

ARTFORUM

LOS ANGELES

## Ivan Morley

PATRICK PAINTER

While Ivan Morley has often included hand-lettered "anecdotes"—textual cocktails of oddball California lore and fantasies dreamed up by the artist—as nebulous primers and legends to his disparate work, no such guides were present in his recent show, leaving viewers to fend for themselves. But four works here, made in 2005 and 2006, all titled *Tehachepi (sic)* (a folksy misspelling of the name of the mountains that separate the Los Angeles basin from California's Central Valley), make Morley's *modus operandi* clear.

One *Tehachepi (sic)*, in oil on canvas, is an all-over composition packed with hard-outlined cartoonlike blossoms, each inlaid with a pastel shade, that intermingle to create shiftingly mottled blocks of color—imagine a symbolist/pointillist/Orientalist Pattern and Decoration Pop Rothko. Another, in oil and gold leaf on glass, is iconic, depicting a skull and crossbones adorned with what appears to be a hybrid between a grass skirt and a cheerleader's mini. The tops of the crossed femurs burn as torches while the bottoms morph into fists clutching pom-poms. The iconic merges with narrative in a canvas combining oil, acrylic, batik, and embroidery that depicts a masked and helmeted ghost rider on a BMX bike, its ID plate marked with a toll-free telephone number and a dollar sign. Cycling straight at us through space under a crescent moon, the rider hauls as passengers a pair of tribal guardians and a drummer whose presence is made known only by sticks raised aloft. Another *mélange* of process offers an arrangement, strangely like something a florist might assemble, of primitive weapons and obscure industrial objects, topped with a straw hat and hovering under a crescent moon in a smoldering sky.

Among other stylistic offerings was the distilled surrealism of *Ghost(s)*, 2005, an embroidery depicting a flat surface interrupted by an encrusted orifice leading to a dark void, into and out of which travel lily-white, slightly flaccid, fleshy arrows. Another embroidery, *A True Tale*, 2006, suggests a baroque division of landscape into earth below, sky above, and an activated heaven above all, but abstracted as if Hans Hofmann and Clyfford Still had collaborated in a sewing circle. Hofmann turns up again in *Bad Memory of a Good Painting*, 2006, the exhibition's one fully narrative painting. It's a vision of a scruffy lad navigating a jumble of modernist paintings hung on dark gray walls, the whole scene rendered in a style that merges R. Crumb, William Wiley, and Paul Klee.

As with Morley's past exhibitions, the show revealed the pleasure and provocation to be found in the work of an artist who confounds our expectations of painting less through riffs and one-liners than through daring to explore how a sensibility might navigate outward expressions that are variously abstract, iconic, and narrative. The only clear weakness was inconsistency: Morley is just better at, or at least more devoted to, his exploration of the abstract and the iconic than the figurative and narrative, and likewise, he is more adept at embroidery and painting on glass than he is at straight oil on canvas. If Morley really wants to confound expectations, he needs to avoid what has become a habit of hamstringing or neglecting the more conventional aspects of his practice.

Ivan Morley,  
*Tehachepi (sic)*, 2006,  
oil and gold leaf  
on tempered glass,  
42 x 30".



—Christopher Miles