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In the Studio: Rebecca Morris
By Jenny Gil | April 21, 2025



Rebecca Morris in her studio, Los Angeles, 2025. Photo by Flying Studio.

Rebecca Morris is a Los Angeles-based abstract painter and a 2024 Joan Mitchell Fellow. We interviewed Morris about her work and creative practice in January 2025. The following is excerpted and edited from a transcript of that conversation.

I'm working on about 20 paintings right now, which is a lot for me. Some are just beginnings. Some are almost at the end. I always try to have a range of work at different stages happening. I may work on two pieces in one week, and three other pieces the next week, then cycle back. And there are usually a couple paintings that are hanging out, drying or waiting for me to have a next step worked out in my mind.

The time spent literally, physically painting is not time-consuming per se—things happen very quickly, very improvisationally. The thing that is slow, in addition to the nature of oil paint, is the thought process, what I imagine should happen next. I have to think my way through the paintings.

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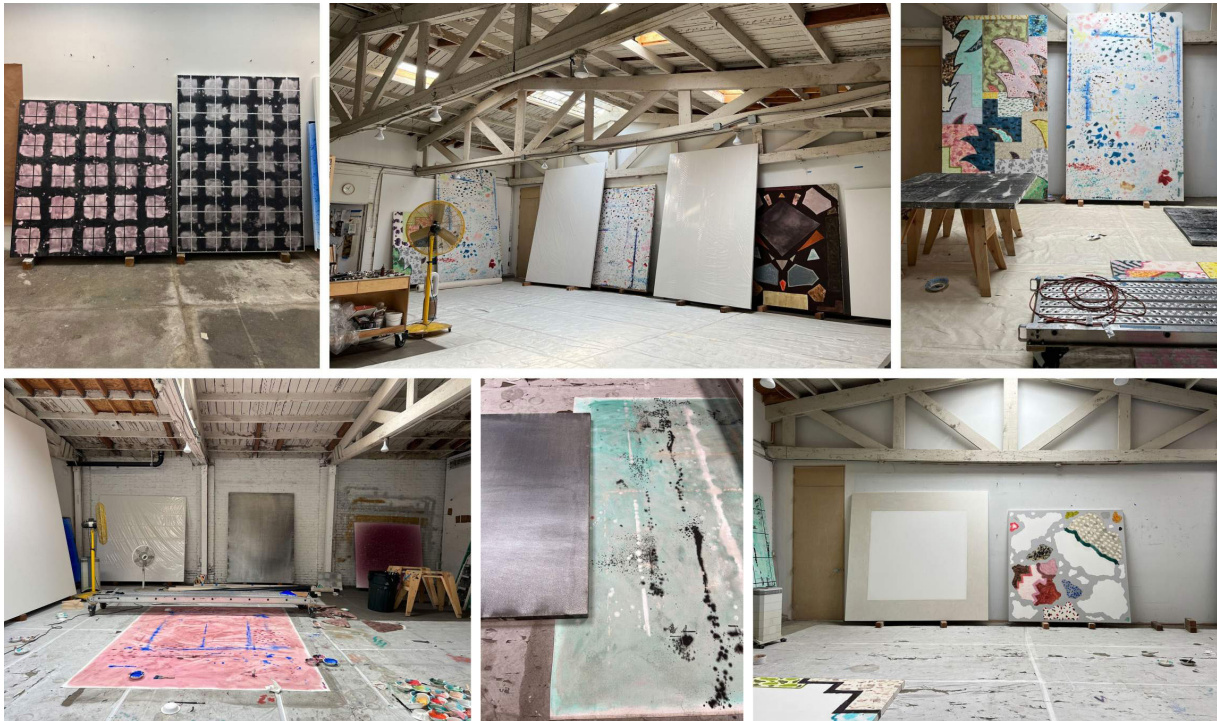
Installation view, Rebecca Morris: 2001–2022, MCA Chicago, Sep 30, 2023–Apr 7, 2024. Photo by Shelby Ragsdale, © MCA Chicago.

Related to that, I am constantly taking pictures of what's going on in the studio. I have a deep archive of these images. My studio is separate from where I live and I really prefer that. So when I go home, and my head is still there, I can look at my phone, think about what I did that day. It gives me extra time with the work. And at other times when I have to be away from the studio, the photography helps by adding that extra desire to get back STAT. It also archives when I started and finished something—which is not particularly interesting in and of itself, but has been helpful for me. When people have asked, "How long does it take to make a painting?" I used to say, "Oh, three to six months." But from the record of my photos, I know that is not true. It's actually nine to eighteen months. When I realized this, I was like, "Jesus Christ."

It's also helpful to see what I've destroyed or be reminded of a direction I didn't take. Seeing those images helps me remember what I was thinking about and why.

There's a particular cycle of restraint, refusal, and permission in my work. Even though I understand the paintings can look free and untroubled, there are a lot of rules about when I will allow repetition or iterations. This comes out of a desire to not repeat, to try to get someplace quantifiably new, different. Honestly, I go between on the one hand feeling that too much repetition is a form of complacency, but then on the other hand, looking at previous work thinking, "Oh, damn it. I wish I'd made more." Because I can't go back in time and make another one LIKE THAT. It is just not the same to revisit after the

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Works in progress, Los Angeles, 2022-2024. Photos by Rebecca Morris.

moment. Revisiting is exactly that; visiting again LATER. Which is cool, but not the same thing at all. I have been struck more recently by seeing that indeed there was more in a given moment. I could have pulled that idea out just a little longer. This haunts. Especially since it was my own fault, my own rule of restraint.

So I've made this conscious choice where, if there is something that I am really, really into and I have an obsessive relationship to it, I try to make a few of them. I know I sound so uptight... But for me, repetition has to be done carefully because I'm not interested in making a kind of painting that I'm going to make and make and make for a really long time: a monomania. That's not what I get stimulated by in the studio. I need a lot of contrasts.

Going back to the work that I'm making now—I'm very consciously trying to push. I want invention not refinement.

I don't want my paintings to just look like better, tighter versions of themselves. I want something new to happen. I want to have the same excitement of those big discoveries I have had in the past. A lot of it is accidental and simply working—working in the studio, and just being open to improvisation, fuck-ups, bad moves and leaving them. But how do you create the conditions where that keeps happening? I'm consumed by this.

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A lot of painters talk about wanting to start at this zero point where you have to relearn everything with each new work. There is also throwing in curveballs. I think about how to make things stranger and upend expectations, both mine and maybe what people might think my work looks like. But ultimately, it's not helpful for me to think about other people, their expectations, etc. I value my location in Los Angeles and my teaching job for this protection.

Color is consistently a place or zone where I can push for something different—a way to go back into the work and create something unexpected or jarring. I ask myself "What are the colors I'm not using?" If I start using that color, that's absolutely a way to springboard into a different arena. I did that with the color blue in the last few years. I made a lot of blue paintings after not having made any, but I made them explicitly because I felt blue was an awful color. Which is not a popular opinion—people love blue and it's the sky, it's water, it's familiar, easy to like. How do you make a successful non-representational blue painting?

Green is also a very nature-based color. The green that I used in the painting Untitled (#05-23) was an unusual color for me to use at that time. I loved that particular real grass green color, and the way that the canvas held and froze the liquidity of the paint and its puddles. The green field part was made flat on the floor on canvas that was primed but not stretched. Then I determined the size of the painting based on the areas I found the most interesting. I ordered the stretcher bar, stretched it, and then the second part was, what do I do now? I've got this really great surface. I don't want to cover it up too much, but it's not enough for me to leave the painting to be just that—there's not enough intention yet, still too much accident. I like a particular ratio.



Left to right: Untitled (#17-24) and Untitled (#16-24) in Rebecca Morris' studio, Los Angeles, 2024. Photo by Flying Studio.

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Rebecca Morris, *Untitled (#10-20)*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 90 x 95 in. Photo by Flying Studio.

The relationship between green and gold is very beautiful. It has a history in ceramics. It's a classical color arrangement. This shade of green gets seen through the lens of nature, it's earthy, and that's great, but I like how the gold throws that off. It creates an ornamental association as well, the gold imbues an importance, a decadence. The grid lends an organization. It's neutral, but not neutral. Which is something I like about it.

The finished painting ended up being a lot more beautiful than I was expecting. I think as a female painter, I have conflicted ideas of how beautiful I want my work to be. I'm of a generation where beauty was still a put-down, both in school and when I was coming of age.

A color that I see I'm not using now is orange. I'd say that I don't like orange, but it's not true, because I notice that I am making decisions about orange in my life outside my studio. So there's something about orange that I find tricky. I haven't made a mainly orange painting, but it's creeping in there. There are other colors that feel dicey—like teal. And I am making several teal paintings right now. It's got a real '90s association from certain kinds of architecture, and also in the 90s, Honda made a metallic teal car paint called Aztec Green Pearl. When I met my husband, he was driving a Civic in this color. So I obviously have fond feelings about that version. Even the word teal... it sounds somehow like a designer-only color. There is good teal and bad teal. I am intrigued by that.

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Rebecca Morris, *Untitled (#05-23)*, 2023. Oil paint and spray paint on canvas, 97 x 84 inches.
Photo by Flying Studio.

Shifting proportions and scale is another way that I keep things moving in the studio. It's like cross-training; when I understand how to make work in a certain size—how it operates and I start feeling comfortable at that scale—then I want to be thrown off. So part of working on a lot of paintings at once is to have different sizes in progress. Right now, I have a painting in my studio that's almost 13 feet high, and working on that is one kind of problem. And then the smallest one is maybe 58 by 58 inches—another kind of problem. Shifting between scales is a physical experience and a challenge. It's another operation I use to negate control, ward off too much mastery.

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Works in progress, Los Angeles, 2024. Photo by Rebecca Morris.



Painting materials, studio of Rebecca Morris. Photo by Flying Studio.