

## **STRANGE LINKS: GUIDE TO MORRIS** **By MATTHEW COLLINGS**

Mali Morris is a painter who makes you think about paint, and whose paint asks you to think about light. She is not concerned with making paintings represent recognisable objects, but the world, through light effects, is in her paintings. Talking to her about how she goes about them, making and remaking until she finds them “right”, it is clear that what she asks them to be is luminous, glowing and transparent. She wants light to be constructed chromatically, and for colour to get to the paintings by her own touch, in ways and means that seem new to her. Her paintings are alive not just to a history of abstraction, but in a dialogue with her own method of experimentation. The issues seem to be light and rhythm, and what painting is.

Morris’s paintings are made by first laying in rectangles of colour that look balanced and right together, and after the paint is dry overlaying these with a field of new colour so the rectangles are obscured. Then parts of the still wet overlay are removed so that discs of hazy colour appear within a field of another colour.

What’s there? Colours and shapes in a dynamic relationship to each other, to the edges of the painting and to the surface from which they’ve been picked out. A balance of elements -- how is it pitched? Is there a drama,

is it believable, is there something arresting, important, light-hearted, unglib, something recognisable like light falling on objects, a metaphor for how life seems? Is it a gag or a painting?

This is the process Morris works to, finding colour rather than adding it, doing something and doing it again, or leaving it alone, or appearing to leave it alone but actually laboriously fiddling with it (she might glaze a circle, or pick at the edges of another with some tool, a matchstick maybe) until what seemed to be in the first instance the right, fresh, instant, new, thoughtful and believable image actually is as much all those things as it can possibly be.

What resonance do Morris’s paintings have: nature, art, life, ideas, morality and so on? The answer is partly that they engage with a modern artistic tradition that many different types of artists feel at home with, writers, musicians, painters, and so on, that is about compression, spontaneity and chanciness, and having faith in the unprepared gesture but also a sense of knowledge and experience informing the various giddy leaps that the artist takes. In this tradition humanity is all-important but it must be conveyed through pared-back means.

This tradition like any other can ossify so it’s an academy or it can be worked at so it comes alive again. Perhaps you have to come at it from an angle in order to rediscover what it is. In Morris’s case she takes what might be a

contemporary graphic device, the world of printing, and turns it over, and looks at it, and says, OK, this is how paint is different from print.

Here's a good one with a mauve ground and circles of more or less red – entitled *Loula*. All the issues are here. Looking at it and describing it can be a key to reading the whole show.

The chalkiness of the mauvey colour in *Loula* is given a vivid counterpoint by the red circles. The swish of the mauve marks is a precise expression of the edge of the canvas, and the stops and starts of the sweeping marks are in a dynamic relationship with the positioning of the circles, where they have been found (or cleared, uncovered or excavated – in fact the mauve has been wiped and repainted many times, with different circles, in different colours, covered and uncovered, until just the two reds make it). The eye is diverted from the emphatic series of brush-mark stops in the top right corner by the red circle that floats off the edge of the field. The one deliberate stop-mark within the field, at the centre bottom of the canvas, is accompanied by another vivid circle. The swishy, brushy marks tell you about light and shade, since they're striated with darkness from the colour of the ground beneath the mauve. If none of this is fully a conscious endeavour – the glow, the movement, the careful placement -- it comes from a history of looking at and understanding art and its nature as both strategic and involuntary.

The width of the circles in *Loula* relates to the width of the brushy marks. These repetitions are part of the success of the work. Up and down marks on the left are contrasted with marks from side to side – the field is divided in this way – almost but not quite halves. This relates to the almost but not quite contained circles within the field. The area by which the red circle is intersected, relates to the amount the red circle below is contained within the canvas. These are musical rhythms, and it isn't surprising that she has photos on her studio wall – “as a reminder and for inspiration” -- of the jazz musicians Derek Bailey and Paul Rutherford.

Rutherford, who died recently, was a trombonist. Morris used to hear him play, in various combinations of other free-improvisers, very memorably with the late John Stevens, drummer. She realised quite quickly that they were experienced, talented, disciplined musicians, whose chosen structures of composition/playing depended on taking risks. They seemed to push each other towards invention and discovery of form -- towards expression -- and there was a kind of on-going guarding against cliché in this process. She quotes John Fordham's obituary comment about Bailey in the *Guardian* (29 December 2005), that he “likened improvisation to spontaneous relationships and conversation, full of accidental harmonies, misunderstandings, passion and indifference.”

Lately, in the studio, she's been listening to *Bob Dylan & The Band: Genuine Basement Tapes*. "It's all laid bare, they're working on the songs -- finding out as they go along. On the other hand, Schubert played by Brendel can also sound like improvisation to me, both in composition and performance. Form, meaning, unfolding."

"In painting it works differently," she says. "If I have any faith in improvisation as an aspect of what I do, it's because it can show a way to unfamiliar relationships and structures which interest me, intrigue me. It offers new possibilities of investigation."

The negotiation between strategy and improvisation takes place within the world of the studio, with all its practicalities, and its impractical hopes.

"But when I'm trying to solve the painting problems which crop up, it doesn't always feel like negotiation, it can feel more urgent. I think in the way I work there is a relationship between urgency and detachment, between knowing and not knowing, and this has to be lived through, or painted through."

In general with this show, look at and think about the rhythm of the marks, and how colour creates light and space. Where the marks are less obvious – as in the large painting, *Spinning* -- the issue is placidity, and the dynamism of the relationship of the circles with one another – their brilliance,

chalkiness, flatness or fuzziness. Think of the swing of the space. Paint is at the heart of this. We have become used to circles as a graphic device, meaning "contemporary art" (as in Damien Hirst) as a kind of brand name. This is the absolute opposite.

Why create paintings like this today? Because the formal issues they're about feel urgent to the artist, and because, even if often unconsciously, they can have an urgency for everyone. These abstract values relate to a history of art, which is about constantly coming up with visual metaphors for experience, much more than it is about narrating experience. And this metaphor-world is common to all. It's just that not everyone has the job of intellectualising about it, as a critic does, or producing it in the form of visual pleasure or beauty, as an artist does.