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Adrian Morris, works 1956 - 2004, a selection by Tenzing Barshee

15.03.2019 – 13.04.2019

Opening reception 15.03.2019, 6 – 9 pm

Tenzing Barshee: *I would like to start by talking about your first encounter with the work of Adrian Morris. You were 18-years old, when you saw his paintings at the Hayward Annual survey exhibition in 1978. What impression did you initially have and how do you think today about one of the last public displays of his work during his lifetime?*

Merlin James: In the late 1970s, in British painting, minimalist abstraction was still quite dominant, as represented to an extent in that same 1978 Hayward Annual. And at art schools, say, there would still be a lot of 'masking-tape minimalism' going on. There was even still a vestigial influence from Abstract Expressionism. Then a figurative alternative to all that was the 'School of London' – the existentialist humanism of Freud or Auerbach.

So, Morris struck me as really something different. His work seemed in very individual territory, while clearly internalising a lot of painting tradition and culture. There were aspects of geometric abstraction there, but also connections to Surrealism, and to older things again. But he seemed more like a Morandi figure to me. There were formal resonances with Morandi, but more than that, here was someone who'd found a unique area of research, a set of painting propositions to explore, and its seeming limitations actually gave it great potential for metaphoric extension. Even at 18, I think I recognised this was an artist with an authentic voice, or—as people used to say—a 'vision'.

In 2015 Carol Rhodes and I showed Morris at our space in Glasgow, and people were really struck by it. There've been a couple of shows since, in London, also put on by artists. One was showing Carol and Adrian together, curated by Matthew Richardson. It's great that younger artists have been leading the rediscovery of him. Maybe that's often the way.

So yes, forty years on from the Hayward show, I think Morris looks stronger than ever. It's a more complex and sophisticated environment now, for better or worse. Painting in general has had huge revivals of attention. And I think both the relevance and the individuality of Morris's endeavour will become more and more evident.

You bring up a connection to Surrealism. In the 1940s Morris visited the studios of different painters like Masson and Tanguy in the United States. This access was possible through the mentorship of Harvard poetry professor, Sweeney. Some of Morris' early work is painted in a Surrealist style and some of those works already include windows or apertures, which would become persistent motifs of his later works. In different ways, from architectural renderings to voided places, reminiscent of a human presence but emptied of human figures, both early and later works are linked to Giorgio de Chirico's deserted piazze. Can you talk about the origins in Adrian Morris' work? And if we look his later works, particularly the apertures, how is this heritage still present?

Jack Sweeney knew all the writers and artists. He was in loco parentis to Adrian, who's father was back in England. Surrealism and quasi-Surrealism was huge in America. MoMA did a Dalí show in 1941-2, and a Surreal and Fantastic Art exhibition, and so on. Morris picked up a lot on de Chirico, who was well represented in New York, especially through the Soby collection. New York, the East Coast, was teeming with artists, many escaping the Nazis. You had Chagall, Tchelichew, Hayter, Lipchitz, Carrington, Tanning, the Berman brothers, Calder...

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They were showing at MoMA or Peggy Guggenheim's gallery The Art of this Century, where Morris would go a lot. Léger was very influential too. He was teaching at Yale. Masson and Tanguy were near neighbours in Connecticut. They all knew each other.

But the good thing, maybe, was that Morris had his Surrealist phase when he was so young, and then he could grow out of it, or beyond it. Because there's something childish, or adolescent, in Surrealism, isn't there? A lot of the Surrealist or Surrealist-influenced artists couldn't seem to mature. They remained fantasy illustrators.

Morris came back to Europe, and let youthful Surrealism go, and did a thorough art training. He did life drawing and all the basics, in different schools. He did a year in Paris at the Grande Chaumière academy, around 1950. I'd love to know what art he was seeing then. By the early 1950s he was doing what looks like informal abstractions, but with linear crucifixions superimposed on them. In 1955 he does *Estuary*, which is almost a naturalistic landscape. Then finally from 1960 we get the mature idiom: the flat planes, with schematic or formalised features – rivers, roads, excavations. And the device of the framing aperture starts to appear. Then surreal aspects can come back into the work, but without the illustrative connotations. In a way, the flat terrains and horizons of Dalí and Tanguy are there, but the landscape is mundane. There are no mirages or hallucinations. Instead of being drawn into a fantasy world, we are checked by the surface. The thing about de Chirico, in the paintings from the 'teens, is they are very physical. They're very close to abstraction in a way; the surfaces are very present, the paint itself is present. It's not a mirror-like illusionism. And in his imagery there are a lot of canvases on easels, and play with linear, perspectival diagrams. So there's very self-referential things going on with the nature of the art object. Those are aspects of de Chirico that can re-emerge in Morris, once he's established his own territory.

In our first exchange, we talked about Adrian Morris' hard-won transformation of an art-historical heritage into something viable for the present and future, and how that echoes in the broader philosophical outlook of his work—its conception of past, loss, latency, recuperation, difficult survival etc. How do his paintings relate to the medium's history and what do they anticipate? What does it mean to look at his work with contemporary eyes?

Maybe painting needed to be drained, in a way, before it could be refilled. Surrealism was somehow overfilled with meaning, and the whole of Western art history was so replete with mythology, psychology, symbolism. There's no question Morris did want art to address the biggest possible human themes (witness those crucifixions in 1953/4). But he had to get to a kind of ground zero first. And maybe 'pure' abstraction didn't represent that. It was often as freighted with portentous significance as the grandest history painting and religious art of the past. On the other hand, I don't know what he thought of, say, Stella's black paintings. They were too triumphantly empty maybe. I think they'd have lacked for Morris the sense of loss, of regret at what has had to be let go. Morris thought of his own paintings as seeking revival and recuperation of exhausted resources. Not just environmental resources of the planet, and human resources of the race and the individual psyche, but also of art itself—the recuperation of painting.

This calls to mind an investment in the formal potential of painting. The apertures themselves are like interrupted or opened up monochrome paintings, articulating a interrelatedness of abstraction and meaning. Can you say something about the anxiety to include or, conversely, exclude the human figure in the work of Adrian Morris?

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There is the very literal fact that he did sometimes put figures in the works, images of refugees, but mostly excluded figures, and sometimes painted over them. You can sense the impression of them in the surface. So they're lost within the work, they've become part of the substrata, the sedimentation. But it's too easy to seize on that as a conceit, which it's not. It's just a genuine result of the artist's dilemma about including figures. The more important thing is that mostly he just doesn't populate the paintings. I think he realised it was improper somehow. But the body, and human proximity, is implicit in other ways. Partly there is this sense of the body of the artist (and by transference the viewer), because Morris's window devices are eyes, effectively.

So, the framing device embeds a moment of self-reflexivity in his paintings?

Yes, we are aware of being in our bodies, looking out. He spoke of the 'house of blood', meaning the body we all live in. And I think the physicality of the paint also invokes the body. The tones are often flesh tones, of various kinds, and the paintings have a skin, in a way. His notebooks refer a lot to pathology, organic experience, or qualities that can apply both to living bodies and inanimate or abstract things. There's this clay-like consistency in Morris, and that sense in which clay is called 'body'; potters call the wet clay 'the body'.

I picked up on something that you mentioned in a lecture. That many of Adrian Morris' sources and influences were typical to many post-war artists, art after Hiroshima and Auschwitz. His work was rooted in the real world, he looked at newspaper and magazine photography, aerial shots of camps and settlements, photographs of Cambodia, the moon landing, oil fields, industrial plants, places of construction and crisis, conflicts and atrocities. Can you please talk about AM's subject matter, which was, over the years, heavily abstracted? What were his subjects and interests?

The artist Matthew Pang has begun archiving and examining Morris's sketchbooks and his source materials preserved in the studio: press cuttings and journal photos of all these crisis sites of famines, wars, Vietnam, the Pol Pot régime and so on. Matthew, and Adrian's wife Audrey, can say much more about his sources and 'subjects'. He often referred to the photo-journalism of Don McCullin, for example. But as you say, Morris was partly facing the quandary that so many artists were after World War II, the art-after-Auschwitz question. How can art address these unthinkable atrocities? Or how can a privileged Western artist address the plight of, say, famine in other continents, even (or especially) as there may be geo-economic connections between one's own prosperity and the plight of others?

One thinks of artists who depict some of these things directly. Leon Golub's pictures of military brutality for instance, or Zoran Music's paintings of the death camps. It's a very dangerous area for painting, more so than for literature. There's the risk of some kind of sentimentality, or an inadequate or inappropriate elaboration of indignation. Kitaj tried to be more oblique, with just glimpses of the watchtowers and chimneys of the concentration camps. One artist I think about in relation to Morris is Jean Fautrier, especially his *Otages* series, commemorating the victims of Nazi torture. Those paintings had made a huge impression in Paris after the war, just before Morris was studying in Paris. The series doesn't depict the victims really; Fautrier doesn't presume to depict them. The work is very material—something about the earth—and yet lyrical also. There's a wateriness and even a gaseousness. Morris is very different, but there's something about that gap between the physicality of the work and the narratives of conflict and crisis behind it. That determination not to illustrate.

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Although not directly critical, he embedded his subjects into his painting project. You made a connection to how civilizing nature comes with the connotation of colonization.

It's the old paradox of culture, cultivation, civilization, being almost synonymous with imposition and damage of all sorts. You know that funny sequence from Monty Python, where oppressed citizens start to foment rebellion, saying 'What have the Romans ever done for us?'; then they say, 'Well, of course there's the aquaduct, and the roads, and irrigation, and law and order...'.
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Apart from humans colonizing and oppressing and exploiting each other's lands, there's also this sense that 'advanced' humans have colonized the planet, and they are exploiting and damaging the environment itself. So then they dream of colonizing space, other planets...

A topic (space flight), which intrigued Adrian Morris as well. Another interesting aspect is the ways in which societies control water. In Morris, there are multiple depictions of irrigation trenches, water reservoirs, etc. (Richard Cork: "Although irrigation counters the desert-like dryness in some paintings, spreading at times into rivers, reservoirs or even floodplains, we cannot evade the fact that parched and dusty earth increasingly predominates.") I find it interesting how the flow of water, as well as geometric architectures, find their way into his work. He seemed to have been invested in a negotiation between organic and geometric forms. The horizon lines are rarely straight, the views are often warped. Can you please talk about this?

What seems geometric is actually intuitive and felt. Proportions and divisions are put under pressure and eased out of true, or into another more uneasy truth than that of abstract geometry. And I think Morris is actually breaking down the old distinction between organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate, human and inhuman. There is some proposition here about all matter being one and the same. Wet and dry are sort of opposites, but dust plus water becomes clay. Clay plus fire becomes stone. Water plus fire (sun) evaporates into gas. It's a sort of alchemical continuum.

Adrian Morris' work seems to be appropriately melancholic, for its own and our present time, but at the same time that atmosphere seems to be part of the work's attraction. Can you speak about this dilemma?

At one level, the works address an ecological crisis, that was coming to wider consciousness from the 1960s onwards, and has only deepened up to today. But more generally there's a sobriety in the work, and there can be bleakness, aridity and austerity. And in later work there's sometimes a feeling of threat, often of unease. One might find the work paranoid (recalling Surrealism again). On the other hand, there's great beauty, and there is a meditative stillness and great intensity. There's a richness, as well as paucity. Different viewers have different reactions. The work is unhomey, but it doesn't seem nostalgic for some past where there was greater belonging, or harmony. It somehow feels forward looking, and is in that sense maybe optimistic, even if it is disabused or dubious about the future. The loneliness in the work seeks relief; it's not despairing. The foundations and indentations in the earth are in a way like the footprint that Robinson Crusoe finds in the sand. They are signs that one is not alone.

His aperture and horizon idiom is metaphorically very layered. I see the aperture as a way to encapsulate a space of meaning as well as a tool of projection, the framed motif seems to be inhabited by the idea of otherness, something alien, which is being looked at from far away.

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There is a biographical reference to Morris's transatlantic trips, through submarine infested waters, to the USA, then back to Europe as a teenager. During this return trip he made the acquaintance of T.S. Eliot, who's seminal work "The Waste Land" could be read as a literary foundation to Adrian Morris' artistic project. We are looking through these porthole-like apertures at a landscape that seems no longer inhabitable.

I imagine Jack Sweeney had made the introduction to Eliot. *The Waste Land* is all about aridity, a world in limbo, awaiting rebirth and fertilization, and about the interaction of death and rebirth. But of course the desert image goes back through cultural history, at least to biblical sources (Morris's father was a church minister), like Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones brought back to life. In his studio, Morris kept animal bones and a skull that he'd picked as a boy in the Quantock hills in south-west England. It's a landscape full of bones, from centuries of farming but also from many ancient human burial grounds, earthworks. There are abandoned quarries, and you are up on a plateau above the sea, so there's always the straight distant horizon right there. All these things were already in him.

*Going back to how the picture plane relates directly to its surface. The built-in frames anticipate the connection of painting and its surround, surface and depth, the contextual understanding of painting beyond itself. In this way AM's work becomes almost a commentary on viewing itself. And the view through a frame evokes various references, from Duchamp's *Étant Donnés* to early abstraction including Suprematist painting. I appreciate the link you made to the window views of Sylvia Plimack Mangold. Considering the shapes of the apertures, one is also reminded of early TV screens, light bulbs transmitting imagery, and as such, is Morris' engagement with mass media as well?*

That rounded-off, softened rectangle was so ubiquitous through the 1960s and 1970s, in design and in technology of all kinds. It's like a box that's softened to begin to approximate an eye, or conversely it's our eyes' oval field, squared off towards a screen format. So there's a human/machine merging there, an anthropomorphic robotic thing going on. The rounded window becomes at once this positive futuristic sign, but also suggests fear, protection, quarantine. The Apollo astronauts' helmets (that Morris often depicted, mostly in drawings) are a great example – looking at everything through this ovoid screen, from inside the sphere, the human head becomes its own planet.

But I don't think Morris is about mass media as such. He is utterly unconnected to Pop art in that sense.

Adrian Morris seemed to be reluctant to consider his work finished or ready to exhibit or be made public. Doesn't this inherently speak of a view of history that is open-ended, a concatenation of disparate narratives and counter-narratives, none of which concludes all the others, none which controls one story? And the structures depicted seem to be incomplete, still uninhabited, emphasizing the fact that the conditions of reality are provisional. I do wonder about the time Morris spent with some of his paintings. How he must have painted them for decades. And what that says about them, were they all in process, not so finished after all? Adrian Morris' abrupt death interrupted the work on some of the paintings, but does that diminish their quality as finished works? Isn't his whole project an insistence that in painting nothing is really fixed, even after the artist stops working on it? A painting, both as a material object and an image, exists in its world and as such it is affected by its changes.

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Certainly process, and duration, and very protracted evolution of the composition—all this is essential. And there can be a sense in the paintings of waiting. And beyond that, yes, he held off showing the works for decades, partly waiting to see how they looked after a year, five years, and whether he needed to rework. And I'm sure he had a feeling he was painting for the future, in a way.

But I'm not so sure that philosophically it's about constant change and irresolvability. It's not Heraclitan I don't think. I think of a contemporary of Morris like Howard Hodgkin (who again uses a signature framing trope, and a sense of bodies absent or hidden in the layers). Hodgkin is far more about flux, not just because the paint is much more liquid, but there's the feeling—problematic, to me—that Hodgkin could always go back into a painting and add a stroke, or overlay a new key colour, changing a nuance, or invoking a whole new mood and a new experience, suggesting a different fleeting memory. In Morris it's far more an intense effort to resolve every element of the composition and the image and the light and colour and texture and degree of surface sheen. He wants to nail it. He's fully aware, I agree, of the relativities and temporalities that everything is subject to. But, accepting that, he's trying to achieve something as definitive as possible, as true as possible.