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Mali Morris: The Intelligence of Colour

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“If I were a painter”, observed Roland Barthes, “I should paint only colors; this field seems to me freed of both the Law (no imitation, no analogy) and Nature (for after all, do not all the colors in Nature come from the painters?)” [1] There is something idealistic if not downright utopian in Barthes’ view of painting as expressed in this fragment of his autobiographical work *Roland Barthes*. His point about how a focus upon colour would take one away from the burdensome responsibility of representation appears to clash with what he writes later on in the same passage, remarking upon Nature taking its colouration from the canvases of painters. Does Barthes see artists as merely playful and indulgent, painting in order to distract themselves, for pleasure rather than meaning or a “serious” interaction with the world, or does art not so much merely reflect but in fact construct – in large measure at any rate – what and how we see around us? This latter implication would seem to carry greater philosophical weight than the “pleasure” idea. Barthes himself was an amateur painter, and his “real” position seems located somewhere between the two extremes he cites.

But it is possible to see that Barthes’ curious statement is not so contradictory after all. It is as though he meant to suggest that were he able to fully devote himself to painting he would revel in the sensuous intensity of colour, and this would be for him a kind of freedom. Yet this is not presented as escapism; Barthes is proposing, rather, that the practice of painting includes a utopian component, one which counters the mundane and debilitating forces we engage with on a daily basis in our intensely commercial society. Elsewhere, Barthes calls colour “a kind of bliss”, which term carries, in his idiosyncratic usage, a critically powerful and, indeed, transgressive charge. [2]

As for what Barthes writes about Nature: if Nature gets its colours from the painters then this is to give serious painting great credit, for it is painters (in this comparison) who bring the viewer’s attention to the colours around them, whose works literally model colour, and construct light. We see Nature more clearly – indeed in some cases we only see it at all – because painters direct our attention to its relationships of colour, surface and form. We look at the work of Titian, Turner or Matisse and take back what we have found there to the world around us.

These lines may appear digressive in an article on the British abstract painter Mali Morris, but this dialogic exchange between colours in a painting and how what is within and on the canvas connects with the space beyond it is, in my view, entirely pertinent. Although it is practically impossible, except, perhaps, with

the monochrome, to separate colour from form, this is (almost) what looks to be taking place in Morris' paintings. In talking about her recent work, paintings such as *Spinning* (2007) and *Spinning II* (2008), the artist is at pains to emphasise that she does not regard the circular structures visible within these works as circles as such, a point which may seem strange in print but which, in front of these canvases, makes perfect sense. This is because a cursory, too-simplistic reading of these works only gives the viewer time to glimpse the general formal arrangement of the canvases' constituent elements, and, in the struggle to linguistically pin down what one "gets" when looking at these paintings, one grasps – and all-too-too easily finds – terms such as "circles", "rectangles", "figure-ground" – in one's thoughts. Looking at reproductions of the paintings is similarly misleading, whether in a catalogue or on a computer screen. A more extensive experience of these and other of Morris' works draws one into the drift and depth of a given painting. It is not just art critics but humans generally that are animals of language, bearers of an apparatus which cannot be "switched off". But at a certain level of physical engagement – some would call this "phenomenological" – the experience of the work generates a "seeping-out" and a "projecting-in" of meaning that cannot merely be reduced to the linguistic labels we employ.

In actually regarding these two paintings, and looking at others made around the same time, one soon forgets the geometric configurations that perhaps appear so prominent during an easy first glance. This must be because in giving one's attention to these works, which have been produced in an elaborate and highly effective fashion, the complexity of their construction (terms arguably more apt in the present case than "composition") fosters significant results. Colours within Morris' paintings don't act in a predictable manner. Given the long-standing convention within painting – and not only abstraction – of emphasising the relationship between figure and ground, it's difficult not to slip, on a superficial reading, into thinking in these terms: what is front and what is back, which shape and colour lies above some other part of the canvas? This way of approaching painting is hard to bracket out when one knows, intellectually, as well as through direct experience, that colours "float" on other colours, forms come forward or recede, the canvas can be read like a sort of theatre of thick and thin forms all jostling for – or settling into – their rightful place within the frame. But in *Spinning*, *Spinning II* and their companion works, this paradigmatic machinery of surface and depth, of relational exchanges across the plane of the painting, is effectively defunct. Morris's colours, as she herself has said, "ghost through"; they also pulse, spin, shimmer, fall unexpectedly flat when they should in theory glow or clash, resonate with a plethora of references to external forms and relationships, including to other works of art.

Morris produced this series by painting an irregular grid of densely saturated colours upon the canvas, letting this acrylic framework become completely dry, and then covering it with another layer of paint. She has added a medium that slows down the time this layer takes to dry, which also brings a range of

transparency. At this point, with the act of drying held in check, various parts of the surface are removed (the so-called circles or dots), an action carried out by the artist again and again on different parts of the painting. During this stage of making the work Morris may repaint with a different top colour, completely covering the surface again, and then continue to expose different configurations of the now more deeply buried colours. What results is a mode of colouration that could not be achieved by other means. Paint has been excavated from the topmost layer and we see, through the spaces of removed paint, the colours that lie below it. The edges of the grid determine to a considerable extent where the boundaries of these excavations may be, and Morris makes, as the painting unfolds, fast choices about which constellations she will keep. It is as though we are allowed a peep at an earlier but now obscured painting, with the cleared areas of re-discovered colour now producing new relationships in a final work. This sense of an archaeological engagement with surface and depth is strengthened by the fact that Morris does indeed think of the grid-work as being coherent in itself, rather than a mere foil or “flatbed” upon which to make something new. The painting, then, could have stopped right there; that it did not remain in existence as a competent but unadventurous entity is evidence of Morris’ dedication to moving serious abstract painting into another realm.

Writing about an earlier range of developments within Morris’ practice, the paintings she made at the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s, David Ryan carefully detailed certain specific attributes of the artist’s interests. “Most of these works”, noted Ryan, “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.” [3] Ryan then goes on to raise the important issue of Morris’ relation to Modernism in painting, and his essay helps us to see how she has repeatedly come up with works that both explore and unpick painterly traditions, risking the loss which may result from this, in order to make more radical discoveries. Ryan warns the reader not to reduce Morris’ painting to the familiar schemes – both visual and linguistic – of Modernist painting. I am reminded of another line from Barthes: “The New”, he writes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “is not a fashion, it is a value, the basis of all criticism”. [4] What is genuinely new will not be, this suggests, a mere gimmick or slicker version of an already-extant aesthetic form, but something that realigns the stakes of practice. Artists in any field can remain trapped within the established conventions of their chosen form, unable, for lack of inventiveness or imagination, to move beyond it. This is what we call a traditional, or, more critically, a mannerist response, a going-through-the-motions, as opposed to seeking out weaknesses in order to confront them head on. Ryan’s tactful warning displays a recognition of lazy looking, an understanding that the burden of entrenched formulations is a difficult thing to shake off. Novel developments in art require new modes of address on the part of the perceiver, a willingness to look at the work in as rigorous a fashion as it – this new work – demands. As Brian Eno pointed out in 1985, “One of the problems with art forms is that each one carries the notion with it of how it should

be received.” [5] With Morris’ work we may at first be misled by what appears to be a previously-experienced structure of address, but it is up to us as responsible “experiencers” to guard against this.

Abstract art is relatively young, yet many of its devices, its patterns of expression, already look outmoded. In Morris’ case a certain technical freshness has facilitated the retention of a visceral integrity. This is not the product of trickery or the kind of reductive game-playing that some aspects of her practice (such as grids secreted beneath the surface) might suggest. Formal methods are indeed used but never merely for their own sake, and they are not deployed in an unthinking or overly systemic way, but as and when necessary. Morris has spoken of how certain pieces of music - those of Johann Sebastian Bach would be a good example – appear to analyse and modify their own structure as they unfold in time. The composer seems to have been working this recursive thread into the music as he wrote it, using the strictly coded, iterative nature of the musical palette as an analytic tool with respect to music’s implicit structure. No doubt there are all sorts of mathematical niceties buried in Bach’s work but this technical complexity is only part of the story, a necessary but not sufficient element. Similarly, Morris’ painterly devices are a means to an end, not ends in themselves. Painting, unlike music, does not employ a limited code of repeatable units, yet Morris’s paintings display a testing intelligence. The incredible and engaging luminosity she achieves, the swing of the space, the associations which emerge, come about through her close engagement with the particularities of what is happening on the canvas as she works it. This approach is therefore not formulaic. Each painting is begun from a position of accumulated technical know-how, history and experience, but the question of the work’s accomplishment or success is never marked out in advance. In *Pictures as Arguments* Hans Hess proposes that “the painting teaches the artist as much as the artist teaches the painting”. [6] With Morris in mind, this remark is entirely apt.

1. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 143.
2. Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms*, Basil Blackwell, 1986, p. 166.
3. David Ryan, “The Singular and the Painterly: Mali Morris’s Recent Work”, in *Mali Morris*, Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham, 2002 (unpaginated)
4. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Hill and Wang, 1975, p 40.
5. Brian Eno, quoted in Ziyad Georgis, “East of the Testcard”, *Melody Maker*, November 23, 1985, p. 36.
6. Hans Hess, *Pictures as Arguments*, Sussex University Press, 1975, p. 31.