



# Deconstruct worker

Sarah Morris deciphers cities, taking monolithic symbols of power and decoding them onto huge canvases in shiny colour, or unravelling them in fast-moving short films. Living a jet-set life between London and New York with her Turner Prize-nominated husband and her son, she now has Los Angeles in her sights. By **Gaby Wood**. Portraits by Michel Arnaud

**VIEW FINDER**

Artist and film-maker  
Sarah Morris in her  
New York apartment

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his is like the set of a movie I'll never shoot,' says Sarah Morris, revelling in the subdued glamour of her apartment building in New York. We are standing in the flat she shares with her husband, Turner Prize nominee Liam Gillick, and their 19-month-old son Orson, looking out over the glassy vertical grid of the UN building and at the East River and the Williamsburg Bridge beyond. Inside the apartment, as in the lobby downstairs, there are bright red carpets and black leather Barcelona chairs, complementing the austere yet plush Sixties interiors that were once home to Truman Capote, Johnny Carson and Robert Kennedy.

You can see why this urban setting might appeal to a woman whose paintings and films portray American cities at their most mysteriously powerful. Her enormous, high-gloss abstract canvases of corporate, political and commercial buildings (the Revlon Corporation in Manhattan, the Pentagon, the Flamingo hotel in Las Vegas) are cat's cradles of colour and capitalism. Though she shares some formal tendencies with Piet Mondrian or the sculptor Donald Judd, Morris turns the ideal forms of modernism into something far more pessimistic, or at least more sceptical, so things that once seemed certain are continually breaking down or caving in.

Sarah Morris is a stylish woman with a serious mind. She has a knack for finding beautiful vintage clothes in New York thrift shops, but she also knows 'quite a lot about science', an expertise she wears lightly, along with her Chloé suit or Marc Jacobs pumps. She is warm yet focused, quick to smile, and clearly someone who won't take no for an answer.

In the 14 years she has been working as an artist, Morris has sold her work to virtually every major museum, and built up a career of such distinction that the art worlds of both Britain and America insist on claiming her as their own; she was born in England, and is the daughter of an English scientist, but her mother is American and she grew up there. Morris studied semiotics at Brown University, Rhode Island, a fact that, along with her unfashionable chosen medium – painting – made her something of an outsider when she started out. But then she met gallery owner Jay Jopling and fell in love with Gillick, who makes brightly coloured geometrical installations based on esoteric ideas about utopia.

The couple's first meeting, however, was rather more mundane than their cerebral nature implies. 'I went round to a friend's house to hang some of my drawings for him,' she says, 'and Liam opened the door.' Morris had been told that she would get fed, but she didn't expect what she stumbled into: a very formal dinner for 30. She smiles as she remembers

what she had been wearing that day: black satin jeans and a red Lacoste shirt, an ensemble she describes as 'the most ridiculous outfit I've ever worn'.

That was nine years ago, and now the pair divide their time between London and New York. 'I didn't really think I was going to be spending any time in England,' Morris says, 'until I met Jay, and met Liam, and then it seemed like things had gone full circle.'

Over the past six years Morris has made some short films to accompany each series of her paintings: *Midtown*, about Manhattan; *AM/PM*, a portrait of Las Vegas; *Capital*, about Washington; and *Miami*, a meditation on America's supposed vice capital. She describes these films, in an accurate account of their cool, cumulative impact, as 'a pile-up of people and effects and things that inform a place'. For the past year, she has been working on a film and series of paintings about Los Angeles, which will open at Jopling's White Cube gallery in June. She considers there to be something of a 'segue' between Los Angeles and Washington or Miami, in that each is, in its own way, representative of a certain system of American power. One of the most stunning aspects of those previous films is the access Morris was given: she filmed Bill Clinton in the White House cabinet room and got inside the Coca-Cola factory in Florida. The Los Angeles project – which, at the time of going to press, she had still not named – is no exception. She has always been her own producer, but this time she found out what it was like to be a producer in Hollywood, and 'how little the art world lines up with the entertainment world'.

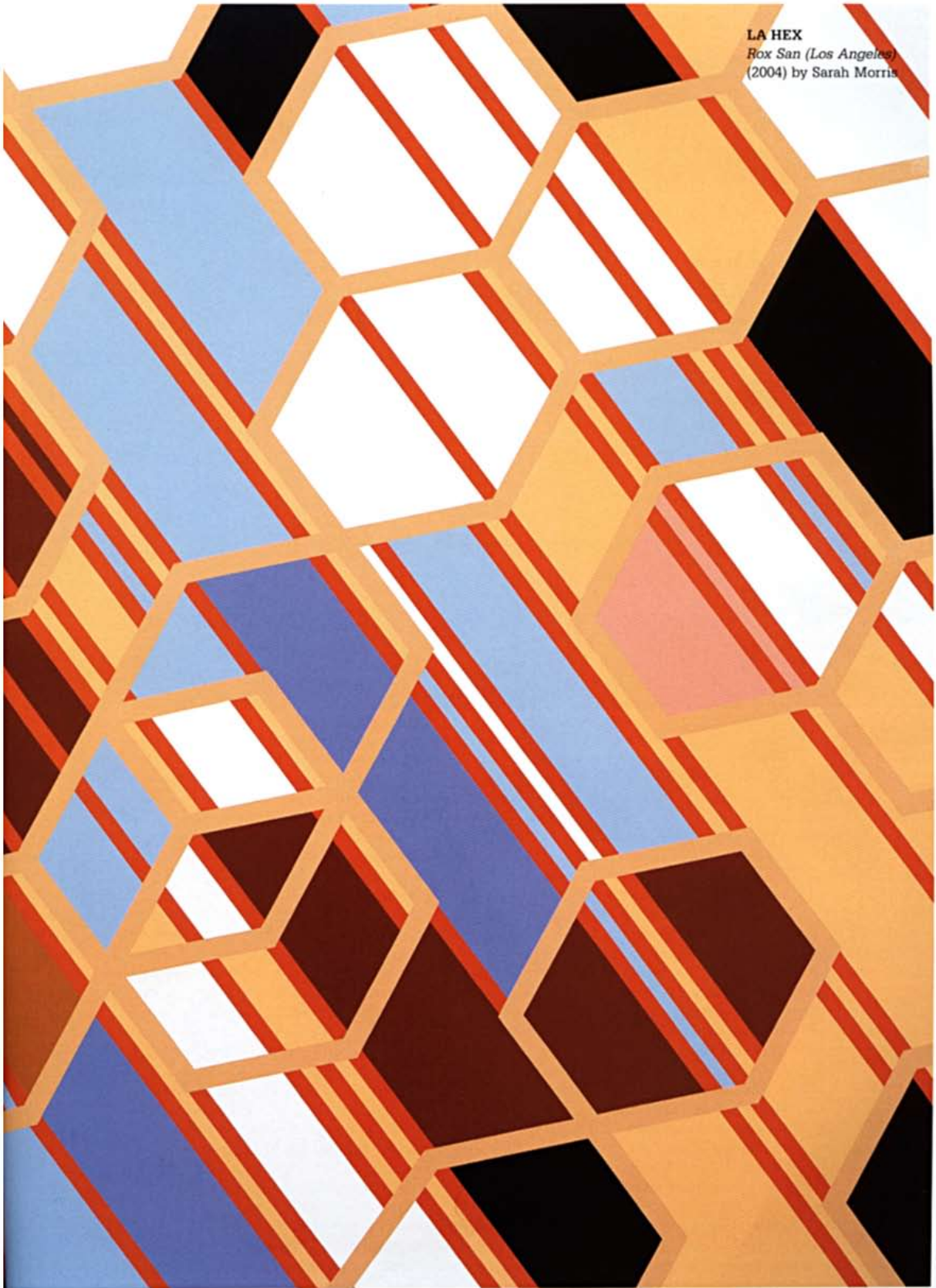
Morris started shooting in the 10 days leading up to the Oscars (despite aeons of planning, her shoots are short – *Midtown* was filmed in one day), because she wanted to film LA in the process of 'awarding itself'. She met Brad Pitt doing stunts on the sound stage of 20th Century Fox, and found him 'charming and well-informed' when they discussed architecture. She spied Jack Nicholson at a Lakers game; caught Dennis Hopper driving a black Jag; and shot the legendary producer Robert Evans as he was shaving. She also got into Paramount Studios and filmed Tom Cruise's entire wardrobe, which she describes as 'quite creepy', adding that the studio keeps every costume Cruise has ever worn, archived by character.

Though Morris talks about these stars with glee, they weren't all that interested her. She wanted to film other phenomena that she saw as representative of LA: the spraying of a Lamborghini; the bleaching of teeth; a copy shop where scripts are photocopied in coded colours. Morris captured it all on CinemaScope, at the same time collecting ideas for her paintings. She was drawn to a particular



PHOTOGRAPH: DENNIS COWLEY. FOX SAN ANGELES (2004)  
© PARALLAX COURTESY JAY JOPLING/WHITE CUBE (LONDON)

LA HEX  
Rox San (Los Angeles)  
(2004) by Sarah Morris



The first time Sarah Morris met Warren Beatty, he said: 'Tell me what's



tangerine colour she saw on a building site, for example, and used it in her portrayal of the 'psychology' of Los Angeles on canvas.

Morris says, with a wry smile, that one of the most fascinating people she met in Los Angeles is someone she has not filmed at all: Warren Beatty, star of *The Parallax View*, the 1974 film about politics and paranoia after which Morris' studio, Parallax, was named. The first time she spoke to Beatty, after what she describes as a 'labyrinthic approach', he said: 'Tell me what's so great about you, and then tell me what's so great about me.' She told him that he had been an inspiration to her, and now Beatty calls her on a regular basis to talk about her work. Exactly what his involvement in her Los Angeles project will be, if any, remains undecided; nevertheless, Morris considers him to be a kind of muse. 'It was clear to me,' Morris says, 'that I wanted to make a film about not only the city of Los Angeles in its de-centred, complex way, but I also wanted to make a film about film, and about how a city represents itself. If Warren Beatty doesn't want to be an image, I think that's perfectly respectable.'

Parallax has its headquarters in an office building on the opposite side of Manhattan from Morris' home. In a studio overlooking the Hudson River, three assistants help map strips of colour onto canvases; each one takes about three months to complete. Lining the walls of the studio are her LA paintings. When I ask what directions her assistants are working to, Morris shows me an indecipherable piece of paper – the measurements the assistants adhere to when masking off a portion of the frame. It looks like an equation dreamed up on another planet, or, as Morris says, laughing, 'the diagram of a headache'.

The political journalist Joe Klein described Morris as having captured the 'existential uneasiness' of Washington DC in her 2000 film, *Capital*. An art critic from *The New York Times* once wrote of Morris'

work that 'thanks to the influence of deconstructionist theory, we've learned to read sociological meanings into Ms Morris' kind of painting'. And yet the paintings are so beautiful, how can we be sure they are criticisms of power rather than celebrations of it?

'That's a difficult question,' Morris reflects. 'I'm not interested in just mimicking power. I'm interested in showing how it informs things, and what it looks like, and how it functions.' Douglas Coupland, who has written the catalogue essay for Morris' new show, puts the ambiguity this way: 'Social critique is happening, but whether or not this critique is censorious is left open-ended.' If there are political interventions in her work, they are sly, cryptic and multi-faceted. But they are, in Morris' view, definitely there. 'If I didn't pose some kind of threat about meaning, and the shifting of meaning, then why would there be paranoia from the studios about what I'm doing?', she says.

Apart from her imminent London exhibition, Morris has a number of major projects on the go, including the poster design for the 2006 football world cup in Germany. Gillick composes the music for her films and, though the only project Morris would describe as an actual collaboration is a nightlight they both designed for a Miami hotel, some similarities between their work are apparent: Gillick's is also of an architectural-conceptual strain, and they are considered two of the most intellectual artists among their peers. When Morris casually describes their son as being in the process of 'learning the colours' ('He knows yellow now, and purple,' she says), I wonder what it must be like to have art so much in the foreground of a family. 'It's our lives,' she says. 'It surrounds us and informs most of what we do. We're both quite passionate about it. We don't know any other way.' □

*Sarah Morris is at the White Cube gallery from 3 June to 10 July. For details, ring 020 7749 7450, or visit [www.whitecube.com](http://www.whitecube.com).*

so great about you, and then tell me what's so great about me'



**A MOMENT'S REFLECTION**  
Morris at home.  
Opposite: a still from  
her latest short film,  
about Los Angeles