



Simon Morris: *Folding Water*

The paintings of Simon Morris offer, alongside their entirely distinctive and captivating aesthetic qualities, a platform for creating a dialogue with history (both his own and that of art history proper) and fostering critical connections in the present moment. As an artist who came to prominence in parallel with the ascension of postmodern gestures and rhetoric, Morris has been viewed in the past as a steady bearer of cool tidings, rather than a conjurer of overheated concoctions.¹ The artist himself I hasten to add is quite resistant to overt aspects of “expressivity” being associated with his own painterly practice. Nonetheless, I would argue that the most recent of Morris’ paintings are frequently expressive in the most productive sense of that term—“expressing a great deal of feeling and meaning”—however it might appear to be overburdened by its historical trappings.

One could in addition propose that with the passing of time and Morris’s increasing skill and ongoing engagement as an artist, he has become more “at home” in the intriguing idiosyncrasies of his own approach. There is after all so much sheer visual pleasure and indeed warmth to be found in these tightly geometric, conceptually configured, and richly layered works. The paintings convey this sense of warmth in part due to their palette, as the artist has turned toward vibrant yellows and orange as well as the choice of a linen support with a pronounced and evident texture rather than an entirely smooth surface. Morris’ works recall a seminal essay of the 1960s, “Systemic Painting” in which the critic Lawrence Alloway argued that “A system is as human as a splash of paint, more so when the splash gets routinized,” and furthermore, that “The personal is not expunged by using a neat technique; anonymity is not a consequence of highly finishing a painting. The artist’s conceptual order just as personal as autographic tracks.”²

Morris’ method of measuring assiduously and recording the time spent creating his works provides an evocative counterpoint to both our overloaded life/work imbalances today, as well as with the common assumption that visitors to museums on the average spend thirty seconds (or less) before each work. This would be completely antithetical to the close attention Morris pays to the contemplative value of artworks for both artist and viewer. They’re just little bits of time, really. This is a paraphrase remembered from my recent visit to Simon’s studio. With characteristic modesty, the artist was speaking of the series of Daily Paintings, in which he applies a new coat of pigment across the surface of each canvas as a daily routine, preserving an unaltered sliver of the previous day’s work, and adding by accretion new layers as the process continues. Morris has further commented: “My interest in noting time in this way is that it suggests there is also a passage of time involved in conceiving the work, planning and preparing, then also the time in which the work sits in the memory of the viewer after the viewing experience.”³

What becomes also very significant to Morris’ work is the notion of a dramatically expanded scale working simultaneously in tandem with these specific time constraints, as his projects over the past decade have included elaborate wall drawings, architectural commissions, and site-specific works.

Key examples of these would include *Coloured line, there and back*, Morris' recent drawing created for the exhibition *Wall Works* (Adam Art Gallery, 2009); the perforated metal façade Morris designed for *TheNewDowse* in Lower Hutt (Athfield Architects Ltd., 2006); and the mowing of a Morris drawing into the pitch of the Jade Stadium, Christchurch (Stadia, 2002).

Beyond this I greatly admire a certain internal consistency of Simon Morris' practice, as the recent paintings created in the studio context after his larger scale ventures carry forth an equivalent boldness and intensity, however comparatively intimate in their actual dimensions. They also bring to mind echoes of a vast and eclectic range of visual references, such as: the designs of Charles and Ray Eames or Buckminster Fuller; subway and bus maps; flow charts; diagrams of electronic circuitry; Josef Albers' squares and Bauhaus typography; silicone memory chips; and the iconic pictographs which clutter public spaces. But of course very crucial in terms of Morris' historical lineage are the interwoven strands of 20th Century abstraction, particularly that of the interwar period (1920s-30s) and the era of Minimalism (1960s-70s).

As I look closely at, say, Morris' triptych entitled *three Orange Lines*, I flash back to a childhood memory: that of a toy created c.1969 called *Playplax*, which consisted of a selection of cylinders and squares made of coloured transparent polystyrene. It enabled many DIY-style abstract constructions—such as my own as a toddler—to go up in playrooms, and is now longed for by nostalgic online scavengers.⁴ Why do I bring this up? Chiefly because both Morris' recent work and the likes of vintage *Playplax* hit at a major crux of modern and contemporary art and culture: how and where do the realms of art and design either inform one another or part company entirely? The critic Clement Greenberg used to condescendingly label Minimalism “good design.” However, today the reigning judgment is that such influential works are all but classical, as their leveling of so many aesthetic distinctions became a dominant style in itself.

Moreover, returning to my initial statement concerning the connectivity and criticality of Morris' specific practice, it's as if his paintings work to demonstrate by their very procedures—an amalgamated construct of handmade artistry and conceptual gamesmanship—their acknowledgment and embrace of a measured yet skeptical perspective concerning the varied complexities of our intermingled artworlds and realworlds. In tracing out portions of time that become further transformed into their new material status as artworks, Simon Morris elects to maintain a tenuous yet essential dialogue. He thus balances and negotiates his practice between art and artifice, architectonic utopianism and actual drawing, painted layers and conceptual strata. It is in this manner that the manifold facets of Morris' work coalesce and artfully reveal themselves, painted vectors extending into unforeseen directions.

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Three orange lines 2009
Acrylic on linen
505 x 505 mm (Triptych)

Naples yellow line 12 minutes
Acrylic on linen
500 x 500 mm

Black line 2009
Acrylic on hessian
500 x 500 mm

Photography credit: Steve Rowe

¹ See for example texts on Morris by artist-critics David Cross and John Hurrell.

² "Systemic Painting" in Lawrence Alloway, Richard Kalina, ed. *Imagining the Present: Context, Content, and the Role of the Critic* (London: Routledge, 2006) 121-135.

³ E-mail to the author, 9 October 2009.

⁴ Following up on my hunch about Playplax, I find that its inventor was one Patrick Rylands, a graduate of the Royal College of Art. Rylands had developed a prototype for his toy while on holiday, which was then manufactured by a plastics company named Trendon. The toy is also in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, NYC.