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## WHO'S AFRAID OF PINK, SILVER, AND BROWN?<sup>1</sup>

JAMILLAH JAMES

If I had to choose a color to describe the Midwest, brown would come immediately to mind. Its nicknames include “America’s Breadbasket” and the “Rust Belt,” each evoking a spectrum of shades of brown from wheat to rye to the flaky brittleness of age and disrepair. The Midwest is known for many foods of the brown variety: beer, cereal, burnt cheese on countless iterations of pizza, miscellaneous cooked meats, fried things of all shapes and sizes. The people of the region are often described as the “salt of the earth,” or “down to earth.” The earth underfoot is the most purposeful brown matter, rich and nutritive unless it is parched from drought or fallow. It is in the Midwest (Chicago to be exact) that Rebecca Morris forged important relationships that have sustained and continued to flourish, and where the artist had formative experiences and exhibitions, including the exhibition from which her most recent survey, *Rebecca Morris: 2001–2022*, and this publication depart.<sup>2</sup>

In 2005, Morris was the subject of an early survey of works entitled *Rebecca Morris: 1996–2005*, organized by Susanne Ghez for the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, following her first solo institutional exhibition, *Frankenstein* at the Santa Monica Museum of Art (now the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) in 2003. In the later exhibition, Morris’s paintings are described as a “lovingly destructive embrace of high modernist tenets espoused by [modernist] critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried.”<sup>3</sup> Among other things, Greenberg writes of modernist painting’s flatness as an antidote to the sculptural, and a structural limitation by virtue of the surface and support relationship.<sup>4</sup> If there is one takeaway from the past twenty-one years of Morris’s paintings—and the five additional years covered in the Renaissance Society exhibition—it is that the frame and surface can hardly contain her marks, strategies, and skillful inversion (or evacuation) of the oversized baggage of canonical painting. Her paintings take up space—physically, gesturally, psychically. It is the focus on formal tendencies—the primary vehicle by which her paintings defy expectation—not chronology that governs our exhibition. By extension, this essay will focus on another essential component of Morris’s work: her inexhaustible engagement with color, particularly those that flout conventions within the historical arc of painting and the boundaries of taste.

Back to brown.

In one of his last works, the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote:

“Why don’t we speak of a ‘pure’ brown? Is the reason merely the position of brown with the respect to other ‘pure’ colors, in relationship to them all? Brown is, above all, a surface color, i.e., there is no such thing as a clear brown, but only a muddy one.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The essay’s title references Barnett Newman’s landmark suite of paintings *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue I-IV* (1966–70), a critical engagement of Piet Mondrian’s use of primary colors and oddly the target of repeated acts of vandalism.

<sup>2</sup>Anthony Elms and Hamza Walker (both contributors to this volume) worked at the Renaissance Society at the time of Morris’s 2005 exhibition, with Walker writing a text “AbstractThis,” for the exhibition. Elms, Walker, and Morris have been close friends and collaborators, working together in various capacities in the years since.

<sup>3</sup>Exhibition page for Rebecca Morris: 1996–2005, <https://renaissance-society.org/exhibitions/445/rebecca-morris-paintings-1996-2005/>

<sup>4</sup>Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Forum Lectures* (Voice of America), Washington, DC, 1960. Reprint, *Art & Literature* no. 4 (Spring 1965), 193–201.

Brown is a complex color and one of countless associations—cultural, political, and theoretical. For one, the problematic connotation of brown as “dirty” in relation to other colors, be it in a social or artistic context. Brown is not monolithic, rather the beginning of endless tonal possibilities. In his analysis of the color in the ongoing “Colors” column in *Cabinet* magazine, Alan Gilbert writes:

...Something in brown always remains unspoken, frequently lodged between the sublime and the abject.... [Josef] Albers’s and [Robert] Ruyman’s experiments with color may be rigorously phenomenological, as opposed to political, but the experience of color in any meaningful sense never precedes psychology and culture. James Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time* that, ‘color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality.’ Accounting for color always accompanies the act of perception, which at its most basic is a physical process involving light, wavelengths, retinas, and electrical and chemical processes in the brain. Brown throws this dynamic into striking relief.... Baldwin was right. Color is a political process. When blended, the commingling of black and white may make gray, but brown has a little bit of every color.<sup>6</sup>

Against all odds, brown persists.

The color figured prominently in Morris’s early paintings— part critical, contrarian gesture, part exploration. As far back as 1989, she made a trio of closely cropped, still-life paintings of cupcakes with swirls of chocolate buttercream icing titled *Betty Crocker Does the Ouija Board*; *Untitled (Chocolate Frosting)*; and *Precarious Pithy Peaks of Pleasure in Chocolate Buttercream (Homage to Niels)* (all works 1989; fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> Other works have explicitly conjured the color in their titles, among them *Composition in Tans* (1997), *Tan Plan* (1998), *Brownout #1* and *#2* (both 1999; fig. 2), *Different Browns* (1999), *Two Times Tan* (1999), *Brown Slabs* (2000), and *Brown Lightning* (2000). “That shit is the future” is how she described brown in her infinitely quotable *Manifesto (for Abstractionists and Friends of the Non-Objective)*.<sup>8</sup> Her palette, seen in the color charts reproduced in this volume, includes pigments like raw sienna, burnt umber, brown ochre, cadmium brown, and the wonderfully dense yet transparent Van Dyke brown, named after Anthony van Dyck, a Flemish painter also known for his dexterous use of brown. Morris’s embrace of an unexpected, muted, earthy palette— associated mostly with incidental color in landscape painting, still lifes, portraiture, or other figurative paintings— continued through her time in Chicago and shortly after her relocation to Los Angeles in 1998. Ironically, the two paintings evoking California by name, an eponymous work from 1996 and *California Composition* (1999), have limited correspondence with the newfound terrain. The former comprises black, wavering, diagonal lines on a white ground, while *California Composition* has a similar composition rendered in tan, grayish blue, and brown. Perhaps her unwavering devotion to the city had not yet materialized— maybe she was, in a word, neutral (like beige).

FIGURE 1  
*Precarious Pithy Peaks of Pleasure in Chocolate Buttercream (Homage to Niels)*, 1989. Oil on Masonite, 14 × 11 1/2 in. (36.8 × 29.2 cm). Courtesy the artist.



<sup>6</sup> Alan Gilbert, “Brown: What Can It Do for You,” *Cabinet* magazine no. 25 (Spring 2007), <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/25/gilbert.php>

<sup>7</sup> Before embracing her current titling system, Morris’s titles were declarative and humorous, though often misdirections for the viewer. Since 2001, most paintings are untitled, distinguished by a sequence of numbers detailing the order in which a painting is made each year in parentheses.

<sup>8</sup> Originally in *Cakewalk* magazine, Morris reproduced the essay as a full-page ad in *Artforum* for her exhibition at Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin. The essay now has a life of its own, embraced as a call to arms for painters working after the turn of the 21st century.

FIGURE 2  
*Brownout #1* and *Brownout #2*, in  
 Morris's first Eagle Rock studio, 1999



Around 1995, Morris began experimenting with spray paint, painting lines in a diamond-like pattern, reminiscent of the mesh of a steel fence or a lozenge-cut gemstone, like a grid turned on its side. These paintings often incorporated slashes of brown; the indeterminate edges of each line seemed to radiate and pulse, projecting outward from the picture plane. Ultimately, Morris's work in this vein became more atmospheric, with lines breaking away from any overarching structure while mingling with floating forms, with rich browns on the precipice of black grounding the compositions. *Frankenstein* (2001; p. 189), the titular work of her 2003 exhibition and included in the Los Angeles presentation of *Rebecca Morris: 2001–2022*, has a brown, spray-painted line cutting through a loose web of black lines and thin etching on a cream-colored, semi-gloss surface. Another entry in the floating shape category is *Untitled (#02-05)* (2005; p. 179), its sumptuous brown depths evade adequate photographic capture. Like all of Morris's paintings, it must be experienced in person. Brown becomes less prominent in her palette after 2008, ten years after her arrival in Los Angeles, as if the sky opened—a different sky than the one meeting the horizon on Lake Michigan. Living with, or enduring, the intense, saturating light of southern California has a way of shifting perspectives and how you see the world. The transition to a new landscape, steeped in sunrises; peaks and valleys; and dry, unforgiving heat marked a new era of experimentation with color and motif in Morris's work.

Pink had always been there: in the wryly titled *Ham* (1994) and *Chiclet* (1995); the stickers on the perimeter of *Ruby I* (1996), an early example of Morris's tendency to "frame" her paintings with an ornamental flourish; *Level 5* (1997), included in her 2005 survey; *Pink Plan* (1999); and elsewhere in drips and drabs in the preceding years. The daily sunsets in Los Angeles wash the mountains in a relaxing gradient of pink, orange, and purple, a reprieve from the searing, inescapable brightness of the day. As Janet Sarbanes writes in her essay for Morris's 2016 exhibition at Corbett vs. Dempsey in Chicago, "[the] aqueous peaches and mauves [in Morris's paintings] . . . are a testament to the light of LA, which Morris finds 'bleaching, blinding, unforgiving.' Stare at them long enough and you begin to feel what LA poet Martha Ronk describes as the 'ache of bright.'" <sup>9</sup> While pink is historically one of the most controversial and oppositional of colors, its skillful deployment is an emergent signature of Morris's uncategorizable work—consider it her Ryman white, Reinhardt or Marshall black, Delaney yellow,<sup>10</sup> or Still red.

The color, which has yet to fully escape the trappings of gender essentialism, gained some wider, hard-fought legitimacy (albeit later and less graciously from critics at first) through the work of Philip Guston (1913–1980), whose dilutions and working of cadmium red resulted in the most luminous yet challenging applications of the color; for instance, his early abstractions like *Attar* (1954) and *Zone* (1953–54); the ground of his *Klansmen* paintings; and the dingy, mottled pinks seen in the disembodied limbs and backdrops of his later paintings. Guston's unapologetic use of pink pokes viewers in the eye with the force of their respective associations. Guston and Willem deKooning (1904–1997)'s fleshy manifestations enjoyed critical generosity for their unorthodox use of a "feminine" color; this has not been the case for their female peers or artists of later generations, similarly working in abstraction and with the color pink in varying degrees of intensity—Joan Mitchell, Alma Thomas, Judy Chicago, Elizabeth Murray, Howardena Pindell, Sue Williams, Miriam Schapiro, Joanne Greenbaum, and Lynda Benglis to name a few. For these artists, pink was at equal turns liberating and a trap.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Janet Sarbanes, "Galaxy Hopping with Rebecca Morris," *Rebecca Morris* (Chicago: Corbett vs. Dempsey, 2016), 33.

<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, yellow appears sparingly in Morris's work, the artist instead preferring its metallic cousin gold.

<sup>11</sup> Ree Morton and Hannah Wilke are certainly part of this conversation; their sculpture exhibits a critical yet humorous orientation toward gender and the feminine yet retains some ambivalence about the prevailing discourses of the time, including the automatic labeling of their work as feminist.

These conditions have not exactly escaped Morris, who has long resisted the facile interpretations of her work through the prism of gender, and the assignments of her work as that of a “woman artist” due to material or color choice:

“Now that [the normative] voice [of modernism] has become hoarse and academic in its insistent repetition of its master narrative . . . In order to discover what is retrievable from the abstract project, we must subject it to an interrogation that is neither submissive nor cynical.”<sup>12</sup>

Her enduring interest in exploring myriad formulations of pink is because she considers the color “limitless.”<sup>13</sup> It is a formal and conceptual concern, one borne out of a desire to invert the historical prescriptions and rules of artmaking. It is a slap in the face of boredom.

There is no shortage of superlative pink paintings in 2001–2022. Morris’s sheer consistency and exceptional talents make the job of selecting works incredibly difficult—she also likes to joke that we could have made several different iterations of the exhibition, each with a new set of paintings. In their essays, contributing writers Anthony Elms, Alex Jen, and Camila McHugh all touch upon one specific painting, *Untitled (#09-05)* (2005; p 177), a “vacant painting” as referenced in Jen’s text. This work signifies a turning point in Morris’s practice—beyond being utterly sublime, it is her first to incorporate a thin, gold line just at the edge of the picture plane, a framing device which the artist continues to use.<sup>14</sup> Without a central focal point, it encourages a slower pace of viewing; it is spaced out, atomized, cosmological, its composition reminiscent of how “pink noise” is visualized.

Pink comes in many shapes and sizes—large and in charge, announcing itself loudly as an acidic fluorescent or the slightest whisper of the palest hue. The color is slowly approaching the status of a neutral, a norm after so much transgression. It possesses a multitude of names, among them Morris’s careful mixtures derived from shell pink, light magenta, cadmium red (the secret weapon in her Sisyphean quest to make the “ultimate red painting”), or flesh tint. Crayons and house paints never fail to amuse with their chosen descriptors: thistle, pink sherbet, flamingo, razzmatazz. Morris has her own lexicon, too—“dirty ballet shoe pink, chewed gum pink, artificial guava flavor.”<sup>15</sup> The pigment’s provenance can be traced to organic and inorganic sources,<sup>16</sup> the result of alchemy and surprise, an apt way to describe Morris’s systemic yet improvisational approach in the studio.

*Untitled (#04-15)* (2015; p. 121), a painting related to the “framed” works discussed in Camila McHugh’s essay “Borderlines” contains another motif central to 2001–2022’s gestural index: the “lobster claw,” a reference to both color and form. Morris began the “lobster claw” paintings in earnest in 2006 with *Untitled (#01-06)* (2006; p. 171). She has repeatedly turned to this form, as she does with her other go-to gestures (among them the grid, checkerboard, and the “party cut,” or floating patchwork shapes reminiscent of Chicago’s “tavern-style,” square cut pizza). Each painting is a new and exciting collision of geometric abstraction and organic shapes. With a slicing trajectory that cuts through the composition, the claws recall the edges of a torn page. *Untitled (#04-15)* melds Morris’s angular forms with a scalloped border; grids; and spare, atomized marks and daubs. Pinks upon pinks abound, including mauve in various densities.

As a card-carrying member of Morris’s “Mauve Club of America,”<sup>17</sup> an informal network of friends and associates founded in 1985, it is always a pleasure to see this most mysterious and ambiguous color appear in the work. For instance, *Untitled (#07-13)* (2013; p. 145) has washes of mauve softening its jagged forms. The color’s inherent ambivalence—whether it is pink or purple—is not unlike the historical and formal contradictions set forth in Morris’s work. Its luxurious unpredictability is intrinsic to its understanding:

<sup>12</sup> Shirley Kaneda, “Painting and Its Others: In the Realm of the Feminine,” *Arts Magazine* 65, no. 10 (Summer 1991), 58.

<sup>13</sup> Conversation with the artist, late September 2022.

<sup>14</sup> In our early attempts at identifying a thematic for 2001–2022, Morris suggested a survey of works that demonstrate the line as a framing device. We ultimately decided to expand this notion to examine additional motifs as the organizing principle rather than relying on chronology.

<sup>15</sup> Correspondence with the artist, March 1, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Ball, *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 140–41.

<sup>17</sup> Correspondence with the artist, March 1, 2023.

Say mauve. It takes longer than most English words of its length. Long enough to lose heart partway through. We're not quite sure how to pronounce its soft center: aw or oh. Mauve collapses in the mouth like a chocolate truffle. Like a truffle, it tastes expensive, decadent, imported. The word is to American English as the color is to American clothes. It enters one's vocabulary late if at all, an adult word, with a tinge of the boudoir, and so it signals sophistication and a possibly unhealthy attention to aesthetics.<sup>18</sup>

A pink by any other name would smell as sweet.

Whenever I see silver, I think of utility: a precious metal of enormous strength and value, encountered in coins, cutlery, jewelry, and scientific manifestations less visible. Silver is the color of industry, newness rendered in glinting steel, aluminum, and chrome. It is a building block of modern photography, that other imaging technology. Silver is part of the future always imagined.

I associate silver and adjacent materials with sculpture more than painting, but there is Joyce Pensato (1941–2019), Jacqueline Humphries, and Scott Lyall to consider. It is the most mercurial of all pigments used by Morris, and elemental to some of her recent paintings. It gives the impression of liquid in heat and motion, material instability, a color "in continuous flux, constantly related to changing neighbors and changing conditions."<sup>19</sup>

Her chosen application of silver, as seen in *Untitled (#18–20)* (2020; p. 71) and *Untitled (#04–07)* (2007; p. 157) encroaches on the surface and its existing marks, creating an expanse of suspended patterned cutaways:

...There is a playfully speculative quality to the paintings [using metallics] .... Even where galactic motifs can't be read into the work, there's a gesture towards other realities, achieved by thicker applications of paint on top of washy, improvisational surfaces, solid-feeling structures opening out onto the unknown.<sup>20</sup>

The metallics are the most direct expression of ornamentation in Morris's work. These flourishes are layered onto the surface as a finishing touch integral to the composition. She paints silver in different weights: the sheen of *Untitled* (2003; fig. 3), punctuated by scattered impasto, or the thin, controlled grids of *Untitled (#13–13)* (2013; p. 137) and *Untitled (#01–22)* (2022; p. 45), to organize the turped-out red ground, diluted drips, and streaks of red, black, and more silver. If you look closely, you can find errant footprints, the residue of activity in the studio. There is also the molten, vaguely scalloped crust forming at the edges that lends additional heft—this is a variation of the all-encompassing foil of *Untitled (#18–20)* (2020; p. 71), with the silver instead receding to the periphery. Even in its deference to the main action of the painting, it brings everything together. The margins hold and sustain the center—it wouldn't be the first time.

I have ripped through the blue lampshade of the constraints of color.... Follow me, comrade aviators. Swim into the abyss...I have overcome the lining of the colored sky, torn it down and into the bag thus formed, put color, tying it up with a knot. Swim in the white free abyss, infinity is before you.

—Kazimir Malevich, "Non-Objective Art and Suprematism" (1919)



FIGURE 3  
*Untitled*, 2003  
Oil and spray paint on canvas, 84 × 86 in. (213.4 × 218.4 cm).  
Carola Golding Collection.

Over the past twenty-one years, Morris has produced an extraordinary body of complex, rigorous work that is always a joy to behold. My introduction to her work was the 2009 group exhibition A Painting Show at the now-defunct Harris Lieberman Gallery on West 26th Street in New York.<sup>21</sup> I posted my snapshot of *Untitled (#02-09)* (2009; fig. 4) on the Tumblr site I operated at the time, a standout in a stacked show.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the production of 2001–2022, I have returned to this serendipitous encounter; that afternoon laid the foundation for a seamless collaboration and gorgeous exhibition that survived a global pandemic, postponements, and departures.

The painting neatly indexes an assortment of gestures that Morris would continue to revisit through constant iteration: linework (i.e., an almost straight line, grids, or framing borders) as scaffolding or a container, atmospheric drips, and floating shapes disrupting the surface—in pink, silver, and brown, the pillars of her dynamic, singular approach to a new vernacular of abstraction. Her willingness to turn to her own history and find inventive ways to refresh and recast it with the utmost confidence and conviction is indicative of an artist who is deeply committed and thoughtful. She ably dismantles and resists the confines of the ever-expanding field of painting, one canvas at a time. Morris forges future directions for herself and new rules to be broken every day. In these pursuits, an infinite loop of inquiry, experimentation, and execution, she too is limitless.



FIGURE 4  
*Untitled (#02-09)*, 2009  
Oil and spray paint on canvas, 46 × 41 3/4 in.  
(116.8 × 106.1 cm)

<sup>21</sup> This prescient exhibition assembled a who's who of contemporary painting: Polly Apfelbaum, Kristin Baker, Cecily Brown, Ann Craven, Moira Dryer, Nicole Eisenman, Keltie Ferris, Michelle Grabner, Alexandra Grant, Joanne Greenbaum, Heather Guertin, Mary Heilmann, Jacqueline Humphries, Rosy Keyser, Suzanne McClelland, Haley Mellin, Rebecca Morris, Carrie Moyer, Elizabeth Murray, Elizabeth Neel, Donna Nelson, Laura Owens, Joyce Pensato, Analia Saban, Amy Sillman, Dana Schutz, Patricia Treib, Jackie Saccoccio, Kianja Strobert, Nicola Tyson, Lesley Vance, Mary Weatherford, Wendy White, Brenna Youngblood, and Molly Zuckerman-Hartung.

<sup>22</sup> <https://frntrs-blog.tumblr.com/search/rebecca+morris>