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Schjeldahl, Peter. "Rackstraw Downes and Malcolm Morley, Renegades from Sixties Abstraction."  
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"Melee at Agincourt," by Malcolm Morley, from 2017. Photograph by Robert Vinas, Jr. Courtesy the Estate of Malcolm Morley / Sperone Westwater

*Downes's meticulous restraint and Morley's stylistic compulsions blazed new trails for painting.*

Malcolm Morley, another British-American renegade from abstraction in the nineteen-sixties, died this year, at eighty-six, after a turbulent career of eccentric masteries and forthright weirdnesses that bounced into and out of fashion and critical esteem. He was a great painter off and on. A current show at Sperone Westwater of some of his last works, with a few early gems thrown in, won't exalt his reputation, but its antic perversity—with flatly painted, surreal tableaux, wizardly in composition, of toy medieval knights on fabric-armored horses—is well worth witnessing. It extends a category of regressions to boyhood fantasy that have included painted and sculpted flotillas and flocks of First World War-era warships and fighter planes. Morley had an eventful early life. During the Blitz, a V-1 buzz bomb damaged his family's home and obliterated a balsa-wood model that he had made, and which he treasured, of the battleship H.M.S. Nelson: a poignant memory that he recovered, he said, in psychoanalysis. As a teen-age runaway, he served spells in reform schools and then two years in prison for burglary and theft—petty crimes short of his dreams of big-time heists, he said, but "I always got caught"—during which he studied art by correspondence course. He then attended proper art schools, was excited by a show of American Abstract

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Expressionism, and emigrated in 1958. Leading New York artists including Barnett Newman welcomed and encouraged him.



“St. George Fleeing a Prairie Meadow Burning,” by Malcolm Morley, from 2018. Photograph by Robert Vinas, Jr. Courtesy the Estate of Malcolm Morley / Sperone Westwater

In the mid-sixties, Morley uncorked a novel style—painstakingly copying banal postcard, travel-brochure, and calendar images of ships and vacation spots or of reproduced paintings, most notably Vermeer’s “The Art of Painting”—which art historians generally credit as the starting gun for Photo-Realism, a movement that engaged scores of painters in diffident imitations of the camera’s Cyclopean eye. But Morley’s pictures (among them, unforgettably, a Kodachrome-lurid scene of a quite insanely happy family at a beach) were gamier. As ideas for art, they may be said to qualify as proto-postmodern, to the extent that that means anything, for their tension between the Duchampian readymade (with white borders signalling thingness) and self-abnegating obsession. Selfhood soon resurfaced in such masterpieces as paintings that fretted precise images of the Los Angeles Yellow Pages with seething painterly incident. The results, beginning in 1969, are like violent collisions of persnickety objectivity and mad abandon. They were also gorgeous. (That yellow!) Morley then jettisoned realism and joined the initiation of another world-changing movement, neo-expressionism. His jungle landscapes of the early eighties felt as though they were bent on fighting through the peskily insistent presence of plants and animals to reach a reborn Abstract Expressionism. What was, say, some tiger up to? Morley as much as implied no responsibility for it.



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If ever an œuvre cried out for a retrospective exhibition, it's Morley's. In 1984, the Brooklyn Museum imported a show from London's Whitechapel Gallery that had won the artist the first annual Turner Prize. He has had only a single retrospective in this country since, in Miami. I fancy one that would focus on the onsets of Morley's stylistic convulsions, including several that I haven't mentioned here, to emphasize the demonic restlessness of his sensibility, which could hardly be farther from that of, say, [seventeenth-century Dutch master Pieter Jansz.] Saenredam. It would help to explain his personal appeal to other artists of many kinds. (Richard Serra wrote a gnomic catalogue preface for one of his shows.) He had a sense of vocation akin to falling off a cliff and hitting all manner of surprising things on the way down. He was fun though somewhat alarming company, by the way. To touch on his work is, in the way of Walt Whitman, to touch the man, an experience none too gentle, but plenty invigorating.



"The Ultimate Anxiety," by Malcolm Morley, from 1978. Courtesy the Estate of Malcolm Morley / Sperone Westwater

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