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ARTNEWS



Malcolm Morley, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps with Cannon*, Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

"I never look back," the legendary 83-year-old British ex-pat artist Malcolm Morley said Thursday. Morley—who at different points in his distinguished career has been at the forefront of movements like Photorealism and Neo-Expressionism—was speaking to me on the afternoon of his opening at Sperone Westwater, his fifth solo exhibition for the gallery.

We sat down on folding chairs and talked inside of a room that houses a striking new mixed-media installation called *Napoleon Crossing the Alps with Cannon* (2014). The work remakes Jacques-Louis David's painting of Napoleon galloping on a horse (which includes a great painted faux-wood frame) and tethers it to a handmade cannon via what the artist calls "a very physical rope." Adjacent to all of this is a stack of cannonballs attached to wheels. The whole piece feels ready for battle.

"The painting was made first, and the idea of building a cannon developed," Morley said. "The cannon was built later. Linking the painting up with the cannon was a kind of inspired idea, really. Is the cannon pulling the painting or is the painting pulling the cannon?"

(Morley was dressed quite dapperly in a houndstooth blazer and colorful scarf. He was wearing a hat that I want to call a trilby but I can't be sure—my brimmed-hat knowledge is pathetic. This wasn't his opening outfit, however. He told me that later on he would be changing into a tailored black suit.)

Morley's past includes a childhood spent enduring the Nazi Blitz and a brief tenure in prison for theft, which actually led to his career as an artist. After moving to the States, he first gained wide notice in the 1960s for his grid-based Photorealism works (which he prefers to refer to as superrealism) before ditching associations with the style after it became diluted by art school students around the country.

The 1970s saw him delving into more expressionist work that would open the door for artists like Julian Schnabel and also pulling some art-world pranks of his own: once, as an act of protest, he nailed a squirt

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gun to his own canvas at an auction house. In 1984 he was the first ever artist to receive Britain's prestigious Turner Prize.

Morley's new show at Sperone Westwater marks a procedural departure for the artist: a handful of the paintings on display were created without the use of a grid, which has been somewhat of a hallmark for him throughout the years.

Morley said that the poetic novel *Les Chants de Maldoror* by Comte de Lautréamont (a favorite of the Surrealists), in which a passage describes "the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella," was a giant influence on his new grid-less paintings.

"These new paintings without a grid were painted by just starting off with one single object, be it a bomber from World War II, and after that was completed it would suggest another object, which would be a lighthouse," Morley explained. "So then the bomber, then the lighthouse, and that would suggest another object. So the paintings were made by adding on."

When talking about this free-association painting process, Morley might have been referring to *Dakota*, which contains all of the above and more. The lighthouse in the work has an almost faux naïf quality to it, the bricks all skewed in a way that brings to mind the drawings of the late outsider artist Wesley Willis.

The scale of each object in *Dakota* is unrealistically proportional, as if the artist has been painting from a couple of toys next to each other. This was not a coincidence: the genesis of much of the work on display stems from a large cache of paper-made model airplane kits that the artist keeps in his studio, a byproduct of his longstanding interest in English war history.

(An employee from the gallery showed me photos of work from the exhibition packed tightly in Morley's studio, a converted church on Long Island. Among these was a large shelf full of paper models.)

"The rule is that all of these images have to come out of these paper-made kits," Morley explained. Some of the models show up on actual canvases, as in *The Searchers*, in which two paper airplanes are attached to a sky-and-water landscape, painted with oil on linen. The effect is a three-dimensionality that feels like a real-space version of Morley's photorealistic paintings. This feeling is compounded when viewing the work through the lens of a book or computer screen.

The artist spoke of "picking subjects that have a larger human scale to it," which has in the past included everything from motorcycle jumpers to distinguished war heroes. There's a sense of pop-culture heroism to a lot of these images that spans history and traditions. *Cromwell* was painted from a DVD box of the 1970 movie of the same name.

"I guess what connects them is I've made a choice based on the idea of the painterly possibilities in each instance," Morley said, "and that varies a great deal."