

Art in America

Ivan Morley

NEW YORK,
at Bortolami

by Tatiana Istomina

Ivan Morley: *A True Tale*, 2015, thread on canvas, 84 by 50 inches; at Bortolami.



Ivan Morley's sparse exhibition at Bortolami contained only six paintings: *Tehachepi (sic)* in the front room and five works in the main gallery, each titled *A True Tale*. While the paintings are from 2015, the titles have been around for years. Since the late 1990s, the Los Angeles-based artist has been using a mere handful of titles for all his works. *Tehachepi (sic)*, *A True Tale* and others, such as *Dig, Lab* and *El Monte*, refer to humorous anecdotes and folktales from local California history that have inspired Morley's practice. (*A True Tale*, for example, alludes to an ex-slave who allegedly got rich selling cats to a rat-infested town.) The works may share titles and sources, but they have little else in common. Morley's painting is mercurial in character, moving freely between descriptive, symbolic and abstract visual languages, and utilizing an exceptionally wide assortment of materials and techniques.

Morley's newest version of *Tehachepi (sic)*—the backstory concerns an American Indian family living in an extremely windy locale—depicts a stylized tree, three gigantic walnuts and a scattering of strawberries. Parts of the image are oil-painted or batik-dyed, and parts are made with machine embroidery. The other works, which appear to be entirely abstract, employ radically different techniques: two of them have been painted in oil on glass and transferred to panel; two others have been machine-stitched on canvas; and one has been assembled from pieces of leather painted with dye and acrylic. The five works have the same composition, based on the pattern of cracks in a large pane of broken glass in Morley's studio, but their various colors and textures disguise the similarity of the basic design.

The oil paintings are covered with intricate multicolored patterns resembling the iridescence of soap bubbles and gasoline spills. The embroidered pieces are composed of blocks of solid color; in one of them, dark lines trace the edges of the colored segments or move across them in elaborate calligraphic strokes, creating little arabesques that seem to teeter on the edge of representation. The leather piece, embossed and painted with luminous colors, features not only abstract patterns and fanciful calligraphic lines but an occasional pictorial vignette: a schematic window, a wheel, a strawberry.

Even though Morley's new works are still linked to the old tales, the connection appears to be purely functional. The stories may be

necessary for the paintings, just as a grain of sand trapped in the shell of a mollusk is necessary for the growth of a pearl, but they are equally unimportant for the viewer's appreciation of the final product. The paintings have an intimate relation to the physical labor of the artist (as the use of personal lubricant in some of them seems to suggest). They develop layer by layer, and this process links them not only to the accretion of pearls but to the repetitiveness of histories and myths, which Morley renders in purely optical and tactile terms.