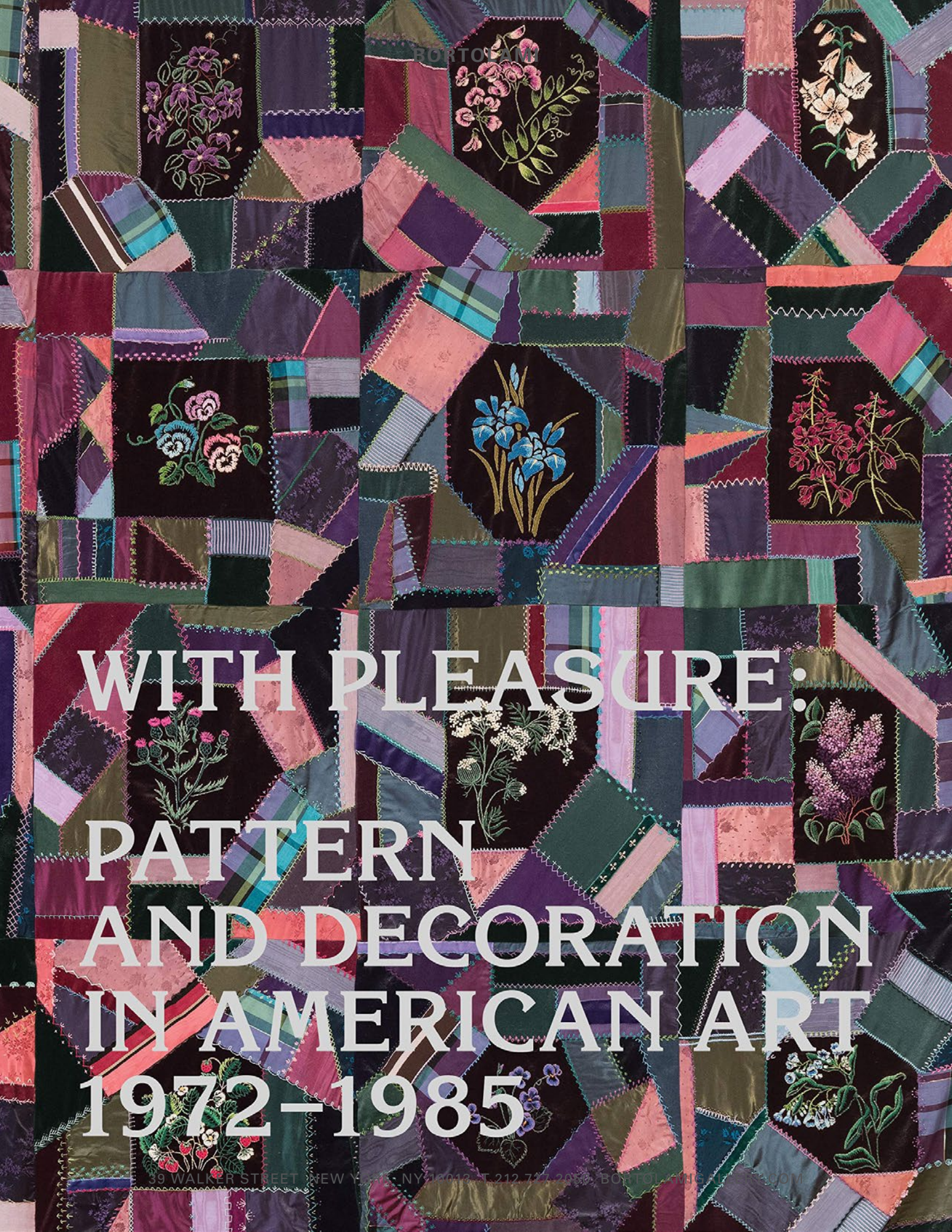


Selected Articles & Interviews

Rebecca Morris

2001-2022



BORTOLINI

WITH PLEASURE:
PATTERN
AND DECORATION
IN AMERICAN ART
1972-1985

39 WALKER STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013 T 212 777 2089 BORTOLINI.COM



REBECCA MORRIS AND THE REVENGE OF P&D

HAMZA WALKER

In 1969 Daniel Buren penned his seminal essay “Mise en garde!” (“Beware!”) on the occasion of his inclusion in *Konzeption/Conception: Documentation of Today’s Art Tendencies*, a survey of Conceptual art curated by Konrad Fischer and Rolf Wedewer for the Museum Morsbroich, in Leverkusen, Germany.¹ With more than forty artists, the show was a who’s who of the American and European avant-garde. What better opportunity to express umbrage taken at Conceptual art? An umbrage cloaked as grave reservations, as the title “Beware!” suggests. Pun intended, Buren’s polemic begins straight out of the gate with the infamous quote “Concept has never meant ‘horse.’”² His barbs have yet to dull over time. Take for example this remark about mannerist Conceptual practice: “In order, no doubt, to get closer to ‘reality,’ the ‘conceptual’ artist becomes gardener, scientist, sociologist, philosopher, storyteller, chemist, sportsman.”³ As the artist Joe Scanlan has shown, all you have to do is replace “conceptual artist” with “relational aesthetics artist,” or “social practices artist,” and the essay reads as applicable to the current moment.

But Buren’s barbs are sharp ultimately because he has skin in the game. He developed his in situ method of working through an extremely rigorous line of thinking about the dematerialization of art, which was not to be taken lightly. If anything, “Beware!” expresses his fears about its trivialization. His warning regarding the dematerialization of the object is introduced with the heading *Concept = Idea = Art*:

Lastly, more than one person will be tempted to take any sort of an “idea,” to make art of it and to call it “concept.” It is this procedure which seems to us to be the most dangerous, because it is more difficult to dislodge, because it is very attractive, because it raises a problem that really does exist: how to dispose of the object?⁴

Buren was bothered by the thought of Conceptual art devolving into a trend, a new style of art, at which point it would become “the prevailing ideology.”⁵ The problems the movement sought to address would then be considered solved. These solutions are the new art, which, according to Buren, is simply the old art in a new form. Buren’s work was aimed precisely at the problem of form, specifically its neutralization, which was tantamount to the dematerialization of art. The neutralization of form was a problem that could only be addressed in a sustained fashion, in a manner that would rearticulate rather than resolve the problem. By 1969, Buren had spent four years working “without any evolution or way out.”⁶ However polemical his essay, Buren is equally explicit about his methodology.

The text begins with a call for a painting that is non-illusionistic, in the sense of being not merely abstract, but abstract to the point of being “its own reality.” In other words, it is a call for a purely self-referential painting, one that is staunchly anti-illusionistic in that it does not refer to anything outside of itself:

1 Daniel Buren, “Beware!,” in *Konzeption/Conception*, trans. Charles Harrison and Peter Townsend (Leverkusen, Germany: Staatliche Museum, 1969); reprinted in *Studio International* 179, no. 920 (March 1970): 100–104.

2 *Ibid.*, 100.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

In the same way that writing is less and less a matter of verbal transcription, painting should no longer be the vague vision/illusion, even mental, of a phenomenon (nature, subconsciousness, geometry . . .) but *VISUALITY of the painting itself*. In this way we arrive at a . . . method which requires . . . that painting itself should create a mode, a specific system, which would no longer direct attention, but which is “produced to be looked at.”⁷

Hence the evenly spaced vertical stripes, each band being 8.7 centimeters wide and a single color alternating with white (fig. 2). Colors are deployed in a systematically democratic fashion such that they are equally interchangeable (black = red = green = blue = yellow) from one work to the next. Each work comprises a succession of bands of equal width filling up the painting side to side; thus whatever composition there is to speak of is completely neutral insofar as the part-to-whole relationship is evenly dispersed across the surface area. There is no “contradiction,” only an evenly distributed alternation of equal forms. Without contradiction, by default there is no “tragedy,” to use the term which in Buren’s case is a euphemism for anthropomorphism. The stripes likewise dispense with the horizon line. There are only top and bottom. This succession of bands is a system resulting in a fixed internal structure. The internal structure of the painting is independent of its external dimensions, which are allowed to vary depending wholly on circumstances.

With the stripe motif as a constant, repetition became Buren’s starting point. It was the means to highlight the ever-changing context of the venue, whether that was inside or outside the museum or the gallery. Buren’s work could assume a variety of forms and be placed in a variety of settings where it could directly address specific



Fig. 2: Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Peinture acrylique blanche sur tissu rayé blanc et rouge*, 1971. Acrylic on woven red and white fabric, 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 x 7/8 in. (200.03 x 200.03 x 2.22 cm). The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, purchased with funds provided by Robert H. Halff

formal and or sociopolitical aspects of its location. By extending, or transferring, the logic of painting's self-reflexivity to its context, Buren would place painting, as opposed to the readymade, at the core of institutional critique.

At the time of the publication of "Beware!," Buren had been producing his signature stripe works for four years. In that time, his stripes had come to exemplify Conceptual art. This, however, would eclipse the fact that Buren had arrived at the stripe in empirical fashion as the paintings over the course of 1964 through 1965 and into 1966 make abundantly clear; observe the appearance of the stripe in 1965's *Enamel paint on cotton canvas* (fig. 3), followed by work in which Buren painted directly on fabric, 1966's *Variable Forms Painting* (fig. 4).

Buren's work perfects the paradigm of an art for art's sake. Here, any formal evolution within painting is replaced by repetition. The emphasis previously reserved for individual paintings is shifted onto a logic of production, or a methodology. This shift corresponds to another shift, namely a shift from the empirical to the theoretical come again as the ideological. For Buren, the ideological assumes the form of a recurring proposition. As such, it is anything but absolute. The transitional works of 1964/1965/1966 are remarkable in that they literally illustrate the perfecting of an art-for-art's-sake paradigm in which the terminating logic of the monochrome is substituted with a generative logic belonging to what else but pattern painting.



Fig. 3, left: Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Enamel paint on cotton canvas*, [September-October] 1965. Enamel paint on cotton canvas, 89 ¼ × 75 ½ in (226.5 × 191.5cm)

Fig. 4, right: Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Variable Forms Painting*, [May] 1966. Acrylic on white and grey striped cotton canvas, 89 × 75 in (226 × 190.2 cm)

Buren has never shunned the decorative, and should anyone have speculations regarding Daniel Buren as the ultimate Pattern and Decoration painter, I call to the witness stand the 2013 Buren/Louis Vuitton collaboration (fig. 5), in which Buren provided the sets for the spring fashion-week unveiling of Vuitton's line. And continuing to make this case, I wish to juxtapose the Buren/Vuitton collaboration with the performances of a seminal member of Pattern and Decoration, or P&D, Robert Kushner. His performances grew out of a fascination with both movement and costuming, an interest Kushner developed during his early years as an artist in San Diego, having attended the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). Later, he would integrate food into the costumes, as in *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*, performed at both Jack Glenn Gallery, Corona del Mar, California, and Acme Productions, Greene Street Gallery, New York, in 1972 (fig. 6), and Kushner began staging performances that developed into fashion shows, a series of which he would mount in New York throughout the 1970s, including *The Winter and Spring Lines* (1973), *The Persian Line* (1975), and *Sentimental Fables* (1979), this last presented at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

But what about Pattern and Decoration proper? As curator Anne Swartz has detailed in her 2007 exhibition catalogue *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975–1985*, as a movement, P&D began in 1975 over a series of three discrete events. The first was a panel at Artists Space titled “The Pattern in Painting,”



Fig. 5, left: Louis Vuitton runway designed by Daniel Buren, Paris Fashion Week, Spring/Summer 2013
Fig. 6, right: Robert Kushner, *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*, 1975. Performance, Acme Productions, Greene Street Loft, New York

organized by Mario Yrisarry and moderated by Peter Frank. Its speakers included Martin Bressler, Rosalind Hodgkins, Valerie Jaudon, Tony Robbin, and Sanford Wurmfeld. The second and most formative was a series of “pattern meetings” at Robert Zakanitch’s Warren Street loft. Attendees included art historian and critic Amy Goldin, Leonore Goldberg, Hodgkins, Jaudon, Joyce Kozloff, Robert Kushner, Robbin, Miriam Schapiro, Kendall Shaw, Nina Yankowitz, and Zakanitch. The third event was the opening of Holly Solomon Gallery, which debuted with a group exhibition that included nineteen artists, among them Kushner, Kim MacConnel, and Ned Smyth, all of whom were core P&D subscribers. The premiere was followed by a solo show of Brad Davis’s work and shortly thereafter a solo show of MacConnel’s work. A steady stream of panels, meetings, and exhibitions continued unabated over the next two years, culminating in the 1977 survey *Pattern Painting* at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York, curated by art critic John Perreault.⁸

8 See Anne Swartz, “Chronology of Shows and Writings,” in *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975–1985*, ed. Anne Swartz (Yonkers, NY: Hudson River Museum, 2007), 113–19.

P&D is not a feminist movement in my view, yet it is inconceivable without feminism, which lent it a critical platform as well as a means of networking. As for the latter, relationships between P&D’s key female members (Jaudon, Kozloff, Schapiro) were cemented a few years earlier through their involvement with the women’s movement on both coasts. The feminist collectives that formed throughout the United States were self-determined groups, and P&D was no different. In calling to order a “pattern meeting,” Zakanitch consciously wanted to build a movement around overtly decorative work. As for how to do this, Zakanitch could not have picked a more ideal role model than Schapiro, to whom he turned for advice. Early on, Zakanitch told Schapiro that he wanted to start a movement and asked her, “How do you do that?” Schapiro, who had considerable experience in starting a movement—feminist art—answered his question with a question: “Well, how did the Cubists do it? How did the Impressionists?”⁹

9 See Arthur C. Danto, “Pattern and Decoration as a Late Modernist Movement,” in Swartz, *Pattern and Decoration*, 8–9.

As far as lending P&D a critical platform, over and above redeeming the decorative and celebrating it as a form of women’s work, feminism gave P&D an oppositional edge. Feminism’s emergence within the visual arts is concurrent with the rise of Minimalism, which ideologically speaking is a purely self-referential art and thus a zenith of modernism. Referring to nothing outside of itself, it is an art predicated on the exclusion of history, memory, biography, race, and gender. This would prove anathema for women and people of color actively engaged in the struggle to find voice and political agency. As a result, feminism had no choice but to be anti-modern insofar as modernism was anti-feminine. The anti-modernism endemic to feminism was part and parcel of P&D. A prime example is Kozloff’s 1976 two-part manifesto, printed in the pamphlet accompanying the exhibition *Ten Approaches to the Decorative* at Alessandra Gallery (and reproduced in this volume). The first section is titled

“Negating the Negative (An Answer to Ad Reinhardt’s ‘On Negation’)’ and the second is titled “On Affirmation.”

P&D’s oppositional position to a large extent overshadows its heterogeneity as a movement. All of the P&D artists embraced pattern and ornament well before it was a movement, arriving at their own artistic conclusions for different reasons, scarcely any of which could be said to be reactionary. MacConnel and Kushner were students at UCSD when they fell under the sway of Islamic art. Goldin’s tutelage was key to their exploration of non-Western art, an investigation that formed out of a passion for Asian and Middle Eastern art and artifacts. Zakanitch cites autobiographical sources for his turn toward ornament: “In my grandparents’ house, ornamentation was everywhere. They had embroidered tablecloths and armrests. They used stencils to paint flower patterns on their walls, which gave me an affinity for stencils. My grandparents refused to live in bleak empty rooms and decorated everything.”¹⁰

10 Zakanitch, quoted in *ibid*, 7.

Jaudon’s work draws from architectural ornamentation. But the work belongs as much to a hard-edge geometric abstract tradition as it does to P&D. The same is true of Robbin. All of this is to say that despite the oppositional tone of P&D as a movement, its tributaries were hardly reactionary. The sources from which these artists drew their inspiration, even when they were modernist sources, were revered. This is important in that P&D, no matter how anti-modern, was never ironic. That this was so is no small feat for what many acknowledge as postmodernism’s first movement, with Peter Halley’s Neo-Geo being a very close second.

Los Angeles-based painter Rebecca Morris is a child of post-modern irony. That said, Morris’s commitment to abstraction lies somewhere between the poles of fierce and rabid; commitment of this kind is a prerequisite for coping with a pluralism arising not only across disciplines but from within the discipline of painting itself. Abstraction is now a given, an option that is taken for granted as one chooses rather than fights to become an abstract painter. It is a choice, however, within a discipline that itself has become a field of specialization by virtue of taking on the characteristics of a language. If the closure of modernist painting is taken as the closure of painting itself, then under the aegis of postmodernism, painting’s history is a finite collection of styles readily offering itself up for quotation. In other words, paintings are read in and through reference to other paintings: this fact raises the question, Once abstraction has acquired this kind of legibility, is there such a thing as an abstract painting? (The shorthand for this is an understanding of abstraction as an allegory for modernism.)

Judging from Morris’s work, the answer is a resounding “Hell yeah.” Hers remains a rudimentary language of shape, line, color, gesture, surface, and composition that quotes so as to reduce its references to an alphabet. In this respect, her paintings function as an ur- or protolanguage of abstraction through which one can discern the compositional logic of Frank Stella’s Black Paintings, an isolated Pollock-like splatter, or a Hans Hofmann-esque approach to the

discreet juxtaposition of color. Morris's early paintings feature her signature device of layering a shape that is an undifferentiated hybrid of square and circle. Executed flat on the floor, these paintings look as though they have emerged, faceup, from a boiling cauldron of protozoan possibilities dating back to the Flintstones. Between works such as *Level 5* (1977; fig. 7) and her paintings consisting exclusively of lines, such as *Untitled* (2000; fig. 8), her early vocabulary was indeed one of sticks and stones. When not registered as a scrubby stain or a series of wavering, spray-painted lines, her touch consists of a redundant slathering of viscous paint that builds in thickness, going from *painting* as a verb to *painting* as a noun. On stretchers deeper than required for paintings of their size, these canvases assert their objecthood so literally they become rhetorical. Fracture is determined by gravity and the drying properties of oil, which contracts as it congeals, forming a skin with an unctuous, hive-like wrinkling that seems to emerge from within the paintings. With a life of their own, the works become susceptible to disease and aging, forms of corruption well beyond any irony.

Morris's early paintings could hardly be said to escape such irony, which is endemic to any and all questions of legibility. Whatever irony may be attributed to her intent, however, corresponds to history's larger irony, which was already well in effect. To submit abstraction to a process of quotation that reduces stylistic specificity to very basic and general features is to craft a generic abstraction, one that cannot fail to signify abstraction's utter ubiquity. Little wonder, then, that these early paintings resemble a species of abstraction found in transient public spaces—fast-food dining courts, airport terminals, the DMV. Once considered an ideal complement to public spaces because of its universal appeal, abstract art came to be read as a gratuitous effort to beautify impersonal spaces of rote functionality. These spaces, with their accepted levels of vagrancy and dereliction, often resulting from the public's very absence, were in effect non-spaces. Abstraction spoke for no one, becoming a vacant language. Referring to figurative elements lacking a place within abstract paintings, Clement Greenberg coined the infamous phrase "homeless representation." If the dialectical pendulum of history made a complete swing, then it is safe to say Morris's early paintings are species of "homeless abstraction."

Morris's predilection for a scathed abstraction is a way of welcoming abstraction and its subsequent fate, with arms open wide. As for an attendant irony, let there be no mystery as to what she would say: "Bring it on!" For painters who share Morris's commitment to abstraction, the challenge is to reinvent on terms that are relevant and relative the spirit and dialectical conditions that make abstract painting urgent and necessary. For the better part of the twentieth century, this struggle was defined by a dialectical tension between abstraction and figuration. In Morris's case, the conflict is defined by an irony residing exclusively within the domain of abstract painting. In short, abstract painting has nothing to overcome but itself. This is an irony Morris is bold enough to instigate and even bolder for transcending, as her paintings, over the past decade, have increased

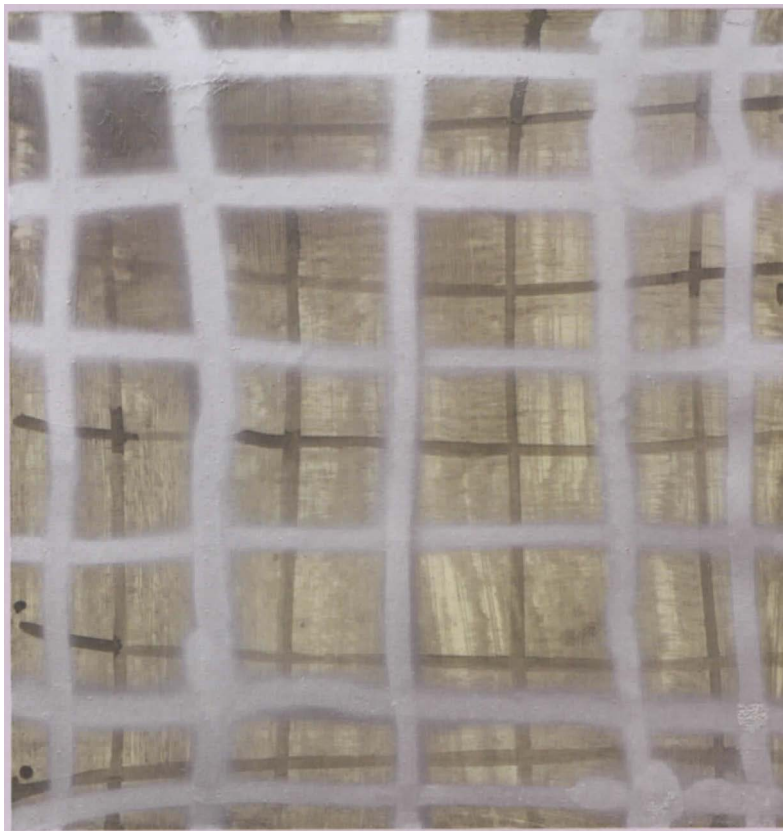


Fig. 7, top: Rebecca Morris, *Level 5*, 1997
Oil on canvas, 28 × 27 in. (71.12 × 68.58 cm)
Fig. 8, bottom: Rebecca Morris, *Untitled*, 2000.
Oil on canvas, 31 × 29 in. (78.74 × 73.66 cm).
Private collection

in scale and complexity on every front—palette, paint handling, and composition, including Morris's notable forays into crafting deep space—and are thus robust enough to dispel any question of whether they insist upon painting for painting's sake.

The struggle from one generation to the next might be different, but the goal of making paintings of which nothing is asked other than that they be paintings remains the same. Indeed, Morris's paintings are anachronisms. Her method of reducing any attributable stylistic specificity to rudimentary painterly concerns negates the idea that abstract painting would, could, or should evolve. Her sticks-and-stones period could just as easily serve as a paean to Wassily Kandinsky's 1926 book *Point and Line to Plane* as it could be said to reference the New York School. Although the advent of pure abstraction is a thing of the past, it was not marked as belonging exclusively to the early years of the twentieth century or to the New York School. Abstraction now belongs to the ages, which problematizes any claims to contemporaneity made on its behalf. Hovering outside a historical dialectic, abstraction operates at its own speed. At times, it has been ahead of its present, and at others behind. Several of Morris's paintings circa 2000 might recall the 1980s better than a painting actually executed during that decade ever could. And now she seems to be working her way further back, her work having skirmishes with P&D; compare, for example, Morris's *Untitled (#17-15)* (2015; fig. 9) and Schapiro's *Tapestry of Paradise* (1980; fig. 10), each exemplifying the framing, or bordering, that is a consistent feature of Pattern and Decoration.

It is easy to be ironic about P&D. It can be hard to look it in the eye and even harder to avail oneself to a course of painterly exploration in which you don't choose your bedfellows. Such is the case with Morris. This is what happens when you relinquish irony. You are subject to any way the wind blows. To rub shoulders with P&D, however, is to reanimate an empiricist pre-stripe Daniel Buren. If anything, I would argue that P&D—and *only* P&D—holds the keys to Buren's *Mosaïque aux éléments composites* (fig. 11). And this is work with which Morris sees eye to eye (fig. 1, p. 172).





Fig. 9, top: Rebecca Morris, *Untitled (#17-15)*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 95 x 97 in. (241.3 x 246.38 cm). Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Museum purchase, International and Contemporary Collectors Funds, 2017.9

Fig. 10, bottom: Miriam Schapiro, *Tapestry of Paradise*, 1980. Acrylic, fabric, glitter on canvas, 60 x 50 in. (152.4 x 127 cm). Brooklyn Museum of Art, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, gift of Robert Sugar

Fig. 11, opposite: Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Mosaïque aux éléments composites*, [January-May] 1965 (detail). Site-specific work, Grapetree Bay Hotel, Saint Croix, Virgin Islands, US

Perverse Formalism: Rebecca Morris Tenzing Barshee and Camila McHugh

Rebecca Morris' edge is never that hard. In her painted abstractions, Morris insists upon the margin. Borders and boundaries drive her vibrant compositions. Each segment stands its ground. Claims its place. Divides and separates. The loops that tie her odd shapes into impossible fields of color arrange a codependent whole. With daring discordance, her works defy and double down on the properties of the pattern.

The earliest known map was engraved on a mammoth tusk; later maps were painted on cave walls. Ever since, the image-based technology has served as a useful tool to place a body (a person, a nation, a vessel) in relation to its surroundings and other bodies. Orientation, as a concept, is already pretty abstract. Rebecca Morris maps abstract territories.

Like maps, Morris' paintings can be taken for aerial views. Looking at her pictures can feel like peering through a microscope. Others resemble the cross section of a rock. But they're none of these things. In any case, a view from above flattens—builds a depth that it simultaneously collapses. The artist stretches the principle of collage, which relies on this paradox of perspective. "Strive for deeper structure," Morris professes in her "Manifesto for Abstractionists and Friends of the Non-Objective," first published in 2006 to advertise her exhibition at Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin.¹

In silver and gold, Morris outlines new boundaries atop her shaped color fields. Masquerading as a flourish, these metallic finishing touches are a structural part of her perverse formalism. Like the embellishments that lent personality to ancient Greek sculptures—silver eyes and golden armor—Morris uses ornamentation for more than its decorative function. It plays a crucial role and completes the work.² The thick gold and silver lines—sometimes covering large swaths of the canvas—stand like selvages ("self" + "edge"), recalling the zone of altered rock, especially volcanic glass, at the edge of a rock mass.³ Or a fabric band that prevents unraveling. In *Untitled (#01-20)* from this year, on view in Morris' recent exhibition at Bortolami in New York, she painted a gold grid (that deviates into an unsteady, organic shape) over shaded, washed-out gray strokes. The layer over this tumultuous monochrome pulls things together, measures the previous level's dynamism and tension. Containing again, like a structuring embrace, the final line straps on like a harness: channels power and settles.

And this is where the artist's self-reflexive wit and relentless commitment to painting meet. These are, perhaps, the principal components of great abstraction (think Ad Reinhardt). Morris' method of faux gilding reiterates the basic condition of painting and its history: paintings contain. Morris maintains the medium's rectangular format. Sometimes she works on huge pieces of canvas that fill her studio floor, cutting out a piece to stretch and continue working on. When we visited Rebecca Morris in Downtown Los Angeles earlier this year, she told us she paints big to feel a part of something. Enveloping, rather than extending, the maker. Her insistence on the canvas's classical frame is significant, a point of distinction from her contemporary Ruth Root. Both artists have mastered pattern-based polyphonic compositions,

but Root models her canvases in forms that echo the shapes she paints.

Historically, cartography was mainly used for warfare and games. The premise in both is similar: stake a claim, grab a piece. Inevitable confrontation. In Morris' work, confrontation is the program. By pushing a cacophony of elements into conflict within a limited space, she takes a jab at hierarchies: Who's on top? Who is brighter? Who came first? Who's out? Surprisingly, she manages to level the confrontation in eventual resolution, and her edges remain soft. This abstract vernacular makes an argument for plurality. While exercising a dogmatic abstraction, she manages to promote a coexistence of voices. Hers is an equal plane for a multitude of problems and solutions. To encounter such an open posture carved from the rigidity necessary for effective abstraction is a rare find. Also perhaps, an invitation to reflect on a fractious contemporary moment.

With the lexicon of checkerboards, hooked claws, stepping blocks, and stylized grids and patterns, Morris charts new territories with each painting. While orienting under the same constellations, she won't be lured to retread what has worked in the past. From three bright stars, astronavigators plot a triangle. Angular lines between celestial bodies and the horizon locate the position of ship and self. Connect the dots. An oral ruttier (a long navigational poem memorized by sailors) colors this triangle with the variations of the journey: tide's ebb, water's glint, texture of the seabed.

In Dionne Brand's book *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001), the poet writes a ruttier for the marooned in the diaspora that speaks to Rebecca Morris' compositions:

"It has the shakes, which is how it rests and rests cutting oval shells of borders with jagged smooth turns. It is an oyster leaving pearl... They are a prism of endless shimmering color. If you sit with them they burn and blister. They are bony with hope, muscular with grief possession... Their coherence is incoherence, provocations of scars and knives and paradise, of tumbling wooden rivers and liquid hills."⁴

1 The manifesto is reproduced at <https://aestheticanxiety.tumblr.com/post/56890154228/rebecca-morris-manifesto-for-abstractionists>.

2 Ancient Greeks typically represented cult figures with chryselephantine statues constructed around a wooden frame with thin carved slabs of ivory attached, representing the flesh, and sheets of gold leaf representing the garments, armor, hair, and other details.

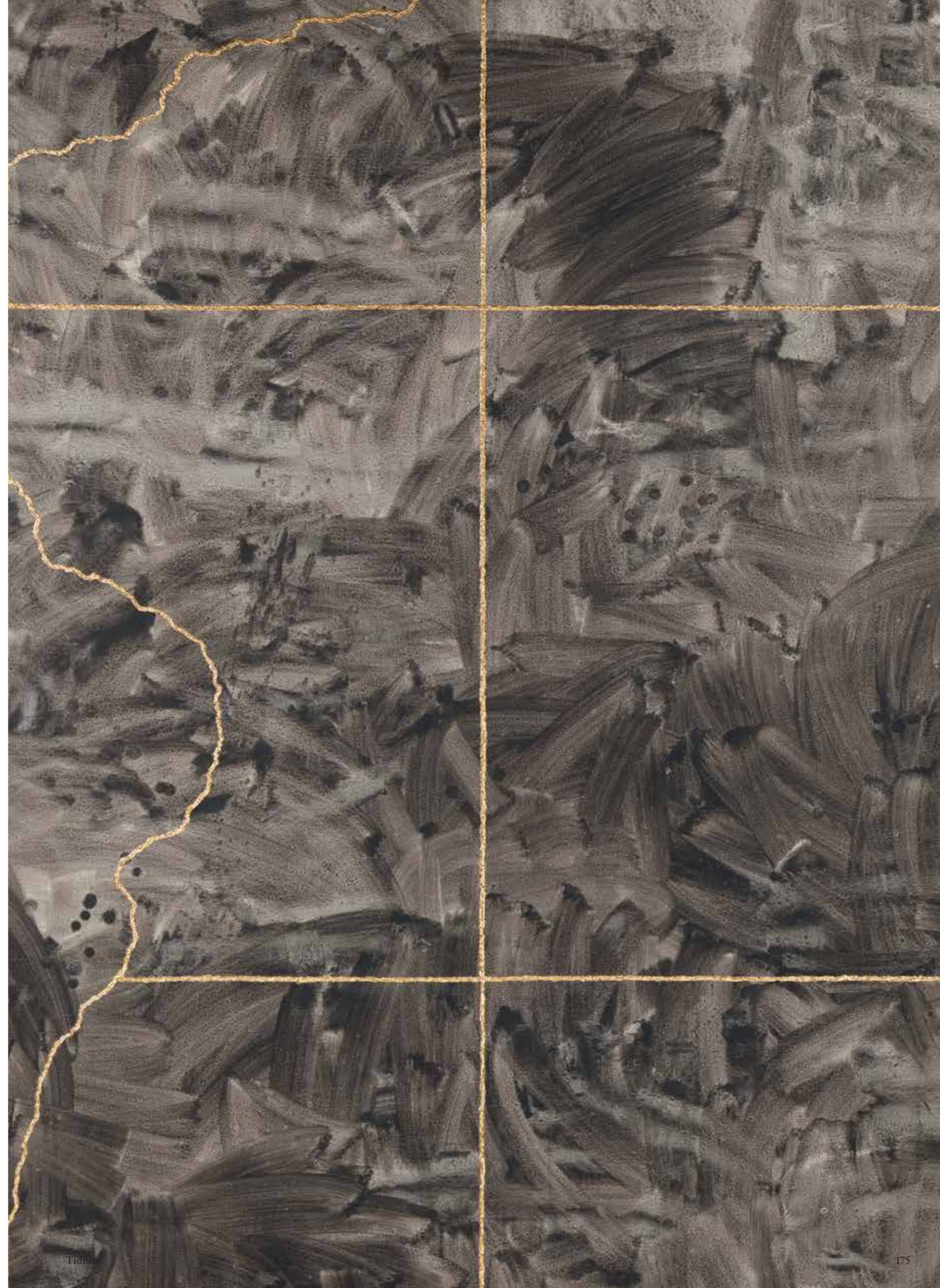
3 The authors came across the term "selvages" in Vanessa Agard Jones, "Selvage/Obsidian: A Response," *e-flux*, no. 105 (December 2019), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/105/304783/selvage-obsidian-a-response/>, where the anthropologist uses the term to reflect on childbirth's rending of the self in the context of her work on how coloniality is made material in bodies and landscapes.

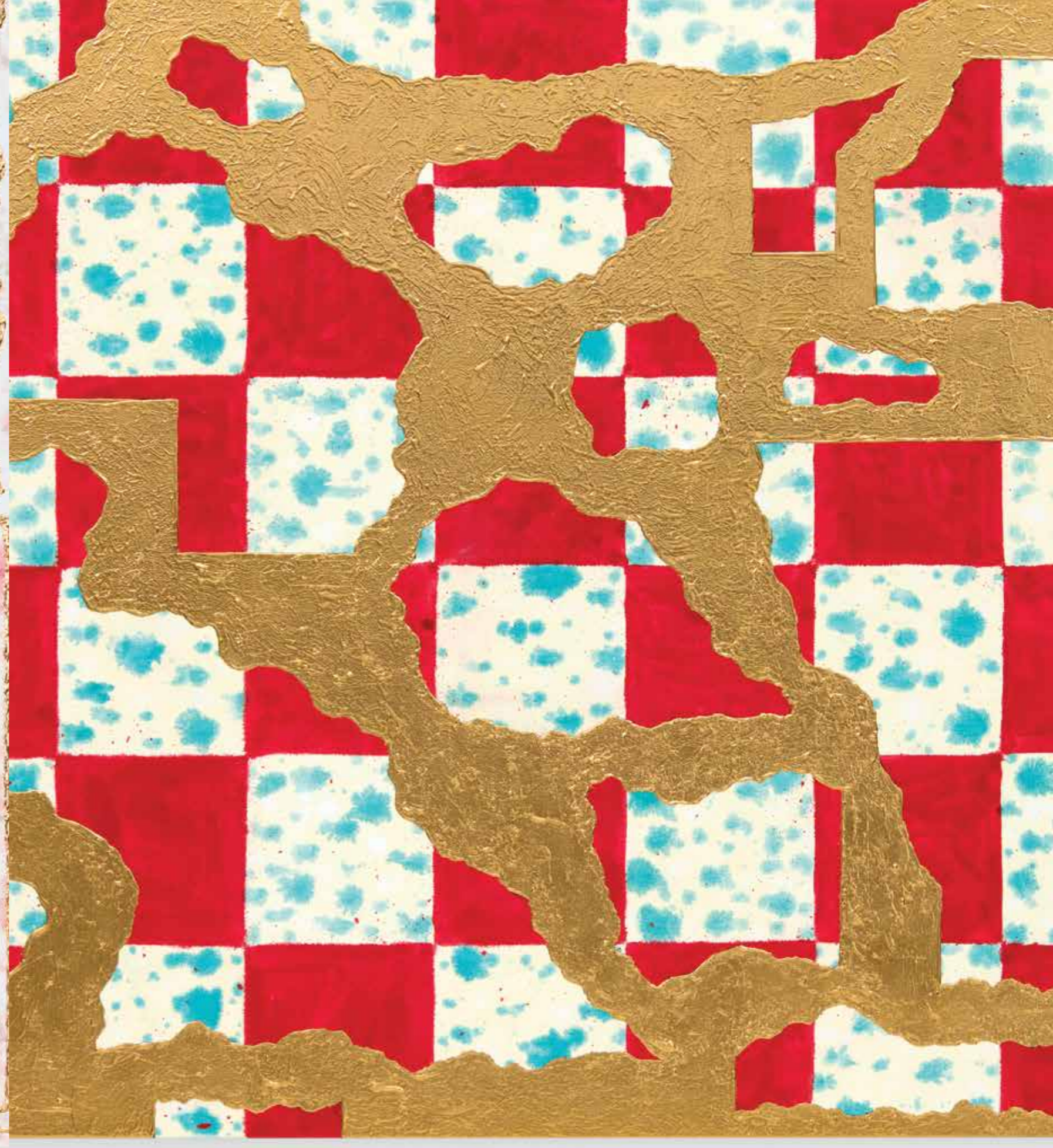
4 Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001).

175 Rebecca Morris, *Untitled (#01-20)* (detail), 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Bortolami, New York

176 Rebecca Morris, *Untitled (#09-19)* (detail), 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Bortolami, New York

177 Rebecca Morris, *Untitled (#16-19)* (detail), 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Bortolami, New York





SKOWHEGAN

ABOUT PROGRAM ALUMNI OFF-CAMPUS

SUPPORT



#01: REBECCA MORRIS



Don Edler: We are building an archive of artist interviews that we hope to make available through the Skowhegan library, the concept for these interviews is to allow artists to speak candidly about their practice or otherwise. We hope to create a more interpersonal archive



Skowhegan class of 1994

through which contemporary artists can represent themselves in their own words, through conversation. The format is open, so if there is anything you would like discuss, feel free to do so, otherwise, I have a few questions prepared, we can start from there and see where the conversation goes.

Rebecca Morris: Great! Thank you for inviting me.

DE: Do you mind talking about your time at Skowhegan as a participant in 1994? And is there anything in particular that you remember learning during your time at Skowhegan that is still part of your life or practice today?

RM: I went to Skowhegan right after I got my MFA, and I think that was perfect timing for me because when you get out of graduate school, you can get a little depressed and overwhelmed, and you lose the community that you had while in school. Attending Skowhegan really opened up my community at a crucial moment I met people from New York, LA, and places in between. It was exciting to have conversations with people that were in the same place I was, but with different backgrounds and having come out of different schools across the country. I was living in Chicago at the time, but meeting all these fellow artists that summer helped me begin to make decisions about what I wanted to do next. It was empowering to open up those kinds of possibilities. It was at Skowhegan that I met and became friends with people from Los Angeles, whom I later visited. Soon after, I began thinking that I wanted to move to LA. That was pretty huge in terms of where I am now, having lived in LA for 16 years and counting. Looking back, Skowhegan was very stimulating in this way.



Scott Reeder, Elizabeth Saveri, Rebecca Morris, Matthew Plumb, in front of Van Gogh Studio, 1994

DE: Let's move on to your work. Do you see a relationship to photography in your work?

RM: When I was in undergrad at Smith College, I was doing equal parts painting and photography. At some point, I started working primarily in painting. I don't remember any sort of a specific moment that caused this shift, it just happened. I know I was getting sick of all the darkroom work, I liked taking pictures, and I liked working with contact sheets, but after a while, all the chemical processes became too tedious, and working within photography lacked immediacy. It felt too distant from the hands-on aspect of making an image and working with materials that you get with painting.

Photography is still incredibly important for my work in the sense that I have always taken tons and tons of photographs. One of my graduate advisors was the Chicago Imagist painter Barbara Rossi—she had this slide collection of ice cream cones that she had taken, basically signs for ice cream shops. A lot of them were taken in India, and you would think that ice cream cones would be a pretty steady format, some variation of a circle and a cone, but these are so charming and surprisingly inventive. She took hundreds of pictures like this. If you were a very lucky graduate student of hers, she would bring in a slide carousel and show them to you. It made a huge impression on me—this idea of taking a picture of a single type of thing over and over and over again and capturing all the different permutations, and thus creating a personal typology. I have always been interested in a kind of vernacular photography

(that so many people are interested in now with Instagram and Pinterest) so it is not very novel at this point. But I think seeing Barbara's ice cream cone pictures in my early twenties really made an impression on me. It encouraged a directed start to documenting the normal and weird things around me like signs, architecture, parking lots, van art, whatever. This is interesting to me still, but I see people who can capture these same things I'm photographing doing such a better job and putting all of their effort behind it. So it doesn't feel as important to me to reveal that part of what I do right now. But it's definitely there.

DE: It is interesting to hear that you have also made those connections between your paintings and contemporary modes of image making. I don't really know why I was thinking of those things when I was going through your catalogues but the idea of casual photography just came to mind somehow.

RM: That's nice actually. The thing that I really do take pictures of all the time is my studio. I'm constantly taking pictures. Each time I go, I maybe take 20 pictures of what's happening in there. The paintings change so much, I take pictures because I want to remember what something looked like before and after certain moves. It's helpful.



DE: Do you think subconsciously you might be incorporating the collapse of dimensionality or the flattening of the image plane that happens in photography—taking that flatness into your mind and using it as a resource for coming up with the shapes that you paint?

RM: Yeah, maybe, I mean no one has ever said that before, but I could see it. It is totally possible. I am a strong believer in the unconscious. There's a painting I made recently that's going to be in a show in Los Angeles in March. I'm not going to bore you with explaining it too much because explaining abstract paintings can get really kind of stupid, when you start hearing back what you say. But it's a painting that has a similarly painted background area and center area, so the center area seems to reveal back to that background. But I changed the marks in the center so it's not a one to one match. It ends up doing that thing in filmmaking, I don't remember what it's called—maybe you do, where you pull back and zoom in with the camera at the same time.

DE: I don't, but it's a weird sort of warping effect where the subject matter stays still but the background shifts.

RM: Yes, exactly, and it's a way to really create drama and it's almost that feeling when your heart starts beating faster and freaks out for a second and the camera can kind of capture that sensation.

DE: It emulates vertigo, right?

RM: Yeah, it's like a hyper focus? Anyway in this painting that I'm describing, I had to think for a long time about whether I would make this center area a direct reveal this outer border. In the end I decided not to, and change them a little, and to me it creates that cinematic effect I'm talking about. It was the big decision in the painting and I'm very happy I did it. To me it feels cinematic. So I think you're right about that. There's something conscious or unconscious or whatever.

DE: Weirdly enough I hadn't thought of this but now that you mention it, it becomes very loud in my mind. Do you find yourself thinking about the perceptual implications of your paintings? How the viewer perceives the paint?

RM: I do—sometimes it has to be pointed out to me, someone will say "oh this is doing this, space-wise for me" and I'm like "oh, right." So although I know I am doing it, I may not be aware of how much I am doing it. I also think there is always a sort of question about the space I am painting, it is never a very assertive gesture where this is the foreground and this is the background, etc. There is always a bit of ambiguity as to whether I am painting the background, or the foreground, or painting the flicker between these two possible spaces. I like that in-betweenness more than deciding. Some paintings will have very similar formats, but the way they work spatially will create very different impressions. Some will be very layered and go back into space, but others will feel like the space is side by side on the same plane. I am not overly aware of these things while I am painting, but maybe subconsciously I am accepting that picture space, and going more towards it. I don't set out thinking 'this painting's going to be very flat' but I am making decisions and moving in one direction or another, but without a set idea of making a specific type of painting.

DE: How do you feel about that creation of space, and maybe we can actually use this as a transition to speak about one of your paintings in the Biennial—Untitled (#14-13). I was looking at that painting, and I noticed you are using framing devices and scale to create depth and distance in a vaguely architectural sense. Without getting into a conversation about defining what is or is not abstraction, I am curious if you could talk about the depiction of space and how that relates to abstraction because I feel like establishing figure-ground relationships you're starting to undermine pure abstraction in a sense.

RM: For a time, I was making paintings that were more field-based, meaning the abstraction was more about an all-over composition that continued, perhaps, beyond the edge of the picture plane—embracing the idea that the painting was capturing a smaller portion of something larger. I was concerned with how to make something go back or forward in that space, or how to articulate the literalness of the canvas itself. I made those paintings in the early 2000s and then there was a definite switch to a very frontal, splintered-type space. So instead of having a single field, now there were many pieces of things coexisting together. That was a big shift and I haven't really gone back to the field paintings since. I will say that the way I'm handling the borders around the paintings right now is more



Untitled (#14-13), 2013

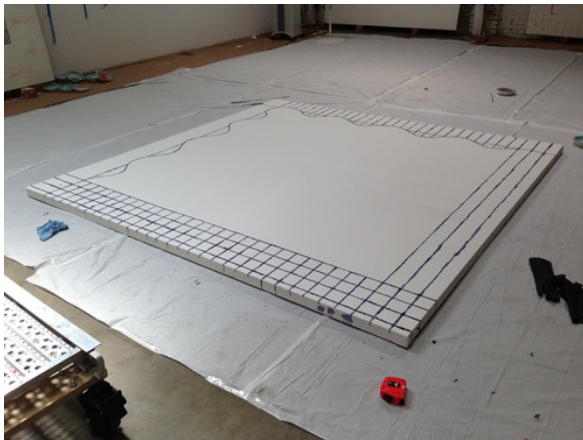
field like and what's happening inside the borders is more like after that break I made probably around 2004-2005. The one at the Whitney is like this. It is a blue painting with a grid around it, and the grid is a field. If you look at how the grid ends at each edge of the canvas—it's not even.

DE: It's off-center. I see it.

RM: It's off-standard. In all honestly that wasn't something I was trying to do on purpose—it's literally because I wasn't measuring things, I'm just thinking of the basic shape I want. I wanted an internal shape of a square with two scalloped/ wavy edges and two straight ones. When I put the grid in around it, I was free-hand measuring. I was a little worried that the grid not meeting the sides of the canvas the same way at each edge would be distracting, and feel too much like content. But I think that there is so much happening in the painting, that I don't think it does. In the end, I wouldn't mind if it did function as content, whatever that content might be.

DE: Do you think the grid functioned as a sort of support mechanism or structure that gave you support or security to try different things within the composition?

RM: Absolutely, I think it is a very stabilizing force. In that painting there are a lot of wavy, free form shapes happening, so the grid, which is a cool, dark blue has a more clinical character, that is non-sentimental and functions as a structured back-drop. It may not even be an actual back-drop, but it is a bracing character, and it is a border too, containing everything, holding it together, so yes, the word support is definitely accurate.



Early in-progress shots of Untitled (#14-13), September 2013

DE: The grid is a type of repeating form or pattern, it makes me think of repetition, and the notion that the repetition of an object, shape, or sign has the effect of obliterating meaning, do you think that applies to your grid?

RM: There was a period of time when I thought about that idea a lot, repeating something to make it banal, but I haven't been concerned with those ideas for a long time. I think now when I repeat something, I only repeat it when I feel it is being used in a different way. I am not repeating something because it is the same thing each time I am using it. When I am repeating something, it has some different association for me, so I can repeat it. I am only interested in

repeating things if they have a different function or resonance from iteration to iteration.

DE: You've alluded to this in other writings, but are you familiar with the term "paradoleia?"

RM: No.

DE: It's a psychology term, but it's the psychological phenomena for seeing recognizable things in patterns or objects. When you see an animal in the clouds or something, that's paradoleia. It comes from the Greek word "dolem" which is Greek for "form." "To perceive form" is the Greek translation.

RM: Yes, I am interested in that idea without having known the formal word for it...that's how I see the world a lot. It's funny—when I listen to music and really like something, I'll hear the lyrics based on how they fit in with the music but I'm very rarely listening to the lyrics for meaning.

DE: I can relate to that. Are you good at remembering lyrics to songs?

RM: No, only if the song is playing at that moment might they come back to me. The words don't translate to meaning for me. My dad who is a composer comments that I often refer to the sounds of music as "noises" — I don't say notes — and I think it's something funny about the way I'm perceiving it — sounds as noises.

DE: I can totally relate to that, and I sort of have the exact same relationship to music and lyrics as you just described. Maybe it's how our minds work—why we're drawn to abstraction in general, or image making, or why we're visual people.

RM: I'll also look at things and never question what the image could be about—like strange shapes or something. There's sort of a literalness that I notice, but that's not to say I'm not detail oriented, or not able to experience nuance.

DE: Are you speaking to looking at images in painting right now or in general?

RM: In general. Though I've done studio visits with grad. students, and I'm looking at their work and talking about it and realize after an embarrassing amount of time that this thing I've been talking about the whole time was an abstracted figure and I had no sight of it. I think it's because I'm just so prone to looking at shapes and forms that I just don't feel this urge to make them make sense. I can exist for a long time without this necessity to make things cohere, and I'm perfectly happy to exist in that state, but I know it drives other people crazy.

DE: I think that's an invaluable tool for you as an abstract painter though because it allows you to fully explore shape and form in that regard without having to deal with any sort of additional informational hang-ups associated with those things.

RM: I think you're right about that. You stay more baggage free.

DE: I'm interested in your relationship with mixing materials or experimenting with textures and also I'm really curious about your use of white in your paintings— are you painting white or are you leaving the canvas gesso white? How do you deal with that background whiteness you seem to leave in a lot in your painting compositions?



Morris's studio in Los Angeles, November 2013

RM: I sometimes leave the white of the gesso as a white and I sometimes paint-in the white. I like using the white of the gesso because it's such a neutralized surface and I enjoy that. For example, with the painting at the Whitney, Untitled (#14-13), the blue grid sits on white gesso and there's no white oil paint there. But inside the central shape, there are lots of different painted-in whites. I love seeing white on white, especially when it's kind of a bisque-y dirty white next to a very warm white. I think it looks really beautiful and it's very subtle. I do a lot of light paint handling—a lot of turped out oil paint, so everything gets very transparent, and you're very aware that the paintings are painted on a white ground because of this transparency. The transparency also highlights the quality of oil paint itself, which can change so dramatically given what color you're using, and what brand you're using.

Williamsburg Paints—some of their blacks and browns have this really earthy chunkiness so when it turns out you see the paint's granulation. I really like that. I'm making the paintings with oil paint and not acrylic because I like this sort of stubbornness and the irregularity that happens with oil paint. I really love this quality in oil painting, so I'm always trying to highlight different aspects of it—with certain brushstrokes, or by painting something quickly. Sometimes I purposefully fill-in an area in specific way because I want a motion or direction left in the paint. Due to it being so thin, that motion is captured. It's a way to make everything look vibrating and different from itself.

I'm also quite dedicated to color and color relationships for textural shifts. Specifically relational color. I have a friend (Mary Weatherford) who's so gifted at layering colors and building washes on top of each other and creating entirely new color situations because of that layering. I'm always attracted to that because I don't do that so much. It is a different textural look.

DE: Now that you've spoken about it a little bit, and I'm looking at this painting in the Biennial, and it almost feels collaged. It feels like you have different moments or shapes that are all collaged together as opposed to like painted in a transparent way that would sort of layer them in the way you're talking about that your friend does.

RM: You know when I was talking earlier about making that break from the more field-based paintings to the work I'm making now, I see it as coming out of an intense period of making collages back then. That sort of did it—collage is incredible.

Rebecca Morris (A '94) lives and works in Los Angeles. This interview was conducted to coincide with the exhibition of Morris's work in the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

INTERVIEW PROJECT

NEWER

OLDER