

Mali Morris interviewed by the poet Tamar Yoseloff, an edited version appearing in the magazine Art World, August 2008

1. Your work has gone through many different phases. Can you say something about your early development?

I studied at Newcastle in the sixties, Richard Hamilton ran the Basic Course in the First Year, - it was very lively, a lot going on. I think my early work was probably most influenced by meeting the late Ian Stephenson, just as I was leaving – he was the first abstract painter I knew who was working on a large scale. I went on to the MA course at Reading, run by Terry Frost. His paintings and conversation gave me my first inkling of colour as entity rather than description. When I arrived in London, in the early 70's, and began teaching, I met many artists, amongst them Geoff Rigden, John McLean and Jennifer Durrant. They introduced me to current American post-painterly abstraction, Frankenthaler, Noland, - and around that time I changed from oil paint to acrylic, so that I could paint directly into the canvas, without losing saturation of colour. From there I sort of worked back – from Hofmann and Avery to Matisse and Cezanne, back to Tiepolo, Velazquez and Titian, - drawn to their great painting, and especially what they did as colourists.

2. It seems to me that by the late eighties and nineties there is a shift from a more solid, delineated form, to a fluid, more gestural stroke. Did you feel that your technique was changing?

I became interested in how paint reaches the canvas to make the forms, and how touch is different from gesture. Touch moves the eye around at a different pace from gesture, it's slower, and pictorial space seems to open up. That brought with it all sorts of new possibilities for how colour might work, and I began to use transparent glazes, with various gels and mediums, colour showing through colour, which gives a different light from an opaque covering, or a saturated stain. I tried making forms with simple movements of brush and paint, stopping short of gesture, and they seemed to approach but stop short of a kind of imagery which had, for me, a poetry. Bell, sail, wing, swing, skirt, fan, profile, plait, and so on, - but never quite making it into description. This rhyming and echoing, touch becoming evocation, reminded me of the mysteriousness of depiction in favourite paintings, - Velazquez's princesses, with their piled up plaits, coiled with pearls, - apparently direct but very subtle, sensual painting, - or Matisse's few brush-strokes becoming a draped curtain in a Nice interior. I realised that among the reproductions pinned up on the studio wall were many portraits and still-lives. I think I was fascinated by the idea of a very simple, centralised form being the first premise of the painting, and so much complexity flowing from that – colour, touch, space, light, feeling, evocation, sensuality, sensation, association.

3. Recently you were quoted as saying that 'luminosity' is your prime goal in using colour. Could you say more about that?

Colour in painting brings with it the possibility of constructing luminosity; - I don't mean brightness of hue, or the illusionism of shading, but an actual source of a particular light. Light makes space apparent, and space in painting is always on the move, as the eye weaves through it, even though the painting itself is still. I

don't refer to colour theory or science when I work, I'm more interested in instinct and eye and making empirical assessments about what I see, finding out as I go along. It's always extraordinary to me that this inert object, a painting, can be a source of light, and that this light opens up space; if one's eye is moving through this space, made by light, made by colour, it does relate to one's experience in the world, one's *body* in the world.

4. That's interesting, the emphasis you make regarding one's body in the world – does that apply to the way you work, which is to my mind, quite physical?

For a few years, my paintings have been easel-size because the cleared central forms needed to be made with an easy reach, and I wanted something compact and intense and intimate. I have recently made some large paintings, expanding that intimacy into something more epic, and those are quite athletic in the making. I paint them flat, on wooden platforms laid on the floor. They have constellations of circular forms; - I don't actually think of them as circles, I think of them as areas where I've cleared the paint. I'm interested in *finding* the colour, not placing it – the colours sit differently in space that way. I discover the processes by trial and error, by avoiding what seems too familiar to me, and I found a way recently of 'excavating' the colour, by which I mean I have to lay it down in the first instance so that it will be there to re-discover at a later stage. I first paint an irregular grid of rectangles in very high-key, saturated colour, in a medium that will allow for lots of wiping. It's like composing inside-out, or back-to-front. I make what feels like a finished painting, then once it's dry, I paint another layer of colour all over it, and while that is still wet, I wipe away in different parts of the canvas to find these 'incidents' of buried colour. At this stage I keep on painting over and wiping back, all day, before it dries, revealing and hiding, discovering different groupings, until I arrive at something I want to see, - or I have to start again. The earlier stage of building these rectangles, with many layers of paint to get the intensity of colour I need, is slow and deliberate, but the final stage is fast and furious, a bit like that Chinese plate-spinning act – I'm dashing around from one bit of the painting to the other. I want the paintings to come across initially very straightforwardly, then, if the viewer stays with them, they slowly show that there are many complexities being played out.

5. Your titles often play with sounds, like Swing-Slip, or Lattice-lap. Do the paintings have some kind of sound quality to them?

I title paintings when they are finished, and in a way, it's an exercise almost like painting, a mixture of experience and hunch and instinct and choice. I never want titles to be explanatory, but they're not arbitrary either. 'Swing-slip' could suggest the movements in the painting, - these circular forms of colour, as they are looked at, begin to shift and move and swing the space about, - and the form on the bottom left does seem somehow to have slipped out of the action. There is a ring to the phrase, which I thought suited the painting. I did actually slip off a swing, unintentionally, a couple of months after deciding on the title, which is disconcerting.

6. Titles are often locational, like 'Cornered', so there is often a notion of boundaries, or looking at the edges of things.

Yes, edges are always interesting, whether it's the edge of the painting or a form, or how one colour moves into another. And the word 'Cornered' opens out into other sorts of meanings. I hope the paintings have an openness to them – the paintings I like seem to go on forever, you move around in them differently every time you look at them.

7. And you often take titles from poems.

The books might be in the studio, or at home, and a phrase turns up, which suits, visually and in feeling. Elizabeth Bishop is a favourite poet; I named 'Crusoe's Parasol' after her poem 'Crusoe in England'. In the last few stanzas, which are very poignant, Crusoe, rescued from the island, lists the objects he made to use there, now seeming to him pathetic artefacts. 'Traherne' is another title, after Thomas Traherne, the English metaphysical poet. I like the sound of his name, as well as his writing. His words, 'the corn is orient' made me think of the golden yellow in the painting. Other favourites have been Hopkins, Rilke, Mallarme, and Celan, Finding a title takes me back to re-reading the poem, and I often find affinities with painting there. I'm not interested in working from the literary towards the visual, but I enjoy finding the connections, when I'm reading. There are rhythms which reach you fast, on first reading or hearing poetry, before other meanings are deciphered, and this can happen visually, in painting. Two close friends, Martha Kapos and Elizabeth Cook, are poets, - I read them, and go to hear them read, as well as other poets writing now. I admire Alice Oswald's work.

8. I know you like to have music on in the studio. What do you listen to, and how can tempo or cadence in music change the nature of the work?

I often prefer a single voice or instrument, somehow that's a big enough sound for the studio. I can't tell if it changes how I work. I don't think it does. I have stacks of CD's, but my regulars are Schubert, piano especially, Beethoven and Bach. The new releases of Tom Waits, White Stripes and Jonathan Richman are my current favourites. A friend lends me the Dylan bootlegs, - I really like having those on at the moment, because their rawness - that feeling of making it up as you go along - suits a mood of improvisation, if that's what I want to be doing myself.

9. What artists are you watching at the moment?

I've recently seen shows by Mary Heilmann and Bernard Frize, aspects of whose paintings I'm interested in, and Thomas Nozkowski, an American painter I like a lot. His work has some of the qualities I admire in Geoff Rigden's, a deep understanding of what painting is, and a personal and idiosyncratic way of playing with that. I'm also interested in following the careers of some of the young artists I first met as students - I think Gabriel Hartley and Lucy Moore are very good. I sometimes have studio visits with painter friends like Rob Welch, David Webb, Cath Ferguson, Gina Medcalf, and I live with the sculptor Steve Lewis, whose work is very important to me.

10. If you could live with any artwork ever made, what would it be?

Maybe the fantastic Matisse I saw again recently in the RA From Russia show, the big 'Harmony in Red', or a small Manet, 'Lilacs in a Vase', - his last painting.