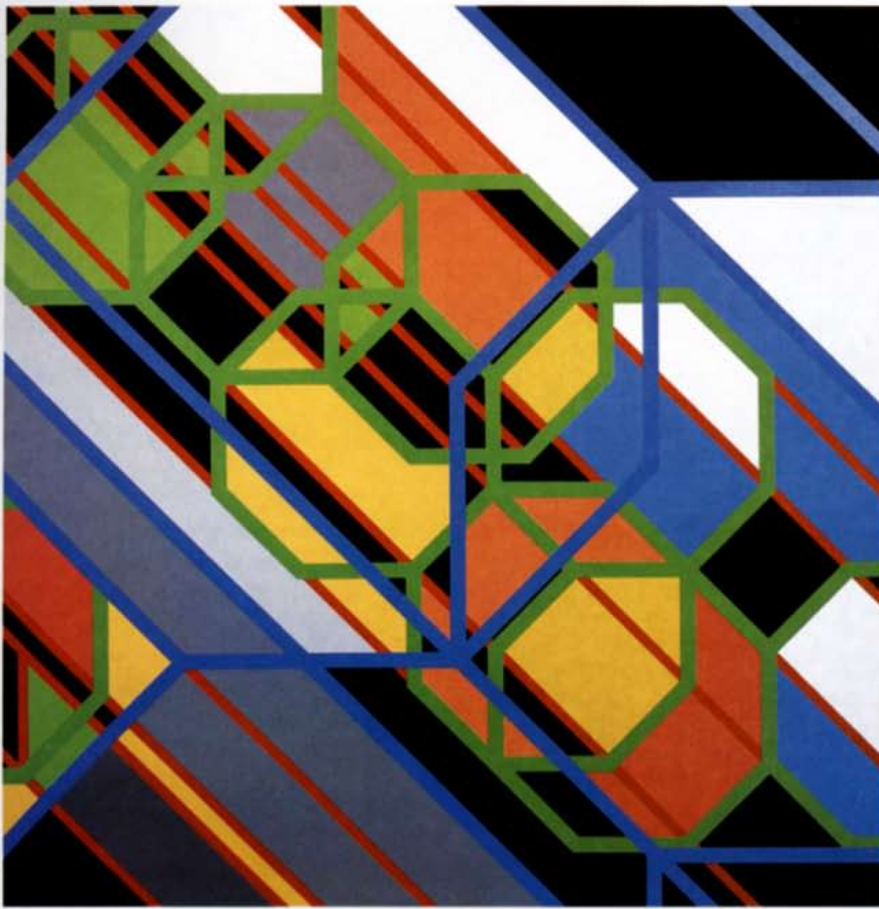


## INTERVIEW



'I love my paintings, but the process of producing them is like the diagram of a headache': Morris uses buildings as a starting point for her complex pictures including (above) the Department of Water and Power in Los Angeles

# Cinéma vérité

Brad Pitt's punching himself in the face, legendary producer Robert Evans is being shaved by a naked woman, and now Warren Beatty's on the phone...

**Gaby Wood** meets Sarah Morris, the British-born painter and filmmaker who's turning the cameras on Hollywood. Photograph **Todd Selby**

Sarah Morris has almost finished her short film about Los Angeles. She is sitting with her editor, Terence, in an editing suite 10 floors above Times Square, incorporating some final touches. A few recognisable faces whizz past in fast-forward on the screen – John Travolta, Dennis Hopper, Uma Thurman – as the pair try to work out where to put some footage of fish Morris has shot in various LA aquariums. 'We have this whole sociology of fish thing,' she tells me, as Terence inserts some small amphibians after a shot of one of the most powerful agencies in Hollywood. He plays it back for her. 'I think that's going to be too direct,' Morris suggests. 'I think we have to avoid putting bottom feeders next to CAA.'

Speaking to Sarah Morris, you begin to suspect that you are face-to-face with the consummate 21st-century artist. She would no doubt say that she is merely one person and one style among many, but there is something intriguing about her talent, and her rounded success. She looks edgily professional: today, she is wearing a tailored black designer suit with a bright yellow shirt; she speaks about her work with direct, highbrow clarity, yet she is far from severe and quick to soft, easy laughter. She has achieved steady, worldwide recognition; she is a kind of director – not just in her film work, but because her canvases are so complex as to require the help of three assistants; she is a working mother; she is a contemporary of the YBA crowd, yet detached from their antics. She has none of the flamboyance of Emin or Hirst, yet she makes smart, subversive statements in works that are aesthetically alluring and commercial. In her unassuming way, Sarah Morris has the art world sussed.

This is the third time I have met Morris and each time she has chosen a venue that casts a completely different light on Manhattan, the city where she mostly lives. First there was her studio, a large bare space in an office building on the far west of the island, with a freight elevator strong enough to carry her monumental canvases. Then there was her sleek, modernist apartment on the East River, where she lives with her husband, Turner Prize nominee Liam Gillick, and their son, in a building once inhabited by Truman Capote and Robert Kennedy. It overlooks the United Nations' headquarters, and right between her studio and her home is the Times Square editing suite, an office with expansive views of some of the biggest advertisements in the world, many of them for movies.

All of this is grist to Morris's mill, for her work – on film and on canvas – portrays, questions and often subverts urban systems of power. What is the influence of corporations? What are the parameters of the commercial? What is the political subtext of our everyday lives? Her paintings – graphic configurations of colour that might be Mondrians seen through a politically inflected kaleidoscope – use buildings as a starting point (the Pentagon in Washington, the Revlon building in Manhattan, the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas, the Department of Water and Power in Los Angeles) and break down their facades to dizzying effect.

'I always thought that [actual] architecture was beside the point with the paintings,' Morris explains. 'I'm more interested in strategies of ▶



◀ architecture – how it makes the individual feel empowered, or plays with distraction or scale.' Douglas Coupland, who has written a catalogue essay for her forthcoming exhibition at the White Cube gallery in London, says of Morris's paintings that there is the 'paradoxical suggestion that in reducing these systems of power, in simplifying them, she gestures towards what's left out of the picture – what, you wonder, is behind this after all?'

Her short films – which, in her own description, 'get to the same place by very different means' – are wry urban anthropologies, wordless accumulations of detail with music composed by Liam Gillick, which ranges from alienated electronics to Bernard Herrmann-esque drama. There is, Morris believes, a 'sort of segue' between Washington and Miami – 'because of all the covert operations that go on, and also the 2000 election' – and between Washington and Los Angeles. In the latter, she knew that she wanted to make 'a film about film, and about how a city represents itself'.

One of the most mysterious and striking aspects of Morris's films is the access she's had. For *Capital*, she filmed Bill Clinton up close in his cabinet room. For *Miami*, she shot the relentless machines inside the Coca-Cola factory. Morris says she is her own producer (she got Coca-Cola to let her in by showing them a *Vogue* cover she had done of Kate Moss sipping 'what looked to be Coca-Cola, though it wasn't Coke in the cup'). But even her powers of persuasion were taxed by the 'labyrinthine' approaches required to reach people in Hollywood. 'The level of scrutiny and paranoia was sort of extreme,' she says. Every day she would make so many calls that she divided them into categories and pinned them on the wall – the conduits (friends who knew people), the gatekeepers (agents etc), the talent (Warren Beatty, Brad Pitt). The graphic on the wall is, she says, like a 'huge, convoluted map of LA. The diagram of a headache'. And the calls haven't stopped. 'We're still having an ongoing discussion,' Morris says of her new phone pal Warren Beatty. 'About the film at hand, about Los Angeles, about the self-identity of a movie star. I said everybody else had said yes; what was his problem? He told me I was a narcissist.'

When she first got in touch with him, Beatty quizzed her, not just about her film, but about herself: what did she think of the presidential candidates, what did her parents do, and so on. It was, she says, 'intense', but worth it. Beatty is significant for Morris. Her studio, Parallax, is named after *The Parallax View*, the 1974 conspiracy movie in which he starred, and, she tells me, 'various roles he's played have made me think of the political subtext of narrative stories'. Beatty still hasn't decided if he wants to be in her film, and she's nearly finished. 'Last week, my final proposition was that he could read the credits. One thing that's interesting about him is that he's a self-degrading character and I knew that would appeal to that side of him. So he thought about it and said he'd read the credits if he could be a silhouette. I said no,' she laughs, referring to another famous political intrigue. 'Warren Beatty can't be Deep Throat!'

**Morris was born in England** in 1967, to an English father and an American mother. The family moved to the US when she was little – part of the 'brain



Flash photography: stills from Morris's film, *Los Angeles*, which she shot on old-fashioned 35mm Cinemascope. Top: paparazzi wait for the stars and (above) Uma Thurman on the carpet

drain' of that period (her father is a scientist). Though she spent a year at Cambridge as part of her university course, she stayed in America for the most part, studying semiotics at Brown University in Rhode Island before going on to take part in an artists' programme organised by the Whitney, which boasts such alumni as Julian Schnabel and Jenny Holzer. 'I chose painting because it was the simplest, most streamlined thing,' she says of her then-unfashionable medium. 'I didn't have the hang-ups of my friends because I didn't go to art school.'

In 1989, the year of the Whitney programme, she also worked as an assistant to Jeff Koons and the two activities couldn't have been more different. 'It was at the height of political correctness,' Morris explains, and Koons was as incorrect as they came. 'I used to bike between the Whitney and

his studio – they were very different perspectives. I quite liked it. But it did lead to a sense of not really being part of either.'

To an extent, this is something you suspect Morris has sought out. She says she wanted to be an artist because it freed her 'to play with contradictions and to revel in them. It's quite important to be able to know what's going on from multiple perspectives,' she says. 'You can watch the BBC and CNN at the same time – different misperceptions can be interesting.' Now Morris – who has been represented by the White Cube gallery's managing director Jay Jopling for a number of years, and met Liam Gillick in 1995 – leaves New York once a month. She and Gillick spend much of their time in London.

'Vested interests would rather you hung out in your studio and flicked some paint around,' she says drily when I ask if she has a preference for painting or filmmaking. 'I don't think the two should be segregated. I love my paintings, but the actual process of producing them is like the ▶

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