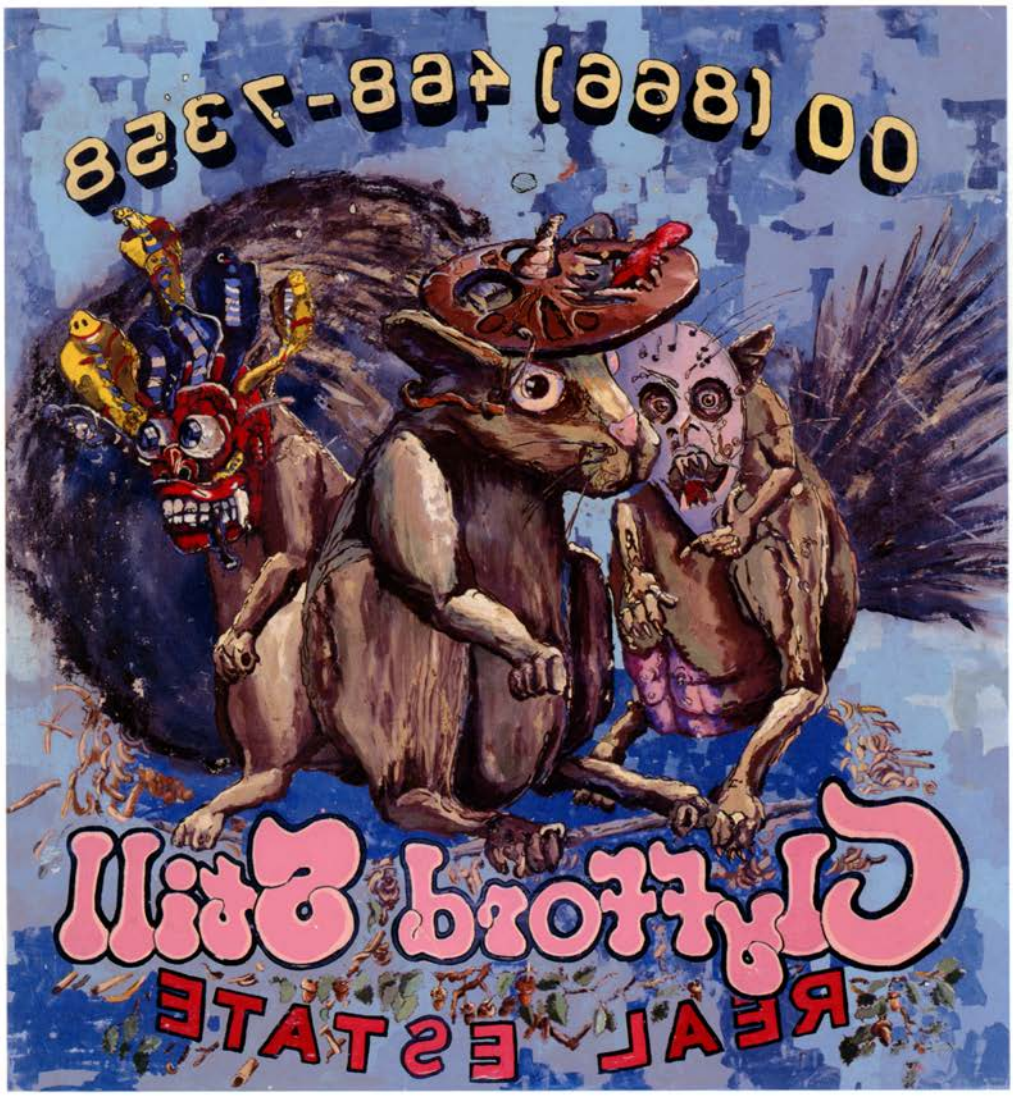
Roussel, Noëllie, “Ivan Morley, Custodian of Memories,” *Ivan Morley,* Los Angeles: Patrick Painter Inc., 2006, pp. 2-9



Logo, 2004, oil, wax, KY jelly on polyester over panel, 24 x 25 inches (61 x 63.5 cm)

Roussel, Noëllie, “Ivan Morley, Custodian of Memories,” *Ivan Morley,* Los Angeles: Patrick Painter Inc., 2006, pp. 2-9

Ivan Morley, Custodian of Memories

With the renewal of interest in painting observed over the last few years, an interest focused on traditional genres such as portrait painting, or on elegant post-abstract decorative pictures, or even on the resurgence of symbolic narratives so elaborate that we even come to witness the return of old-fashioned, pre-Modern, pre-Craig Owens literary and figural allegories; a painter like Ivan Morley stands out as an exigent maker of adventurous yet whimsical paintings that haven't denied or abandoned the desire for pure "retinian" pleasure.

The complexity and variety of his paintings are at first glance bewildering, as Morley seems to jump effortlessly from abstract to figurative painting blending together materials and techniques a *priori* foreign to each other, not unlike his most obvious forerunner Sigmar Polke. Morley may use in the same picture some simple, popular craft techniques and precious materials alike, or allude in the same breath to Modern Masters and vernacular art folktales.

As with Polke's work, we witness in Morley's paintings of the past few years a similar desire to link unexpected sources or references, the same experimental and irreverent approach to image making by agglomerating diverse mediums and materials contradictory in nature. Like Polke, Ivan Morley creates a visual vocabulary out of apparently heterogeneous elements that make his idiosyncratic paintings immediately recognizable as such despite the various identities they assume: the oval-shaped paintings recalling classical emblems and insignias, the thread pieces, or the semi-abstract floral glass paintings.

This manifest heterogeneity is deceptive, as Morley's *œuvre* is driven and unified by a desire to investigate the possibilities of painting, something he approaches by circumventing the loaded vocabulary of tradition. Circumvention however doesn't imply avoidance and Morley, well aware of the potential for failure in such an ambitious enterprise, accomplishes his painterly goals by several means. Failure itself plays an interesting role, since Morley capitalizes on failed attempts, deviations or "things that go wrong" within his working process. Morley's strategies in making painting can be summarized as such: the exploration of conventional and non-traditional painting techniques alike; the reliance on narration and the remembrance of hearsay as a starting point, and a profound engagement and curiosity for historical painting.

Morley's relentless exploration of obscure subject matters as a pretext for meticulously fabricated, visually stunning artworks is outwardly united by constant references to apparently absurd narratives in the construction of groups[1] such as *A True Tale; From Don, George and Diane;* or *Tehachepi (sic).*

These narratives may for example be built on a story recalled from Morley's childhood; they may refer (as the artist tells us) to murky memories of local conversations, allusions to local and/or famous artists' quotes or rumors about them, or to apparently senseless or random anecdotes.

Ultimately these elaborate stories, however entertaining, are unnecessary to the viewers' engagement with the finished painting in the sense that they are not a crucial key to their comprehension. Morley's paintings are not

[1] Morley explains his preference for the word "group" over "series" by his wish to make "color-coordinated" artworks as opposed to paintings that would be brought together by a similar subject developed over a length of time. Phone conversation with the artist, October 11, 2006.

Roussel, Noëllie, "Ivan Morley, Custodian of Memories," *Ivan Morley,* Los Angeles: Patrick Painter Inc., 2006, pp. 2-9

mere illustrations of his narratives or attempts at making ideological or theoretical points. Unlike many of his contemporaries using narrative in painting at present, Morley doesn't create allegories.

Nevertheless his narratives are indispensable as a step, a pretext to begin constructing pictures, in his path to engage with such concerns as purely formal tropes or the decorative. This is most patent in Morley's patient production of textile patterns such as *A True Tale*, 2006 (p. 27) which may evoke some vague Abstract Expressionist patterns but in this particular case happens to be "an attempt that went wrong to depict the sails of a ship". *A True Tale* started in fact as a tentative monochrome in the bottom part, and then the rectangular sails became a grid, resulting in a tall, vertical composition of layered colors.

In *A True Tale* the tradition of maritime painting with its foggy seascapes, proud billowing sails, translucent renditions of splashing and raging waters has been used as a starting point. These elements are later progressively obscured and layered into an abstract embroidered vertical panel, becoming in essence a totally different object altogether from what was initially planned. This is where Morley's artistic integrity and intellectual humility come out at their best, when the artist embraces a setback in a planned project and makes the most of it by turning the situation to his advantage. Calling the result a happy "accident" would be an exaggeration since the magnificent thread "painting" results from a longish, painstaking process of embroidery. Rather, it is an honest attempt at using different means, *i.e.* thread instead of paint, to engage with a certain topic of painting tradition encompassing everything from Jakob van Ruysdael to Claude Monet to Edward Ruscha. This succeeds in producing an entirely new sort of tactile, sensual art object whose nature resides somewhere in between sculpture, painting, and decorative textile.

It should be noted here that the use of textile in Morley's thread, batik and embroidery works is patently different from Sigmar Polke's. Unlike the German artist Morley doesn't appropriate existing, manufactured fabrics but builds them up from scratch, learning some simple craft methods for the production of his textile pieces[2].

As in many of his technical endeavors, Morley had to learn some basic skills (in this case machine embroidery) in order to be able to achieve his project. The artist is quick to point out that acquiring these basic skills in non-traditional painterly techniques doesn't make him an "accomplished" craftsman, far from it[3]. Morley is rather an explorer in semi-forgotten, often overlooked or even scorned crafts, discarded from what is often the lofty, serious and self-conscious realm of painting's Western tradition.

This exploration of unusual methods of artmaking and unorthodox materials in order to attain the visual goals Morley sets out for himself[4] leads occasionally to sensationalism and confusion. Much has been written for example about the use of a personal lubricant (K-Y Jelly) in the making of Morley's paintings. The artist is obviously well aware of its sexual connotations and acknowledges he finds them humorous. He however explains he ended up using KY Jelly as he needed the equivalent of what is known as a "resist" in sculpture, what in this case is merely a technical aid to prevent oil paint from sticking to the glass support he uses to form patterns.

Looking for a way to disengage from the loaded history associated with the brushstroke, Morley had been using

---

[2] Ivan Morley mentions Anni Albers' pioneer work on textiles as an obvious reference in this context.

[3] Phone conversation with the artist, *op.cit.*

[4] To clarify this idea of "goals", it should be noted that in Morley's words, if the conceptual aspirations and objectives he starts with are always met in his finished paintings, his visual ambitions tend to deviate in the sense that many objects or images end up not looking the way we expect them to do.

Roussel, Noëllie, “Ivan Morley, Custodian of Memories,” *Ivan Morley,* Los Angeles: Patrick Painter Inc., 2006, pp. 2-9

glass sheets to drop oil paint and to create his distinctive, characteristic anemone-shaped patterns. The glass surface ensures that the bottom part of each of these paint shapes remains perfectly flat. These are subsequently lifted from the glass sheet while still wet and then glued on their final support by the power of the paint humidity, in a reverse process that makes the top of the finished painting surface absolutely flat.

Finally, to prevent the oil paint from sticking to this glass panel Morley required a water-based substance, hence K-Y Jelly. Additionally the lubricant is mixed with wax as it absorbs the glossy finish of oil paint, making certain of the sheer and absolute flatness of the resulting painting, as in *Tehachepi (sic)*, 2006 (p. 20).

What is interesting in Morley's use of various techniques is the way he experiments with methods of artmaking that may appear at first glance craft-related but are reintroduced into the realm of "serious" contemporary practice. A closer look at his glass paintings demonstrates an intriguing historical circularity. Glass painting first appeared in Europe during the Italian Renaissance to produce precious miniatures depicting religious scenes. Glass was expensive to manufacture and therefore reserved as a support for the most noble subjects; the task was also entrusted to the best skilled painters: the reverse process of glass painting mandated to paint the details first and the background last. Later, as glass became less expensive and easier to fabricate, the technique was gradually adopted during the 17th and 18th century in folk art throughout Europe. Like many folk-related craft objects, glass painting slowly slipped into a discredited art practice, joining the ill-reputed domain of domestic crafts.

So the return of the technique, updated to suit Morley's attempt at sheer flatness in his disseminated compositions of floral all-over (something a perverted Greenbergian mind probably could never have foreseen) really demonstrates how a resourceful artist in need of reinventing each one of his new paintings could literally rehabilitate a disgraced craft into a wondrous tool.

Morley's glass paintings are a *tour de force*, not only because of the complicated painting process at play but because he succeeds in making visually arresting paintings out of what is now essentially a somewhat tacky

Tehachepi (sic), 2003
Oil, acrylic, batik, thread, KY jelly
and u.v. varnish on cotton
36 x 29 ¾ inches (91.4 x 75.6 cm)

Tehachepi (sic), 2003
Oil, acrylic, batik, thread
and u.v. varnish on cotton
41 x 33 inches (104.1 x 83.8 cm)

pictorial technique mostly used throughout the late 20th century to make mock stained glass[5] and almost never sanctioned by Modern Masters.

Very ancient shapes and compositional tropes also reappear in paintings like *Emblem*, or *Logo* (both 2005) mounted on oval panels. The oval was used in the history of classical painting to make portraits, most particularly 18th century pastels. At the beginning of the Modern era it was rediscovered and updated by Braque and Picasso for many Cubist still-lifes.

The use of oval canvases thus has a long and distinguished past, concentrating as it does two thousand years of art history. Most notably, Morley's oval paintings recall the motif of the Roman trophy. With their frontal depiction of piled-up armor, shields, helmets, javelins and swords looted from the vanquished enemy, these balanced compositions characterize some of the oldest graphic condensations of symbols and meaning.

As such the trophy (also variously referred to as emblem or insignia) has given birth to a modern commercial incarnation; the logo. As with glass painting, we are witnessing a slow descent of a powerful symbol into the everyday culture of marketing tools, and its appropriation by Pop culture in the form of heavy-metal band logos. This is probably where Morley picked up the shape, twisting the traditional representation (in *Logo*) to show strange masks, trucks, construction equipment and airplanes. In addition to these there is the mysterious "Clyfford Still Real Estate" sentence, alluding to a cryptic comment the late Abstract Expressionist painter may have made on the phone about being more interested in real estate than in art at the time the purported conversation took place. *Logo* (p. 14) is one of these paintings about which knowing the initial story won't help to "get" the work since the

---

[5] An exception should be taken with Marcel Duchamp's iconic *Large Glass* (1915-1923) which was intended as a work that is anything but a painting, as asserted in the extensive literature about *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*. Paul Klee who was heading the glass painting workshop at the Bauhaus also comes to mind. Lastly, it is interesting to note that Sigmar Polke studied glass painting in Düsseldorf from 1959 to 1960, before transferring to the Academy of Fine Arts.

Scar Score, 2000
Batik on canvas
30 x 36 inches (76.2 x 91.4 cm)

Roussel, Noëllie, “Ivan Morley, Custodian of Memories,” *Ivan Morley,* Los Angeles: Patrick Painter Inc., 2006, pp. 2-9

words seem so clearly dissociated from the objects depicted; it also relates to other paintings displaying the "Clyfford Still Real Estate" phrase but accompanied this time by a phone number, as in *From Don, George, and Diane*, 2003 (p. 37).

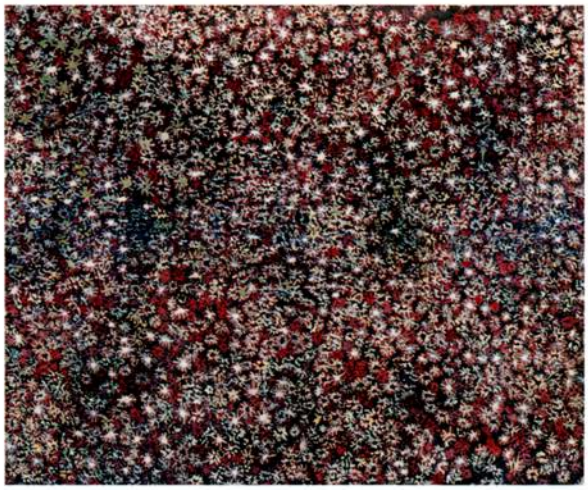
In the latter painting the number and the "Clyfford Still Real Estate" words are represented on a rickety sign outside a house, as if we were looking at first at a banal, everyday scene, but with the odd addition of what at first appear to be floating bubblegum-shaped pink clouds that are in fact hydrangeas. The phone number on the sign is a functioning number for an actual realtor, something Morley explains as an attempt to make a picture that someone could call, compounding the link between a symbolic image and "real life" with the desire to "help sell some real estate with the painting"[6]. This anecdote is exemplary of the whimsical and endearing aspect of Morley's work, part of an added commentary that brings some entertainment value to the appreciation of his painting, but also shows the humility and sometimes self-deprecation with which Morley approaches his task. If everything fails, if the attempt at reinventing each painting anew is unsuccessful, then maybe this particular painting can have some social usefulness in the real world.

Elsewhere, the oval *Emblem* (p. 16) shows a floating figure made up of an empty mask associated with some disembodied limbs holding a couple of drumsticks. The composition shares a faint similarity with Magritte's *The Liberator* (1947, Los Angeles County Museum of Art), a painting Morley has seen but didn't conscientiously mean to quote or emulate. The floating elements seems obvious in the comparison, but a closer inspection shows that the limbs and masks in *Emblem* are so separated that no physical body is represented, rather, elements are piled up in a trophy-like composition[7]. *Emblem* and the oval-shaped paintings are exemplary of the concatenation of art historical tropes, mundane anecdotes and everyday images present in Morley's art. The shape itself is

---

[6] Through the artist never called this number himself.

[7] *Emblem*'s physical oddness is accentuated by its support of sculpted leather, it also departs from the oval since it is shaped like a medieval Norman shield.



Hope Whore, 2000
Batik on canvas
30 x 36 inches (76.2 x 91.4 cm)

Roussel, Noëllie, "Ivan Morley, Custodian of Memories," *Ivan Morley,* Los Angeles: Patrick Painter Inc., 2006, pp. 2-9

representative of the artist's many strategies of diversion in engaging with the heroic tale of Modern painting. The oval has been chosen consciously for its distance from the conventional rectangular canvas but also to make an object halfway between painting and sculpture, whose materiality would counterbalance what amounts to an impure, non-reductive opticality of the picture.

But in a post-media, post Internet world, it often proves impossible to escape from the visual white noise of thousands of years of art history, mass media and Pop culture concatenated in an everyday stream of images. It is as if art itself had been swallowed whole in the collective unconscious, chewed and regurgitated in vague, half-forgotten, half-remembered lumps of semi-iconic pictures constantly lurking in the back of our minds.

Therefore Morley's attempts to evade references to the obvious expectations of what a painting should be often end up bringing back other historical comparisons. If the Abstract Expressionist heroes are successfully circumvented, then Cubism immediately comes to mind. If we disregard Cubism and throw it out the front door, then Byzantine mosaics or 18th century portraiture return through the window.

In this sense it could at first appear that Morley's whole enterprise would have been too ambitious, had he tried and set out to radically transform "Painting in general" instead of simply and humbly embarking on the invention of his own singular paintings, one at a time. If he had attempted such a grandiose task, it would certainly have been doomed to failure since "our expectations of what a painting should be" can only be imprinted by the ghostly presence of a century of Modernism, marred by confusing and conflicting theories promulgated after the fall of formalism, and haunted by the teleological narration of centuries of Classical art. As Morley states himself, strategies of circumvention in trying to thwart our *idées reçues* about painting often end up being circumvented themselves by the unreliability of memory.

The capricious unpredictability of memory is intimately linked with art historical references to Modernist painters. In addition to the aforementioned Clyfford Still, Morley refers, in *Bad Memory of a Good Painting*, 2006 (p. 33), to Josef Albers, Hans Hofmann and Arshile Gorky. This work literally quotes "from memory" archetypal paintings by the trio of émigré European artists whose teaching ultimately shaped Modernism in America, but whose own works were considered of lesser interest than those of the Abstract Expressionist pioneers who succeeded them. The three artists were chosen according to the vague memory of one of the galleries of the Art Institute of Chicago where Morley was a student in the late 1980s.

In *Bad Memory of a Good Painting*, we see a museum viewer, turning his back on us, looking at one of the paintings in what clearly resembles a museum gallery situation, complete with wall labels. Except the paintings remembered in Morley's painting may not be those installed at the time, but rather some generic visual reminiscence of these artists' styles. To add to the blurred recollections, the wall labels depicted in *Bad Memory...* are shown in reverse, leading us to conclude that the "remembered" paintings might also be depicted in reverse.

One can't escape the feeling of having been sent right through the looking glass and that, in this reverse universe, the stiff heroic criticism that filters our perceptions of these three Modern pioneers has magically morphed into "frabjous" verses from the Jabberwocky.

Bad Memory... is emblematic of Morley's way of coping with the self-assigned task of trying to build pictures and paintings not so much for the 21st century but that happen to exist after the 20th. It is not an enterprise in

Roussel, Noëllie, “Ivan Morley, Custodian of Memories,” *Ivan Morley,* Los Angeles: Patrick Painter Inc., 2006, pp. 2-9

rebuilding a new tradition for painting as a genre, but an everyday project that starts and ends with each singular painting. Each one of them begins with painterly goals, most often as humble as trying to determine how to deal with angles or corners in a particular composition, how to assemble colors in a way that wouldn't be determined by taste or theory, or how to experiment with lowly techniques while interpreting historical tradition without ignoring Abstract Expressionist history.

To help accomplish these quotidian goals, the means at Morley's disposal are humble and modest, the technique is patient, history and tradition are alluded to in a humorous way through faded visual memories and funny but unreliable anecdotes about famous or not so famous artists.

What makes Morley's works so singular and exemplary, aside from the obsessive craftsmanship, idiosyncratic way he has of using quotes, derivations and the subliminal messages of historical and modernist art alike, is the work ethic and humble intellectual integrity that Morley brings to and makes manifest in each and every one of his paintings.

- Noëllie Roussel