Space Through Colour, Colour Through Space

Sam Cornish

Mali Morris's fresh, lively and concise images provoke pleasure and delight. Circles of light and colour move through their spaces, and the worlds they offer us are buoyant and luminous, imbued with movement and a sense that they are coming into being in the moment in which they are seen.

Yet as we look further we realise that their directness, simplicity and clarity have been – are being – gently teased apart. What appears at first so immediate and unaffected is actually the intersection of multiple, perhaps contradictory, spatial registers. The circles exist alongside – or against, behind, on, in, through – swirling brush marks and improvised grids, here forming a multi-coloured patchwork, there a faint trace, subtly dividing up the more assertive layers of a painting. This is a conception of painting as a play of different levels, with opacities and translucencies delicately bound together to allow space to come through colour and colour through space. Morris's means are simple and her ends clear. The mystery lies in quite how she gets from one to the other.

Beginnings

> I think of painting as a never-ending process, an investigation into what I find beguiling and mysterious about pictorial structures, which take in the world, are related to it, but have their own language of light, space and boundary.[1]

Mali Morris has been exploring the language of abstract painting for over four decades. She held her first full solo exhibition at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham in 1979, following a smaller presentation two years earlier at the Serpentine Gallery, London. The Serpentine paintings – with their freely arranged quasi-geometric forms – were the culmination of a few years of extensive and deliberate study of Henri Matisse. In many ways this investigation is still ongoing, a thread running throughout her creative life, ever-present and often very directly visible, as in the *Saraband* series (1987–88), whose rich, clear colour, held within patterns bathed in space

Third Party, 1979
Acrylic on canvas, 208 x 139 cm
Artist's collection

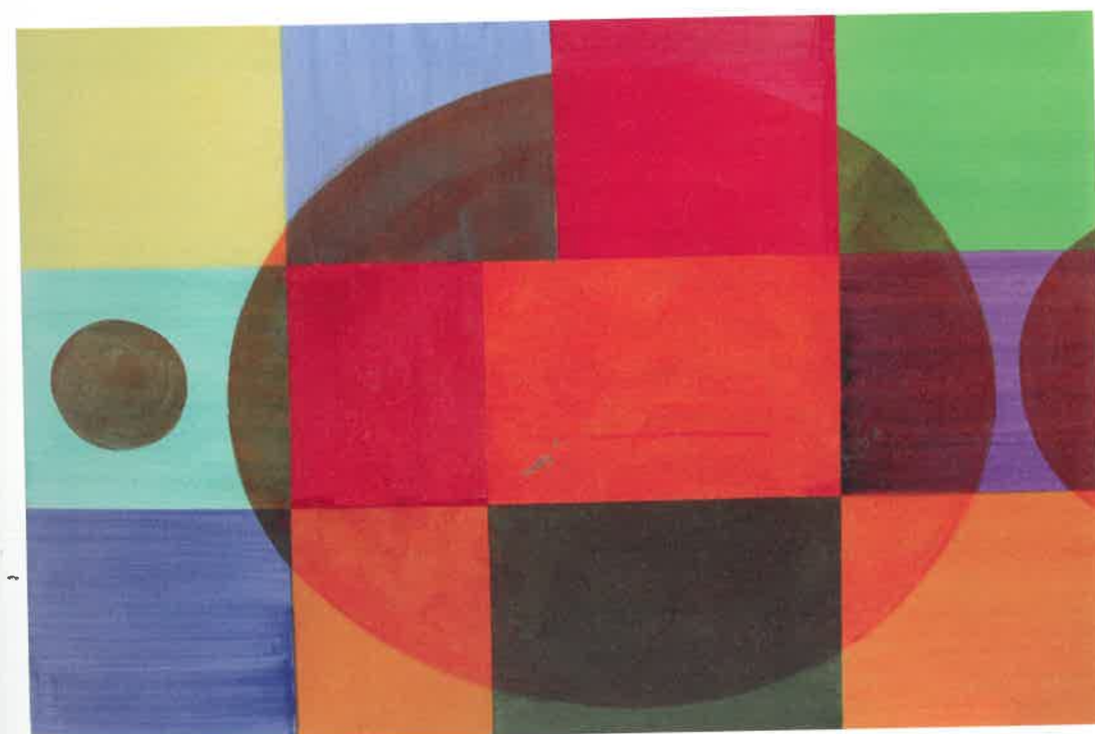
Painting Colour Place, 1976–77
Acrylic on canvas, 160 x 193 cm
Artist's collection

and light, owes much to Matisse's Nice paintings of the 1920s. The blocks of colour that structure some of Matisse's late cut-outs can be found echoed in recent works by Morris, such as *Glide* (2013).

For Morris, the central revelations of Matisse – by setting them out I inevitably restrict a much more intimate, constantly changing and in a sense inexhaustible relationship – are his abstractness, his use of colour to create the sensation of space and light, and his demonstration that 'intelligence and the senses could be in accord'.[2] Yet an early hint of the space-making and expressive possibilities of colour, and a confirmation of the idea that a painting could be far more than an image of something, came in the shape of a postcard of a painting by Albert Marquet, given to Morris by a friend in the early 1970s. The continuing importance to her of the art of both Matisse and Marquet – whose painting is smaller-scaled, less conspicuously radical and more quietly spoken than that of his more famous friend and colleague – says much about Morris's sensibility.

A trip to Canada in 1978 encouraged experiments with looser, more spontaneous paint application. Morris adopted the then-prevalent procedure of working on the floor in acrylic paint stained into unprimed canvas, and began to crop her pictures before stretching them up, although she did not do this as drastically as many other artists, preferring to adjust an already existing image. These works showed the influence of the American Helen Frankenthaler, something acknowledged by Morris at the time, and of Joan Miró and Hans Hofmann, as well as her contemporaries in London and internationally. During the 1980s many abstract painters, particularly in Canada and America, were working with an approach – by then a few decades old – in which colour created shape and boundary to such an extent that drawing became almost completely subservient to a general and organic sense of colour in fluid motion. Although Morris was to a degree involved in this tendency, her most distinctive work retained pronounced, discrete shapes. In very broad terms more common at this time among British abstract painters, drawing was to continue to occupy an important place in her art. In her works from the 1970s and 1980s drawing encompasses both cursive marks and the delimitation of large areas, and was always employed *as* colour, rather than creating structures to which colour was then added. In a sense, much of her subsequent development is an investigation of the way drawing could become integral to a conception of abstract painting primarily conceived in terms of colour.

The bulging shapes of *Purple Heart* (1979; page 14) are simple, almost gauche, and show Morris grappling with how three-dimensional forms can exist within the terms of a generally flat arrangement. Those in *Angel and People* (1978; page 15) are more open, suspended in a clear, aerated, light-filled atmosphere. Much of Morris's art could be described as an interaction between open and closed form: openness is her preferred state, but it needs to be closed down to a certain extent, tightened enough



Albert Marquet
Studio in Marseilles (*L'atelier à Marseille*), 1916
Oil on canvas, 83 x 97 cm
Galerie des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux

Henri Matisse
Interior with a Violin Case (*Intérieur à la boîte à violon*), 1918–19
Oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm
Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. Lillie P. Bliss Collection. Acc. n.: 86.1934

Glide, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 150 cm
Private collection

to prevent it billowing vaguely. Space must be kept specific. One of the features of Morris's later work is its rethinking of how openness and closedness relate to one another and to the creation of space. Connected to but not reducible to their differing formal or spatial openness, both *Angel and People* and *Purple Heart* share an emotional directness – visual statements presented to the viewer with candour and generosity. They are also both as carefully considered as they are freely exuberant, signalling a proclivity for moderation (although not too much): 'If a painting seems gentle, I would not want it to be weak; if a painting seems beautiful, I would not want it to be ingratiatingly so; if a shape seems eccentric I would not want it to be overly so.'[3]

Purple Heart, 1979
Acrylic on canvas, 167 x 166 cm
Artist's collection

Morris's early paintings were part of the revival of so-called 'painterly painting', which had been growing since the late 1960s and intensifying in the 1970s, the latest phase in an extension of the language of Abstract Expressionism, which in a broader sense also saw itself as sustaining a sensuous and expressive modernism with its roots in Manet, Impressionism, Gauguin, Cézanne, Cubism and Matisse; and through them a Western painting tradition stretching back at least as far as the Renaissance. In Britain, Canada, America and internationally, painters turned away from the distanced handling and hard edges of much abstract painting of the 1960s; or at least complicated these values with a greater involvement in the 'blurred, broken, [the] loose definition of colour

Angel and People, 1979
Acrylic on canvas, 180 x 171 cm
National Museum Wales Cardiff

and contour'.[4] For many artists, the 1970s saw a return to the complex and improvised gestural handling of the original Abstract Expressionist moment, but with its aggression, urgency and angst replaced with a sense of affirmation.

This enterprise is perhaps best called high modernism. During the years Morris was establishing herself, this strand of modernism was, despite challenges to it across art and the art world, still a communal endeavour, at least in part. There was a widespread belief – however intuitively it was arrived at, and however consciously it was accepted – that art was on a more or less definable trajectory, and that its present and its near future would be arrived at by an engagement with this trajectory. The goal was a personal contribution to a broader story, within art that was sensuous and expressive, but also disciplined and rigorous. Modernism, Morris acknowledged in 1980, 'requires a long apprenticeship'[5] – there was, it follows, something to learn, although this was very much done on the job; less a digestion of received ideas than a creative and exploratory unravelling of already partly developed possibilities.

The exchange of visual ideas between artists at the heart of the enterprise was sustained by criticism and made visible in magazines, studios, exhibitions and workshops. By the late 1970s Morris was becoming a part of this ecosystem. She showed in the touring exhibition 'Certain Traditions: Recent British and Canadian Art' (1978); the final group exhibition at South London's Stockwell Depot (1979); and the Hayward Annual (1980), selected by John Hoyland. She participated in two of the Triangle Workshops, led by their founder Anthony Caro, in Pine Plains, New York State, in 1983 and 1992, and in 1990 was a Workshop Leader with Willard Boepple and Dorothy Knowles at the Emma Lake Artists' Workshop, Saskatchewan, Canada, where she was greatly impressed by a lecture on Colour as Structure by the critic-in-residence Robert Kudielka. These gatherings enabled mutually sympathetic artists from across the world to work and exchange ideas within their increasingly marginalised discipline, which not too many years before had been assured of its importance.

The first steps Morris took towards high modernism were not direct, which may in part account for her later ambivalence towards it. Born in North Wales in 1945, she first studied Fine Art at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in the mid-1960s, where the first year Basic Design course was run by Richard Hamilton. An important conduit for the newest art coming from America, Hamilton introduced his students to the work of Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and John Cage, and propagated new ideas about popular culture as a subject for art. Morris was excited by these discoveries and by what she felt was a general opening up of possibilities, but after a year or so, more and more drawn to painting – not much encouraged by the department in its gestural, expressive or abstract forms – she had to begin to find her own way. She enjoyed a tutorial with the visiting artist Sandra Blow and the studio teaching of Rita Donagh, who frequently quoted from Paul Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbooks* (1925). A class given by another visiting painter, Terry Frost, was a revelation, opening her eyes to the possibilities of colour, its richness, variety and complexity and its potential to be itself without losing touch with the wider world. She wrote a dissertation on Giandomenico Tiepolo and hitchhiked to see his frescoes at the Villa Valmarana ai Nani at Vicenza. During her final year at Newcastle she met Ian Stephenson; although he did not teach her, she became a family friend. His were the first ambitious, large-scale abstract paintings she had encountered, and she felt an affinity with their vast, luminous spaces.

Following Newcastle, Morris studied under Frost at the University of Reading for two years between 1968 and 1970. At Newcastle she had made semi-figurative paintings in diluted oil, heraldic in composition, partly influenced by the frescoes at Knossos, Crete, which she had travelled across Europe by train to see in 1965, and the paintings of Richard Smith, although without his references to popular culture. Her work at Reading gradually became more eclectic – perhaps ironically, given the importance of Frost's example at Newcastle – and her final-year MFA exhibition included abstract paintings and an installation of black-and-white photographs and large object-like fibreglass sculptures, one of them illuminated from within. The subjects of her photographs included the random choreography of people observed from a distance as they crossed large spaces, such as railway stations and parks; closely cropped images of corners, doorways and fluorescent light fittings; and ladders, chairs and trapezes, presented simply, as quasi-abstract geometric structures – this latter group later formed the basis of a group of paintings made just prior to her move into abstraction.

A set of silk-screen prints of the minimal geometry of interiors, corners, doorways and lights was chosen as part of the British exhibition

Black Mask Dance, 1979–80
Acrylic on canvas, 264 x 107 cm
Artist's collection

Giandomenico Tiepolo
Gli Innamorati, 1757 (detail)
Fresco, *c.* 300 x 160 cm
Foresteria di Villa Valmarana ai Nani

at the 1971 São Paulo Biennale. It is intriguing that the first major outing of an artist who was eventually to be so committed to a sensuous and expressive abstract painting should have been in an exhibition of conceptual photography. Yet, although the differences are many, there are suggestive connections between aspects of this very early work and the paintings Morris was to develop later, particularly those from the mid-1990s onwards. Across a gap of three decades we can see an interest in how light filters through and fills space; a proclivity for paring down to essentials, not to reach an absolute point zero, but to allow subtle complexities to reveal themselves; and an attention to the interplay between objects – whether real or abstract – and the boundaries that frame them.

After returning for two years to live in Newcastle, during which time she began her teaching career at Sunderland College of Art, Morris moved to London in 1972. She briefly continued her engagement with photography, with a series of details of paintings by Vermeer, concentrating on his rendering of light from windows in corners of rooms, sufficiently enlarged for the viewer to imagine directly entering the spaces. Soon, however, she became more and more immersed in making paintings, rather than reproducing, dissecting and re-presenting them. She began to form contacts with abstract artists in London and while teaching outside the capital, particularly at Canterbury under the leadership of Thomas Watt, who was a somewhat unconventional head of department there and a passionate advocate for painting in any genre. The charismatic figurative painter Stass Paraskos was also on the staff; along with many other British artists, Morris eventually became an occasional Visiting Tutor at the College of Art he set up in Cyprus, 'a rambling, rather chaotic, but inspiring place',[6] where she made many *plein-air* watercolours.

During the 1970s, part-time teaching, a day or two a week at art schools across the country, provided valuable support for artists in Britain, allowing them contact with a variety of fellow artists – which was particularly fulfilling at a time when art schools still had very distinctive and individual characteristics – and sufficient income to devote time to making art when sales were at best scarce. In these formative years Morris met three painters whose friendship and example were to be important to her for many years to come: Geoff Rigden, Jennifer Durrant and John McLean.

Lemba, Cyprus, 1989
Watercolour on paper, 23 x 31 cm
Artist's collection

Lemba, 1989
Watercolour on paper, 23 x 31 cm
Artist's collection

In 1975 she moved into a complex of studios at King George Street, Greenwich, South London, which had been set up by Jeff Lowe, a sculptor she knew from teaching at Nottingham. Lowe had taken over an old London Electricity Board depot in 1974, and invited colleagues from St Martin's School of Art to join him there. A larger, adjacent site was cleared with the help of the construction magnate, art collector and cultural philanthropist Alistair McAlpine. Following an outdoor exhibition of abstract, modernist steel sculpture, a genre by then associated with St Martin's for over a decade, two large buildings were placed on the second site: a corrugated steel Nissen hut and a barrel-vaulted wooden building, the latter provided by McAlpine and previously used as a rehearsal space by the National Theatre. At first intended as an exhibition venue, McAlpine's wooden building was soon converted into four studios. Morris was the first to take one on, in turn suggesting that Geoff Rigden, whom she had met teaching at Canterbury, and Clyde Hopkins, a fellow student at Reading, might move in. Morris remained at Greenwich Studios until their closure was forced by redevelopment in 1995. She remembers a secluded and hidden place, ramshackle but welcoming, close to Greenwich Park and the pub known as The Tolly, a favourite of artists, musicians and locals. The studios and their grounds, filled with buddleia and shaded by trees, were cut off from the bustle of the town and seemed semi-rural,

Jennifer Durrant RA
Other Cloud Painting, 1978
Acrylic on canvas, 261 x 313 cm
Tate

John McLean
Neposet, 1982
Acrylic on canvas, 170.5 x 109 cm
Collection John McLean (The Fine Art Society in Edinburgh)

pastoral. She found a place to live nearby, and is still there.

To many outsiders, Greenwich Studios had a distinct artistic identity, as an incubator of welded-steel sculpture and lyrical abstraction – a little less dogmatic perhaps than the studios a few miles away at Stockwell Depot, with which Greenwich had many personal and artistic overlaps, but nevertheless a bastion of a certain attitude towards art, a local part of the international high-modernist ecosystem. This view was not completely false: the majority of artists there were dedicated to steel sculpture or to painterly abstract painting, although there were also figurative painters, such as Marilyn Hallam, another artist Morris had first met at Reading, and whose work she admired. But there was not, as at Stockwell Depot, an attempt to convert dedication to art, fellow-feeling and common cause into a polemical public position; and although there were annual Open Studios and group exhibitions off-site, organised communal life was more a matter of summer barbeques than combative group crits. Morris herself experienced the studios not as a monolithic totality, but rather as a collection of individuals, to some of whose work and personality she felt drawn, others less so. Beyond the studios, exhibition opportunities with commercial galleries began to open up, following her appearances at the Serpentine, the Ikon, the Hayward and the Canadian-British tour of 'Certain Traditions'. Morris held two solo exhibitions with Nicola Jacobs, in 1980 and 1983, subsequently holding five with Francis Graham-Dixon between 1988 and 1997.

At Greenwich two significant personal relationships developed: first, in 1978 with the painter Geoff Rigden, and then in 1984 with her present partner, the sculptor Stephen Lewis. That with Rigden occurred during a crucial time for Morris's art, as she was beginning to establish herself, finding her feet and taking on influences. It was marked by their shared and eclectic taste, expanding outside painting to encompass literature, music, the decorative arts, photography and film. In addition to the obvious greats, those artists they admired as much as everyone else in their circle, the artists occupying Morris's and Rigden's shared pantheon were 'not heavy hitters', as Rigden called them, but artists with 'a sense of touch, understatement and quietude ... who wanted to interpret what they enjoyed looking at with the minimum amount of fuss and bravura, or visible struggle'.[7] They included, initially, Milton Avery, John Marin and Albert Marquet, and subsequently, Adolf Gottlieb, William Nicholson,

Geoffrey Rigden
Bop, 1978
Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 21 cm
Estate of the Artist, Jennifer Harding

Stuart Davies, Alfred Jensen and Paul Feeley, as well as Winifred Nicholson and Christopher Wood; much later, Thomas Nozkowski.

This list of distinctive talents cannot be readily reduced to a set of common denominators. But looking across it we can sense an embrace of idiosyncrasy, an attraction to lightly worn accomplishment, wit, levity, joy, simplicity, decorative arrangement and pattern; a distrust of the over-reaching melodrama of the grand statement, but with a commitment to painting beyond the tides of fashion or dogmatic adherence to abstraction or figuration. We should be careful not to overemphasise these inclinations and make an overly precious argument for the minor over the major, one that, as it were, gets its excuses in early. High in Morris's canon are Manet, Velázquez, Titian, Tiepolo, Goya and the Sienese School; she recently wrote about Hans Hofmann's 'sheer galvanising, gutsy energy ... tender, raucous and everything in between';[8] and, despite the small size of much of her recent painting, its peaks have been large: *Flotilla* (2007) or *Second Stradella* (2016), are 189 cm and 214 cm across respectively, and *Ghost* (2017) is 200 x 210 cm. The point is not necessarily to reject the epic, but to keep it honest, not to be completely divorced from the mainstream, but to be at something of an angle to it; to face the history of painting but to do so in a manner true to herself. Morris needs both Matisse and Marquet. Writing about the latter's accomplishments, she came close to describing her own:

> ... the economy is deceptive. The paintings often show an emptied-out space, with a minimally geometric sub-structure. The exactness of hue and tone, however, brings a set of chromatic and spatial relationships that keep filling the space. Luminosity can make the small monumental. The touch is direct to surface, without flourish or any apparent system...
>
> He is full of intriguing shifts – the Fauve who began mixing greys, who approached the monochrome but found luminosity, whose paintings can look easy-going, but are actually tough. He was the traveller who meticulously painted the specifics of light, place and time, over and over again, arriving at a constant *present*, a constant *here*, and a constant *now.*[9]

Morris's relationship with Stephen Lewis, now well into its third decade, soon became central to her development as an artist: a shared commitment to making and looking at art is a constant undercurrent of their daily life. They have lived together since the early 1980s, and worked within the same buildings at Greenwich and now Deptford, although in separate studios. They have held three two-person exhibitions, and are frequently included in the same group shows. Morris sees a common sensibility playing out when they respond to each other's work in the

Stephen Lewis, *Attracter*, 2003, painted steel, 68 x 62 x 70 cm, with Mali Morris, *Pearled and Pasted*, 2016, acrylic on paper, 60 x 76 cm, at 'PIER', Linden Hall Studio, Deal, 2017

studio or when visiting galleries and museums together, and this closeness has paradoxically allowed Morris to develop fully her own artistic attitude and personality:

> The rapport doesn't come from much conscious analysis – we call in on each other occasionally at the studios, know what work each of us is engaged in at any time, but it might only be a word here or a brief suggestion there that's needed. It's the shorthand of a keen interest and understanding that grows over years. I recognised something in Steve's sculpture as soon as I saw it – it was a *coup de foudre*. Witnessing over a long period of time what motivates it, how it has developed, somehow helps me think about my own practice. Perhaps the difference between painting and sculpture gives us a space to explore what they have in common, or at least what our own works might have in common. We bring each other our different enthusiasms, which is a good way of learning, but there are also shared revelations when we travel to see art – seeing Cézanne anywhere, for example, or visits to the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, the Met and the Frick in New York, the Musée de Cluny, Paris. I think we are both fascinated by how and why paintings and sculptures come into being – how they are generated, made, and evolve.[10]

The Clearings

The distinctive visual language Morris has developed over the last two decades can be most directly traced back to what she calls her 'Clearing' paintings, the first of which were made in the late 1990s. Aspects of the Clearings can be found in her *Edge of a Portrait* series, which developed out of her long-standing interest in the structuring of early Italian profile portraits, with their ambiguous spatial readings. Such aspects are more easily detected in the *Excursion* pictures (1996; page 26), and antecedents can be found throughout her earlier work: the concise and condensed approached of *Mendocino* (1983), with its almost insouciant concern for the light touch; the decorative structure of the *Saraband* series (1987–88); the controlled simplicity of the centralised motif of *Black Diamond Encircled*

Uncovered Grey, 1994
Acrylic on canvas, 176.5 x 44.5 cm
Artist's collection

(1989). But the Clearings mark something approaching a clean break. They involved a rethinking of how the surface of a painting should relate to its illusion of depth, how elements within a painting could relate to each other across and through this depth, and how gesture – the physical trace of the laying down of paint – could be registered and so create structure; they also rethought the relative importance of naturalness and artifice.

In a material sense the Clearings are the result of changes in technique, and particularly a change in the mechanics of how paint is laid down on canvas. The problem was a formal one. How could shapes – discrete, bounded and the carriers of colour – exist convincingly within the virtual depth of an abstract painting, and how could these shapes relate to each other and to the surface of a picture without ushering in overtly figurative connotations? How could a shape relate to a wider expanse of colour without evoking an object or personage positioned against a background? The very fluid, painterly painting common to many high-modernist painters in the 1980s avoided the problem by completely banishing discrete shapes and diffusing drawing into large spreading fields of colour, a solution that can be traced back through the work of Jules Olitski and Helen Frankenthaler to the example of Jackson Pollock. Drawing for them was carried by colour, as the crest of a wave is carried by the mass of water; or it was imposed after the event by cropping, drawing becoming a kind of selection, kept out of sight at the picture's edge.

Circumventing the issue was not satisfactory for Morris, nor for her contemporaries, such as Geoff Rigden, John McLean and Jennifer Durrant: they wanted to retain overt drawing and discrete bounded, coloured shape. One solution – practised in various degrees and with different inflections by a number of artists – involved a fusion of the examples of Jack Bush, Patrick Heron and William Perehudoff (and behind them Matisse, Miró and Braque). Shapes would dance across a picture's space, with edge related to edge, or shape placed within shape, turning interior into exterior and back again. Just enough depth was allowed into the picture to maintain the surface while providing a space for colour to sit or sing within.

Morris gradually realised that she didn't want to share this fertile but perhaps overcrowded territory – which she most clearly approached in works such as *Delta* (1992; page 27). She came to feel

Fra Filippo Lippi
Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement, c. 1440
Tempera on wood, 64.1 x 41.9 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Collection Marquand, don de Henry G. Marquand, 1889

that the procedures common to her and her contemporaries had become too familiar, habitual and risked complacency: 'laid-on shapes, figure-ground games, lateral spread of rhyming relationships of form and colour'.[11] The question then was, what did she want? How could she have discrete, bounded, coloured shape without adopting a set of solutions already carried to a high degree of sophistication? Her decision that she had gained all she could from this approach was not the same as making something more completely her own. The need to get away from old habits did not entail their complete rejection, rather a reinvestigation, or a turning inside out, a process that left the mark of the old methods on the new. Morris proceeded – and still proceeds – intuitively: a discovery made within improvisation or by chance will become the spur of a small run of paintings, until she feels their potential is exhausted or a different impulse intervenes. At the same time, there is a markedly analytical aspect to her post-Clearing paintings, almost as if the various components of a picture had been isolated in a laboratory before being reassembled, still bearing evidence of their separation.

Excursion, 1996
Acrylic on canvas, 175.5 x 173 cm
Artist's collection

High modernism involved rigorous critical attention to the formal qualities of painting – a precise and involved understanding of how, for example, surface might relate to edge – but it also demanded a type of naturalness: the result should belie the analysis that preceded it and to which it would in turn be subjected; intellectual work was expended in order to disguise itself within ease or inevitability. Different artists working within high modernism had different ways of resolving this fundamental and productive contradiction, depending on their temperament and circumstance. Morris also wanted a meeting of analysis and naturalness but after the Clearing paintings her resolution is of a different kind. Her paintings' constructive logic is gently but precisely teased apart, ambiguities are left open and the pictorial intelligence that went into forming them is signalled, even if it is not fully explained. That this self-consciousness is contained within fresh, clear and sensuous images, and does not lapse into irony, is central to these paintings' mystery and crucial to their success. This perhaps partly accounts for the esteem in which Morris is held by a number of younger artists in Britain, who are drawn to abstraction without the irony that

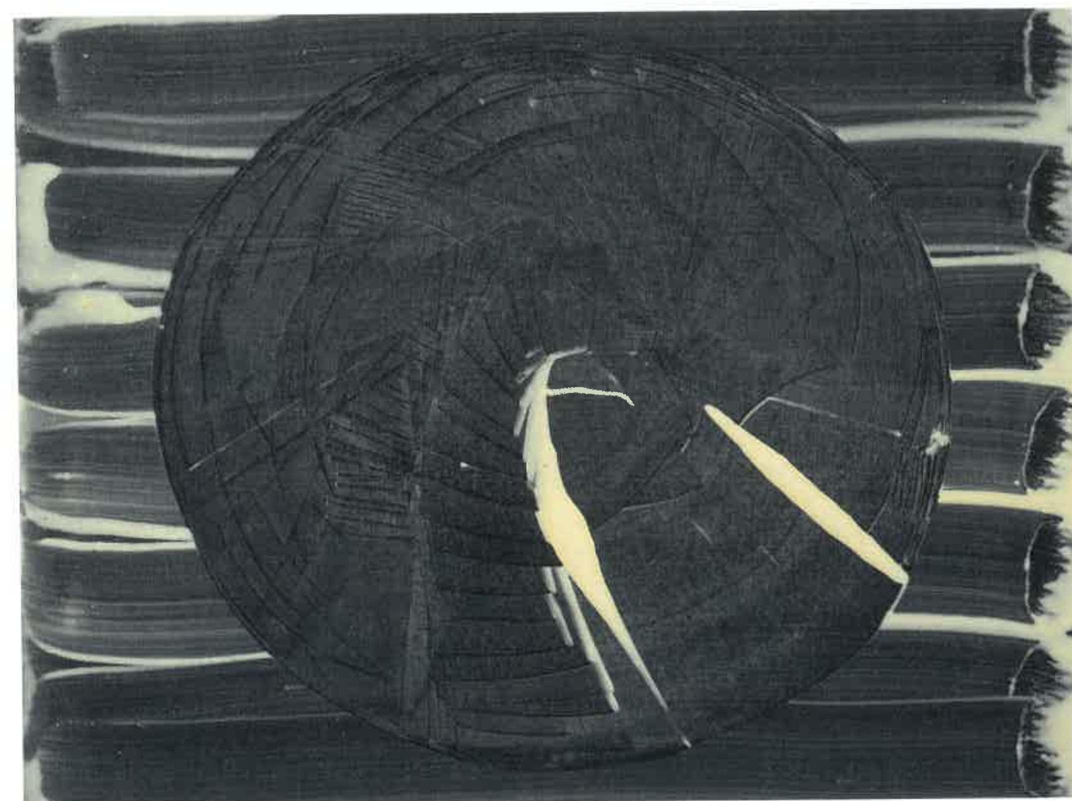
Delta, 1992
Acrylic on canvas, 194.4 x 265.4 cm
Artist's collection

marked many painters of the 1980s and 1990s, but are mistrustful of what may seem to them the certainties of modernism. Her attempt to give equal emphasis to separation and fusion, analysis and naturalness, artifice and ease, strategy and spontaneity, is part of what differentiates Morris from the context in which she developed.

> They were the beginning of one kind of shift – moving away from lateral relational colour. I felt I had come to a full stop with that. I wanted colour that was constructed differently, colour that wasn't read across a vista. I wanted it to come to meet the eye, in a simple way, through other colours.[12]

Posy (1997) is one of the earliest of the Clearings, minimal compared to Morris's paintings of the 1970s and 1980s, although not so reduced in its means as the paintings of a year or two later, such as *Marvell's Mower* (1999). *Posy* has a mute luminosity and a sense of gently but precisely restrained movement, a central group of overlapping marks, a red ruff flecked with lavender, a surrounding area whose striations travel left to

Posy, 1997
Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 65 cm
Artist's collection



right. The ruff appears almost succulent in comparison to the graphic clarity of the marks that lie inside and outside it. The picture is suffused with a light that seems in some way to have come through darkness, not as a solitary gleam, but generally dispersed, as if darkness and radiance had been reduced to their smallest constituent parts and equally and evenly intermingled, without cancelling each other out. The closest real-world analogy I can think of is the light-dark space seen behind closed eyelids. But *Posy* is itself an object in the real world. It has height and breadth and a virtual depth that extends and supplants the literal depth of its thin, pre-made stretcher.

Posy depends on an external light source (you cannot see a painting in the dark), but turns this about to suggest that it originates from somewhere within the virtual depth the painting conjures. This illusion is arguably central to painting in general, but *Posy*'s reduced means make it especially visible. The distinction between the painting as a receiver and a generator of light is brought to the surface, and held there in a state of quiet, purposeful ambiguity. This is most apparent in the overlapping marks at *Posy*'s centre. The striations of the brush marks allow a yellow-

Marvell's Mower, 1997–2000
Acrylic on canvas, 46 x 61 cm
Private collection

ochre glow to shine through them. But at the same time these striations suggest shadows and highlights, creating the illusion of a slightly flattened three-dimensionality, one seemingly revealed to us by a light positioned somewhere in front of the picture, albeit one we can only very indirectly equate with the natural light that allows us to see it at all. This manifest, if quietly realised illusionism could not have been contained in the paintings of a few years before, but was to become central to the paintings that followed the Clearings, as did the light – clearly present but ambiguously distributed – that filters through it.

> I tried making forms with simple movements of brush and paint, stopping short of gesture, and they seemed to approach but stop short of a kind of imagery that had, for me, a poetry. Bell, sail, wing, swing, skirt, fan, profile, plait, and so on – but never quite making it into description.[13]

The technical procedure behind the Clearing paintings is relatively straightforward, although it was first established within the activity of painting, and was in a constant state of flux. First Morris established a strong ground of saturated colour. After this had dried, she then completely covered the ground with a layer of another colour, into which, while it was still wet, she would work with a brush, comb or other tool, or would fully remove in small patches – hence 'clearings'. Rather than adding colour to a painting, a mark here and a mark there, as she had done before, colour was to be found within the painting, revealed coming up from the ground, and through subsequent layers, to meet the viewer's eye. This basic procedure could be repeated many times, building up multiple layers. Some layers could be almost completely erased, contributing only a thin trace to the final image. Morris worked on small, pre-made and carefully primed canvases, rather than the large unstretched canvases she had used before. These enabled her more easily and cleanly to remove any of the layers, and provided a certain resistance in relation to her touch.

The Clearings came about after a few years of professional change for Morris. In 1991 she began teaching at Chelsea College of Art. In 1995, following the closure of their studios in Greenwich, she was one of a group of artists who founded A.P.T (Art in Perpetuity Trust) in Deptford, a mile or so to the east. Twenty years later she continues to work at A.P.T, with her studio overlooking Deptford Creek, the final stretch of the River Ravensbourne before it meets the Thames at Deptford. The A.P.T studios were different from those at Greenwich, housed in a solid, three-storey industrial warehouse built in 1911, and they had a secure future, because the building was to be owned by the charity the artists had formed. Perhaps the process of moving and re-encountering her paintings provided Morris with a retrospective overview of her previous work, but this transplantation across South London involved continuity more than change. Many of the artists initially at A.P.T had been at Greenwich and for Morris the new studios were still a collection of disparate individuals in a supportive community rather than a monolithic club. In the years since she moved to Deptford she has had solo exhibitions in America and Japan, and in galleries both public and commercial across the UK, including Angel Row in Nottingham, Poussin in South London, Mostyn Gallery in Llandudno, Oriel Davies in Newtown and, most recently, Fold Gallery in Fitzrovia.

In 1991 Morris was appointed a Senior Lecturer in what was then the Painting Department at Chelsea College of Art, a post she held until her retirement in 2005. Teaching at Chelsea two days a week provided her with continuity and stability, as she no longer had to travel to art schools across the country. The new situation also gave her the intellectual impetus to re-think her art, although this process was slow and difficult to define, with no eureka moments. Colleges and Fine Art departments had changed dramatically since she first taught in the 1970s. Art schools had become larger, with increased numbers of students and more bureaucracy. Teaching had changed, with fewer part-time visiting artists and greater importance placed on students directing their own learning. The old division of departments into Painting and Sculpture was being replaced by Fine Art, reflecting a wider marginalisation of painting and sculpture, now removed from the centre of art-making and discourse to become two possibilities in a broad spectrum of media. Art History courses had been replaced by theory modules, with the canon shifting towards continental philosophy.

One aspect of Morris's reaction was defensive. High modernism was tightly focused on painting and sculpture, and historical justifications of it revolved around maintaining the importance and integrity of the two disciplines, which didn't preclude interaction between them. She felt bemused at propositions – or even straightforward assumptions – that 'painting was dead', when to her it felt very much alive, both within the

context of her own work and that of many of her peers. There were many painters on the staff at Chelsea, including Clyde Hopkins, who was Head of Painting, but other practices were well represented too. Plurality had arrived in art schools, reflecting developments in the art world beyond. The painting staff worked collaboratively with the Art History/Theory Department and Morris especially enjoyed working closely with the poet Martha Kapos and the painter, critic and musician David Ryan, both of whom have since written about her work. Overall, Morris's contact with her colleagues at Chelsea – committed to their art but many far removed from the high-modernist context – seems to have opened her eyes to a wider world, causing her to re-evaluate her art, and to view its constituent parts from a different perspective; or perhaps Chelsea gave her the confidence to voice an independence that had been latent. She saw differences of opinion debated rather than dismissed, and began to define her interest as dealing with pictorial structure, rather than accepting the overused terms of lyrical abstraction, or colourist, and even abstraction, which seemed too ambiguous, baggy, without clear meaning. Structures in other art forms, poetry, film, literature, music, became more and more interesting, as useful references, as much to discover difference as similarity.[14]

Working up to the present

Morris's Clearings turned the figure-ground problem inside out: a bounded shape is no longer a pseudo-object or personage against a background, but something closer to an aperture, a positive absence. At the same time, what could have been read as background is itself emptied out: both figure and ground are instead permeated with colour-space. Her paintings became a play of translucencies and opacities, the exploration of which entails a pleasurable and carefully calibrated disorientation. Does this circle lie in, against, on, or behind those swirling brush strokes? And, rather than being a flat circle, perhaps it is an orb, a three-dimensional presence? Or alternatively, instead of being a positive presence, perhaps the circle is a hole, a space through which colour comes?

Although it is impossible to find definite answers to these questions, the overall effect is to keep the image close to the surface of the picture, but to throw into doubt precisely where that surface lies. There is a curious sensation that each mark and the painting as a whole are covered by a kind of membrane. We always feel as if we are looking through something that, while still remaining clearly defined, we can never quite grasp. We are both invited in and kept at a distance: in this Morris's pictures recall the importance of the window as a device to painters within the Western European tradition, as well as the paths to abstraction suggested by Monet's ponds or Matisse's goldfish bowls. We might also point to the frequency with which transparency appeared within the early history of modernist abstraction, particularly in the paintings of Paul Klee, in which bands of colour intersect, or where precisely rendered transparent planes, often brightly lit as if from an external source, create pattern by fanning over each other. Perhaps, unintentionally, Morris has brought back into play an approach to form that high modernism's greater emphasis on coherence – in particular its downgrading of drawing – had disregarded. Despite many differences, further parallels could be drawn with Klee's personal, expressive and witty take on Cubist ambiguities and the purity of geometric abstraction, and his use of tiny incidents to evoke large scale, even within small pictures.

Voyage, 2005
Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 55 cm
Artist's collection

With paintings such as *Voyage* (2005; page 33) and *Peeps* (2006), Morris introduced a more complex interplay and dispersal of circles. *Peeps* was based on a failed painting that left a complex ground. This Morris covered over, making many clearings, which she changed repeatedly until she was satisfied by a constellation of buried colours, in a dynamic relationship with the covering brush strokes. Multiple layers of paint, within which four pink and yellow circles were revealed, created a field of creamy striations, meshing together figure and ground. This gave her the idea of preparing a patchwork of saturated colour, laid on deliberately, which could be repeatedly covered over and then excavated. She did not make this patchwork in a systematic or arbitrary fashion, but approached the task as if she were making a real and final painting, adjusting tone and colour until reaching a satisfying result, before covering this up – and then partially revealing it – with subsequent layers. The resulting irregular grid then began to play a role, as it was partially revealed and partially disclosed within her paintings' ambiguous depths. The grid's geometry plays a large part – alongside a re-thinking of gesture – in Morris's control of the relationships between her images and the boundaries and surfaces that hold them in tension. In larger works, such as *Flotilla* (2007), this develops into an architectural substructure. Subtle and complex interactions suggest that elements that are literally very close to each other in fact call across large, even unbridgeable spaces, while those separated by greater literal distance can appear in close accord. These relationships seem to re-form each time viewers take a different element as the focus of their attention: part of the beauty of *Flotilla* is that these spatial contradictions – which risk visual clutter – achieve simplicity, even as they avoid final resolution.

Peeps, 2006
Acrylic on canvas, 31 x 41 cm
Artist's collection

Morris has now explored the possibilities of these dispersed circles for a little over a decade. Where the early Clearings projected – however ambiguously – a single central image, in those that followed multiple circles defined an arena: space became more important than a singular image. This countered the centralising impulse that had begun with the stripes of the *Saraband* series and the diamond-motif pictures of the late 1980s, but did not return to the complex and improvised relationships

Flotilla, 2007
Acrylic on canvas, 170 x 189 cm
Stewarts, London

of Morris's earlier paintings. The containment and precision afforded by a central motif were dispersed without being dissipated: each individual circle has its own sense of isolation and seems to face forward, rather than obviously relating laterally to its peers. This peculiar sense of togetherness and apartness, singularity in multiplicity, has allowed Morris to unfold more completely her works' spatial ambiguities and their interplays between pseudo-background and pseudo-figure. The strangely diffused light contained within such late 1990s works as *Posy* or *Marvell's Mower* is now generated by stronger, more varied colour.

Gesture has become a means of taking control of a space, sometimes calmly, elsewhere with a darting impetuousness, as with *Surface Later* (2010). The gestural underpinning of a loose, expansive and free-flowing painting such as *Rolling* (1979–80) was one of dramatic variety: this variety has been tamed, and often condensed into a single type of mark, related but never identical – like a flock of birds or a herd of animals. Space has come to be described with precise but slightly irregular repetition, as if contained within the warp and weft of fabric, or the rhythm of a pulse. A work such as *Lost Light* (2012) is made up of a single looping line. Although immediate in appearance it was arrived at through many over-paintings, wet-on-wet, allowing for many different excavations, until the final spread of coloured circles was achieved. Morris herself describes the change as a shift from gesture towards touch – touch

Surface Later (2), 2010
Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 30 cm
Private collection

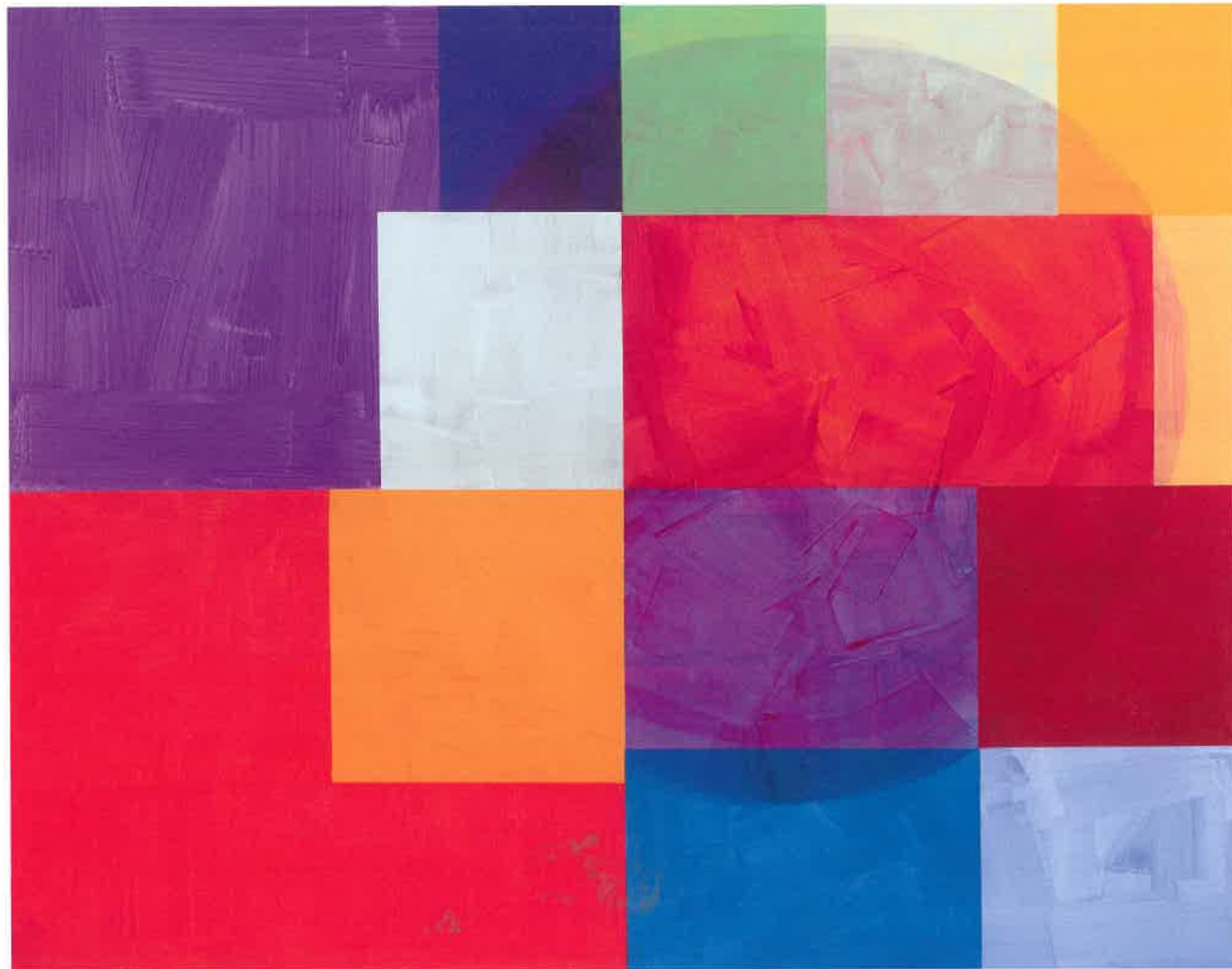
Lost Light, 2012
Acrylic on canvas, 25 x 30 cm
Private collection

implying greater intimacy, delicacy, constraint and subtlety. She did not want the over-dramatic aspects of gesture:

> I became interested in how paint reaches the canvas to make forms, and how touch is different from gesture. Touch moves the eye around at a different pace from gesture. It's slower, and pictorial space seems to open up. That suggested new possibilities for how colour might work. I began to use transparent glazes, colour showing through colour, which gives a different light from an opaque covering.[15]

Rather than drawing attention to itself, imposing itself on the viewer, the physical evidence of making should allow nuance, and so invite the viewer into the painting. Morris's mark-making has a carefully unleashed caprice, 'as formal and stylised as an Edwardian brooch or as casual as coiled ribbons'.[16] At the height of the tendency's painterliness many high modernists used fluidity to overwhelm drawing. For Morris fluidity is governed by drawing from within: the blurred and broken edges of the painterly are turned inside out, presented with the clarity and openness of the unpainterly: the inversion is typical of Morris's considered, moderate and positive deconstruction of the tradition from which she emerged.

Her paintings show the marks of the tools that made them and the physical action of her hand as it manipulates brush, comb or squeegee. Yet



this activity and the pressure of tool on surface are refracted away from the physical, turned – almost – into vivid simulacra. Perhaps for Morris the opposition between the physical and the non-physical is beside the point. Or conversely, and more precisely, perhaps it is of prime importance – but within painting it is impossible to know where the physical ends and the non-physical begins, or to say how much one is inevitably bound up with the other. Much the same could be said about other oppositions, or seeming oppositions, operating within Morris's work – between nature and artifice, between the direct and the indirect, origin and trace or object and sensation.

For a decade after the first Clearings Morris's work was small, sometimes miniature in size. This was a significant shift, given the importance of monumental size within high modernism. Since returning to larger canvases in 2007 – with works such as *Swing Slip* or *Edie and the Peacocks* – Morris has continued also to work on small canvases, and in these she has allowed herself the greatest freedom of scale, with circles reduced to tiny glowing dots, or almost entirely filling the picture's surface. Her larger works tend to a more stable scale and a greater detachment, and so have a more public voice; while her smaller, domestically scaled pictures are appropriately private, intimate, and have a more pronounced emotional resonance: if the latter tend to call to the viewer, the former give the viewer a more neutral space to explore, although this distinction cannot be maintained absolutely, particularly with regard to recent paintings, such as *Ghost* (2017), in which large shapes *do* seem to shift forward to meet our gaze. But overall, without taking on an oppositional character, Morris's painting has become anti-panoramic, anti-sublime. Containment and closeness have replaced expansiveness. Illusions of large scale are presented in miniature, as if we are being shown a world within the compass of a crystal ball.

Morris's work since 2014 has questioned the premises introduced by the Clearings. In the *Rivoli* series, while the importance of interacting transparencies is maintained, Morris's circle motifs have become more fully positive presences, directly realised rather than being 'cleared' from a larger field. From the *Stradella* works onwards, the grid has moved forward, becoming a more prominent part of her pictures. In the *Ghost* pictures of 2017 these two developments are combined, with large ovals hovering behind a patchwork of squares and rectangles. The ovals' lingering presence reaffirms the frontality of the pictures while

Ghost, 2017
Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 220 cm
Artist's collection

Rivoli, 2017
Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 80 cm
Private collection

complicating the interplay of spatial registers generated by varying hue, opacity, translucency, the whole animated by traces of gesture. The effect is to move Morris's pictures towards greater disjunction, giving them more pronounced distinctions between surface and depth, held together within more physically assertive structures.

The development of Morris's painting for the last two decades has been driven by a desire to prevent stasis, to avoid allowing a way of working to become a trap, while at the same time creating a path Morris could call her own. Deciding what not to do could only be the beginning of the story, one that ends – although really it is still ongoing, productive of fresh paintings – not with new procedures but with a new and distinctly personal binding together of 'light, space and boundary'.[17] Retaining modernism's dedication to a sensuous and intuitive investigation of painting's evolving properties, Morris has turned inside out many of the solutions developed by her peers and predecessors. Without completely rejecting their example, she has opened her work up to new contexts, and now forms a bridge between older generations and the art of younger painters in Britain. She has created a pictorial world that distantly reflects our experience of the world at large, that filters through her own vision our awareness of light, space and movement, that values the startling detail as much as the certainly delineated whole. Stating complexity with economy, in images both resonant and self-contained, her precision makes ambiguity sing.

Morris returns the world to us filled with levity, joy and wit. Light and space are rendered as substance; the hue and materiality of colour luminously open up.

Second Ghost, 2017
Acrylic on canvas, 169 x 193 cm
Artist's collection

Parents, Poems, Paint

My father was born at the foot of Snowdon, in an isolated house on the edge of a village. He spoke Welsh before he learned English. My maternal grandmother was from the Midlands and when I was born in 1945 my parents were living with her, in Caernarfon, so English was our home language. When I was about ten, although I had no Welsh to speak of, my father explained the complex structures in the poetry he loved, the intricacies of the *englyn*, with its strict system of repeated consonants and vowels, clear internal rhythms and a very specific shape on the page. He took me to Trawsfynydd to see the statue of his favourite poet, Hedd Wyn, who was killed at Passchendaele at the age of thirty.

Later on at school I recognised how my own favourite poet at that time, Gerard Manley Hopkins, had learned from this tradition, using the same patterned forms, but in English. Studying art during the '60s, when we loved all things Zen, the taut compression of the Japanese *haiku* reminded me of the *englyn*. I thought it strange that such severe restriction could produce an easy-sounding beauty, how the conventions were a given but did not interrupt the flow of poetry, or even seem noticeable.

A while before I was born my grandmother bought a second-hand country bus, broken down and out of service. She had seen it advertised in the local paper. Her neighbour, a carpenter, stripped out the seats and replaced them with bunk beds and a primus stove. It was towed a couple of miles to Dinas Dinlle, the nearest seashore, christened Casita, and parked on the edge of an empty field. Every year, I am told, my mother painted it all over with cream gloss, to keep it weather-proofed. I imagine her on the roof, energetically wielding a brush, as I don't think she would have had a paint-roller in those days. My first holidays were spent there, and I have faint memories of walking along a sheltered lane to the pebble beach, high reeds on either side, and the sudden opening up of space, the forwards and backwards and sideways of it, with the horizontal of the distant horizon, always ahead, never grasped.

I don't know if these memories have influenced the way my painting developed; I've picked them out from the many because they lead me now to think of family, language, the materials and movements of painting, and finding myself in the space of the world.

Joan and Bill, Mali's parents, on the day of their engagement, outside Casita, Dinas Dinlle, North Wales

Mali, in borrowed bathing hat and handbag, heading for the hills after a day at the beach, Dinas Dinlle, *c.* 1946

Going to Newcastle

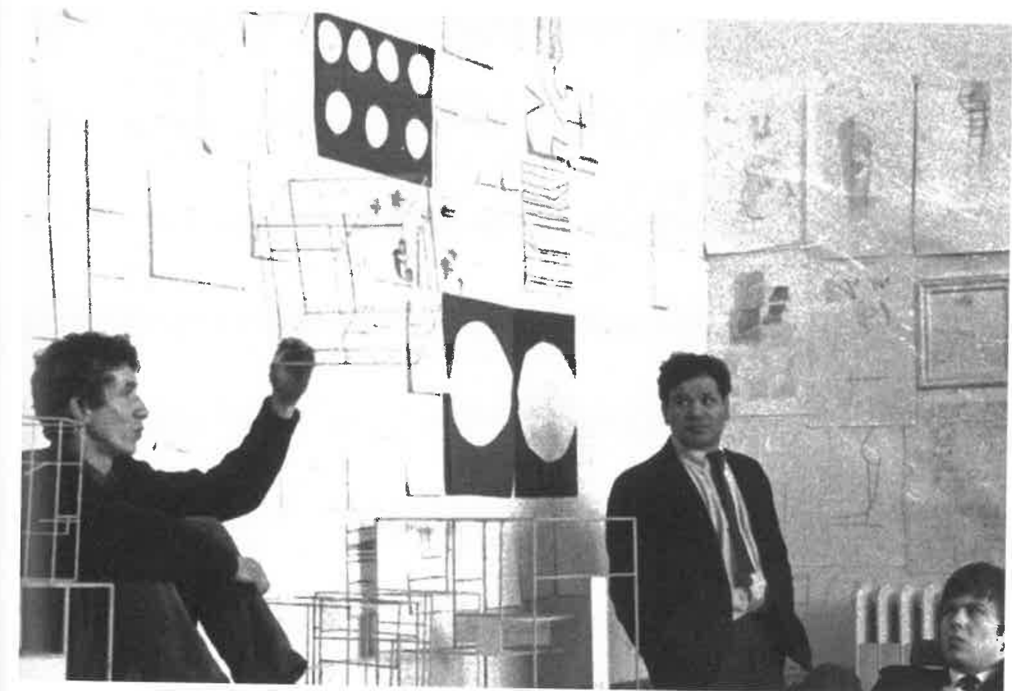
The Fine Art Department at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne was very different from small-town life in North Wales. I loved the wide streets of the city, the way people spoke, the first sight of the ancient walls as the train crossed the great bridge high over the river, taking me to a new life. The First Year Basic Course was run by Richard Hamilton; Victor Pasmore had just retired. Rita Donagh was the Studio Assistant, a very sensitive teacher, making the strangeness of it all easier to understand. Richard and Rita brought us first-hand news of what was going on in New York, which seemed to me as far away as the moon. The poet Tom Pickard and his then-partner Connie organised readings in the Morden Tower, where we heard Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Even more amazing to me now, Basil Bunting once came in from Northumberland to read from *Briggflatts*.

After the intensity of the first year we seemed to be on our own. There must have been tutorials, and there were occasional Visiting Artists, people we had heard about, who showed in galleries and travelled up from London. Paolozzi gave his *Bunk* lecture, hundreds of fast-changing images on a screen, an early taste of Pop Art. Sandra Blow came for a day and gave me technical advice, and I realised that she, and other women I had heard of and whose work I admired, like Prunella Clough and Gillian Ayres, had somehow become painters. I probably thought around this time that perhaps I could do this, too. Nobody I knew seemed to be planning a future.

Whenever there was a Film Festival at Newcastle I would see three films a day, mostly the French New Wave. I loved François Truffaut's *Shoot the Pianist*, Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante*, and *Shadows* by the American John Cassavetes. I liked the sensation of not knowing who I was when I came out of the cinema. I guessed that film editing had a lot to do with what interested me about making paintings, the structuring of them, but it took me years to become conscious of this, and I'm still trying to work it out.

The more senior students set the pace. They taught us a lot, by example. There were polarities – glamour on the one hand, and also some radical revolutionary talk. I know I was learning all the time, but in a seemingly random way, at my own pace. Years later I feel incredibly grateful for this. I had a grant, the fees were paid, and I could not believe it when this kind of encouragement was withdrawn for following generations.

Gregory Corso reading at the Morden Tower, Newcastle upon Tyne, with Lawrence Ferlinghetti (right) and Basil Bunting (far right), 1965



Installation of *White Mirror* by Mali Morris, Hatton Gallery, Department of Fine Art, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1964

Eduardo Paolozzi (centre) in studio discussion with Matt Rugg (left) and Stephen Buckley, Department of Fine Art, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1965

Colour

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On the Colour Project that began the following Monday, I really did learn something new about painting. Terry had asked us to bring in a fruit or a flower, our oil paints, turpentine, rags and a glass panel for mixing on. We were not to draw or describe, but to look as hard as possible, mix the colours we thought we could see, and put them down in touches across a sheet of paper, or canvas. It was completely absorbing. The more I looked at my flower's golden petals, the more I saw, and so the touches of various yellows and the lilac-greys of their shadows spread out in a random but rhythmic way, slowly building form and light. Colour as entity, not adornment or description, not as decoration, but as structural force. It was in the stuff I was mixing on my glass palette, it had everything to do with the world, but without having to describe it. Something was going on in the relationships *between* the colours. This activity was building a new world, even as I looked, touched the surface, and looked again.

That was more than fifty years ago and I could list many changes of direction in my painting interests since then, but this epiphany somehow feels deep-down and central.

Improvisation and Strategy

In 1966, my third year at Newcastle, I bought the LP *Spirits* by Albert Ayler, because I liked the cover. Then I heard he was coming to London to play at the LSE, so I hitched there to hear him. I also heard Roland Kirk around this time. I had no knowledge at all of jazz, but I liked the strangeness of it, and the courage of improvisation. Years later, with Geoff Rigden, I would hear many London jazz musicians, and through Geoff got to know the trombonist Paul Rutherford and the drummer John Stevens, both great improvisers. John was also a natural teacher, and off stage he never stopped talking; he enjoyed discussing painting in relation to music, especially his kind of free jazz. I asked him once how he began a set, and he said 'You just have to steam in.'

In my own work I depend on a relationship between improvisation and strategy. They seem to demand each other's intervention, when too much control gets in the way, or too much of the arbitrary gets rid of the way. They are like unannounced guests, not always welcome, and I'm never prepared for either. Impulse might take over and I find myself painting without plan, responding with immediacy to whatever is happening before my eyes. Or I could go through a period of non-action when everything is held at bay, a cross between patience and boredom, when I hang around inside the problem until a solution seems obvious.

When I left Newcastle I spent two years on the MFA course at the Fine Art Department at the University of Reading. I felt lost for most of the time, but kept working. I made all sorts of objects and photographic installations as well as paintings, and I dreaded seeing them all together in my degree show. In the end, when it was installed, I decided that the strange mixture was not too bad. It seemed as if my unconscious was making connections, even if I needed a while to catch up.

Mixing Colour

One project on the Basic Course in my first year at Newcastle involved analysing from all approaches an object that we owned. I chose a two-sided mirror that swivelled on a china stand, decorated with pink roses, cheap rococo for a teenager's dressing table. After many drawings, collages and diagrams I decided that my final work, a culmination of these two weeks of study, should be a large construction on a panel 8 feet by 4, with seven discs sawn out of plywood and tilted against the base at various angles. My oil paints did not seem to be in the right colour palette, so I bought some pots of household gloss in pastel shades from Woolworths. I painted each disc a different colour, keeping the base white. It was the biggest thing I had ever made, and I was pleased with it. Terry Frost was visiting the department, about to lead a Colour Project the following week. He walked through the studios, stopped at my work, had a long quiet look, and said, 'That's terrible colour, where did you get it, Woolworths?' Then a final year student said it was the best thing he had seen in ages, very contemporary, very American, beautiful. I think I slipped away, not understanding either the criticism or the compliment. It wasn't mine any more. I began to paint over the discs in white, as an act of destruction, and noticed that the colours on the reverse sides were reflecting across the base in overlapping ellipses, veils of colour. I liked this discovery so much I didn't care what anyone else might think. I hung it as it was for the crit the next day, and Terry congratulated me on its success. What did I learn? No idyll without catastrophe, and vice versa. That people can like and hate what you do, sometimes for the same reasons. That disaster can be moved through, especially if you don't know how.

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Communities

Studios and galleries

I was never in search of a community. We tend to fall into them, and then get involved. When I first came to London in the early 1970s I lived in shared houses, moved around a bit, and found various spaces to paint in. Then I began to get some part-time teaching and met the sculptor Jeff Lowe on that circuit. He told me about some studios to rent in Greenwich, an old electricity depot he had taken over in a leafy, hidden corner near the park; I jumped at the offer. There were later additions: a Nissen hut, and a wooden building that I moved into. I loved the ramshackle make-do nature of it, grew geraniums and tomatoes outside my back door. Eventually there were painter friends on either side of me, Geoff Rigden and Clyde Hopkins, and about 25 other artists on site. We were there for over twenty years, until the lease expired on the last day of 1994.

A few months later I joined some of the Greenwich artists who had formed a charity, The Arts in Perpetuity Trust. We found an empty industrial building on Creekside in Deptford, three storeys high, with a yard. Foursquare and solid, built in 1911 as a rag-sorting warehouse, it had evolved over the years through changing use. Other artists arrived and we began the conversion. The site has gradually been extended, and now houses 44 studios; the artists take an active part in running things, and because A.P.T owns the building we are more secure than many other studio complexes.

My studio is high up, overlooking the tidal creek. The colour and movement of the water changes constantly, and there are many birds that visit, including a kingfisher, an ibis and a heron. I love the seclusion of my space, but stop to chat on the stairs or in the yard; I have known some of my neighbours for many years, and my partner the sculptor Steve Lewis is on the ground floor. So my solitary painting time has a background of community to it. This is an elusive sensation, and the dynamic keeps changing. No art ideology holds us together, we can be independent of each other but still mutually supportive as a group, and this shows itself, often in unexpected ways.

Being taken on by a gallery felt like joining a community. My first invitation came out of the blue – Nicola Jacobs was setting up in Cork Street, had seen my work in a catalogue, thought Mali was a man's name, sounded puzzled when I answered the phone. This was in 1980, and it felt like a big break. I had two solo shows with her before she went on to other things. Then I was taken on by Francis Graham-Dixon, along with a number of artists I knew and admired, when he started up near the Barbican. I had five solo exhibitions there, before he too closed. His private views always ended up in the pub next door, with a convivial crowd. I've had shows with many other galleries since then, without being represented by them, so that tribal sense has faded. A recent solo show at Fold Gallery, London, has put me in touch with a group of younger artists, which I have enjoyed and felt energised by. Sometimes ex-students include me in shows, which I'm always pleased about – a strange twist on the relationships we used to have.

I think of the dead artists that I love as a community, too – if I fall for someone because of the art they have made, it feels like a belonging. I travel to see their work, which is like visiting them. I learn from them, lose myself in them, change my mind about them, return to them. I like thinking of Manet visiting Velázquez at the Prado in Madrid on 1 September 1865, and marvelling at *Las Meninas*, painted in 1656. When I marvel at it myself in Madrid, and at any painting by Manet, wherever and whenever I go to see them, time

Some of the artists at Greenwich Studios in 1987.
Left–right: Richard Rome, Katherine Gili holding Harry Persey, Robert Persey, Kate Whiteford, Mali Morris, Geoff Mowlam, Marilyn Hallam, Jeff Dellow holding Bryony Dellow, Clyde Hopkins, Zadok Ben-David, Iain Herdman, Jim Unsworth, Andre Paul Tonkin, Richard Lawrence

collapses, times merge. I think of all this in the way that the American poet Jorie Graham speaks about poetry:

I'd say poetry wants to be contagious, to be a contagion. Its syntax wants to pass something on to an other in the way that you can, for example, pass laughter on. It's different from being persuasive and making an argument. That's why great poems have so few arguments in them. They don't want to make the reader 'agree'. They don't want to move through the head that way. They want to go from body to body. Built in is the belief that such community – could one even say ceremony – might 'save' the world.
'Jorie Graham, The Art of Poetry No. 85', *The Paris Review*, No. 165, Spring 2003

Art schools

Many artists of my generation survived for years as peripatetic visiting artists in Fine Art departments, until the art school system changed in the 1980s. We were paid by the hour and could live on the earnings of a couple of days a week, never thinking of pensions or sick pay. Travelling to teach at Canterbury, Winchester, Reading, Nottingham and sometimes much further afield meant train journeys with other part-timers. This was a kind of random, ad hoc community, meeting up in the buffet car for breakfast-time coffee and drinks on the way home. Two hours was a good length of time to gossip and sometimes argue, and I got to know people whose art and thinking was unfamiliar to me. It was a good education.

I never wanted a full-time post and what came with it, but was glad to settle down eventually, for 14 years, at Chelsea College of Art on a 0.5 Senior Lectureship – half a proper job, with the rest of the week in the studio. Each art school in those days had a very different character, and every year saw a change in the chemistry of staff and students. At Chelsea, my first tenured post, aged 46, I suddenly found myself in a community that had been ripening over generations, a department with a rich history and a roll call of well-known characters. It took me a while to settle, to find my voice, and my feet, which meant I was learning and changing.

This was in the olden days, when smoking was allowed in the studios, and at six o'clock someone would nip out to buy a few bottles of wine, and whoever was in that day – the regular staff and the part-timers, and maybe a couple of students – would stay on in the tiny, very untidy staffroom, narrow as a caravan, to wind down. But everyone worked hard, and I remember those years with rosy fondness; when I see people now who taught and studied there, they describe feeling part of a family that was driven by seriousness and hilarity. Clyde Hopkins, Head of Painting, set the tone with his warmth and wit. Hundreds came to his funeral and wake in July 2018, to mourn him and to celebrate his life as a great artist-teacher.

Everything was changing at art schools as I approached sixty. There were more managers than artists, bringing with them the language of bureaucracy, with no time for the intimacy of the tutorial teaching that I valued, no feeling for the way a department evolves because the people who work there, students and staff, are themselves evolving. A sense of community seemed to be breaking up. I decided to leave on an impulse, sitting on top of a double decker bus one day, as it took me along the King's Road towards the College. I didn't know if this was a good decision or not, but it felt urgent.

Five years later in 2010 I was catapulted into another community, one with an ancient history. I got a call from the Royal Academy of Arts to say I had been elected an Academician. I had no idea what this might involve. There were a few Academicians I already knew, but many I didn't, so I was a new girl again. By now I have seen something of the workings of this huge and rather strange institution, which has become even bigger, and is changing with each year. But it's certainly a community, another motley band of artists, and it has definitely shaped my life, along with all the others.

Private view card for 'Summer Exhibition, Gallery Artists', Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London, 1981.
Left–right, standing: Keith Reeves, Jon Groom, H.-Dieter Pietsch, Paul Rosenbloom, Derek Southall, John Carter, Jeff Lowe, John McLean, Mali Morris, Anthony Whishaw. Left–right, seated: Ken Kiff, Jennifer Durrant, Jean Gibson, Simon Edmondso

Terrain

I once wrote an essay at school about a midnight ascent of Snowdon by the light of the Harvest Moon, along the Pyg Track, arriving at the summit at dawn. This was a walk organised by our local Minister, a scholarly man who was married to a composer, Dilys Elwyn-Edwards. They lived opposite us, in Caernarfon, and I used see her sitting at her piano for hours on end, her back to the window. I was fascinated by her complete absorption. Some evenings she knocked on our door to ask my mother if we could spare a loaf of bread, as she had forgotten to go to the shops.

That trek up the mountain seems now like a great gift. My essay described the livid colours of dawn, and the vast ranges of Snowdonia slowly coming to light, as if this were an everyday occurrence, which of course it is, but not one seen by me before, nor since. I was struck dumb, watching the land below rolling away from me, as far as the eye could see, further away than my eyes had ever seen. At the beginning of that walk I saw the Minister's wife striding ahead at a steady pace, crossing a meadow, alone but within reach, and that image of a person moving through the world has stayed with me ever since.

When I was a child we moved around a lot. We set up home in a new town every few years, always in North Wales. The place my brother and I loved best was Blaenau Ffestiniog, although our mother cried when our father first took her there, driving down the Crimea Pass in a rainstorm, towards the dark wet streets built of slate. Our house was on the edge of town; Ian and I were allowed to wander off into the valley behind the back garden, coming back for tea only because we were hungry. We rolled down a steep grassy hill to get to the woods down there, and I remember a river, dense copses of mountain ash, and always getting almost lost but never completely.

A painter friend once described my earlier abstract paintings as pastoral, and I could not disagree. I did sometimes paint in watercolour on paper directly from landscape, if I felt a response to its rhythms, but I never thought of my canvases as related to this. Occasionally something I had seen would kick-start a painting, or a title given later would refer obliquely to a remembered place. Eventually I decided I needed to eliminate any association with location or the natural world, to move on towards what I was searching for. But I am convinced that my interest in the pictorial space of painting, how it can be constructed through chromatic shifts and light-making relationships, has something to do with my earliest awareness of being a body moving through the spaces of the world, through its various kinds of light. I'm fascinated by how the space of painting and the space of the world are separate from one other, although always connected.

Tricks of Time

On 21 May 1966 I saw Bob Dylan go electric at the Newcastle Odeon. The cry 'Judas!' had gone up at the Manchester concert a few nights before and it was still echoing in parts of the audience, but from then on I was a devoted fan. The following month a section of Kurt Schwitters's *Merz Barn* was installed in the University, at the initiative of Richard Hamilton. A team of students, led by Fred Brookes, had dismantled it the year before at Ambleside and we watched them put the pieces together again in the Fine Art Department. It was all fantastically exciting. Everything seemed new to me – music, emotions, books, people, art. There was no real guide as to how to live, which was disturbing and exhilarating.

We had good studio spaces as students, and plenty of time to sweat it out. The Hatton Gallery was on the left of the big entrance doors to the Department, and the library to the right, great teaching treasures both. The exhibitions alternated between the newest contemporary art and works drawn from distinguished collections – of fine eighteenth-century drawings, for example. I eventually decided to write my thesis on Giandomenico Tiepolo because I liked his Punchinello etchings. I hitchhiked with my friend Richard to Vicenza to see the Tiepolo frescoes in the Villa Valmarana ai Nani (page 17). From there we found our way to Biot in the South of France, where the Fernand Léger Museum had just opened. Then we hitched all the way back to Newcastle.

I have forgotten a great deal from those years but bits and pieces come back to me. I suppose there is too much to remember. I saw the *Merz Barn* recently when I returned to the Department as an external examiner. It looked as strange and wonderful to me as it had done in 1966.

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I continue to look at both Tiepolos, father and son. Domenico's Valmarana frescoes linger in reproduction on my studio wall. A few years ago I discovered with great pleasure *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* by Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall (1994). It led me to another favourite book, Alpers's *The Vexations of Art* (2005), which has a wonderful chapter that compares two of my favourite painters, Velázquez and Manet, and explores how paintings play tricks with time.

When I'm in front of a painting that moves me, my face starts to tingle and smart. I don't have a vocabulary for what I feel. Wherever it was painted, in whatever year, the immediacy of my experiencing it as a painting puts me so intensely and sometimes uncomfortably in the present, that time, memory and the future cease to exist.