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; among many others. Morris has also been the recipient of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award, among others.

Rebecca Morris: The Ache of Bright is curated by Tyler Blackwell, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Curatorial Fellow at the Blaffer Art Museum. The exhibition is accompanied by a full-color, fully-illustrated catalogue.

The exhibition is organized by the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston's Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts. Generous support for the exhibition is provided by Ingrid Arneberg, Leslie and Brad Bucher, Kristen and David Buck, Jereann Chaney, Cullen K. Geiselman, Cecily Horton, and Sallie Morian. Additional exhibition and program funding is provided by the Cecil Amelia Blaffer von Furstenberg Endowment for Exhibitions and Programs, the George and Mary Josephine Hamman Foundation, the Sarah C. Morian Endowment, the John P. McGovern Foundation, Jo and Jim Furr Exhibition Endowment at Blaffer Art Museum, the Farrell Family Foundation, and Blaffer Art Museum's Advisory Board members.

SIGHT LINES Arts, Culture, News & Ideas

# CACOPHONY ON CANVAS: REBECCA MORRIS STRIVES FOR DISCORD AT THE BLAFFER

**REVIEW | Rebecca Morris's first United States solo museum exhibition since 2005 is at the University of Houston's Blaffer Art Museum. It is also the first time Morris' work is being shown in Texas.**

REBECCA MORRIS, UNTITLED (#03-18), 2018. OIL ON CANVAS. 101 X 92 INCHES. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CORBETT VS. DEMPSEY.

In 2006, Rebecca Morris caused a stir with "Manifesto: For Abstractionists and Friends of the Non Objective" — a list of 21 audacious yet humorous short statements that include mantras like "Don't pretend you don't work hard" and "When in doubt, spray paint it gold." Indeed, its battle cry "ABSTRACTION FOREVER" still resounds. And it's here where I feel it's best to start a review of her latest exhibition, "The Ache of Bright," at the University of Houston's Blaffer Art Museum, organized by curatorial fellow Tyler Blackwell.

Blackwell has followed Morris's work for the past eight years and notes in conversation via email that his admiration for her work comes from "how singular her practice is. She is steadfastly dedicated to abstraction and is constantly reinventing the ways she approaches the picture plane. I am also endlessly fascinated by her ability to manipulate the optical effects of density, color, geometry, and space — often all at once."

REBECCA MORRIS, UNTITLED (#01-18), 2016. OIL ON CANVAS. 122 ½ X 77 ½ INCHES. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CORBETT VS. DEMPSEY

Morris's work plays dutifully in a landscape of colors, shapes, grids, and amorphous entities that wander across her canvas. She employs vaguely monochromatic, muted color palettes that occasionally receive a smattering of more vibrant colors as decoration. Her subject matter also offers a nod to elements of contemporary design and architecture though rendered with a more human hand. This oscillation between order and chaos is one the Morris seems to thrive in, but for the audience, it can be dizzying to try and absorb both in stride.

One of the exhibition's more subdued works "Untitled (#01-18)" depicts an almost tie-dye purple and white background, trapped behind the bars of a pale, painted white grid. It's entertaining to study the smart, precise flicks of purple that segue from light-to-dark-and-back-again between panels. Morris paints in the natural light of her Los Angeles studio and often references not only the appearance, but also the effects, of light in her work.

Blackwell comments, "There is also something to be said about the optical effects of the 'bleaching' or 'washed out' quality of sunlight in southern California specifically, which I think

REBECCA MORRIS, UNTITLED (#06-16), 2018. OIL AND SPRAY PAINT ON CANVAS. 80 X 69 INCHES. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CORBETT VS. DEMPSEY.

certainly affects Morris's decisions to utilize the more liquidous, porous, bleached gestures and bright color washes happening on many of the canvases."

"Untitled (#01-18)" evokes the character of light without providing any contextual elements (like a cloud, horizon line, or sun) to create the scene — it's only in the individual and personal experience of a hazy purple dusk that the subject resonates within the piece.

Those who appreciate subtle details may find equal enthusiasm in the show's more brightly hued works, but it is hard to deny these pieces' contrasting elements render almost abrasive. In "Untitled (#03-18)," a fire-engine red overlay presses right up the edges of a mauve checkerboard, decorated with corners of dotted seafoam green and a saturated black — this bleeds into various other sections that, if they were not constructed of paint, could conventionally describe the aesthetics of a rust stain, damask doodle, the inside of an amethyst, a portrait of outer space, and an undergrowth of mold.

Likewise, in "Untitled (#06-16)," audiences are confronted a half-spiral of shards, loosely composed of soft patterns, that could easily stand in as rejected 1970s upholstery scraps. Harsh army green gives way to a shaggy black and brown swatch while a patterned stripe of faded pink squares comes in from bottom right.

Blackwell qualifies, "[Morris] is a masterful colorist…this notion of tension or contradiction or dissonance is definitely a consistent theme through her practice, and she likes to actively avoid moments that look too 'pretty' or 'buttoned up' or even 'good.' Instead, she prefers to disregard our (and often her own) expectations for painting."

Fair enough, but it challenges the audience, for better or worse, to find interest in work that fundamentally has no compulsion to be visually identifiable or aesthetically pleasing.

"The Ache of Bright" is Morris's first United States solo museum exhibition since 2005 and the first time her work is being shown in Texas. For the show to be exhibited at the University of Houston's Blaffer Art Museum will undoubtedly incite many student artists to challenge themselves within their own work, both in study of the contemporary arts and the inquiry into abstractionism.

In this pursuit of arts philosophy and creation, I stand alongside Morris, chanting, "Abstraction forever" — but beyond that, we diverge. For as much enthusiasm as her manifesto creates, the experience of Morris's work leaves an overwhelming impression of discordant color execution, celebrated as an opportunity to buck the rulebook.

WALKER, HAMZA. "REBECCA MORRIS AND THE REVENGE OF P&D." WITH PLEASURE: PATTERN AND DECORATION IN AMERICAN ART 1972 — 1985. MOCA LOS ANGELES AND YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS. 2019

WALKER, HAMZA. "REBECCA MORRIS AND THE REVENGE OF P&D." WITH PLEASURE: PATTERN AND DECORATION IN AMERICAN ART 1972 — 1985. MOCA LOS ANGELES AND YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS. 2019

# REBECCA MORRIS AND THE REVENGE OF P&D

HAMZA WALKER

In 1969 Daniel Buren penned his seminal essay "Mise en garde!" ("Beware!") on the occasion of his inclusion in *Konzeption/ Conception: Documentation of Today's Art Tendencies*, a survey of Conceptual art curated by Konrad Fischer and Rolf Wedewer for the Museum Morsbroich, in Leverkusen, Germany.[1] With more than forty artists, the show was a who's who of the American and European avant-garde. What better opportunity to express umbrage taken at Conceptual art? An umbrage cloaked as grave reservations, as the title "Beware!" suggests. Pun intended, Buren's polemic begins straight out of the gate with the infamous quote "Concept has never meant 'horse.'" [2] His barbs have yet to dull over time. Take for example this remark about mannerist Conceptual practice: "In order, no doubt, to get closer to 'reality,' the 'conceptual' artist becomes gardener, scientist, sociologist, philosopher, storyteller, chemist, sportsman." [3] As the artist Joe Scanlan has shown, all you have to do is replace "conceptual artist" with "relational aesthetics artist," or "social practices artist," and the essay reads as applicable to the current moment.

But Buren's barbs are sharp ultimately because he has skin in the game. He developed his in situ method of working through an extremely rigorous line of thinking about the dematerialization of art, which was not to be taken lightly. If anything, "Beware!" expresses his fears about its trivialization. His warning regarding the dematerializa-tion of the object is introduced with the heading *Concept = Idea = Art*:

> Lastly, more than one person will be tempted to take any sort of an "idea," to make art of it and to call it "concept." It is this procedure which seems to us to be the most dangerous, because it is more difficult to dislodge, because it is very attractive, because it raises a problem that really does exist: how to dispose of the object?[4]

Buren was bothered by the thought of Conceptual art devolving into a trend, a new style of art, at which point it would become "the prevailing ideology."[5] The problems the movement sought to address would then be considered solved. These solutions are the new art, which, according to Buren, is simply the old art in a new form. Buren's work was aimed precisely at the problem of form, specifically its neutralization, which was tantamount to the dematerialization of art. The neutralization of form was a problem that could only be addressed in a sustained fashion, in a manner that would rearticulate rather than resolve the problem. By 1969, Buren had spent four years working "without any evolution or way out."[6] However polemical his essay, Buren is equally explicit about his methodology.

The text begins with a call for a painting that is non-illusionistic, in the sense of being not merely abstract, but abstract to the point of being "its own reality." In other words, it is a call for a purely self-referential painting, one that is staunchly anti-illusionistic in that it does not refer to anything outside of itself:

1 Daniel Buren, "Beware!," in *Konzeption/Conception*, trans. Charles Harrison and Peter Townsend (Leverkusen, Germany: Staatische Museum, 1969); reprinted in *Studio International* 179, no. 920 (March 1970): 100–104.

2 Ibid., 100.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

> In the same way that writing is less and less a matter of verbal transcription, painting should no longer be the vague vision/ illusion, even mental, of a phenomenon (nature, subconsciousness, geometry . . .) but *VISUALITY of the painting itself.* In this way we arrive at a . . . method which requires . . . that painting itself should create a mode, a specific system, which would no longer direct attention, but which is "produced to be looked at."[7]

7 Ibid., 101.

Hence the evenly spaced vertical stripes, each band being 8 .7 centimeters wide and a single color alternating with white (fig. 2 ). Colors are deployed in a systematically democratic fashion such that they are equally interchangeable (black = red = green = blue = yellow) from one work to the next. Each work comprises a succession of bands of equal width filling up the painting side to side; thus whatever composition there is to speak of is completely neutral insofar as the part- to-whole relationship is evenly dispersed across the surface area. There is no "contradiction," only an evenly distributed alternation of equal forms. Without contradiction, by default there is no "tragedy," to use the term which in Buren's case is a euphemism for anthropomorphism. The stripes likewise dispense with the horizon line. There are only top and bottom. This succession of bands is a system resulting in a fixed internal structure. The internal structure of the painting is independent of its external dimensions, which are allowed to vary depending wholly on ci rcumstances.

With the stripe motif as a constant, repetition became Buren's starting point. It was the means to highlight the ever-changing context of the venue, whether that was inside or outside the museum or the gallery. Buren's work could assume a variety of forms and be placed in a variety of settings where it could di rectly address specific

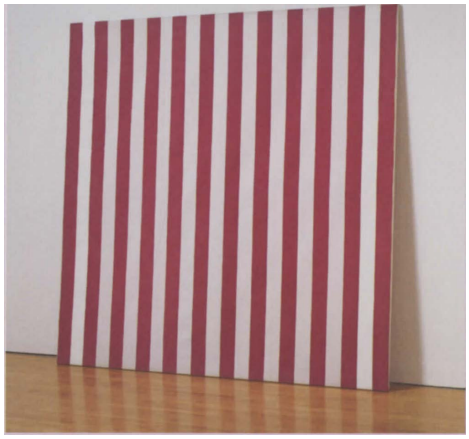


**Fig. 2:** Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, ***Peinture acrylique blanche sur tissu rayé blanc et rouge,*** 1971. Acrylic on woven red and white fabric, 78 ¾ × 78 ¾ × ⅞ in. (200.03 × 200.03 × 2.22 cm). The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, purchased with funds provided by Robert H. Halff

formal and or sociopolitical aspects of its location. By extending, or transferring, the logic of painting's self-reflexivity to its context, Buren would place painting, as opposed to the readymade, at the core of institutional critique.

At the time of the publication of "Beware!," Buren had been producing his signature stripe works for four years. In that time, his stripes had come to exemplify Conceptual art. This, however, would eclipse the fact that Buren had arrived at the stripe in empirical fashion as the paintings over the course of 1964 through 1965 and into 1966 make abundantly clear; observe the appearance of the stripe in 1965's *Enamel paint on cotton canvas* (fig. 3), followed by work in which Buren painted directly on fabric, 1966's *Variable Forms Painting* (fig. 4).

Buren's work perfects the paradigm of an art for art's sake. Here, any formal evolution within painting is replaced by repetition. The emphasis previously reserved for individual paintings is shifted onto a logic of production, or a methodology. This shift corresponds to another shift, namely a shift from the empirical to the theoretical come again as the ideological. For Buren, the ideological assumes the form of a recurring proposition. As such, it is anything but absolute. The transitional works of 1964/1965/1966 are remarkable in that they literally illustrate the perfecting of an art-for-art's-sake paradigm in which the terminating logic of the monochrome is substituted with a generative logic belonging to what else but pattern painting.

**Fig. 3, left:** Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Enamel paint on cotton canvas*, [September-October] 1965. Enamel paint on cotton canvas, 89 ¼ × 75 ½ in (226.5 × 191.5cm)
**Fig. 4, right:** Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Variable Forms Painting*, [May] 1966. Acrylic on white and grey striped cotton canvas, 89 × 75 in (226 × 190.2 cm)

Buren has never shunned the decorative, and should anyone have speculations regarding Daniel Buren as the ultimate Pattern and Decoration painter, I call to the witness stand the 2013 Buren/Louis Vuitton collaboration (fig. 5), in which Buren provided the sets for the spring fashion-week unveiling of Vuitton's line. And continuing to make this case, I wish to juxtapose the Buren/Vuitton collaboration with the performances of a seminal member of Pattern and Decoration, or P&D, Robert Kushner. His performances grew out of a fascination with both movement and costuming, an interest Kushner developed during his early years as an artist in San Diego, having attended the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). Later, he would integrate food into the costumes, as in *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*, performed at both Jack Glenn Gallery, Corona del Mar, California, and Acme Productions, Greene Street Gallery, New York, in 1972 (fig. 6), and Kushner began staging performances that developed into fashion shows, a series of which he would mount in New York throughout the 1970s, including *The Winter and Spring Lines* (1973), *The Persian Line* (1975), and *Sentimental Fables* (1979), this last presented at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

But what about Pattern and Decoration proper? As curator Anne Swartz has detailed in her 2007 exhibition catalogue *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975–1985*, as a movement, P&D began in 1975 over a series of three discrete events. The first was a panel at Artists Space titled "The Pattern in Painting,"

**Fig. 5, left:** Louis Vuitton runway designed by Daniel Buren, Paris Fashion Week, Spring/Sumer 2013
**Fig. 6, right:** Robert Kushner, *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*, 1975. Performance, Acme Productions, Greene Street Loft, New York

organized by Mario Yrisarry and moderated by Peter Frank. Its speakers included Martin Bressler, Rosalind Hodgkins, Valerie Jaudon, Tony Robbin, and Sanford Wurmfeld. The second and most formative was a series of "pattern meetings" at Robert Zakanitch's Warren Street loft. Attendees included art historian and critic Amy Goldin, Leonore Goldberg, Hodgkins, Jaudon, Joyce Kozloff, Robert Kushner, Robbin, Miriam Schapiro, Kendall Shaw, Nina Yankowitz, and Zakanitch. The third event was the opening of Holly Solomon Gallery, which debuted with a group exhibition that included nineteen artists, among them Kushner, Kim MacConnel, and Ned Smyth, all of whom were core P&D subscribers. The premiere was followed by a solo show of Brad Davis's work and shortly thereafter a solo show of MacConnel's work. A steady stream of panels, meetings, and exhibitions continued unabated over the next two years, culminating in the 1977 survey *Pattern Painting* at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York, curated by art critic John Perreault.[8]

P&D is not a feminist movement in my view, yet it is inconceivable without feminism, which lent it a critical platform as well as a means of networking. As for the latter, relationships between P&D's key female members (Jaudon, Kozloff, Schapiro) were cemented a few years earlier through their involvement with the women's movement on both coasts. The feminist collectives that formed throughout the United States were self-determined groups, and P&D was no different. In calling to order a "pattern meeting," Zakanitch consciously wanted to build a movement around overtly decorative work. As for how to do this, Zakanitch could not have picked a more ideal role model than Schapiro, to whom he turned for advice. Early on, Zakanitch told Schapiro that he wanted to start a movement and asked her, "How do you do that?" Schapiro, who had considerable experience in starting a movement—feminist art—answered his question with a question: "Well, how did the Cubists do it? How did the Impressionists?"[9]

As far as lending P&D a critical platform, over and above redeeming the decorative and celebrating it as a form of women's work, feminism gave P&D an oppositional edge. Feminism's emergence within the visual arts is concurrent with the rise of Minimalism, which ideologically speaking is a purely self-referential art and thus a zenith of modernism. Referring to nothing outside of itself, it is an art predicated on the exclusion of history, memory, biography, race, and gender. This would prove anathema for women and people of color actively engaged in the struggle to find voice and political agency. As a result, feminism had no choice but to be anti-modern insofar as modernism was anti-feminine. The anti-modernism endemic to feminism was part and parcel of P&D. A prime example is Kozloff's 1976 two-part manifesto, printed in the pamphlet accompanying the exhibition *Ten Approaches to the Decorative* at Alessandra Gallery (and reproduced in this volume). The first section is titled

8 See Anne Swartz, "Chronology of Shows and Writings," in *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975–1985*, ed. Anne Swartz (Yonkers, NY: Hudson River Museum, 2007), 113–19.

9 See Arthur C. Danto, "Pattern and Decoration as a Late Modernist Movement," in Swartz, *Pattern and Decoration*, 8–9.

"Negating the Negative (An Answer to Ad Reinhardt's 'On Negation')" and the second is titled "On Affirmation."

P&D's oppositional position to a large extent overshadows its heterogeneity as a movement. All of the P&D artists embraced pattern and ornament well before it was a movement, arriving at their own artistic conclusions for different reasons, scarcely any of which could be said to be reactionary. MacConnel and Kushner were students at UCSD when they fell under the sway of Islamic art. Goldin's tutelage was key to their exploration of non-Western art, an investigation that formed out of a passion for Asian and Middle Eastern art and artifacts. Zakanitch cites autobiographical sources for his turn toward ornament: "In my grandparents' house, ornamentation was everywhere. They had embroidered tablecloths and armrests. They used stencils to paint flower patterns on their walls, which gave me an affinity for stencils. My grandparents refused to live in bleak empty rooms and decorated everything." [10]

10 Zakanitch, quoted in ibid., 7.

Jaudon's work draws from architectural ornamentation. But the work belongs as much to a hard-edge geometric abstract tradition as it does to P&D. The same is true of Robbin. All of this is to say that despite the oppositional tone of P&D as a movement, its tributar-ies were hardly reactionary. The sources from which these artists drew their inspiration, even when they were modernist sources, were revered. This is important in that P&D, no matter how anti-modern, was never ironic. That this was so is no small feat for what many acknowledge as postmodernism's first movement, with Peter Halley's Neo-Geo being a very close second.

Los Angeles–based painter Rebecca Morris is a child of post-modern irony. That said, Morris's commitment to abstraction lies somewhere between the poles of fierce and rabid; committment of this kind is a prerequisite for coping with a pluralism arising not only across disciplines but from within the discipline of painting itself. Abstraction is now a given, an option that is taken for granted as one chooses rather than fights to become an abstract painter. It is a choice, however, within a discipline that itself has become a field of specialization by virtue of taking on the characteristics of a language. If the closure of modernist painting is taken as the closure of painting itself, then under the aegis of postmodernism, painting's history is a finite collection of styles readily offering itself up for quotation. In other words, paintings are read in and through reference to other paintings: this fact raises the question, Once abstraction has acquired this kind of legibility, is there such a thing as an abstract painting? (The shorthand for this is an understanding of abstraction as an allegory for modernism.)

Judging from Morris's work, the answer is a resounding "Hell yeah." Hers remains a rudimentary language of shape, line, color, gesture, surface, and composition that quotes so as to reduce its references to an alphabet. In this respect, her paintings function as an ur- or protolanguage of abstraction through which one can discern the compositional logic of Frank Stella's Black Paintings, an isolated Pollock-like splatter, or a Hans Hofmann–esque approach to the

discreet juxtaposition of color. Morris's early paintings feature her signature device of layering a shape that is an undifferentiated hybrid of square and circle. Executed flat on the floor, these paintings look as though they have emerged, faceup, from a boiling cauldron of protozoan possibilities dating back to the Flintstones. Between works such as *Level 5* (1977; fig. 7) and her paintings consisting exclusively of lines, such as *Untitled* (2000; fig. 8), her early vocabulary was indeed one of sticks and stones. When not registered as a scrubby stain or a series of wavering, spray-painted lines, her touch consists of a redundant slathering of viscous paint that builds in thickness, going from *painting* as a verb to *painting* as a noun. On stretchers deeper than required for paintings of their size, these canvases assert their objecthood so literally they become rhetorical. Facture is determined by gravity and the drying properties of oil, which con-tracts as it congeals, forming a skin with an unctuous, hive-like wrinkling that seems to emerge from within the paintings. With a life of their own, the works become susceptible to disease and aging, forms of corruption well beyond any irony.

Morris's early paintings could hardly be said to escape such irony, which is endemic to any and all questions of legibility. Whatever irony may be attributed to her intent, however, corresponds to history's larger irony, which was already well in effect. To submit abstraction to a process of quotation that reduces stylistic specificity to very basic and general features is to craft a generic abstraction, one that cannot fail to signify abstraction's utter ubiquity. Little wonder, then, that these early paintings resemble a species of abstraction found in transient public spaces—fast-food dining courts, airport terminals, the DMV. Once considered an ideal complement to public spaces because of its universal appeal, abstract art came to be read as a gratuitous effort to beautify impersonal spaces of rote functionality. These spaces, with their accepted levels of vagrancy and dereliction, often resulting from the public's very absence, were in effect non-spaces. Abstraction spoke for no one, becoming a vacant language. Referring to figurative elements lacking a place within abstract paintings, Clement Greenberg coined the infamous phrase "homeless representation." If the dialectical pendulum of history made a complete swing, then it is safe to say Morris's early paintings are species of "homeless abstraction."

Morris's predilection for a scathed abstraction is a way of welcoming abstraction and its subsequent fate, with arms open wide. As for an attendant irony, let there be no mystery as to what she would say: "Bring it on!" For painters who share Morris's commitment to abstraction, the challenge is to reinvent on terms that are relevant and relative the spirit and dialectical conditions that make abstract painting urgent and necessary. For the better part of the twentieth century, this struggle was defined by a dialectical tension between abstraction and figuration. In Morris's case, the conflict is defined by an irony residing exclusively within the domain of abstract painting. In short, abstract painting has nothing to overcome but itself. This is an irony Morris is bold enough to instigate and even bolder for transcending, as her paintings, over the past decade, have increased

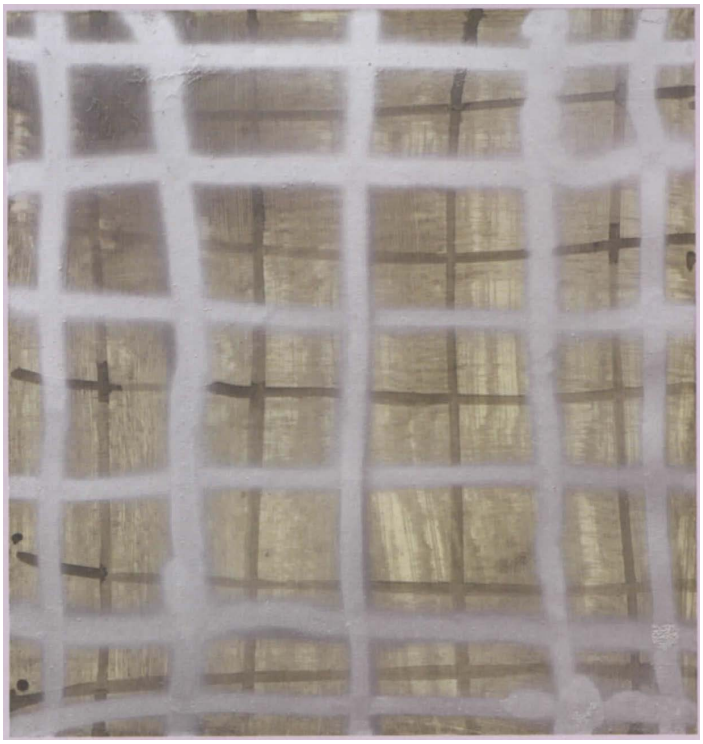


**Fig. 7, top:** Rebecca Morris, *Level 5*, 1997
Oil on canvas, 28 × 27 in. (71.12 × 68.58 cm)
**Fig. 8, bottom:** Rebecca Morris, *Untitled*, 2000.
Oil on canvas, 31 × 29 in. (78.74 × 73.66 cm).
Private collection

in scale and complexity on every front—palette, paint handling, and composition, including Morris's notable forays into crafting deep space—and are thus robust enough to dispel any question of whether they insist upon painting for painting's sake.

The struggle from one generation to the next might be different, but the goal of making paintings of which nothing is asked other than that they be paintings remains the same. Indeed, Morris's paint-ings are anachronisms. Her method of reducing any attributable stylistic specificity to rudimentary painterly concerns negates the idea that abstract painting would, could, or should evolve. Her sticks-and-stones period could just as easily serve as a paean to Wassily Kandinsky's 1926 book *Point and Line to Plane* as it could be said to reference the New York School. Although the advent of pure abstraction is a thing of the past, it was not marked as belonging exclusively to the early years of the twentieth century or to the New York School. Abstraction now belongs to the ages, which problematizes any claims to contemporaneity made on its behalf. Hovering outside a historical dialectic, abstraction operates at its own speed. At times, it has been ahead of its present, and at others behind. Several of Morris's paintings circa 2000 might recall the 1980s better than a painting actually executed during that decade ever could.
And now she seems to be working her way further back, her work having skirmishes with P&D; compare, for example, Morris's *Untitled (#17–15)* (2015; fig. 9) and Schapiro's *Tapestry of Paradise* (1980; fig. 10), each exemplifying the framing, or bordering, that is a consistent feature of Pattern and Decoration.

It is easy to be ironic about P&D. It can be hard to look it in the eye and even harder to avail oneself to a course of painterly exploration in which you don't choose your bedfellows. Such is the case with Morris. This is what happens when you relinquish irony. You are subject to any way the wind blows. To rub shoulders with P&D, however, is to reanimate an empiricist pre-stripe Daniel Buren. If anything, I would argue that P&D—and *only* P&D—holds the keys to Buren's *Mosaïque aux éléments composites* (fig. 11). And this is work with which Morris sees eye to eye (fig. 1, p. 172).

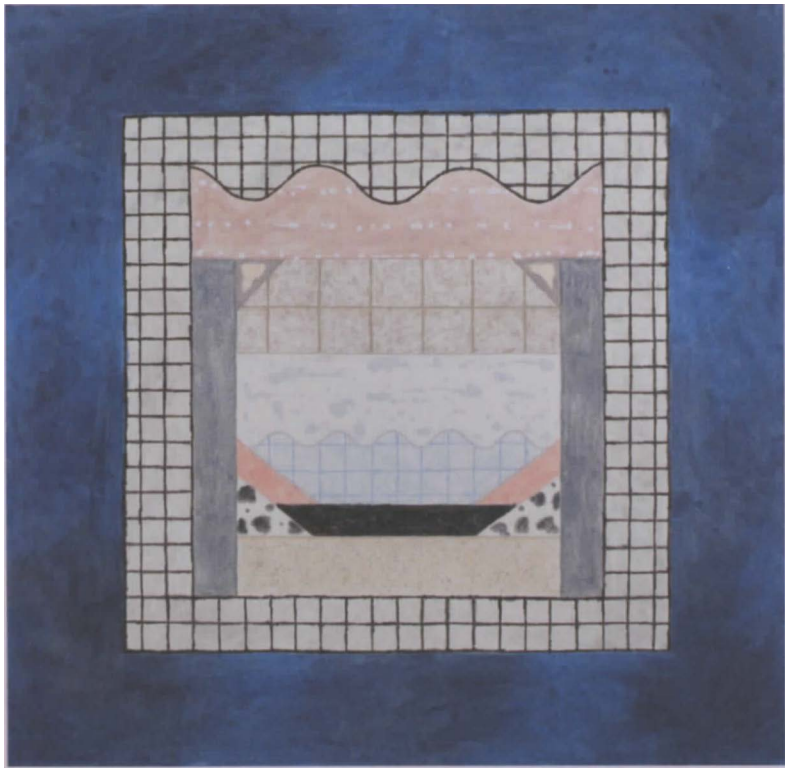


**Fig. 9, top:** Rebecca Morris, *Untitled (#17-15)*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 95 × 97 in. (241.3 × 246.38 cm). Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Museum purchase, International and Contemporary Collectors Funds, 2017.9
**Fig. 10, bottom:** Miriam Schapiro, *Tapestry of Paradise*, 1980. Acrylic, fabric, glitter on canvas, 60 × 50 in. (152.4 × 127 cm). Brooklyn Museum of Art, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, gift of Robert Sugar
**Fig. 11, opposite:** Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Mosaïque aux éléments composites*, [January–May] 1965 (detail). Site-specific work, Grapetree Bay Hotel, Saint Croix, Virgin Islands, US