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Art in America



Malcolm Morley *Bomber Strafing the Water*, 2010 oil on canvas 45 1/2 x 58 inches

The legendary London-born New York artist Malcolm Morley turns 80 this year, on June 7. The irrepressible Gemini has been a leader of at least two art movements. His precise paintings of ocean liners defined Photo-Realism in the 1960s; in the late 1970s and '80s, his exuberantly deconstructed imagery paved the way for the Neo-Expressionists, such as Julian Schnabel and David Salle. Morley was the recipient of the Tate Gallery's inaugural Turner Prize, awarded in 1984. Since then he has maintained a unique and rather exalted reputation as both a modern master and a cult figure.

Morley, who grew up in the midst of World War II, has vivid memories of the Blitz that destroyed his childhood home. No wonder he often returns to the subject of war in his art. Morley revisits the theme in his latest efforts. After a long and serious illness last year, he made a heroic recovery and painted the powerful group of works in "Malcolm Morley: Rules of Engagement." The show, on view through Apr. 30 at Sperone Westwater, New York, is accompanied by a catalogue with an essay by Brooks Adams. Morley's latest paintings of battle scenes and modern day warriors could well launch a new, one-man movement—Heroism.

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Among the highlights of the exhibition are the action-packed images for which Morley is well known—here they include aerial scenes of dogfights and planes exploding midair or on runways. Many, however, are haunting portraits of notable pilots from various wars, immortal folk heroes to some, villains to many, from legendary figures like the Red Baron to others long forgotten.

On the occasion of the exhibition, Morley met at the gallery with *Art in America*'s David Ebony to explore the artist's triumphant but not unproblematic art-world odyssey spanning more than five decades. The conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

DAVID EBONY: You're turning 80 soon, and you're looking dapper as ever. You are a survivor personally and professionally. Tell us about your regimen.

MALCOLM MORLEY: Yes. I work out three days a week—pushups, weight training. I am no good in the mornings, so I go to the studio midday and work until dinnertime. I go back to the studio after dinner until around 10 PM or so. Then I go watch a movie on TV.

EBONY: Has your routine changed over the years?

MORLEY: Yes, it did when I married Lida 23 years ago. Prior to that I was a roving lunatic, painting mostly at night.

EBONY: Early on in your career Salvador Dalí recognized you as one of the best and most important contemporary painters. He made a great show of support for your work. But he also predicted that one day you'd wind up trying to assassinate painting. Have you done that?

MORLEY: No. I saved painting. There's the great line of Clement Greenberg where he's talking about Pollock and he quotes Miró saying that he wanted to murder painting. He was talking about a certain kind of attitude about painting.

EBONY: Dalí said that in the late 1960s, during the heyday of Photo-Realism. You were at the pinnacle of the movement. But not long after, you were the first of the Photo-Realists to sort of deconstruct the genre, making more expressive paintings and textural kinds of works that undermined Photo-Realist methodology.

MORLEY: I always preferred the term Super-Realism because it is related to Suprematism. Malevich is one of my favorite painters. The end of Photo-Realism for me came about from a very emotional experience after seeing the movie *Z*, directed by Costa-Gavras, with Yves Montand. I was with Tony Shafrazi, and we went back to my studio after seeing the film. I had just finished a painting of a South African racetrack [*Race Track*, 1970] and Ivan Karp was coming to photograph it the next day. We were so revved up from the movie, I thought I had to "X" out the image. But I didn't just paint an "X" on the canvas. I got a sheet of Mylar and put red paint on it so that when pressed against the surface it would leave a red "X." We did a number of tests and the "X" got thinner and thinner. Finally, we pressed it hard on the canvas. It came out like a perfect "X"; lo and behold, I became Malcolm X. [*Laughs.*] Racial issues were already implied in the painting. Also, at that same moment, I was X-ing out Photo-Realism.

EBONY: That painting does seem to mark the end of an era.

MORLEY: Even before that, critics would say that my brushstrokes were kind of ugly, not neat and tidy like Goings or Estes. My painting style really comes from my childhood, when I was painting model boats and airplanes. I had spent six months on a model of a big ship when I was about 12. One night the neighborhood was bombed by a "Doodlebug," which is what we called a V-1 guided missile. I was lying



Malcolm Morley *Beautiful Explosion*, 2010 oil on linen 45
1/2 x 58 inches

around 1960, and New York was still a hotbed of Abstract Expressionism. I used to go to The Club where people would rant and rave at each other. De Kooning and Milton Resnick and everybody would scream at each other. I was most attracted to Cy Twombly's early work. I made paintings with bands, using a pastry gun, with some added pencil marks. In the end, the paintings have the feel of the structure of an ocean liner, with rows of windows, for example.

EBONY: I saw some of them from the early '60s in your Hayward Gallery retrospective in London [2001]. It was the first time I had seen any of the abstract works in person.

MORLEY: At the time, they were a big breakthrough for me. I studied at the Royal College of Art with Carel Weight, a figurative painter who was my mentor. When I discovered Matisse and started doing Matisse-like nudes, Weight accused me of being a modernist. But my classmates at the school included hip artists like Richard Smith, Peter Blake and Robyn Denny. I was like the Grandma Moses of the bunch. Not cool. At least not in the studio. At night we'd all twist the night away at the Peppermint Lounge.

EBONY: Do you get nostalgic for those times?

MORLEY: Not really. I recently discovered that the Latin root of nostalgia means "disease of the past."

EBONY: Early on in your career, you became known for some provocative incidents, like when you attacked a painting of yours at an auction as it came up for sale.

MORLEY: That was at an auction in Paris. It was a painting of Buckingham Palace I did in 1970 that had been commissioned by the flower company F.T.D. [*Buckingham Palace with First Prize*]. There were a number of artists also commissioned, and I decided to give myself first prize, and stuck the ribbon in the corner. Around that time I was very taken in by Artaud and when the painting came up for auction a few years later, I developed a performance piece. I asked friends to come to the auction, and let them know that I was going to do this event and maybe shoot paint at the canvas with a water pistol. The auction house was tipped off about it and when the painting came out they had it covered in plastic. I was dressed in a tuxedo with long tails. I had hired a violin player. She started playing and I spouted off a speech I wrote about how God means the painting not to be a fake, or something like that. I went up to the painting and nailed the water pistol onto the canvas. The audience was beside itself, shouting and laughing, and the auctioneer stopped the sale. The painting was eventually bought by a Swedish collector, and now it's in the Pompidou

in my bed sleeping when suddenly there was a big bang and the entire wall of my bedroom collapsed. The shoe store downstairs exploded and the street was filled with shoes. My model disappeared. We had to leave the building and my family and I were basically refugees. Anyway, eventually, through psychoanalysis, I made the connection between my paintings and trying to recover the boat that disappeared-the beloved lost object. I guess I should thank the Germans for that!

EBONY: Your early works were abstract. You painted Minimalist compositions. Who and what inspired you early on?

MORLEY: My first show in New York, at Kornblee Gallery, was of abstract compositions. I came here

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collection—with the water pistol still attached. The whole thing was filmed. But I left the film with someone who I paid \$1,000 to edit it, and it disappeared.

EBONY: Have you done other films?

MORLEY: I made a film called *Vincent the Ballroom Dancer*. It never really got it off the ground, so I don't want to go into it too much. But that one is lost, too. Someone stole it.

EBONY: Are you interested in new media or new technology?

MORLEY: My only interest is in using Photoshop to rev up the images. My assistant helps me with it. I'm not that good at it.

EBONY: You often use 3-D elements in your work. Your previous New York show featured a rare freestanding sculpture—of a motorcyclist jumping through a flaming hoop.

MORLEY: My paintings sometimes have objects attached to them that you don't notice at first. In a sense they are eye tests. It is only when you look around the painting that you notice them, like the paintbrush attached to the canvas near one of the jet's firing machine guns in *Rules of Engagement* [2011]. I was trying to say here, "make art, not war!"

EBONY: What is the difference in your approach to sculpture and painting?

MORLEY: One thing I would say is that with painting you are kind of outside the action but with sculpture you're always in it. You think as you go with sculpture. But with painting, I already have the script pretty much set out.

EBONY: Your new works are closely related to one another in terms of scale and subject matter.

MORLEY: That's what the series calls for. I was more involved in the works as a set from the beginning. I had a show in Brussels a couple of years ago and a young painter gave me a book with old illustrations of fighter pilots. The moment I saw it, I knew this would be my next series. It brought back memories of being a kid, when we used to watch the fighter pilots battle it out in the sky at night. And I never doubted that this series would be everything I wanted to do now. Many of them are portraits. David Sylvester once asked me, "Why don't you paint people?"

EBONY: You have painted figures over the years.

MORLEY: Yes, but these are really more like portraits.

EBONY: In the way of a Graham Sutherland portrait, maybe?

MORLEY: His portrait of Winston Churchill was amazing.

EBONY: You chose historical figures that relate in a more general way to current events, especially armed conflicts in the world. You have also painted quite a few images of well-known sports figures.

MORLEY: They are all related. The sports paintings have to do with heroes. And the new ones are heroes too. That is the link. I came across a book about early Rothko, and he talked about mythology and how strong that is as a theme. Mythology always needs a hero and a hero always needs danger. And I thought about what a hero means to an American. I went to the local deli and listened to the guys talking about a

football game from years ago. They remembered every detail of the game. I realized that this is their mythology; these are their heroes.



Malcolm Morley *Ring of Fire*, 2009 Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

EBONY: In your work, you often juxtapose images of violence and pleasure, a jarring dichotomy. What wins out in the end?

MORLEY: Neither. There is no end.

EBONY: I guess I meant to ask, are you an optimist or a pessimist? Is humankind about to self-destruct? Or will we be OK?

MORLEY: I have that dichotomy within myself. I feel that we are pretty pathetic as a species, yet there are grand ideas. Personally, I feel that life in itself is a good thing. It is not good for most people, though, I think. I am always conflicted about the idea of god, if god exists.

EBONY: It makes me think of the Woody Allen quip, that if god does exist we should mount a class-action lawsuit.

MORLEY: He got it right on the head.

EBONY: There is something spiritual about your work, in the sense that you convey some core beliefs about the infinite greatness of humanity and the world.

MORLEY: I have a friend who says that what we call spiritual is just a certain configuration of particles. There's no denying that it's spiritual, but it is just another bunch of particles. I never thought that someone would be able to have a spiritual experience like that through my work. I feel it mostly in music.

EBONY: Maybe what I am getting at is a kind of emotional intensity I find consistent in your work. The painting *Macaws, Bengals and Mullet* [1982] has that kind of impact.

MORLEY: If you look closely at the center of that composition, you will see a kind of crucified Christ figure, a torso appears in the tree trunk.

EBONY: What's your next project? What paintings are you planning?

MORLEY: Babies and English pubs. Babies because I want to paint all of those beautiful plastic toys. A big baby with all those toys; it would look like a horror story.