

SARAH MORRIS | PORSCHEs | RUTH ASAWA | NEWCOMB PO

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OCTOBER 2013 BLOUIN ART+AUCTION



“I’m constantly thinking about the direction of the work and where it’s going and how to question what has come before it.”

—PAINTER AND FILMMAKER SARAH MORRIS AT HER STUDIO IN QUEENS, NEW YORK.

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106



A comprehensive system of gallon paint cans helps Sarah Morris create formalist abstractions, such as this work in progress in her 8,000-square-foot studio in Queens, New York.

WITH WINDOWS THAT REACH FROM waist height nearly 15 feet up and wrap an entire corner, Sarah Morris's 8,000-square-foot studio in Long Island City is flooded with light. Trying to take it all in, the eye darts from a freestanding ladder reaching up to hanging light fixtures, to a stripe of dark cork that punctuates a white half-wall, to large-scale canvases in various stages of completion that, despite their size, are dwarfed by the studio's sheer breadth, to the Empire State Building, framed by a window, flat and two-dimensional against a cloudless blue sky. The same quick-cut effect appears in many of Morris's films, the latest of which, *Rio*, complements a series of paintings of the same name and debuted in July during "Bye Bye Brazil," her exhibition at London's White Cube. The show moves to New York's Friedrich Petzel Gallery in November.

The dizzying ceiling height creates a sensation of moving on a dolly as one walks through the studio's open space, located in a former Learjet interiors factory. Areas are clearly demarcated by purpose—making and viewing work, storing art materials, categorizing canvases—in an environment that seems virtually spotless despite the custom cart groaning with gallon cans of paint. The artist explains that her recent move to this studio accounts for its cleanliness but then she admits, "The cleaner the studio, the easier it is for me to think, focus. It just produces better work."

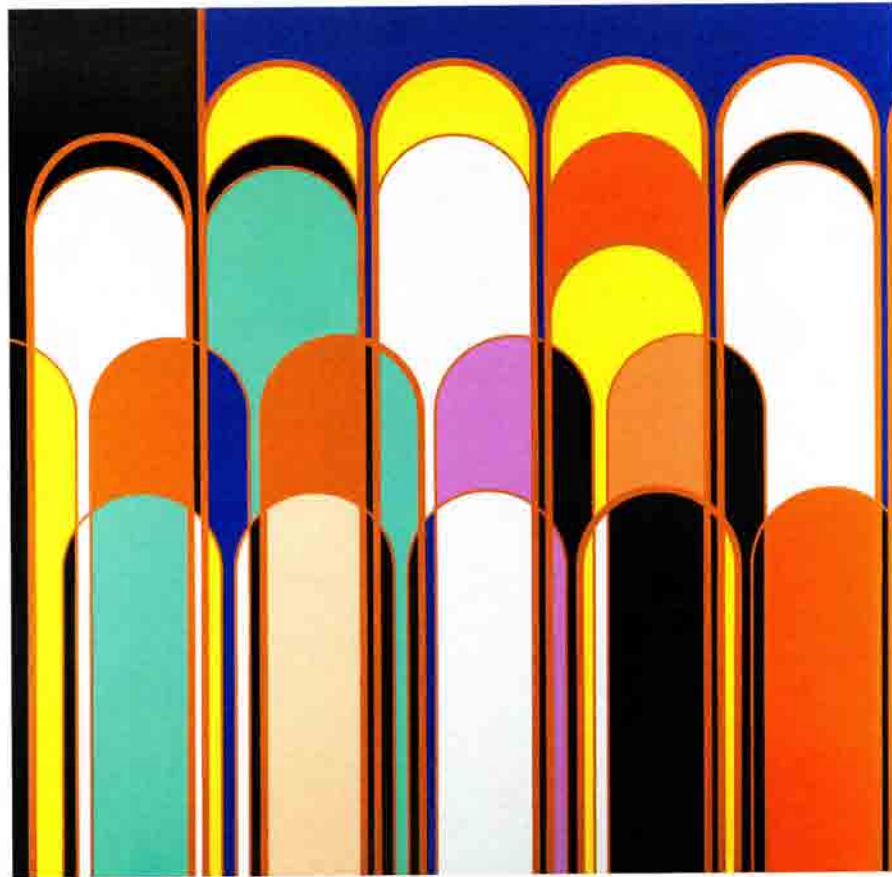
Focus is certainly required for Morris's cool, highly formalistic paintings featuring thick grids, sharp diagonals, sliced spheres, and broken geometries. Her workstation off to the left is the studio's obvious mission control, dominated by a Mac Pro with HD display, which the artist uses to map out her compositions. They draw on precedents found in Malevich, Mondrian, and Kelly but offer seamless gestures that once again send the eye darting as an action painting would. Over the past 15 years these works, which are simultaneously meditative and challenging, have gained the artist inclusion in such important exhibitions as the 25th Bienal de São Paulo, in 2002, and the 2003 Tate Triennial, and have earned her solo shows at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, Stockholm's Moderna Museet, and MMK in Frankfurt.

SARAH MORRIS

IN DYNAMIC, FORMALIST PAINTINGS AND FLUID YET EDGY FILMS,
THE ARTIST CHALLENGES VIEWERS TO CONNECT THE DOTS

BY DEBORAH WILK PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTINE LARSEN

It's surprising to learn that canvases flaunting such vivid hues of teal, orange, yellow, indigo, pink, and green begin life in black-and-white on a computer screen. Form comes first, but color has long been a key component of Morris's work, from her early text paintings shown at the Saatchi Gallery in London, which associated her with the YBA crowd (including Darren Almond, Liam Gillick, Sam Taylor-Wood, and Jane and Louise Wilson), to the grids of her "Midtown" and "Las Vegas" series and the heightened optical game of the present day. Each body of work offers a distinctive palette based on an actual geographic locale or a conceptual landscape. "It usually starts with a place—its politics, situations, images," says the British-born Morris, who grew up in the U.S. "In that context, I look at geometric forms and start drawings, diagrams, which very quickly go onto



From the artist's "Rio" series of paintings, *Praça da Apoteose [Rio]*, 2012, top, offers vertical movement in juxtaposition to a still from the accompanying film, showcasing the colors of Carnival. The artist, above, exclusively uses household gloss paint on her canvases, which are built up with stencils.

the computer." Those diagrams are sparked in part by the "thousands of photographs" Morris shoots while in preproduction for a film. For *Rio*, her subjects included architecture by Oscar Niemeyer, bikinis, train stations, and Volkswagens (the first South American factory for which was built in Brazil).

"For the 'Rio' series of paintings, say, colors were taken from the beach umbrellas in Ipanema, from the Globo snack wrappers seen everywhere, maybe a blue from the Brahma beer label," the artist says. She walks over to the cork stripe, which is just starting to be populated with such found ephemera as well as a grid of mini diagrams sampling marriages of form and color. "If someone tried to create a system for it," she says, "it would be quite difficult because it's both objective and subjective." This

is an apt phrasing for the appeal of her works, which are fully abstract yet manage to convey the impression of place.

For all the edgy energy they evoke, the artist takes a fairly meditative approach to her canvases. "The paintings are very slow, very precise, very meticulous. You can't rush them," she says. She jokes that she should buy stock in 3M, the manufacturer of the blue painter's tape she and her studio assistants use to create stencils upon which layer after layer of color is applied to build the compositions. "They're sort of an open system, and within that economy of time there's a lot of space between things where I just have to wait." But as a cerebral sort—Morris earned an undergraduate degree in semiotics and political philosophy at Brown University, read social and political science at Cambridge, and attended the Whitney Museum of Art's Independent Study Program—she does not rest idle: "In that emptiness I do a lot of other things, one of which is have a lot of conversations about the films."

Although they are separate, the films and paintings feed each other. "They are parallel," she explains. "They're always happening at the same time. It's not a linear, causal relation." »

The paintings, for example, “involve the ideas of light and motion,” she says. They’re “self-splintering, fragmenting, and generating the next thing. Together they create a chain of pieces, a series of steps, and I’m constantly thinking about the direction of the work and where it’s going and how to question what has come before it.”

There is a lyricism about Morris’s films that sets her apart from many artists working in the medium. Perhaps it’s a reverence for the form rather than a co-opting of it. (Or perhaps it’s the ethereal soundtracks composed by Gillick, a longtime collaborator.) Her first thoughts about moving images were of animations of her painted compositions—like a flip-book that would leave the viewer feeling as if he or she had taken a journey. But given her knowledge of film



Shapes from *Academia Militar* [Rio], 2013, above, echo *The Parallax View*, 2012, an ink and gouache on a paper movie poster for a foreign-language version of one of the artist’s favorite films. Its uncredited script adapter talked about the film industry and his role in it as the subject of *Robert Towne*, 2006.

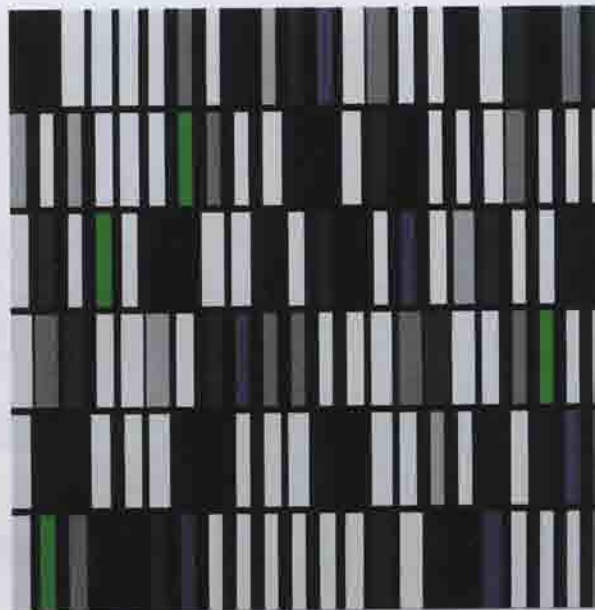
theory and the way didactic images can be made abstract to affect atmosphere, Morris realized she could frame shots from real life and create referential parallels to her plastic work. In 1998 she engaged a news crew to shoot her first film, *Midtown*, to show with a body of paintings at Cologne’s Museum Ludwig. “They were most versatile and adept,” she says of the crew. “I had these pulse points I wanted to capture, both corporate and pedestrian, and that was the beginning of my film process that is structured, fast, very cinema verité, with nothing staged.”

Morris appears to be having a good time in the director’s chair, informing her film crews (no longer rigged by the newsroom) that a typical shoot day will involve many more locations and situations than they might be used to. “Robert Towne has this line that as a filmmaker, you’re functioning as an anarchist who’s trying to control a fantasy world,” says Morris. Towne, the legendary Hollywood script doctor, was once a figure Morris admired from afar—she named her



studio Parallax after the 1974 film *The Parallax View*—but she has begun a dialogue with him as the result of her film *Robert Towne*, 2006. The artist is fascinated by his role: “He takes existing material, tweaks it, and makes it better,” she says. “That is what I do.”

The films, like the paintings, are meditations on place, whether the artificial flash of Las Vegas or the leisure culture of Miami or the power corridors of Washington, D.C. Naturally, the ideas brought forth in one place set the stage for the next. “Some things have to follow others as potentially corrective gestures,” says Morris. “While I was shooting or making the ‘Los Angeles’ series of work, dealing with the concept of the film industry and the ego, I had already made a very firm decision that the next project was going to be based in China. What better place to position the next work than somewhere that doesn’t value ego in the same way, a nation-state that is hypercapitalist and possibly totalitarian at the same time?” She continues, “Choosing Rio after Beijing »



In a city renowned as a center for surgical innovations in cosmetics and dentistry, the artist observes a procedure for her film *Rio*, 2012. *Vale*, 2013, top right, from the "Rio" series of paintings, revisits the artist's previous examinations of corporate building facades. Mini versions of the "Rio" compositions populate a cork board in the studio.



means something. I'm not going to spell out exactly what. There's no way to isolate one city from any other place."

Despite the correlations, Morris is reluctant to say that there is a linear connection between places and ideas. "I wouldn't use that word. I would say it's a chain of ideas and people and travel and movement," she says. "The films are an excuse to create situations and meet people and somehow learn something from politics, architecture, advertising, film, law, and see how someone could use the best of those things as a way of thinking." In that context, films such as *Robert Towne*, in which Morris moves from a macro lens to a single psychology, don't seem so anomalous. In her 2010 film, *Points on a Line*, she brings the macro and micro together by showcasing two places, iconic buildings by famous architects,

and examining how the marriage of form and function is successfully (or unsuccessfully) engineered. For Morris it's a matter of connection, but rather of one idea giving rise to another and sometimes looping back again

Left alone for a moment in the studio, I'm examining Morris's bookshelf when my eye falls on a pocket-size map of the London Underground adorned with her painting *Petrobr* [*Rio*], 2012, printed as part of the city's Art on the Underground program. The composition of dissected circles has an obvious visual echo in the spaghetti bowl of train lines detailed inside. The tube is also the place where people living separate lives, unknown to one another, move in tandem, perfectly in sync while going from one place to the next. It's a system that seems tailor-made to Morris's affinity for points on a line. H