

Mali Morris: Notes on some titles, 2008 - 2014

Titles are given after the paintings are finished, to identify each one. They are not meant to explain or describe, but could act as invitations to enter the world of the painting.

Although colour, and how it can construct light and space, is one of the main concerns in these paintings, quite a few of their titles refer to poems, and some to music. I like reading about the structures in both, how the writer or composer gets to the poem or the song. I'm interested in how different or similar these processes are to the ways that paintings are generated.

1. "...*toujours...*" (i.m. NF) 2008 24 x 30 cm and also *In the Pink* 2008 24 x 30 cm

In memory of the painter Noel Forster, who died last year, greatly missed by his many friends. Chris Yetton, in the obituary in *The Independent*, wrote of Noel: "... *He was always immensely positive. "Je suis toujours in the pink," he said, when extolling pink as a colour in painting. ...*"

2. *Crusoe's Parasol* 2007 30 x 40 cm

Refers to the last part of Elizabeth Bishop's poem 'Crusoe in England'. I have a tape of her reading it, a gift from a friend, another favourite poet, Martha Kapos.

3. *Traherne* 2008 41 x 51 cm

Named for Thomas Traherne, 1636 - 1674, the English Metaphysical poet. In his lifetime only one of his works was ever printed. I love the sound of his line "The corn was orient..." The painting is mostly golden yellow, and when it was finished I thought of those words. The American poet and author Forrest Gander writes of the closeness of Traherne's thinking to that of the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, who, like Traherne, he proposes, was obsessed with "attentiveness and wonder." "*It is the world, more specifically the body in the world, that structures perception...and he quotes Cezanne's boast that the landscape thought itself inside him and that he was its consciousness.*"

(See also the note for the painting 'No difference'.)

4. *Swing-Slip* 2007 153 x 183 cm

These two words feel like the movements in the painting, the space swinging, and a kind of slippage, of the lower colour-disk.

5. *After Dark* 2008 24 x 30 cm

These are lines from Elizabeth Bishop's poem, *Florida*.

*"After dark, the fireflies map the heavens in the marsh
until the moon rises.
Cold white, not bright, the moonlight is coarse-meshed,
and the careless, corrupt state is all black specks
too far apart, and ugly whites; the poorest
post-card of itself.
After dark, the pools seem to have slipped away."*

The pale grid was painted wet into dark wet paint, quite some time after the earlier stages of the painting, also very dark. The four colour-disks were retrieved (by wiping) at each successive stage, from the very first layer of rectangles of bright colour. I re-read the poem after finishing the painting – and liked the phrase *coarse-meshed*, in relation to the structures I had found whilst painting, when struggling with colour-space.

6. "... soft green flame ..." (for EC) 2008 24 x 30 cm

A painting dedicated to friend Elizabeth Cook, whose poem *Heart of Stone*, in her recent collection *Bowl* ends with the line "thunders with soft green flame." I happened to be reading it in the studio last month, when trying to imagine a title for this painting.

7. *Loula* 2008 51 x 76 cm

I gave this painting its title under the mistaken impression that Loula was small town in France, south of Toulouse. I liked the ring of the two-syllabled name, and the way it seemed to suit the relationship of the two red shapes, close in colour, but different. Turns out I had mixed it up with the name of someone I met at that place, a juggler, - which seems just as appropriate an association for the painting.

8. *Spinning* 2007 198 x 214 cm

The last lap, when painting the two large works, *Spinning* and *Spinning (2)* was a bit like performing the stage act of Chinese plate-spinning, without rehearsal, or audience. I had to rush from one part of the painting to the other, wiping and re-painting and wiping again, as the paint dried, to find the combination of colour-disks I wanted. It is also a respectful reference to Svetlana Alpers' reading of the Velazquez painting 'The Spinners', in her book 'The Vexations of Art'. (Among my favourite painters are Velazquez and Manet. The final chapter of Alpers' book is a wonderful account of the affinity between them.)

9. *No Difference* 2008 30 x 40 cm

Michael Fried's prose-poem "*Flesh*" in his book *The Next Bend in the Road*, begins in this way:

The last summer of his life Maurice Merleau-Ponty broke off work on The Visible and the Invisible, which was left unfinished when he died, to write the third of his great essays on painting, "Eye and Mind." At its heart is the intuition, at once luminous and obscure, that primordially there is no difference (no difference yet) between seer and seen. ...

10. *Kinalty* 2008 168 x 192 cm

Kinalty is a fictitious country house in Ireland, the setting of one of my favourite novels, *Loving*, by Henry Green. Another painting in this series, *Edie and the Peacocks*, is named for its ecstatic final paragraphs.

This extract from an e-mail to a painter friend does not contain a painting title, but offers further contexts for these paintings, and refers again to Henry Green's *Loving*.

"... The mother in the Manet (*The Railway*) does have Virginia's hair, you're right. The painting really fascinates me, I think because the spatial lay-out of the figuration echoes the dynamics of (abstract) pictorial space - the railing acting like a picture plane, one figure looking inwards, the other looking outwards, smoke taking up space as well as bodies, as well as the directions of their gazing. A kind of very simplified *Las Meninas*, or a more prosaic version of *Bar at the Folies-Bergere*. I like the dead-pan look of it, and the way it keeps me looking, its endless movements.

It reminds me of a page I copied out once from Henry Green's *Loving*, which describes two people looking through a glass screen at some peacocks, and when the birds get agitated, they press up against this dividing screen/plane, all the colourful agitation flattened out. I'll try and find it, a synopsis takes away all the magic of it, the unfolding of space, and the way this is animated by colour.

(When I did check, I found I had slightly mis-remembered this image. It reads: "... For most of one side of this room was taken up by a vast glass-fronted cupboard in which had once been kept the bits, the halters, and bridles, and the martingales. At some time O'Connor had cut away wooden partitioning at the back to make a window into the next chamber, given over nowadays to his peacocks. This was where these birds sheltered in winter, nested in spring, and where they died of natural causes in the end. As though stuffed in a dusty case they showed themselves from time to time as one after another across the heavy days they came up to look at him. Now, through a veil of light reflected over this plate glass from beneath, Edith could dimly see, not hear, a number of peacocks driven into view by some disturbance on their side and hardly to be recognized in this

sovereign light. For their eyes had changed to rubies, their plumage to orange as they bowed and scraped at each other against the equal danger. Then again they were gone with a beat of wings and in their room stood Charley Raunce, the skin of his pale face altered by refraction to red morocco leather.

The girls stood transfixed as if by arrows between the Irishman dead motionless asleep and the other intent and quiet behind a division. Then dropping everything they turned, they also fled.”

The interest I felt in the history of sign-language, and in the early developments in film-editing - how that led to cinematic space - are about the same thing, I think; to put it crudely, what I found inspiring in reading about them was the account of how the dynamics of space in each activity were pragmatically explored, and how this was discovered to be expressive, and communicative, - all this through continuing physical engagement in the action (practice) itself. This is all very personal. It coincides with my own memories of first grasping the complexities of being in the world spatially, and how, in painting, through different means, as long as one is responsive to pictorial space, there is a constant re-encountering of this....”

Colour in painting brings with it the possibility of constructing luminosity, - not an illusionistic depiction of illumination and shade, but an actual source of particular light. Light makes space apparent, and space in painting is always on the move, as the eye moves through it, even though the painting itself is still.

Mali Morris
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Postscript, 2010.

Some recent paintings get their names from the book I was reading during the time I worked on them - **Arcata, Canopy, Nameless, Sillett**. The book, *The Wild Trees*, by Richard Preston is a gripping account of how a variety of people began a lifetime of locating, climbing, and naming the tallest trees in the world, and tells the story of how they found each other. Stephen Sillett is one of the memorable heroes of the narrative. Arcata is a place-name, Nameless is a tree. The passages which describe the climb up into the high cloud canopy, and then the walk across the tangle of branches from tree to tree, in a world both separate from the one below, but also a part of it, read at times to me as metaphor - of how perceiving space in painting relates strongly to being in the world, but is also separate from it. And I loved the way the book described how the climbers found their way instinctively, sometimes with difficulty, towards this activity, - which gave them a world within a world.