

# Tale of Two Cities

Artist Sarah Morris is about to shake up midtown Manhattan with a new work about Los Angeles.

Portrait by BENJAMIN DONALDSON

**T**wo years ago, painter and video artist Sarah Morris was in Warren Beatty's library, trying to convince him to appear in her 26-minute film "Los Angeles." She wanted to show him some of her previous work, but Beatty couldn't figure out how to use his DVD player. And causing even more distraction, there was a call on hold for Beatty—from Robert Towne, the legendary screenwriter of *Chinatown*, who just so happens to be Morris's idol. "For me, he's emblematic of Los Angeles," she says. Though Beatty didn't end up in the film, the moment helped inspire Morris's painting *Robert Towne [Los Angeles]*.

Sarah Morris in her Chelsea studio with the 2005 painting *Endeavor [Los Angeles]*

In September the British-born, Rhode Island-bred Morris will unveil a 19,744-square-foot version of the vivid abstraction on the ground-level public plaza of one of Manhattan's most iconic buildings, Lever House. "It's interesting to create this juxtaposition that seemingly doesn't make sense but makes people reflect about what it means," she says. There's no denying, however, that she's projecting her impressions of one city—and of the man who penned a famous

work about that city—onto the landscape of another.

Morris, 39, who shows at White Cube in London and Friedrich Petzel in New York, has been an art-world darling since the late Nineties, when she debuted her first city-focused paintings and video, on New York. Series on Las Vegas, Washington, D.C., Miami and Los Angeles followed. "It's become less about cities and more about this idea of multiple moments happening in a single place at a single time," she says.

At first glance, Morris's abstract canvases appear to be graphical, colorful interpretations of the buildings, people and places they're named after (*Mandalay Bay [Las Vegas]*, for one). But the way lines intersect and shapes align seems to address how the cultural, political and social entities in a city coexist. "Sarah is really interested in urban situations and connections between people, as well as the relationship between art and architecture," says Rochelle Steiner, director of the Public Art Fund, the nonprofit that commissioned the Lever House project.

Morris works simultaneously on her video art and painting. She first scouts locations to process her impressions about a city before developing the colors and symbols that will appear in her work. The Miami paintings, for instance, are filled with gradations of yellows and aquas based on the way light refracts in the pools there. "It's not a question of if there are causal relations between the painting and the film," she says of the two disciplines. "It's all part of one

vocabulary." To wit, the videos give a similar sense of a city's mood. The hypnotizing "Los Angeles," which was filmed in the 10 days leading up to the Academy Awards in 2004 and set to music composed by her husband, artist Liam Gillick, shifts between red-carpet moments and the pages of an anonymous script.

Morris is admittedly fascinated with movies. She calls her Chelsea studio Parallax Corporation, after Towne's 1974 film *The Parallax View*, and she named her four-year-old son Orson, though she says it's an homage to a character in the medieval tale *Valentine and Orson*, not the *Citizen Kane* auteur.

And in true Hollywood style, Morris has a knack for gaining access—she has filmed Bill Clinton and Brad Pitt, on separate occasions, of course. She chalks it up to the power of conversation. After all, it was a persuasive chat with art theorist Hal Foster that helped her gain admission to the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program upon graduating from Brown. "I hadn't produced anything," she says. "But I was following what was going on in the art world." She also began assisting Jeff Koons and later experimented with sign paintings before settling on her current style.

She now splits her time between New York and London and has just returned from Beijing, where she'll film the city's transformation in anticipation of the 2008 Olympics. For the first time, Morris plans to deal explicitly with architecture. "People look at the paintings and see architecture, but I don't," she says. "I'm more interested in the way architecture communicates or how it makes you feel." But this time around, the city's structures themselves will have a story to tell, albeit one about modern media: "I liked the idea of a place that is rebuilding itself with a deadline of a televised event."

—JAMIE ROSEN



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