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Greenberger, Alex. "Malcolm Morley, Pioneer of Photorealist Painting, Dies at 86." www.artnews.com
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ARTNEWS



Malcolm Morley in front of his 2008 painting *Thor*. Courtesy Xavier Hufkens and Sperone Westwater

If there is one common thread that runs through Malcolm Morley's output, which spans the gap between Photorealism and surrealist tableaux, it's ships. Vessels sit in port, float through open seas, explode mid-air, zig-zag through choppy waters, and sail forward in his canvases, creating compositions that, depending on the mood of the picture in question, are either energetic or decidedly somber. Morley often ascribed his

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interest in ships to battles he used to create between toy models. But, he sometimes cautioned, the ships were “more than toys”—they became tools for him to explore issues related to scale and size.

Fittingly, Morley’s painting was a rigorous form of play that lasted the whole of his career. Morley has died at age 86, Brussels’s Xavier Hufkens and New York’s Sperone Westwater galleries, which represented the artist, confirmed today. In a statement issued by both galleries, they wrote, “Morley defied stylistic characterization, moving through so-called abstract, hyperrealist, neo-romantic, and neo-expressionist painterly modes, while being attentive to his own biographical experiences. Thank you Malcolm, for your captivating art that broke new ground, your unique character, your exceptional knowledge and your friendship.”

Morley is often discussed in relation to the Photorealist movement, which sought to strip any sense of authorship from the act of painting through the creation of carefully worked images that mirror their photographic sources. However, Morley said he preferred the term “super-realist” to describe his work, because it aligned it with Suprematism, the early 20th-century Russian avant-garde that sought to distill painting to its most basic forms.

Morley’s method often involved dividing a canvas into a grid—a technique he had borrowed from his friend Richard Artschwager—and intricately copying postcards of ships. “It was the total opposite of abstract,” Morley said of the “excruciating” style in an interview with the *Guardian*. The results of Morley’s labor were extraordinarily detailed images of vessels that are quaint and strange, and also a little drily funny, since they are so clearly reproductions.

But only a few years after he began creating these works, Morley began moving away from a Photorealist style. He said that he considered his final work in this mode to be *Race Track* (1970), an image of just that with a big red X superimposed on top of it. The work is at once a protest (Morley was acting in defiance of apartheid in South Africa, where the race track was located) and an abandonment of Photorealism (he was crossing out a picture made using the style).

In the decades that followed, Morley, whom Salvador Dalí once labeled one of the best contemporary artists of his era, began working in a mode that drew on various Surrealist strategies. One painting-cum-performance involved visiting an auction house in Paris where a work of his was to be sold, with plans to shoot paint via a water pistol at the picture. The auction house was made aware of Morley’s plans, and they covered the painting in plastic; Morley nailed the gun to the work, instead. These sorts of gestures, Morley said, were inspired by the writings of Antonin Artaud.

Morley’s later work has sometimes been seen as a freeing-up of his earlier style, due to changes in his body resulting from old age. Planes swoop in from the sky, while ships sail through harbors and trains chug toward unknown destinations. The perspective is deliberately distorted, as though Morley was emphasizing the fact that he was no longer using the grid method; the compositions are bombastic and full of energy. (Other recent subjects included athletes.) Sometimes, he affixed objects to his canvas, so that the pictures branched out into the third dimension. He also crafted cryptic installations—one paired a reproduction of a Jacques-Louis David painting with a cannon tied to it. In a 2015 essay about late-career painters for *ARTnews*, the artist David Salle wrote of these pictures, “Morley’s work is almost punishingly dense, demanding, uningratiating; he dares us to imagine the act of sustained concentration that goes into its making.”

For Morley, this repeated emphasis on objects related to war—fighter planes, naval vessels, guns—came from his childhood, which he was able to recall vividly after having undergone psychoanalysis for years.

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Morley was born in 1931 in London. His childhood home was partly wrecked during World War II by a German bomb, creating a longtime fascination—or, perhaps, obsession—with conflict.

Morley was sent to naval school, but a three-year jail sentence for petty theft derailed that career route. While imprisoned, he read Irving Stone's 1934 novel *Lust for Life*, about the painter Vincent van Gogh, which convinced him that he could become an artist. He was let out early, and his parole officer got him into the Camberwell College of Arts in London. Shortly afterward, he transferred to the Royal Academy of Art. In the late 1950s, he moved to New York, where he fell in with a Downtown crowd that brought him into contact with various avant-garde strategies, principal among them Abstract Expressionism and Pop. (His first mature paintings were abstractions.)

Among the various accolades Morley won over the course of his decorated career was the first Turner Prize, in 1984, awarded to a distinguished British artist by Tate. He was also the 1992 winner of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture's Painting Award. Morley was included in the 1966 Guggenheim Museum exhibition "The Photographic Image," a landmark survey that explored the relationship between photography and other mediums in contemporary art, and the fifth and sixth editions of Documenta in Kassel, Germany, in 1972 and 1977, respectively. His work was the subject of retrospectives in 1983, at the Whitechapel Gallery in London (it later traveled to the Brooklyn Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago); in 1993, at the Centre Pompidou in Paris; and the Hayward Gallery in London (2001).

Morley's work is sometimes credited with having helped spur on some artists associated with Neo-Expressionism, principal among them Julian Schnabel and Salle. But it's not difficult to imagine that Morley's paintings could be motivating the move toward figuration within the medium right now. If his influence was something Morley thought about, he didn't speak much about it. In 2015, he told *ARTnews*, "I never look back."