

HYPERALLERGIC

Beer with a Painter: Rebecca Morris

I heard Rebecca Morris speak earlier this year in Chicago, and was struck by how she discussed becoming an abstractionist at a time when both abstraction and painting were under attack. Morris was personal and direct, but also confident, almost nonchalant. She talked about being in Berlin and writing, as a motivator for herself, the “Manifesto: For Abstractionists and Friends of the Non Objective.”

Barbara Weiss Galerie, Berlin, published the manifesto as an Artforum advertisement for her 2006 exhibition there. It struck a chord in the art world with such brazen but humorous lines as: “Never stop looking at macramé, ceramics, supergraphics and suprematism,” “Whip out the masterpieces,” “When in doubt, spray paint it gold,” and “ABSTRACTION FOREVER!”

Like her manifesto and her way of speaking, Morris’s work is deliberate, but never precious or ornate. She makes small paintings on paper, several of which were shown in a group exhibition this summer at David Zwirner, and large-scale oil paintings, two of which were included in this year’s Whitney Biennial. The work on paper often plays off of a grid, evocative of an urban topography, made irregular by Morris’s hand and the textural effects on the paper. The large paintings juxtapose shapes, forms and loose patterns of marks that suggest diverse visual influences from popular culture —street fashion, food, domestic objects—to high modernism. Morris also often combines oil painting, applied in thin, pale washes, with spray paint.

Morris lives and works in Los Angeles. She received her BA from Smith College in 1991 and an MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1994. She is represented by Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin, and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago. She has exhibited in New York with Harris Lieberman. Solo exhibitions of her work were held at The Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2005; the Kunsthalle Lingen, Germany, 2013; LAXART, Los Angeles, 2014; and the Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht, 2014.

We met over brunch at Schiller’s Liquor Bar when Morris was on a visit to New York. Morris noted, amused, that my plate of eggs and fries was a fantastic yellow monochrome, as we began to talk about the light of different cities, rainbows of similar hues, paleness and contrast.

Jennifer Samet: You were born in Honolulu and grew up in New Haven, Connecticut. I know your father was a composer. How did you become interested in art making?

Rebecca Morris: I remember going to museums: The Yale Art Gallery and the Peabody Museum – a natural history museum, with its dioramas and fossilized animal displays, and a giant squid suspended from the ceiling. These were some of my first encounters with art.

At the Yale Art Gallery there was a room with several Rothko paintings, and a bench. My parents tell a story where they found me sitting in there when I was four, and so they joke that this was the sign I would be an artist. There was something about the bench. I understood it was a social space: you were supposed to participate by sitting there and hanging out with the paintings. I have always loved museums.

The architecture in New Haven was also inspiring to me. From the 1950s to the early 1970s, there was a lot of new construction and urban renewal. My father taught at Yale, so I spent time there and liked the Yale School of Art by Paul Rudolph and the Yale Center for British Art by Louis Kahn. There was also Earl Carlin’s Brutalist Fire Department Headquarters. My dad used to take my sister and me to the Claes Oldenburg lipstick sculpture near Morse College (designed by another great, Eero Saarinen), and my mom took us to the Beinecke Rare Book Library. I still love revisiting these places when I am “home.” I also remember going out for pizza at George and Harry’s, which was right under the Yale music school where my father taught.

JS: You mention architecture, and it makes me think about the use of the grid in your work. How did you start working with the grid?

RM: I was always interested in creating systems and plan-type drawings. As a child, I drew floor plans of split-level houses, and plans for cities and towns. I also drew imaginary family trees, which were based on a grid-like system, but they featured cat families instead of people families.

I became interested in the grid again as an adult, when I was shifting from making realist paintings to abstract ones. Going back to the grid, seeing it as a kind of realistic thing, which had implications with the analytical, helped me.

There was a great Mondrian retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1995. I also remember my mind being blown by a Russian Constructivist book exhibition there. The Constructivist work is not a grid per se – but it is geometric and based off a grid system.

Seeing the simple grids in Robert Ryman's work was a big deal to me, and so was seeing Mary Heilmann's very casual grids. There is a Ryman painting at Dia: Beacon; it is a grid drawn with charcoal on raw canvas. It's a small square, and the charcoal drawing continues around the sides of the canvas. Everything else fell away when I was in front of that piece – a sublime moment. It is elemental; it is about the simplicity of the means. The charcoal is beautiful on the canvas: dark but soft. I realized that the language I was trying to get to was simple. I had been over-thinking it. It was really helpful to see what a pared down drawing you could do, how you could reduce everything.

JS: Can you tell me more about your transition from realist work to the abstraction?

RM: In college and at the beginning of graduate school, I was making super-detailed paintings based on still life arrangements: things like cupcakes (in fact, I painted cupcakes for an entire year), or rooms in dollhouses which I set up with a light source. These had a narrative content and were perhaps more autobiographical, but the making wasn't satisfying. It seemed not enough like my work. There are aspects of my paintings now that are like still lifes: things on display, a presentation of things within a fixed format. But when it was all about painting something realistically, it became drudgery.

In between the realistic and abstract paintings, I made work without paint. I used glitter, I staped-on drawings, and stickers. I was exploring the language of painting without paint – a foray into thinking about placement and formalism. In the end it drove me back to painting harder.

I had never made an abstract painting before, so I didn't have it as an internal option. But when I started doing it, it felt so natural, like a huge sigh of relief. It was immediately clear on a gut level. I knew that if I had a painting problem I would be able to figure it out.