

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 lifes: 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.