

SPERONE WESTWATER
257 Bowery New York 10002
T + 1 212 999 7337 F + 1 212 999 7338
www.speronewestwater.com

Baumgardner, Julie. "Now in His 80s, Malcolm Morley Is Still Finding New Ways of Looking."
tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com (T Magazine), 15 April 2015.

T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE



The artist Malcolm Morley in his studio in Bellport, New York, in 2009. Credit Jason Schmidt

Malcolm Morley has gotten off the couch. A longtime champion of psychoanalysis, the 83-year-old British artist "finally got thrown out" by his therapist, he says. But that doesn't mean the self-described "super-realist" painter has been relieved of that foundational psychoanalytic catch: He is still fixated on his childhood. "I have been able to, as one person put it, 'make friends with your unconscious life,'" says Morley, who was quite famously a child of neglect with a disregard for the system. But a stint as a petty thief, and then one in prison, straightened him out — though naturally, it was painting that truly saved him.

With a new group of paintings showing at Sperone Westwater, his fifth solo exhibition at the gallery, the octogenarian Morley is finally returning to those early struggles that "I didn't have the means to deal with at the time," he says. "It's good when an artist can see into himself for heavy emotional experiences that he hadn't been able to resolve as a small person. It's the adult person who resolves that initial experience." Though he is well known for exacting photorealist portraits, tragic-satiric images that capture the banality and fragility of life, "I've always been fascinated by evolution and one's self-evolution," he says. These works are brighter, looser in brush and certainly don't stick to the script of reality. One of the paintings

SPERONE WESTWATER
257 Bowery New York 10002
T + 1 212 999 7337 F + 1 212 999 7338
www.speronewestwater.com

depicts a British Douglas C-47 plane nearly crashing into a red-and-white-striped lighthouse, while a Viking ship sails around its basin. History never saw such an event, nor previously would have Morley. The new works “have to do with the idea of layering, a form of excavation, leading me to a different scale of thinking about what I’ve been doing,” he says, “It’s rather like a big, huge lasagna.”



Morley’s “Dakota,” 2015 Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater Gallery



“The Island of the Day Before Regained,” 2013
Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater
Gallery

Morley hasn’t abandoned World War II bombers or tankers as subjects — rather, he’s just reoriented what he does with them. “The layers are moving in a particular direction, towards large world wonders,” he says of the technicalities involved. “The themes got bigger.” The famously traditionalist curators Robert Storr and Norman Rosenthal waxed wistfully on that change in the essay they wrote for recent exhibitions they both staged for him (at Yale and Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum, respectively), chalking it up to a product of his aging body failing him. (In the 2012 show catalog, Storr wrote of artists in their elder years, “Painting is most seriously endangered by the congenital weaknesses compounded by old age.”) And Morley does owe his new approach, at least in part, to a physical event. “Quite recently, in the last year, I had taken a bad fall that shook me up quite a bit,” he confesses. “I had been in slumps before, and a slump is a good indication of running out of stuff and being open to the idea of the new. I think that was part and parcel of this recovery.”

But such a narrative can’t fully explain the 15 paintings Morley’s been crafting over the last two years. “I felt very lucky I got to a point when it all come to a stop. There’s always agonizing in the stop,” he confides. “Then this new thing started, and I started making these paintings in a much more open way.” Instead of wallowing in the woe, Morley’s new works have a bit of a surrealist edge, indirectly inspired by Comte de Lautréamont’s “Les Chants de Maldoror,” a cruel novel considered foundational to André Breton’s poetic experiments that helped to found the pre-war psychoanalytic movement. “I don’t really think about the Surrealists as a deciding factor in what I do,” he explains. “My eyes look at an object and translate it into what I call ‘painterliness,’ which is pre-imagining the object has already been painted in my mind. It’s a continuous rehearsal of looking at the world as if it’s made of paint.” So while critics may chalk his new kind of vision up to failing eyesight, it’s actually far more simple — and profound. “It’s a great game to play wherever you are,” Morley says, “and the experience of turning it into paint is very much based on how much experience you’ve already had turning other things into paint.” Who ever said the mind doesn’t sharpen with age?

“Malcolm Morley” is on view April 16 through June 6 at Sperone Westwater, 257 Bowery, New York, speronewestwater.com. Morley will also be the recipient of a Francis J. Greenburger Award on April 21 at the New Museum.