

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



