



“Malcolm Morley: The Art of Painting.” In *Malcolm Morley*. New York: Sperone, Westwater, 2005.

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## **Malcolm Morley: The Art of Painting**

Robert Hobbs

I take painting very literally to be a thing to do with seeing. I want to know what perception is in terms of painting. . . . I want the eyes to float and bob like buoys on the wetness of the painted surface. . . . [With the grid] I get a concentration of a kind of molecular-bunching-up of seen things. I can avoid figure-ground problems. Normally, you spend all the energy on the figure, and you just fill in the ground. This way everything is ground.

Klaus Kertess, "Malcolm Morley: Talking About Seeing," 1980

Three-and-a-half years ago the British expatriate and noted New York painter, Malcolm Morley, returned to his 1960s super-realist practice of employing photographs as models for his painting. The move came at the end of a breakdown, which had left him speechless for six months<sup>1</sup>. To help him find a way out of this ordeal, Morley's wife Lida cut out a picture of a fleeing Afghani and child from the New York Times and suggested using it as the catalyst for a new work. Instead of utilizing the image as an inspiration for a watercolor, which would in turn become the model for a painting in accordance with Morley's customary way of working for more than two decades, he relied on the photograph itself, thus connecting himself and his art more directly with a current event. For the first two months after beginning this piece, Morley found that he could paint for only 30 minutes at a time.



Ultimately, he completed Man, Boy and Donkey (2002), which was often seen by others as unfinished due to the schematic nature of the photograph that Morley

used. Although atypical of his overall approach because of its broad flat planes and quasi-cubist background, this painting impressed on Morley the need to connect himself and his work more directly with the world and to grow out of his '80s-based practice of using his own watercolors, either singly or in collaged groups, as models for his art.

This breakdown came several years after the artist proclaimed in 1999 his intention in the future to repaint all his paintings. The formal announcement of this far-reaching goal assumed the appearance of a one-line epilogue in Jean-Claude Lebensztejn's important monograph, Malcolm Morley: Itineraries,<sup>2</sup> thus locking the artist into an ambitious and constraining agenda. This published statement foreclosed the type of sharp breaks and radical turns for which Morley had become justifiably renowned and may have contributed to his period of speechlessness several years later. Thus, in retrospect, the opportunity represented by *The New York Times* photograph to initiate a new course of working was no doubt enormously appealing and ultimately recuperative,

perhaps in part because it enabled the artist to revisit the 1960s mode of working that had initially vouchsafed his reputation.

This process of relying on photographs instead of sketches had a profound effect on Morley's overall style of painting. Soon, he began to tighten his grip on his work, look more closely at the motif in front of him, and advance the course established by his early cool and distanced paintings of the 1960s, even though he was able to rely on the experienced eye and knowing modulations of tone that he had developed in the course of four-and-a-half decades of intensive painting.

Some time after Morley recovered fully from his breakdown, a broken hip necessitated an operation, which was followed in turn by the type of physical therapy usually described as excruciating. This series of events made Morley far more aware of his body than he had been in recent years and impressed on him both the frustrations and the excitement of strenuous exertion that athletes regularly experience. It also inspired him to continue working regularly with a



physical therapist. This new outlook encouraged him as well to search for new types of images for his art. At first he began rethinking his past work, and he studied in particular his notable Race Track (1970) with

its giant red graffiti-like “x” emblazoned across its surface. The “x” Morley had inscribed marked the winner at a South African racetrack depicted in it at the same time that it punned, through its implied connection with the artist’s name, the famous militant black nationalist leader Malcolm X. Looking at this painting more than three decades later, Morley’s thoughts about Race Track bifurcated almost immediately in the two directions of sporting images and disasters. Since that time, he has collected images from sports pages in media print as well as various printed news sources and then put them through Photoshop before using them as models for his paintings, including those in this exhibition. For Morley printed matter still assumes qualities of painting since ink sits on paper in a painterly fashion.

Because Morley’s recent sharp-focus images so vividly recall his 1960s mode of working, they bring to the fore once again a number of unresolved misconceptions about this early art that need to be recalled, questioned, and analyzed before they can hopefully be laid to rest. Among the most notable are (1) the term “photorealism” that is still indiscriminately used to reference Morley’s work (2); his assumed connections to pop art, particularly its emphasis on mediated imagery, which conflicts with the directness of his approach to painting, which is his real subject; and (3) his often cited desire to extend Cézanne’s basic approach, which still remains misunderstood, thereby impoverishing our understanding of the depth and range of Morley’s ambitions for painting. Once these false impressions and misunderstandings are analyzed and understood,

we will then be in a position to look at Morley's recent paintings and appreciate how he realizes in them his proclaimed overall mission "to take out everything but painting without having to make abstract painting" and to demonstrate compellingly that "painting's object is not reality but an image."

When Morley's works are misrepresented as "photo-realist" rather than "super-realist" as they so often are even by well-meaning and highly-informed critics, his important quest to realize the process through which reality can be transposed into painting continues to be misunderstood. Often it is conflated with Chuck Close's estimable but very different project, which was initiated two years after Morley's, when Close began to regard painting as a means for undermining photography's then unquestioned truth. A fellow teacher with Morley at the New York School of Visual Arts, Close became similarly involved in superimposing grids on small photographic images in order to break down their visual information into discrete bits. Then, with commendable accuracy, Close like Morley attempted to reproduce each square of this imaged reality. However, unlike Morley who relied on the mundane subjects of travel posters and postcards in his early works as a means for stabilizing and neutralizing these topics so that he could then emphasize the process of re-presenting them in terms of visible brushstrokes, Close emphasized them at the same time that he diminished his means by choosing to work with an airbrush. It was still regarded in the '60s as a commercial tool, but it was particularly useful for Close since it ensured that there would be no paint strokes in the final work to interfere with his images that simulated black-and-white

snapshots, albeit on the grand scale. In this way, Close was able to utilize both painting and large scale, which enabled him to heighten the pictorial inconsistencies in snapshots, as tools for underscoring formerly unquestioned photographic conventions such as the sharp and diffused focus caused by cameras' inability to register depth of field accurately. Because he decided in his art to underscore photography's compromised objectivity, Close clearly deserves the appellation "photo-realist," which has been regularly used to characterize it.

While Morley's early work also utilizes photographic information as its model, his early choice of a low-key, commercial, and certainly sub-aesthetic subject matter was intended as a means for partially canceling out the subject's customary symbolic import in order to encourage viewers to appreciate the basically two-step process of painting he was intent on refining. This process involves first seeing and then pre-imaging each discrete component making up his designated grid as if it were an individual work before remembering this imaginative construct in order to establish painterly equivalents for it.

Specifically it is initiated by studying and pre-imaging each of his designated cells resulting from the overlay of grids on his model as a composition in acrylics in his earlier work and in oils in the later ones. He then draws on his residual memory as he works. Finally he depends on his consequent selection of colors and their relationship to each other, as well as to the strokes comprising them, in order to render a painting of his imagined view of the discrete image before him.

Pre-imaging is a crucial theoretical construct for Morley that has a distant antecedent in the British tradition of the picturesque. Although writings on Morley's work have not noted this connection, it is a crucial one because it places emphasis on the largely eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century tradition of first looking at nature as a picture in the guise of the art of expatriate French landscapist Claude Lorrain, who idealized the Italian landscape in Arcadian terms. After seeing the landscape in this way – and this process was often aided by holding up to a scene a smoky-colored monocle called a "Claudian glass" to emulate the darkened varnish then associated with old-master status – one was in the position to paint nature since it had already been pre-imaged as art. This type of looking at nature as art before proceeding to paint it is essentially the same process that Morley employs when he pre-images a discrete segment of a photographic reproduction as if it were a painting.

In the course of undertaking the complex project of painting, Morley differs from his picturesque forbearers when he reduces the coordinates of his vision from a broad view to a series of abbreviated fragments to create a scintillating mosaic of parts that in the artist's words, "all exist in a punctuated equilibrium." Each cell or group of cells comprises an individual set of challenges that Morley must face and then resolve before moving forward. He states, "each cell is a hologram of the entire painting, so that the overall work can be known and understood in terms of its discrete parts." The even-tempered imbrications of these discrete cells work together to constitute a radiating field that is all background, as he explains in the



statement serving as an epigraph for this essay. Morley readily acknowledges that viewers' habitual way of looking at the world reconfigures these overall grids according to the spatial coordinates of foreground and background with which they are familiar, thus redefining them. Despite their tendency to re-conceive the painted surface before them in this way, Morley's atomization of focus does function, at least in part, to break up the overall motif, thereby encouraging viewers to savor his means of working at the expense of his motif.

Of course, when one looks at reproductions of Morley's works, most of his phenomenal atomization of painting into small workable bits is lost, and the overall image takes over, thus falsifying his process by giving his art the appearance of photo-realist work. While the subject matter of many of the early works were intended to be neutral so that the artist's ongoing



operations could become the painting's real topic, at times he decided to allegorize this process when he chose, for example, to paint Vermeer, Portrait of the Artist in his Studio in 1968 so that the subject matter would reinforce and explain his chosen object matter, paint and canvas.

Because Morley's major issue is paint and not photography, his preferred designation "super-realist" is a far more fitting characterization of his work than "photo-realist." This term is a play on Kasimir Malevich's suprematism. His early paintings which included even the white areas surrounding the travel posters, can be considered equivalents to Malevich's white fields with abstract forms suspended in them. The main difference between the two, Morley says, is that Malevich pursued abstract geometric components while he [Morley] grids his mainly rectangular photographic images before painting them on white fields. Today, Morley would call this movement "post-pop" after post-impressionism since it seems truer historically and less egocentric. This post-pop reference, as we will see, also correlates well with the artist's respect for Cézanne, a preeminent post-impressionist and a major influence on Morley.

The calculated neutrality of Morley's early subject matter, which relied on travel posters for ocean cruises as trompe l'oeil objects, certainly played into his professed goal to reveal painting's equilibrated way of re-presenting aspects of the world. His rigorous objectivity moreover represented the type of new and detached worldview that French new-wave novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet, who had been trained as an agronomist, represented so compellingly in his writings. These texts began in the 1950s to be translated and published into English shortly after their appearance in French. In addition to being enthusiastically read by Morley, Robbe-Grillet's writings were widely discussed among a number of younger members of the New York art world. These works had a profound

effect, for instance, on minimalism's later emphasis on stripping sculpture of its presumed virtual envelope of space so that it would be forced to compete with ordinary objects in the world. And, as we will see, they were important for Morley as well as for a number of the photo-realists.

French critic Roland Barthes offers one of the clearest and most perceptive summaries of Robbe-Grillet's overall mission in his introduction to *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet*



(1965), which had appeared in English in the 1950s as an article in the U.S. vanguard periodical *Evergreen Review*. Coincidentally, 1965 – the date that Barthes' essay was republished – is the same

year that Morley created his first paintings: images of the cruise ships that he entitled Empire Monarch and Independence with Côte d'Azur.

According to Barthes, Robbe-Grillet's goal is to reconfigure writing so radically that "only one mode of perception: the sense of sight"<sup>3</sup> is represented.

Veering away from symbolic novels of depth in which situations and characters are burdened with the weight of meaning, Robbe-Grillet's novels restructure fictive prose so that it is comprised of flat, detailed descriptions that resist symbolic overlays. Barthes notes prophetically that this novelist's

visual encounters, “will be quite drained, consumed, and used up,”<sup>4</sup> as they are read even though the writer’s perspicacious vision continues to insinuate itself in the reader’s mind since it resists attempts to colonize it under a transcendent meaning. Although this critic asserts that in order to find creative work on a par with Robbe-Grillet’s emphasis on sight and resistance to metaphor “one must turn to modern painting,”<sup>5</sup> he does not name any artists whose work embodies this type of trenchant vision, even though he may have been thinking of Cy Twombly’s early paintings, which he had analyzed earlier in an essay.

Barthes’ tantalizing reference to modern painting as Robbe-Grillet’s rightful equivalent and this novelist’s uncompromising empiricism constituted provocative challenges to an entire generation of artists, including those who became pop artists and minimalists as well as those who worked with representational subject matter. We can well imagine Morley regarding Robbe-Grillet’s work as a series of ideas to be mined. And certainly a great number of photo-realists responded to this French novelist’s ideas, including those found in his series of sketches, *Snapshots*, which contains a series of brief descriptions of visual phenomena that these artists could plunder in works that coalesced into a full-fledged movement in 1968, the same year of this slender volume’s publication in English.<sup>6</sup> This new emphasis on neutrality, which Robbe-Grillet’s writings made so compellingly vivid, provided first Morley and later the photo-realists with a *raison d’être* for understanding the world as

undeniable facts, which did not need to be supplied with symbolic references since its physicality and presence were deemed sufficiently interesting. Photo-realists such as Don Eddy, Audrey Flack and Ben Schonzeit among others who were working in the wake of Robbe-Grillet's fiction fell under the sway of Ektachrome slides, which they projected as models for mediated and usually air brushed works rendered in the anonymous mode of commercial art so that their real subject, photographic looking, could be emphasized. Differing from them, Morley regarded the new focus on the prosaic, evidenced in Robbe-Grillet's writings, as a springboard for heightening his poetic means of seeing and interpreting images then moving from the what of subject matter to the question of how it is rendered. Instead of passively accepting commercial or technical mediation as a fact of modern life as did first the pop artists and later the photo-realists, Morley advocates an active identification with the type of disciplined seeing entailed in his figurative painting's reconstitution of the twinned motifs of its ostensible subject (its model) and its implicit one (itself).

In 1965 when Morley began to play on tensions between using banal subjects in order to accentuate his real topic, painting, as a mode of pre-imaging life as art before transposing this imagined counterpart into a medium, a new and revelatory book by German art historian Kurt Badt, called *The Art of Cézanne*, was translated into English.<sup>7</sup> Morley purchased this book almost as soon as it was published. It is essential to our understanding of Morley's connections with this post-impressionist's work since he regarded Badt's text as

particularly helpful. Reading at times like the observations of a particularly perceptive painter, Badt's study is particularly helpful in articulating certain aspects of Morley's overall program that has definite affinities with Cézanne's. Among the most important are this super-realist's way of working that stresses his mode of painterly seeing over the object represented, his emphasis on the word "tone" to describe relationships of color, his many allusions to painting as equivalent to music, and his reliance on watercolor as a primary way of understanding the world, which was made explicit during his expressionistic period.

In the first chapter of Badt's text entitled "Cézanne's Water-Colour Technique," this medium is understood as the basis of Cézanne's way of conceiving his work in terms of patches of color. And this response to watercolor as a means for realizing one's initial response to a subject is a characteristic of Morley's overall way of working. "It is true that his [Cézanne's] pictures were constructed with components taken from the real world," Badt acknowledges, before elaborating on an approach that is similar to Morley's pre-imaging process. He notes that Cézanne

did not, however, take these from the particular form, colours or outward appearances of individual things but from an analysis of this color context in space. . . . [W]hat Cézanne the artist had to say, and what his pictures were concerned with first and foremost, was the fact that the colours and shapes were there, which, from an external point of view, meant they were all equal in space and that a unity of space was created by this equality.<sup>8</sup>

Badt goes on to discuss Cézanne's modulation of his pictures in terms of tones. Since the terms "modulation" and "tones" are of crucial importance to Morley's overall project, it helps to look at Badt's analysis of the two in the following passage:

So, when he [Cézanne] "modulated" his pictures, he produced the overall structure by means of sequences of tone, closely related and similar to one another in colour and degree of lightness, yet clearly separated from one another, in a manner analogous to the notes of the chromatic scale. . . .

In setting up his chromatic scales Cézanne was helped by a fundamental piece of scientific knowledge which he was the first painter to exploit. The primary and secondary colors of the spectrum – yellow, blue, red and green, violet, orange – when seen in the way which we are accustomed to regard as normal (i.e., when they obtain their purest and most intense effect) possess a light-dark relationship to one another which the imagination of the unscientific mind transforms spontaneously into a 'position.' Blue appears as a 'low' tone and so does brown; yellow high; red in the middle, while orange lies near red; green and violet on the other hand appear lower, in the blue region. . . .<sup>9</sup>

Badt describes the extraordinary sensitivity and difficulty entailed in finding equivalent tones that work in harmony with adjacent ones to create distinct notes in the overall orchestration of a painting. These tones must be created in several ranges, necessitating a number of octaves, and they can only be realized through associations of colors that in turn reinforce this overall musical approach to painting:

Once he had constructed his own chromatic scale of colour Cézanne was able to tackle the actual business of 'modulation'. This meant that one and the same colour could be given a different significance in different picture keys, i.e., according to its differing relationship to the keynote; and the

keynote could be changed in the course of the execution of the picture. Thus, by making the same colour reappear in different contexts, he could give an idea of inner relationships of a hitherto unsuspected nature between the things he painted in his pictures. For this reason the re-appearance of one particular colour or the presentation of one and the same colour now in a lighter and now in a darker tone has a significance quite different in a picture by Cézanne than that in pictures by all other painters.<sup>10</sup>

The intricacy and interplay between these color notes that must create harmonies rather than cacophony and that must describe in terms of painting a world, which has been thoroughly distilled in terms of a single sensibility, begin to indicate not only the enormity of Cézanne's project but also the great ambition of Morley's painterly vision. Between the two, however, there is a profound difference since Cézanne wanted to manifest an image of the oneness of matter and the interrelationships between all the things he chose to paint,<sup>11</sup> while Morley more succinctly views his subjects in the secular terms of their being transposed into paint and understood as the result of a complex process of pre-imaging models before transposing them into visual orchestrations of tones.

In his recent paintings Morley builds on these complexities while trying to condense them. No longer seeking out the type of neutral objects that Robbe-Grillet made the basis of his inquiry, even though the theme of ubiquity is certainly a consideration, Morley allows the subject of his work to resonate with his mode of realizing it. The athleticism and skill required in the painting of his tonal works, which are built on elaborate and subtle chromatic interplays, is paralleled by the topic of consummate sports competitors, including skiers and



swimmers as well as a variety of team players in the areas of baseball, football, and hockey that populate his recent pieces. Just as Morley's type of painting accepts the accidents and glitches that occur in the process of enacting it – a practice he encourages and willingly accepts – so wrecks, crashes, and catastrophes are understood as part of the world we daily inhabit.

In addition to creating visual rhymes between the means and the subjects of his recent paintings, Morley's highly developed sensitivity to working with undiluted oil paint fresh from the tube enables him to achieve subtly modulated series of tones throughout his work, and this even-tempered approach differs from the more staccato-like approach that he had developed in the 1960s. Keenly aware at this point in his life of differences not only between colors but also the same color produced by a number of manufacturers, Morley prefers to concentrate his activity on at most one to three of the cells resulting from the superimposed grids on his photographic models so that he can work by painting wet paint into wet paint before it begins to oxidize and form a dry skin after coming in contact with air. This transformation of oil paint, which can start within a half hour of concentrating on an individual cell, dramatically affects the colors of the artist's original conception so that fresh paint cannot be combined with partially dried and oxidized colors without distorting and compromising his initial solutions. Assuming the very democratic way of working that has been his custom since the 1960s, Morley tries to give each cell the same attention. A key word for him is "fidelity," and he manages to maintain a high level of consistency by first



cutting out with scissors individual cells from his chosen photographic images and affixing these small bits of visual information to the canvas on which he is working so that the phases of pre-imagining and transposition will remain

as true to his model as possible. In this way, he reduces some of his need to rely on his memory of the photographic image. Pre-imaging enables him to enhance direct sensations as he paints in very close proximity to his photographic source, since he has already gone through the exercise of transposing the image into art. Although the procedure differs from his earlier reliance on postcards or travel posters as catalysts for this pre-imagination by masking off areas around a cell (or cells) under analysis, he continues his overall project of emphasizing painting as a means to transpose the given discrete image before him and expand it on sizeable canvases. The literal and metaphorical aggrandizing role that this mode of seeing and working assumes vis-à-vis the photographic image being re-imagined as art before becoming art results in canvases replete with exciting painterly passages that testify to the success of this method.

Even after undertaking these precautions to ensure painting a primary role in the conceptualization and actual production of a work, a slight but critical, qualitative gap, break, or displacement intervenes: it inserts itself between the see-er (the artist) and the homonymic seen/scene. In this highly important and often overlooked space, painting as a creative, multipart, and not entirely seamless pursuit of pre-imaging and transposing these mental constructs into paint insinuates itself. At times Morley doubles the complexity of his procedure while raising the ante of playing with the variables of sight, imagination, memory, and execution – crucial cards in the high-stakes game



of painting – when he makes the already seen car crashes, represented by two different paintings in this show, the basis for a third work that combines them in a two-tiered composition reenacting the overall strategy of his early

Coronation and Beach Scene (1968). Without doubt it is this ever so minute yet remarkably mysterious hiatus between pre-imaging a subject in terms of paint and actually painting it that inspires Malcolm Morley to work with the astonishing rigor and drive that he continues to maintain after five decades of making art.

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Morley, Interview with Author, Brookhaven Hamlet, New York, 19 February 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *Malcolm Morley: Itineraries*, trans. Lucy McNair (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, "Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet" in *Two novels by Robbe-Grillet*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Snapshots* (New York: Grove Press, trans. Bruce Moissette, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> Kurt Badt, *The Art of Cézanne*, trans. Sheila Ann Ogilvie (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1985, rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1965).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-40.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 42-43.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 156.