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REMADE ANEW: MALI MORRIS'S PAINTINGS

Mali Morris is after pictorial buoyancy, a sense that her paintings exist in a state of near weightless suspension, acknowledging but not constrained by the pull of gravity. She achieves this with a unique mix of concision and plenitude, variety and simplicity. Each inch of the canvas is carefully attended to, richly filled with illusions of light and space and permeated with the magic of colour. Buoyancy leaves room for the impetuous move, the off-kilter detail or the sideways glance, as if the bonds between the different elements of her images were always open to change, able to be loosened and remade anew. Perhaps we can say she wants a sense of both chance and inevitability, which sounds like a paradox, but is really a condition of our lives. After all we are always unavoidably in the present, yet the particularity of each moment depends on the previous interaction of innumerable contingencies and will dissolve into those yet to come.

This publication provides a necessarily abbreviated introduction to Morris's work, the result of half a century dedicated to abstract painting. It includes examples from most of its phases, and finishes with two very recent works, completed since the 2019 Royal Academy monograph. The paintings divide into two very broad periods. From the mid-1970s until the mid to late 90s; and then from the late 90s up to and including the still-evolving present.

The decisive shift came with the Clearing paintings, begun in 1997. Morris began to make images by removing ('clearing') areas from still wet layers of paint, rather than her previous process of adding colour, in small marks or broad areas, to what had come before. This sounds like a simply technical change, but it enabled her to question many of the assumptions she and her peers had been working with. She rethought the role of space in abstract painting, how figure and ground could relate to each other, how light might filter through and so create a painting's structure. Luminosity often appears to emanate from within one of the Clearings, even as the image, or parts within it, appear simultaneously lit from the back and the front. A new distancing came into her art, as she took its constituent elements apart and reassembled them in unexpected configurations. Because it brought with it a more precise way of working, this distance also enabled a new type of intimacy, as if by taking a step away from the scene, its parts came into sharper focus.

These parts were established in the opening decades of Morris's painting, the 1970s and 1980s, when she saw herself engaged in the "long apprenticeship of modernism". Establishing a studio in Greenwich, in south London, near where she still lives and works, she began making connections to other artists. Many of

these worked within what could be called High Modernism, the transatlantic art that had developed in the long wake of mid-century Abstract Expressionism. She began to work within this tendency, and it was its shared assumptions that she moved away from with the Clearings. A sense of community with other artists has always been vital to Morris. She sees herself as taking part in a visual conversation between painters, from the distantly historic to her immediate peers, a conversation that is open to a receptive audience and strongly opposed to the idea of art as a luxury commodity.

In its early years Morris's painting moved between constructive and gestural poles. Her first mature works used improvised, informally arranged blocks of colour, drawing on her study of Matisse. These blocks reappear in the late 80s in the guise of more foursquare and formalised bands, that play with our expectations of repetition within pattern. In the years between gesture tended to take centre stage. The lively paintings from the turn of the 70s into the 80s are made up of accumulations of marks, some impetuous, almost scrappy, others broader and more fully formed. In the succeeding years these morphed into a more fluid approach, in which marks, and indeed, whole images, seem to emerge out of waves or veils of colour.

With hindsight certain paintings from these early years appear as precedents for the shift of the Clearings. Perhaps especially prescient were a group from the later 1980s, based around the motif of a diamond, presented singularly or in just-off symmetrical pairs. They evoke the Clearings in their clear, simplified and centralised images, and in their otherworldly bringing together of geometry and fluidity, an opposition the Clearings would register in much starker terms. More obviously transitional (although without the incompleteness or indecision the word implies) are the wonderful Edge of a Portrait series of the early to mid 90s, and the paintings related to them. In these we feel a new sense of space and light, a pared down simplicity that brings with it a lucid fullness, opening a space for the apertures and the more complex arrangements the Clearings would then introduce.

In the last few years, Morris has again moved on. The complex central motif of the *Colour Go Rounds* seems to be made from squares of coloured paper, dropped almost at random onto the picture surface, yet landing with complex directional rhythms, and intricate relationships of hue and tone. By employing structures that appear to build out from the surface of the canvas, Morris has turned the Clearing themselves inside out. The conceit allows Morris to explore layering, opacity and translucency and fresh, vibrant colour with her characteristic wit and light touch as her art continues to develop. There are not many abstract artists who have developed a body of work as coherent, varied and innovative as Morris's – and it still awaits a full retrospective.