

Petzel

MALCOLM MORLEY

Painting as Model

June 20 – August 2, 2024

520 West 25th Street

Petzel is pleased to present *Painting as Model*, an exhibition of multidisciplinary works by British-American artist Malcolm Morley (1931–2018). On view at the gallery’s Chelsea location at 520 W 25th Street from June 20 to August 2, 2024, the exhibition spans over 50 years of the artist’s oeuvre in 38 works created from 1959 to 2014. Organized in close partnership with the artist’s estate, *Malcolm Morley: Painting as Model* will be the first comprehensive survey of Morley’s work in over two decades.

Comprised of paintings and sculpture, *Painting as Model* features loans of seminal works from important institutions, prominent private collections, as well as the artist’s estate. The exhibition includes landmark paintings lent by the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., The Broad Art Museum in Los Angeles, and the CCS Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

Important works on loan include *Coronation and Beach Scene* (1968) from the Hirshhorn, the only double image “super-realist” painting Morley ever made. Starting in the mid-60s, Morley created his “super-realist” works using a technique in which a small source image, such as a photograph, is overlaid with a grid and translated to a large canvas in segments, an uncommon practice among New York artists at the time. Stacking the Queen of the Netherlands’ horse-drawn carriage procession atop, yet among, lounging 60s beachgoers (both sampled from a Dutch travel brochure), Morley’s two-tiered association, inscribed in the language of leisure and advertising (but then, not yet in painting), would continue to unfurl in his later work.

Morley’s relationship with the grid, and indeed models, is further synthesized in the 1977 painting *The Day of the Locust*, on loan from the Museum of Modern Art. Titled after Nathanael West’s 1939 novel, whose hero wanted to paint *The Burning of Los Angeles*, Morley uses his first catastrophe painting, *Los Angeles Yellow Pages* (1971) as the base from which he superimposes numerous boats, helicopters, and figures, suspended, in a flurry of combustion and chaos, atop the Los Angeles skyline. As Jean-Claude Lebensztein notes:

“The shifting of the viewer’s eyes in relation to the transparent grid between it and these complex motifs causes strange transformations but also evokes a modern tradition—that of the artist’s moving gaze, evident in Cubism, in Matisse’s work of the 1910s, and in de Kooning from whom Morley borrowed the key word *slippage*, lending the phenomenon a violent, discontinuous twist.”¹

Morley’s scenes are active, his picture planes often dizzying, in flux. While his images sample photographs and print media, their references are not fixed, “but fluctuate between source and transformation, between one sign system and another. In place of wonder we are given uncertainty, but both states of feeling have to do with a mobile rather than a fixed subject matter.”²

¹ Jean-Claude Lebensztein, *Malcolm Morley: Itineraries* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 96-98.

² Lawrence Alloway, “Morley Paints a Picture,” *ARTnews*, Summer 1968, 42-44, 69-71.

Petzel

Leaping off the grid and into the third dimension in the 90s and 2000s, Morley retained his hallucinatory, uncanny activation of the real, as his oeuvre edged toward abstraction. However, such delineations between the abstract and figurative are ultimately unstable when assigned to Morley's exhaustive corpus. When asked about his later work, Morley noted: "figurative—the word itself pisses me off, as if anything is not a figure."³ Fiercely iconoclastic, Morley was always pushing back at the institution of painting, always maintaining a sense of grit. Through the 2010s, Morley continued to defy stylistic characterization. *Aircraft on a Yellow Plane* (2014), the latest work in the exhibition, demonstrates Morley's release from the grid, the wings of aircraft brushing each other in a loose ensemble against an opaque plane.

Morley was committed to a ferocious formal rigor, a desire to ever-evolve: as he states in 2006, "each painting is the first painting I ever made."⁴ His painterly lexicon, transmutations of the vocabularies of advertising, capitalism, commodification, consumerism, corruption, modification, leisure, power, surveillance, transport, war, and weapons, continue to expand into gestural, focused fanfare for the retina, each painting containing many pictures.

About Malcolm Morley

Malcolm Morley (1931–2018, UK) is acknowledged as one of the earliest innovators of Superrealism, which developed as a counterpoint to Pop Art in the 1960s. Over the course of his distinguished career, Morley defied stylistic characterization, moving by turns through so-called abstract, realist, Neo-romantic, and Neo-expressionist painterly modes, while being attentive to his own biographical experiences. Morley studied at the Camberwell College of Arts and the Royal College of Art.

Over his lifetime, Morley had numerous presentations of his work hosted by institutions including the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (1983); Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (1983); Brooklyn Museum, New York (1984); Tate Liverpool (1991); Kunsthalle Basel (1991); Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht (1992); Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY (1992); Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (1993); Fundación La Caixa, Madrid (1995); Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo (1996); Hayward Gallery, London (2001); Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (2006); Yale School of Art (2012); the Hall Art Foundation, New York (2013-14), and Capitain Petzel, Berlin (2023). He has participated in numerous international surveys, including Documenta 5 (1972) and Documenta 6 (1977), and was awarded the inaugural Turner Prize in 1984, the Painting Award from the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1992, and the Francis J. Greenburger Award in 2015. He was inducted into both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2009) and the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2011).

Petzel Gallery is located at 520 West 25th Street New York, NY 10001. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10:00 AM–6:00 PM. For press inquiries, please contact Hanna Andrews at hanna@petzel.com, or call (212) 680-9467.

³ Malcolm Morley, "Malcolm Morley: The Principal of Uncertainty," by Robert Enright, *Border Crossings*, 25, no. 100 (November 2006): 22-36.

⁴ Ibid.