

Searle, Adrian, *Dazzled by the rings*, The Guardian, Wednesday, July 20, 2008 (ill.)

guardian.co.uk

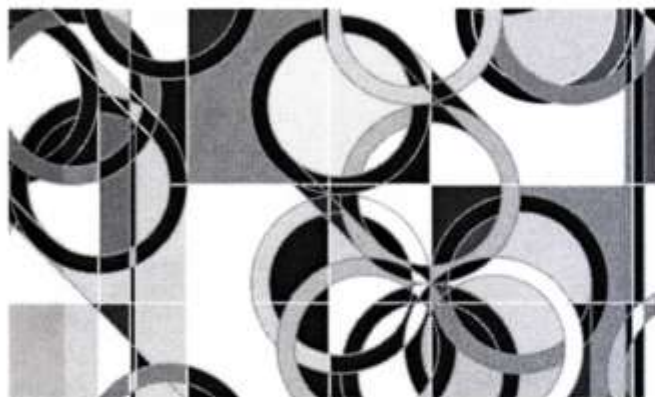
Dazzled by the rings

The Olympics are at the heart of US artist Sarah Morris's chillingly immaculate work. Adrian Searle (no great fan of the Games) is left feeling sweaty, awkward - and captivated



Adrian Searle

The Guardian, Wednesday July 30 2008



Unstable background effect' ... Sarah Morris's 2008 (Rings). Photograph: Stephen White/courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube

Except as examples of grandiose, mass spectacle, I have no interest in the Olympics, whether this year in Beijing or London in 2012. Olympiads are for architects and city planners, prospective terrorists, security consultants and Triumph of the Will types. The mere prospect of a game of ping-pong fills me with horror and despair.

So I was a somewhat hesitant visitor to the exhibition Lesser Panda, by the American artist Sarah Morris at White Cube in Mason's Yard, London. Her show consists of a film about the 1972 Munich Olympics, and a number of paintings, one of which - a huge, corner-turning, eight-panel monster - takes the interlocking Olympic rings as its recurrent motif. Many of Morris's current paintings riff on these rings. She is making a film in Beijing. The Olympics are much on her mind.

But Morris undercuts the sporting allusions and the ideals of the Olympiad: the oddball title of the show refers to a popular Chinese brand of cigarettes - maybe the fags are less harmful than Beijing smog. Meanwhile much of her film, 1972, consists of recent interviews with Georg Sieber, a behavioural and criminal psychologist who worked with the Munich police in the late 1960s and early 70s, masterminding local law enforcement tactics for dealing with crowd control and demonstrations.

Sieber also advised on Olympic security, and predicted the attack, on September 5 1972, by the PLO Black September faction that took members of the Israeli Olympic team hostage. He quit before the bloodbath that ensued. His is a long and interesting story, told by Morris in understated fragments.

Morris frequently pairs her paintings and films. Both are largely concerned with cities: previously she has made films about New York, Washington and Los Angeles. Both share extremely high production values: Morris's films are shot in 35mm, and her paintings have a gloss of impersonal perfection. Her work at once captivates, intrigues and resists me. It enters the territory of the New York-based Catalan artist Antoni Muntadas, who has studied the sinister aspects of the control and choreography of public space. In the catalogue that accompanies this show, Morris says: "There is some element of repulsion in front of my paintings . . . something very all-encompassing and dominating about [them] ... that can be extremely empowering or incredibly alienating; I think having both experiences, the struggle between the two, is what I find to be motivating". According to Christopher Turner, in the current issue of *Modern Painters*, Morris "intends her pulsating displays to be critiques of capitalism", though he admits this might not, at first, be apparent. This is either ridiculous or serious. I am experiencing the struggle between the two. And how precisely is a painting - never mind a "pulsating display" - empowering?

Searle, Adrian, *Dazzled by the rings*, *The Guardian*, Wednesday, July 20, 2008 (ill.)

Like the abstractions of Barnett Newman or Jackson Pollock, Morris's paintings look great when people move about in front of them, even if they don't always do much for the people themselves. As they walk between you and the canvas, they get themselves snarled up in her paintings' hard-edged complications. The fact that 2028 (Rings) wraps itself around a corner invites seeing it as a kind of insistent and unstable background effect. Whatever logic her paintings have, in their grids and rhomboids, the painted origami folds and graphic signage, the colours that reflect the locale she has been studying - it cannot all be assimilated or entirely remembered.

Technically, Morris's paintings are so accomplished there is nowhere for them to go. They are what they are and do what they do, resolutely declaring themselves as both product and spectacle. Morris may think there is something repellent about them - and so do I - but it is interesting to observe how

people want to get right up close to them, to inspect their sheer gloss-painted surfaces, the pristine edges of the shapes.

Two collector types were looking while I was there. "How do they do that?" one asked, tottering up close to the surface. If she got any closer her head would have bounced off the canvas. "Are the shapes stuck on?" Gallery invigilators told us all to move back. Up close, it is as if a breath or a cough might spoil the immaculate finish. Next to a Sarah Morris painting I feel sweaty, awkward, street-soiled and gangling. There's not a bleed of paint, an errant hair or a fly trapped anywhere in the paint. If Morris's horizontals or verticals ever appear off-whack, it is because the world is wrong. Euclid would run screaming from the room.

To witness such perfection in a handmade object is wearying. Even Mondrian was allowed blips, Barnett Newman was positively sloppy. Morris's unremitting dazzle is somehow soulless and inhuman, which I guess is the intention. However much the colour sings and the Olympic quoits jump and shuffle about, the general effect is alienating.

Bill Clinton, paper coffee cup in hand, drifts through Morris's film *Capital* (shot exactly a year before 9/11), and the screenwriter, producer and Hollywood fixer Robert Towne is the ostensible subject of Morris's LA film. Towne was an uncredited script doctor on the 1974 political thriller *The Parallax View*, about a sinister, shadowy organisation that brainwashes and trains assassins. Morris's own film company is called *Parallax Films*. She is much taken with the idea of conspiracy, but wonders if the truth that is hidden from us is that there is no conspiracy, no grand design, nothing at all behind the facades of power, just like the Wizard of Oz pulling his little levers behind the curtain. This might also be the metaphor of her paintings.

Morris's films are full of resonance and unsettled atmospheres, much aided by the ambient soundtracks of her husband, the British artist Liam Gillick. Both Morris's and Gillick's art evince a similar kind of edgy chill. In the film 1972, the camera takes in the arching roof and thousands of seats of the Munich Olympic stadium. A lone office worker trudges along a distant ramp, briefcase in hand. We see city views, sudden clips of old news footage, the head of Georg Sieber - in a car, in his office, being watched over by an incongruous toy Pinocchio, who stares and points its nose at him, like a compass searching for its north of lies.

Sieber is a persuasive talker. But early on in the half-hour film he says: "Historical truth is only the sum of subjective perceptions, interpretations and thoughts, which can be checked by comparing statements and documents. But the real truth remains an ideal, a dream, something that isn't real. Next question, please." This is his key speech. We never hear his interlocutor.

In the late 1960s, Sieber persuaded Munich police to replace their usual heavy-handed approach with one of complicity and communication. Talking, Sieber felt, was better than the thwack of a riot truncheon. When the attack at the 1972 Olympics came, it unfolded in uncanny accordance with one of the possible scenarios Sieber had worked through in his security plans. But then Mossad took over. Sieber went home and watched it all on TV.

Somehow, Morris's film conveys the weight of history and the sheen of the present. It's all down to the shot held for a few extra excruciating seconds, the telling soundbite, the wordless pan, with Gillick's soundtrack adding its layer of unease. Tension doesn't mount but hangs there, immutable. Morris has said that her films are not documentaries, but a "form of inquiry". They might also be portraits - of people, places, the menacing flat-tone mentality of the present. Spectacle and social control, public space and surveillance, architecture as an expression of ideology - all these issues are at the heart of JG Ballard's writing, which Morris admires. Maybe I'll watch the Olympics after all.

• **Lesser Panda** is at White Cube Mason's Yard, London SW1, until September 6. Details: 020-7930 5373