

The Singular and the Painterly: Mali Morris's Recent Work

Catalogue essay by David Ryan, 2002, for Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham

Mali Morris's work thrives on the production of an extremely fresh image – one that is arrested from a fluid painterly process. Her paintings are concentrated, and such is their achievement of openness that they appear to elucidate a particular kind of looking, an individual relationship with the painterly 'thing'. Most of these works explore a contained visual field where, generally, centralised pictorial events take place; what those events are, in terms of depiction, is difficult to say; but they do definitely point elsewhere – not just to their own materiality. This might seem a minor point, but it's one that provides a stumbling block for those who simply read these works through the legacy of modernist painting. As with many other contemporary abstract painters it is the possibility of form coinciding with analogy and metaphor, which lies at the heart of Morris' recent work. It is also the search for particularity within each work that characterises them, and this search also leads, paradoxically, towards repetition. These individual forms are undoubtedly experienced from painting to painting as similar but different – in that they exist in, and are realised through, variable plastic conditions of light, tone, and hue.

Morris has chosen an area which foregrounds the visual and the handmade. It is a difficult space in which to exist these days and eschews the all too familiar tone of rhetoric or hyperbole characteristic of recent strategies within abstraction. Morton Feldman once suggested that one of the dilemmas for the artist was that of operating 'in' the work or 'outside' of it. Feldman's own writings vividly testify to a working practice ensconced in the stuff of materiality, of feeling one's way and thinking through it. This also elaborated a distinctive relationship between artist and viewer: "Mondrian, Rothko, Guston", Feldman suggested, "– all of them come to art by another route, a route abandoned and forgotten by modernity, yet, to my mind the path that has kept art alive. If I can retrace this route...if, say, I begin with Piero, go on to Rembrandt, to Mondrian, then Rothko and Guston – a certain sensation begins to emerge; a sensation that we are not looking at the painting, but the painting is looking at us"(1). This 'sensation' is the result of a search for 'recognition' within the medium, and the struggle to animate inert matter. Feldman himself often spoke of "giving up ideas" or resisting their pull, giving himself over to the material weave of the piece, which resulted in his own music becoming almost "sourceless".

In an oblique way, Mali Morris's concerns overlap with this lineage. She certainly works in the material: there is a sense of creating colour-forms which are in themselves representative of a subjective and yet self-reflecting logic. These paintings also become 'personas', achieving an identity for themselves. It is upon reaching this point that the image is 'arrested' from the painterly process of erasing and beginning again; and it is this search for a mixture of recognition and

surprise on encountering this 'personage' that ultimately defines the painting. Earlier works seemed to circle around these issues – consisting of a different sense of image, often bringing attention to the edge of the canvas; *Edge of a Portrait*, or *Borders and Edges* both of 1994, engage in a more post-cubist involvement with shape – playfully cropping and echoing across the surface. A more recent work such as *Lime Green Clearing* of 2001 displays the shift in formal appearance: what was fragmented, and treated as relation and rhythm dispersed across the surface, is now isolated, centralised, whole, and literally a 'clearing'. This sense of reduced relations allows a greater focus, and a simplicity, which enables a very subtle emphasis on trace, pressure of touch, gesture. These are luminous forms, which are inscribed with the movements that made them.

As a series, the various *Clearing* paintings make use of a beautiful continuity and fluidity of form, often consisting of almost unbroken, whole gestures – and with a sense of light operating rather like an interior illumination of the form. *Laputo* of 2000, on the other hand, is typical of occasional works that have, unusually, a more obdurate facture, slightly more wrought in their handling. Other pieces such as the *Combing/ Combining* paintings or *Cluster*, 2001, suggest more linear optical resolution of the motif. Here, the sense of the comb removing paint and allowing the colour underneath to affirm itself, paradoxically, reverses the reading – the form seems to float on top stubbornly contradicting the process that brought it into being. *Pink Curly Clearing* of 2001 straddles both of these concerns – and brings attention to the comparative nature of these relatively simple forms from one piece to another. Experiencing several of the paintings together one tends to be led to a process of differentiating, and through this, back to commonality or similarity and vice versa. I am reminded here of Feldman's dislike of the word 'variation' – which has all the overtones of a schematic or mechanical dressing up of an original idea. His preferred term, 'almost repetition', captures the notion of an activity attempting to arrive at its own singularity; each event is the appearance of a unique moment, even if only a slightly different chordal arrangement of notes already heard. It is never the same experience. Likewise, Morris's almost obsessive arrival at a central cluster establishes an unfettered one-to-one relationship with these forms which accentuates their unique qualities. They are 'appearances' on the canvas; they declare themselves and at the same time interrupt the calm flow of the coloured grounds. This 'face-to-face' relationship with the viewer is obviously the opposite of the heroic or the grandiose. It gives the paintings an intimate air, a 'faciality', and makes perfect sense of Morris's increased interest in a smaller scale. With their focus, and singular concentration, these works, ironically, gravitate toward each other; Morris often hangs the works in such a way that discovers another collective dialogue, in the words of the artist, "an echo or re-enactment of individually *finding* the painting." Such ensemble presentation, however, does not simply attempt to re-instate a relational approach, but allows the presence of many single tones (to use a musical analogy) to find their place. It accentuates variety.

These paintings have more than a passing affinity with two conventional genres of painterly practice: the portrait and the still life. To witness the artist's studio wall is telling; as here we find reproductions of portraits, women in ruffs and head dresses, single figure frescoes, close ups of Velasquez's heads, and still life paintings by Manet and Morandi, amongst other items. Rather than direct working materials, these images operate on the level of almost unconscious associative links with the paintings, often after the event. An informative relationship, though, persists between these images and the paintings. It is the intimacy, the 'human' dimension of these genres that connects with Morris's paintings. The link is subtle, however, and should not be taken too literally; in no way are these simply surrogate portraits or still lives. It lies more in this emphasis on the singular, which also happens to be accentuated in the still life or the portrait: this *particular* set of objects, for example, or that *particular* person. Yet singularity, as Paul Ricoeur has suggested, operates as a *surplus* in relation to representation. It goes beyond the rules of depiction or copy – rather it is that thread which binds the artist to a moment, a moment of judgment, in the face of making a representation. While this might seem a generalised aesthetic observation, it does seem to underpin Morris's own painterly processes and concerns. This sense of working directly *in* the medium, the potential for the individual 'inflection' of things, reflects Ricoeur's notion of this surplus. As motifs, the present paintings are elusive in their associations and yet contain a directness, highlighting the point of departing – the 'moment of arrest' – from the image. Despite this directness, they also conceal their tracks, as several attempts to find the form may have been swept aside and buried during the process of wet-in-wet painting. Simplicity, here, foregrounds the slightest nuance of the knife, comb or brush moving through the paint which further emphasises their singularity.

The pursuit of singularity, for Ricoeur, also results in communicability and, ultimately, universality: "The work iconically augments the lived experience, inexpressible, incommunicable, closed upon itself."⁽²⁾ In relation to Morris's work, this is what makes the 'mood' or the sense of the piece so graspable and yet, in depictive terms, so elusive. They might contain the memory of a number of things for the viewer, still life, portrait, or whatever, but what shines through is an emotion, a feeling – a lived experience which has no specific depictive reference, but which has found its own iconic embodiment.

Musical analogy – although hackneyed in terms of its historical links with abstract painting – might in fact find a direct resonance with Mali Morris's paintings.

Eva Hoffman, the writer and psychoanalyst, once commented that she hoped her work had 'musical values'; and Morris's work certainly resonates with such musical values; not only in its search for the pitch of colour and form but also in its integral nature of touch and execution. There is a subtle range of formal manifestation: from the razor sharp, precise, incisive, to the indeterminate, fuzzy, and cloud-like. Feldman eloquently articulated abstraction itself as a process, an experience between viewer (or listener) and the artwork. It does not reside in

style or approach necessarily, but in the relationship between perceiver and perceived: “The abstract...is not involved with ideas. It is an inner process that continually appears and becomes familiar like another consciousness. The most difficult thing in art is to keep intact this consciousness of the abstract.”⁽³⁾ It is a particular address of form to the viewer via the intimate engagement of the artist with the medium, which in turn acts as a potential vehicle for the “inexpressible, incommunicable” to be possibly translated into experience. This lies at the heart of what might be called ‘abstraction’, and is nothing other than central to the art of Mali Morris.

David Ryan 2002

- (1) Morton Feldman, *Essays*, ed. Zimmerman, Beginner Press, 1987
- (2) Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, Polity Press, 1998
- (3) Morton Feldman, *Essays*