

## ON VACANT PAINTINGS

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Around 2009, fifteen years into Rebecca Morris's career, a certain density disperses from her paintings—the artist's marks remain, vibrant but bare, drifting in space. Colloquially referred to as the "Vacant Paintings," Morris painted these for two intent years from 2010 to 2012, with a few stray examples and motifs appearing through 2015. They began as a challenge, an attempt to loosen herself from a rut of expectation.

A thin copper-colored line at the center of *Untitled (#01-09)* (2009; fig. 1) meanders sharply toward a cloudy, impaled semioval, while a cluster of deep red strokes floats to the right. This first painting, along with *Untitled (#03-09)* (2009; p. XX) and *Untitled (#05-09)* (2009; p. XX), is executed within a circle, resembling a petri dish.<sup>1</sup> By *Untitled (#10-09)* (2009; p. XX), the tenth painting that year, however, Morris had further relinquished structure, sketching directly onto the canvas. The painting was so sparse that Morris questioned whether it needed more, keeping the painting in her studio for two years before realizing it was already complete. Still, Morris continued demarcating these wide-open paintings with subtle, thin borders as a means of controlling their diffusion.

So how do you catch a break from your own intention?

This is the problem for the mid-career artist.

— Rebecca Morris, "On Painting" panel, Chicago, IL, 2010

Rather than stop a painting prematurely, leaving works in various stages of completion, Morris attempted to slow her approach and "dissect [her] language, take apart words into letters."<sup>2</sup> Following an early career survey at The Renaissance Society, Chicago in 2005, she became known for a geologic kind of painting organized around contiguous patterns, and deeply contrasting applications of paint inside of discrete, serrated apertures. She was also producing small tondi and triangle-shaped paintings, homing in on one gesture or move per canvas. The opportunity to make new, autonomous shapes was invigorating. Morris recalls of that moment in her life, "I didn't have a lot of attachments: I didn't own a house, I wasn't really in a relationship with anybody, I was just totally doing my own thing in every way. I was traveling a lot to do shows, and just felt very free, like I could do anything."<sup>3</sup>

*Untitled (#05-10)* (2010; p. 153) illustrates this sensibility and is at once errant and composed. Descending equidistantly along the left margin are three nebulae: a blue-green tangle, scratched out while wet; a centrifuge of desaturated olive strokes tipped with seafoam green; and a furious flurry of bright yellow brushwork. These are balanced by more architectural elements on the right: a conglomeration of embellished beams and quarter circles at top, and a wavy green conduit joining two points of a burgundy trapezoid at bottom. The "Vacant Paintings" evoke a spatial reconsideration for the artist; the amount of negative space on the canvas and the resulting "hyper-awareness" of each mark's relation to another allowed her to think about painting as sculpture.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Morris makes painstaking efforts to determine the margins and interstitial spaces of her paintings. For works with interior frames, she cuts and lays pieces of tape that radiate from the center, trimming, and reapplying until the perimeter is satisfactory.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with the artist, November 1, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* "[The Vacant Paintings] are also hyper-aware of themselves. Everything is on display. It's like the Noah's Ark of marks. We're going to need two of these, we can't have any duplication. I think this hyper-presentation is what leads me into the borders and margins... it needed some closure... an energy [to] hold it in, without feeling too demonstrative."

In particular, Morris's active, translucent quality of line and concentrated puddling of paint is akin to the play of light and shadow in the work of Keith Sonnier (1941–2020). Primarily known for his innovations in neon sculpture starting in 1968 and throughout his career, Sonnier emerged as a postminimal artist who embraced unstable materials and new media. Indeed, *Untitled (Neon and Cloth)* (1968; fig. 2), Sonnier's first piece to incorporate neon, is composed of an arc of light cutting across bits and gossamer, pastel strips of cloth.

The piece fluctuates and looks as if it could disappear. In a 1999 interview Sonnier said:

I began to create a form of light with true color, color that was not applied and so I was naturally very drawn to neon because it was a gas, a trapped gas, which in almost Duchampian terms, is very interesting. As a material, it was psychologically very loaded and erotic and sexy in a way, and this sensual aspect of it interested me too.<sup>5</sup>

Incidentally, a survey of Sonnier's works from 1968 to 2005 was on view at The Arts Club of Chicago at the same time as Morris's *Paintings 1996-2005* at The Renaissance Society. Morris thinks she may have seen the exhibition and remembers her first reaction to Sonnier's neons; she saw them as paintings—fractured, nearly undone and yet present with light.<sup>6</sup>

Briefly a painter, Sonnier transitioned to other pursuits upon arriving at Rutgers University for his MFA in 1964, then a hotbed of Pop and Fluxus experimentation.<sup>7</sup> During this pivotal moment in his career, he made the *Early Rutgers Drawings* series (1965-67) which predate his use of neon. Unlike his later technical drawings that correspond with specific sculptures, these early works are freer and insistently imaginative, and converse most with Morris's "Vacant Paintings."

In a 1965 drawing (fig. 3), a neatly penciled, spray-painted white square casts a salmon pane, intimating lapping light, and abuts a scumble of pink over red colored pencil. Diagonal lines link a small gray beam to a much larger one, leading up to a sky-blue triangle sprayed all the way to sheet's edge. An adjacent faint sheen of blue paint glows diffusely, suggesting overspray. In another 1966 drawing, two erased lines trail from a suspended cube, revealing Sonnier's errors in perspective.<sup>8</sup> In retrospect, the *Early Rutgers Drawings* could be plans for geometric sculptures, projection-based installations—or, of course, the neons—but most importantly, they were experiments in marking space and creating (or collapsing) perspective, seeking the ephemeral out of some desire to suspend it, if only temporarily.

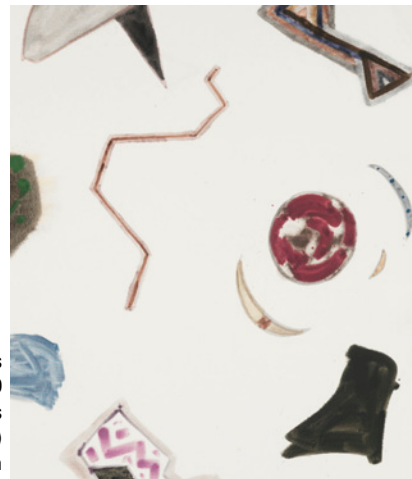


FIGURE 1  
Rebecca Morris  
Detail of *Untitled (#01-09)*, 2009  
Oil and spray paint on canvas  
90 × 76 in (228.5 × 193 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist and Trautwein Herleth, Berlin

<sup>5</sup> Keith Sonnier, in Alexander Pühringer, "Psychology to Material: Keith Sonnier in Conversation with Alexander Pühringer." *Frame*, November–December 1999; reprinted in Keith Sonnier: *Environmental Works 1968–99*, exhibition catalogue (Kunsthaus Bregenz, Bregenz, Austria: 1999), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Correspondence with the artist, January 13, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> While Sonnier attended Rutgers, Robert Watts and Robert Morris were instructors and his classmates included sculptors Alice Aycock and Jackie Winsor, and painter Joan Snyder.

<sup>8</sup> Special thanks to Mark Pascale for his technical expertise and knowledge of these *Early Rutgers Drawings*, both in the collection of The Art Institute of Chicago.



FIGURE 2  
Keith Sonnier, *Untitled (Neon and Cloth)*, 1968  
Dacron and neon, 108 × 60 in (274.32 × 152.4 cm)



FIGURE 3  
Keith Sonnier, *Early Rutgers Drawing*, 1965  
Graphite, with spray paint and colored pencil on cream wove paper, 51 × 57.3 cm (20 1/8 × 22 9/16 in.) Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; Partial gift of the Daled Collection and partial purchase through the generosity of Maja Oeri and Hans Bodenmann, Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III, Agnes Gund, Marlene Hess and James D. Zirin, Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis, and Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley.

Morris's "Vacant Paintings" likewise present a precise lightness of touch. *Untitled (#13-13)* (2013; p. 137) is among the most hermetic of the "Vacant Paintings." Within a silver gridded frame, a single blue-gray stroke echoes two concentric, stenciled and lightly sprayed arcs, while two slight, etched grids appear out of khaki green clouds. The painting appears to reveal itself, as if it were delicately excavated from the white ground. It should be noted that this body of work was created during the height of a stylistic tendency known as "Provisional Painting" (or casualism), characterized by critic Raphael Rubinstein as "the finished product disguised as a preliminary stage, or a body double standing in for a star/ masterpiece whose value would put a stop to artistic risk."<sup>9</sup> In two essays published in 2009 and 2012, Rubinstein delineated a loose, cross-generational group of artists, among them Martin Barré, Raoul De Keyser, Christopher Wool, Michael Krebber, and later artists like Richard Aldrich, Cheryl Donegan, and Wendy White, who practiced in this cursory, scrupulously clumsy mode. Apart from De Keyser to whom Morris pronounces her affinities, these artists were painting out of a willing, ironic subversion of the medium whereas the "Vacant Paintings" are more individual to Morris's trajectory and less about casualism or cancellation than an earnest inquisitiveness.

Though she moved away from this approach by 2013, this period was crucial for a reconsideration of her mark making, the artist recalling, "I craved density, dark paintings, I wanted to put things back together."<sup>10</sup> Morris's long contested methods of painting, from using loaded brushes that obscure the hand to crude monotyping and controlled dripping, are detached yet direct as contour drawing. The "Vacant Paintings" are also related to the artist's drop cloth (or tarp) paintings. Initiated in 2005, the drop cloth paintings exist in the studio under other paintings in progress, catching stray gestures, footprints, and discharged paint from dirty brushes; they can be viewed as "shadow" works, sometimes added to after the fact. An early example, *Untitled (#09-05)* (2005; p. 177) is splattered with pink paint, but not violently. At bottom center, a coppery charcoal smudge dirties the painting and makes it real. The painting is light yet dense at the same time, though the gold trim border tells us its limits.

<sup>9</sup> Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting," *Art in America*, May 2009, 122; and "Provisional Painting Part 2: To Rest Lightly on Earth," *Art in America*, February 3, 2012, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/provisional-painting-part-2-62924/>.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with the artist, November 1, 2022

<sup>11</sup> Toroni painted a few scrolls during this time, which are properly documented in, Simon Castets, ed., *Niele Toroni* (New York: Swiss Institute/Koenig Books/Karma, 2017). An untitled scroll exhibited in Prospect 69 at the Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf reproduced in the publication shares a strong resonance.

Morris's embrace of an automatic mark and understanding of continuity and restraint in these two modes of painting makes a curious counterpoint to the Swiss painter Niele Toroni (b. 1937), whose work she had first-hand encounters through her gallerist Barbara Weiss. A schoolteacher until age 22, Toroni moved to Paris and, as a self-taught painter, sought to reinvent the medium and divert it from pictorialism. Since 1966 he has abided, without fail, by his practice of *Travail- Peinture* ("work painting"), making "imprints of a no. 50 paintbrush at regular intervals of 30 [centimeters]," cascading in as few or many iterations as the support or space demands. Made by pressing the brush once per side, his mark is stark and exacting, yet vital in its minute differences in applied pressure and displacement of bristles. There is a totalizing harmony to Toroni's mark, an understanding that what is not painted, or the space within which a brushstroke exists, is just as crucial.

Morris's *Untitled (#08-18)* (2018; p. 93) is a tall, particolored painting, its marks appearing like skipped stones with complementary, loosely interlocking zones. For such a conditional painting it is rather composed and self-sustained. It began as a large roll of canvas that Morris thought she would eventually cut and make into separate works. Another painting was always being painted on top of it, until she noticed an uncovered expanse one day and stopped painting. Upon unfurling the canvas, she thought about adding to it a little more but refrained. In a way, *Untitled (#08-18)* is automatic and shares similarities with Toroni's *Imprints of a No. 50 Paintbrush Repeated at Regular Intervals of 30 cm* (1969; fig. 4), a waxed canvas scroll that rolls out from the wall onto the floor.<sup>11</sup> Toroni's composition, like all his work, was measured and marked exactly with a compass before execution, while Morris's painting is more serendipitous. However, they share a disposition of never premeditating their marks, allowing them to be open and alive.

The lessons from the "Vacant Paintings" continue in Morris's deliberation of her marks and the facility with which they hold together. As Sonnier remarked in 1999, ". . . sustaining creative energy is very tough for an artist. It's difficult to continue to make real work, because you have to make a living; you have to function in the modern world . . ." <sup>12</sup> Sonnier continued to defy his own work until his death in 2020, experimenting and expanding what he referred to as his "form language" toward reflections of nature and the world. At 85 Toroni continues to paint toward infinity. He speaks of the process as plainly as Morris does: "it refers only to itself . . . it is by itself, hence the impossibility of linking it to an ethics."<sup>13</sup> Morris continues as well, one mark to the next, preferring not to revise. "Fussing with the painting can get dangerous," she says.<sup>14</sup> It's the only way to move forward.



FIGURE 4  
Niele Toroni, *Imprints of a No. 50 Paintbrush Repeated at Regular Intervals of 30 cm*, 1969  
Alkyd on vinyl impregnated fabric.  
398 x 55 1/8 in. (1011 x 140 cm)

<sup>11</sup> Toroni painted a few scrolls during this time, which are properly documented in, Simon Castets, ed., *Niele Toroni* (New York: Swiss Institute/Koenig Books/Karma, 2017). An untitled scroll exhibited in Prospect 69 at the Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf reproduced in the publication shares a strong resonance.

<sup>12</sup> Pühringer, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Niele Toroni, "February 1968," *ibid.*, 291.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with the artist, November 1, 2022.