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Malcolm Morley, *Floundering Vessel with Blue Whales and Viking Ships*, 1998, oil on linen, 8' 6" x 79½".

MALCOLM MORLEY

SPERONE WESTWATER

Like a rock icon who neglected to die young or burn out, Malcolm Morley has to put up with critics interested in nothing but his "early stuff," whether it's his '60s-era superrealist hits or his expressionist work from the '70s. His exhibition of recent paintings reveals the artist glancing over his shoulder as well, but in unanticipated ways.

Good digestion is the key to successful borrowing, and in these paintings, Morley mixes the peculiarly British genre of maritime painting with quotations from artists

as far-ranging as Malevich, Rousseau, and Picasso, washing it all down with imagery from his own work. Underneath these allusions lies a healthy dose of his much younger self, in love with fighter planes and ships, fascinated by the sea. We look down on many of the scenes from above, as if hunching over notebook drawings on a school desk.

This boyishness is embedded in the method: The ships and planes are rendered from maquettes that Morley builds himself (one makes an appearance here attached to the canvas *Biplane in Flight*, 1998). In *Approaching Valhalla*, 1998, the first of three identical Viking ships is painted from a maquette, but the second is copied from the first image, and the third from the second, with the representations losing scale and detail along the way. What separates Morley from other "copy" artists, the assorted photorealists and appropriaters, is the playful self-reflection balancing the reflexivity of his images.

Working from objects rather than photographs liberates the surface of the paintings. They are flat, but not tight. And while Morley's paint is not as loose as it was five years ago—the most recent work, *Battle of Britain*, 1999, is the smoothest here—there are painterly passages. These fail in two gimmicky paintings featuring muddily scumbled mountains that are paired in one work with a figure magnetically attached to the painting (*Maroon Bells*, 1998) and in another with Day-Glo parachutes (*Parasailors with Maroon Bells*, 1998). In *Floundering Vessel with Blue Whales and Viking Ships*, 1998, the heavier paint works: Large areas of stuccolike, splattered paint, particular and unpre-

dictable, efface the cliché of the ocean as an occasion for alloverness. The thick paint and clumsy, distorted figures strike an expressionist note against the coolness of Morley's gridding technique.

The breaking up of the canvas is most obvious in *Mariner*, 1998, a large oil paint "collage" of imagery from earlier works, visually not unlike Jasper Johns's 1987 *The Seasons*. But what in Johns looks like a strut down memory lane seems more subtle in Morley. While the sea is certainly a lifelong interest, the paintings he draws on directly belong, for the most part, to the mid-'90s. Rather than sum up his own career, the artist experiments with different sources (along with the maquettes, he paints after watercolors, oils, and transparencies). The art is intensely personal, well made but decidedly unglossy, sometimes uneven in quality—art that means it, and even makes mistakes.

—Katy Siegel