

# MODERN PAINTERS

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# BEIJING CITY SYMPHONY

**Sarah Morris** talks to Christopher Turner about preparations for her new film, which will document the architectural frenzy in Beijing ahead of the 2008 Olympics and “Rings,” her vibrant, architectonic painting inspired by her travels to China





to Christopher Turner about the new film, which will document frenzy in Beijing ahead of the Olympics, vibrant, architectonic paintings sells to China



The first time I visited Sarah Morris's studio, the space was crammed with her new "Rings" series—enormous canvases that represent various Olympic Games past and future, complex diagrams of lurid overlapping circles. Her studio door is tall and slender, specially adapted so that the nine-foot-high canvases can fit through it, and when we met a few weeks later the paintings had made their exit, having been shipped to London and Munich, where Morris has solo shows this summer. In their absence, she was hanging dollhouse-size versions of the works in a scale model of the White Cube gallery. One 75-foot-long painting, whose cogs mesh together with a forceful dynamism, is made up of eight separate panels and will wrap around three entire walls.

Morris erupted onto the art scene in the mid-'90s with glossy abstract canvases and stylish films that mined the urban landscape for their source material. Her studio is in the Starrett-Lehigh building, a landmark of modernist industrial architecture located in Chelsea, New York's gallery district. (Coincidentally, *Modern Painters* also has its new offices in the same site.) Lewis Mumford, writing in *The New Yorker* in 1931, called the building, which occupies an entire block, "a victory for engineering." When he praised "the contrast between the long, continuous red-brick bands and the green-framed windows, with sapphire reflections or depths...as sound a use of color as one can see about the city," he could almost have been describing one of Morris's vivid architectonic paintings. The dizzying façades of skyscrapers often reflect others in her canvases, overlaying grids with grids. Though perhaps not apparent at first glance, Morris intends her pulsating displays to be critiques of capitalism.

Morris, a 41-year-old Brown University semiotics graduate who has always spoken articulately about her work, tells me that she seeks not to represent, but to borrow from architecture. "What interests me about architecture," she explains, "is really its cinematic potential, and its potential to empower people. I like the idea of trying to use various effects of architecture, whether it has to do with scale or certain ideologies of place." Her sources are eclectic: she's as inspired by the curvaceous and theatrical buildings of architects such as John Lautner (who is featured on page 60) and Morris Lapidus as she is by the science fiction novels of J. G. Ballard and "the way he posits action and ideology in space." Architecture,

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OPPOSITE PAGE: Sarah Morris's "Rings" series, designed by Günther Rambow

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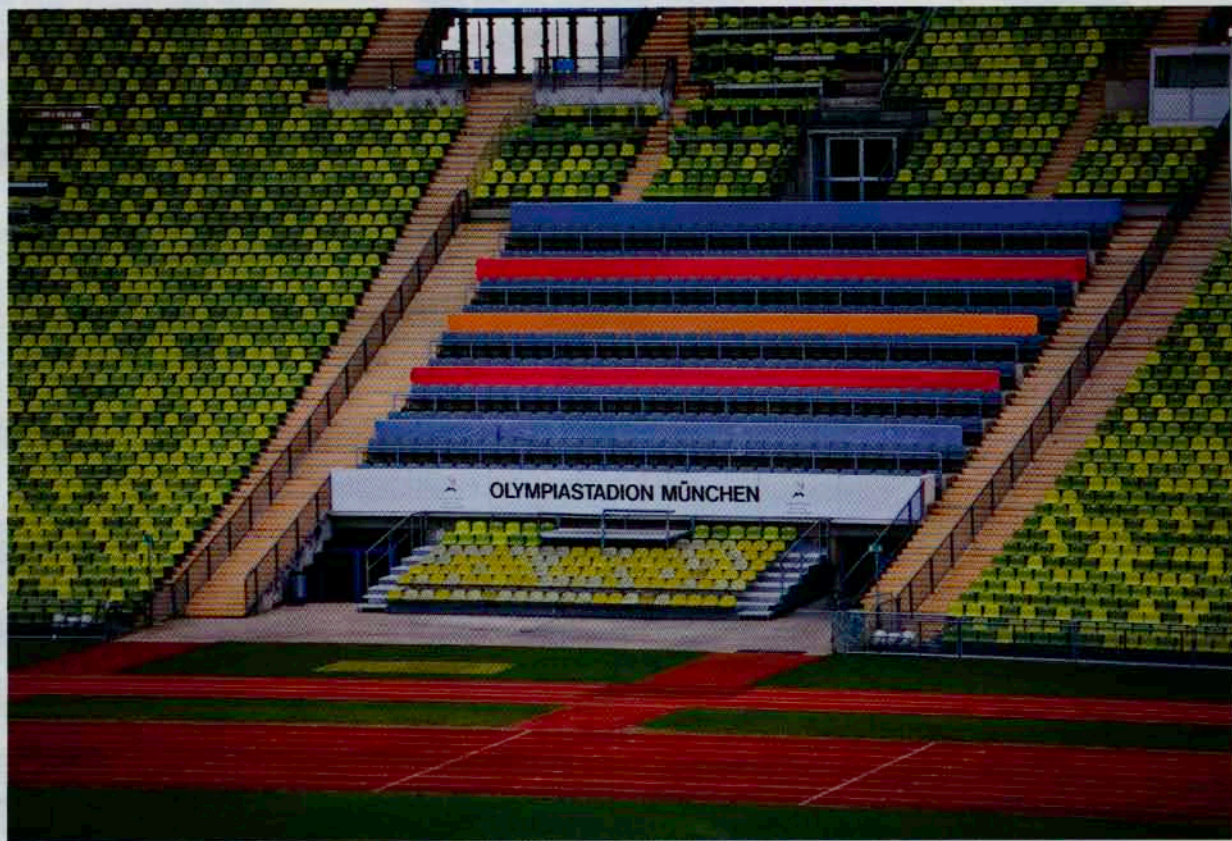


for Morris, is above all about power and psychology, and the colors and cat's cradle geometry of each series are carefully chosen to create a specific politics and poetics of place.

While her new canvases are large, she has built other paintings on an even more architecturally ambitious scale. In 2006, she made a piece for Lever House, on Park Avenue in Manhattan, inspired by her conversations with the seminal '70s screenwriter Robert Towne, who won an Oscar for *Chinatown*. Morris liked the idea of bringing a flavor of the stories of intrigue and political corruption for which Towne is famous into a corporate Midtown context. It was a kind of refracted portrait in graphic abstractions, a 19,744-square-foot temporary mural that covered the ceiling inside the glassed-in lobby with shards of color, and continued outside over the building's pedestrian walkways. "You really get a sense of an expanded grid," Morris says, "of how the paintings are part of a larger whole which you're not privy to."

Morris's new work, however, departs from the rigor of the modernist grid, with its echoes of skyscrapers and Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, to embrace concentric forms. "To me, the Olympic logo is sort of like an afterthought," she explains of the "Rings" series. Beijing, where the upcoming Olympic Games will be held, is a decentered city composed of several ring roads—six-lane highways that are, she says, "constantly expanding, with no real architectural markers against which to situate yourself. You have this feeling of déjà vu as you're going around and around." In her paintings, this chaotic urban plan serves as a metaphor for China's runaway economy.

The palette of each series is based on materials she found while scouting specific locations.

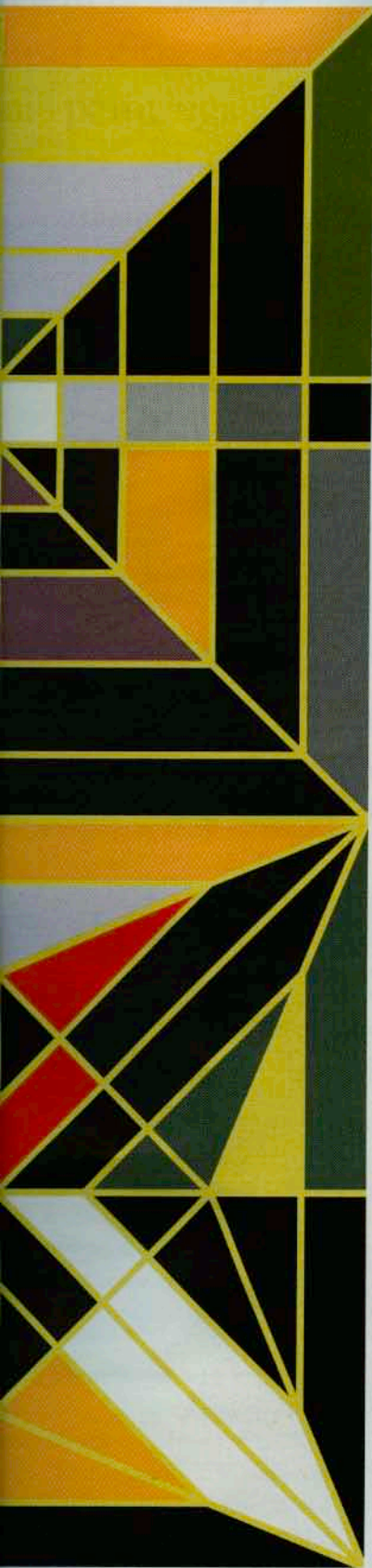


OPPOSITE PAGE: Sarah Morris in Beijing. Photo: Sean Dack. © Parallax. ABOVE: Still from 1972, 2008, showing the stadium designed by Günther Behnisch for the 1972 Munich Olympic Games. Courtesy the artist.

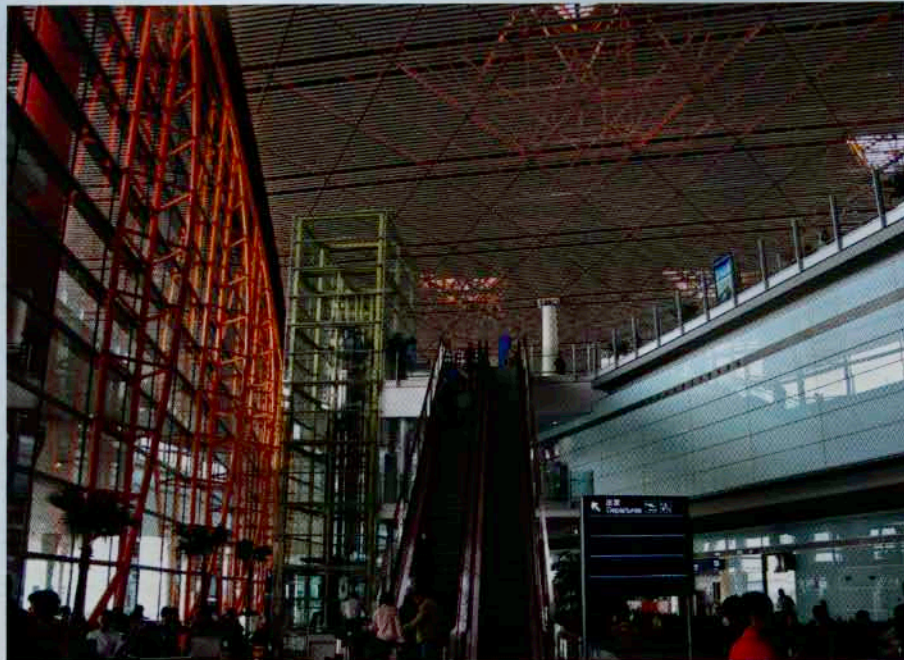
For Los Angeles, she used the blue color of the empty film screen, as well as the color-coded hues of various drafts of screenplays that stack up on Hollywood's photocopy machines and industry desks. With Beijing, red, yellow, and turquoise are repeated a great deal, and colors of a tinny, lacquered immediacy are offset by faded and sun-blasted tones of dusty brown and beige: "Everything aspires to be shiny and new," she says of the city, "but is covered with the dust that comes in from the desert and by pollution." As we speak, Morris produces two brands of Chinese cigarettes: a claret-red pack of Double Happiness and a turquoise carton of Lesser Panda, both of which nod to Beijing's infamous smog and serve as important color reference points ("Lesser Panda" is the title of her London show). Morris habitually achieves her final palette by taking such samples to a paint store, where they are matched by computer to provide the household gloss she uses.

At White Cube, Morris will exhibit the "Rings" series alongside a group of paintings based





Chinese Television headquarters under construction



on DIY origami kits, origami being an art form that was invented in China (not, as many people believe, in Japan). The paintings reveal a certain ambiguity about China, which she describes as a mix of the “extremely authoritarian” and “the hypercapitalism of New York’s Canal Street.” Morris wonders: is this what the future will look like? “I was interested in this idea that comes from *Blade Runner*,” she tells me, “of using the origami form as a harbinger of change, as a marker of something around the corner which you do not necessarily know, and which sometimes is not necessarily for the better.”

Since the late 1990s, Morris has made films—or, as she terms them, “visual manifestos”—that she sometimes shows alongside her paintings. They are city symphonies in the style of Paul Strand’s *Manhatta* (1921) and Walther Ruttmann’s *Berlin, The Symphony of a Great City* (1927). These dialogue-free, half-hour shorts, all scored by her Turner Prize-nominated husband, Liam Gillick, focus in turn on midtown Manhattan; Las Vegas; Miami; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles. “In a way, the paintings are fiction,” Morris explains, “and the films are real—they’re also fiction, but they’re a real-looking version of fiction, and I liked the idea of creating a parallel activity to the paintings which would become a reference point.”

When making her ode to Washington, Morris managed to talk her way into one of Bill Clinton’s cabinet meetings; when filming the narcissistic buildup to the 2004 Oscars, she gained entrance to the movie set of *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, where Brad Pitt is filmed punching himself during rehearsal, and she secured a privileged spot on the red carpet. Every shot represents the culmination of a complex series of behind-the-scenes negotiations. During the preproduction of each film, Morris assembles a reference board that charts a close network of power relations, of institutions and gatekeepers, of people who know people who might give her access to various situations and places. She has talked about such an alternate map of Hollywood as being like “a diagram of a headache.”

Her new film, which focuses on another highly ritualized televised event, tackles the instant architecture of the Olympic Games, where big names have thrown up landmark buildings in record time to meet the 08/08/08 deadline: Norman Foster’s airport (the largest in the world), Herzog & de Meuron’s “Bird’s Nest” stadium, PTW Architects’ bubble-wrap Olympic pool, Rem Koolhaas’s double-Z-shaped CCTV tower. Morris tells me with a smile and a raised eyebrow that she had “to deal with egos the size of film studios” while making her Los Angeles project but that in terms of overinflation, Hollywood’s players “are completely dwarfed by architects.”

The diagram of this particular headache covers one wall of her studio. Stuck to it are sheets of paper, each bearing a name: Steven Spielberg, Cai Quo-Qiang, Rem Koolhaas, and Herzog & de Meuron, as well as bureaucracies such as the International Olympic Committee and the China Film Co-Production Corporation. Ironically, her map of Beijing takes her to Los Angeles, Switzerland, London, and New York. “All these different conversations that are constantly going on inform the way in which the film happens,” Morris explains, “and they also to some extent inform the paintings in a very oblique way. I don’t want to incriminate myself,” she says, and pauses before going on,

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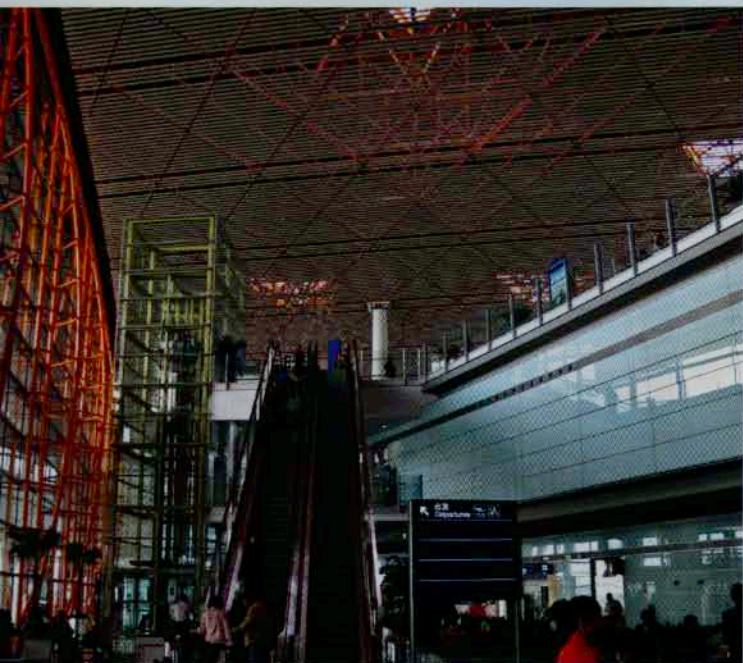
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During her ode to Washington, Morris managed to talk her way into one of the cabinet meetings; when filming the narcissistic buildup to the 2004 Olympic Games, she secured a privileged spot on the red carpet representing the culmination of a complex series of behind-the-scenes maneuvering. During the preproduction of each film, Morris assembles a reference board of the power network of power relations, of institutions and gatekeepers, of people who might give her access to various situations and places. She has an alternate map of Hollywood as being like “a diagram of a headache.” Her film, which focuses on another highly ritualized televised event, tackles the architecture of the Olympic Games, where big names have thrown up buildings in record time to meet the 08/08/08 deadline: Norman Foster’s (the tallest in the world), Herzog & de Meuron’s “Bird’s Nest” stadium, PTW’s wrap-around Olympic pool, Rem Koolhaas’s double-Z-shaped CCTV tower. “I smile with a smile and a raised eyebrow that she had “to deal with egos and studios” while making her Los Angeles project but that in terms of Hollywood’s players “are completely dwarfed by architects.” A wall of this particular headache covers one wall of her studio. Stuck to it are names, each bearing a name: Steven Spielberg, Cai Quo-Qiang, Rem Koolhaas, Herzog & de Meuron, as well as bureaucracies such as the International Olympic Committee and the China Film Co-Production Corporation. Ironically, her travels take her to Los Angeles, Switzerland, London, and New York. “All these conversations that are constantly going on inform the way in which the film is made,” Morris explains, “and they also to some extent inform the paintings in a very subtle way. I don’t want to incriminate myself,” she says, and pauses before going on,

somewhat cryptically, “but certain conversations with some of these institutions that exist in China and also some of the architects working in Beijing inform your perspective on what exactly is transpiring.” The film poses the question: who, if anyone, is responsible for overseeing all this urban planning on such an unprecedented scale?

Morris’s use of CinemaScope, and her celluloid vocabulary of slow pans and tracking shots, lend all her films an air of conspiracy. In her *White Cube* exhibition, she will be showing her most recently completed film, one that deals with a subject about which many conspiracy theories exist. Titled *1972*, it is a product of her interest in the Olympic Games and a kind of study toward her Beijing piece. It focuses on the psychologist Georg Sieber, who advised the police and security services during the ill-fated 1972 Olympic Games, where 11 Israeli athletes and their captors were massacred (the subject of Spielberg’s *Munich* and Kevin McDonald’s Oscar-winning documentary *One Day in September*).

Sieber claims to have predicted the scenario that eventually took place, and blames Mossad for having helped to choreograph the disaster that marred an Olympics that was supposed to have had the flavor of a spring festival. He is interviewed in Morris’s film in front of a statue of Pinocchio, whose long nose points directly at him as if to question his version of events. The atmosphere of suspicion and recrimination is heightened by Morris’s camera work, which lingers on the sweeping canopies and empty seats of Günther Behnisch’s Olympian architecture.

Morris’s studio is named the Parallax Corporation, after the famous 1970s movie *The Parallax View*, a film in which architecture similarly serves to heighten a sense of paranoia. In the film, which was scripted by Robert Towne, the Parallax Corporation recruits and brainwashes political assassins. “I like the idea of working for an organization that you’re not really sure where its headed,” Morris explains of her choice of name, “which is definitely similar to being an artist...you can think you’re in control, but it’s not necessarily clear whether you are in control or not, and I like that play of sort of degrading yourself in the process.” ♦

“*Lesser Panda*” will be on view at *White Cube*, London, through Sept. 6.

