

ARTFORUM



Rebecca Morris, *Untitled (#16-19)*, 2019, oil and spray paint on canvas, 60 1/2 × 54 1/2"

Rebecca Morris BORTOLAMI

For more than twenty-five years, Rebecca Morris has been constructing a visual language that can be read as obtuse yet direct, historical and personal, abstract but also unabashedly literal. Her syntax is composed of a sparse but growing number of motifs that recur within a seemingly infinite number of inflections. Shapes get slurred. Squares become round. Edges bleed. Patterns are executed with reckless imprecision. Grids feel like fishing nets, unyielding but malleable. Lines function as cartographic divisions, tentative embraces, or cartoon snakes—sometimes all at once. In this most recent presentation, the artist's vocabulary expanded even further, across nine oil paintings.

A few weeks into Morris's inaugural exhibition at Bortolami, the gallery temporarily shut its doors and joined the rest of New York in a collective lockdown due to Covid-19. The show reopened in July, but with a couple of curatorial edits, one being the addition of six ink-and-watercolor pieces in a viewing room adjacent to the main space. Playfully experimenting with surface-resist techniques and gesture, the artist foreshadowed the unassuming complexity and intuitive spirit of the larger canvases with these works on paper.

On the back wall of the main space were two paintings that screamed with such high-intensity color that they nearly drowned out the subtleties in pieces on the opposing walls. Even at a distance, they were raucous and confrontational. One of these, *Untitled (#14-19)*, 2019, was a patchwork field that appeared to be composed of giraffe skin, splattered bits of baby vomit, and even

microscopic views of jittery organisms. Each patterned area is cordoned off by jagged, scumbled edges rendered in Jelly Belly hues. The optical experience is of a surface that's tangible and textured—each collage-like section grates against the eyeballs at different levels of intensity. But seen up close, the work shifts—the paint itself is extremely fluid, and the weave of the canvas is still visible through thin washes and stains; clusters of polka dots bleed into one another, conjuring a pointillist's wet dream. The lightness of Morris's paint application plays off the sheer heft of her gloriously garish palette, manifesting a fruitful contradiction that cropped up in different ways in this show.

A number of the paintings, however, were disarmingly subdued. Some were nearly monochromatic, composed of feathery brushstrokes and casual spills. One such work, *Untitled (#16-19)*, 2019, hung in the prequarantine version of the show but was unfortunately not on view in July. The canvas—once used as a drop cloth in the artist's studio and then stretched—is accented by eighteen irregular shapes defined by glittery bas-relief outlines, one of which also frames the composition itself. The forms look broken and feel like fragments of pottery waiting to be mended. Their golden edges recall the Japanese kintsugi technique of repairing cracks in ceramic wares, yet whether these shards were ever part of the same whole is impossible to tell. This phantom work is resonant and brought to mind the absences, caused by the pandemic and this country's failures in leadership, that we face today. As of this writing, more than 150,000 people in the United States have been killed by the virus, while tens of millions are unemployed and on the verge of losing everything. Morris's fractured missing picture is very much like this country—trying to hold itself together as it falls apart.

— Julia Ribeiro