

this is tomorrow

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Title : Rebecca Morris, 2020, installation view, Bortolami, New York.
Images courtesy the artist and Bortolami, New York. Photography by Kristian Laudrup

Rebecca Morris
Bortolami
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Review by Claire Phillips

Every few years or so, the death knell of painting is sounded. Critics, artists and gallerists proclaim that the time of painting, is over. But for Rebecca Morris, the Los-Angeles based artist known for her ambitious abstractions, painting continues to surprise. "Abstraction never left, motherfuckers," Morris proclaimed in her manifesto, written in 2006: "Don't pretend you don't work hard... Be out for blood..."

Morris's first solo exhibition with New York gallery Bortolami, found in the stylish Tribeca neighbourhood of Manhattan, has reimagined itself in a time of Corona for the online viewer. Run by Italian-born dealer Stefania Bortolami, who worked for the likes of Anthony d'Offay and Larry Gagosian before striking out on her own in 2005, the gallery is known for its profound support towards its artists. This perhaps explains why Bortolami has spent time putting together this sleek online presentation to highlight these diverse new paintings. Morris's fearless 'get-up-and-go' is apparent in this selection of works, dated from 2019 and 2020, in which she continues to riff on the vernaculars of the New York School of Pollock and De Kooning, and Neo-Expressionists like David Salle.

There are two artistic strategies behind these paintings: the first a specially-crafted scaffolding unit that allows Morris to glide over her canvas; and the second a harnessing of accident, as wayward drips and scuffs of shoes conjure complex grounds. Underlying structures of framing lattices and grids anchor these two devices when the impulses of colour, form and texture might threaten to veer off in different directions.

At heart, Morris's practice is a tale of these two halves - hard-edged geometries colliding with spontaneous flurries, the pre-planned rubbing up against the intuitive. In 'Untitled' (#09-19) (2019), an organic body oozes over the grounding checkerboard pattern that often recurs through Morris's works. Similarly in 'Untitled' (#01-20) (2020), a dark mass expands and contracts against a line of shimmering gold; stains of colour, gauzy edges and thin washes shift in and out of focus.

Morris's rhapsodic hues are indebted to the light of California, juxtaposed at times by more severe monochromes that equally stem from the world around her. 'Untitled' (#16-19) (2019) appears like the cool inverse of 'Untitled' (#14-19) (2019), the raucous colours now diluted or seeped into the canvas. Jostling for attention, the shapes of 'Untitled' (#14-19) recall a rock formation after the violent clash of tectonic plates. As two sides of a coin, these paintings teeter on a tightrope between dazzling and muted, forceful and contained, brash and subtle.

Like her palette, Morris's cache of forms is stripped from her environment: geological jigsaw pieces that feel faintly familiar; somehow on the tip of your tongue or at the corner of your eye, but never discernible. In the case of 'Untitled' (#03-20) (2020), a tessellating pattern echoes the palm fronds and crashing waves of Los Angeles or Honolulu, where the artist was born. Critics have described this kind of drift between the recognisable and abstract in Morris's work as "homeless abstraction." For Morris's part, she doesn't think her paintings need a coherent narrative to trigger an emotional response.

But when it comes to fostering a feeling from an abstract painting through a screen, our approach has to change. Unable to experience scale, texture or presence, we have to rely on colour and form to do the heavy lifting for us. While it's hard to say that abstract painting has many surprises left in its back pocket, Morris certainly fulfils the aspirations of her manifesto and demonstrates that, for her at least, painting has much yet to accomplish.