

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.

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.”

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

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.