

# Malcolm Morley: Painting as Model

BR [brooklynrail.org/2024/07/artseen/Malcolm-Morley-Painting-as-Model](https://brooklynrail.org/2024/07/artseen/Malcolm-Morley-Painting-as-Model)

Alfred Mac Adam

July 2, 2024

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

## Art and Technology



Malcolm Morley, *Coronation and Beach Scene*, 1968. Magnacolor and liquitex on canvas, 89 5/8 x 90 1/8 inches. Collection of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC. Image courtesy of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. © The Estate of Malcolm Morley. Courtesy The Estate of Malcolm Morley and Petzel, New York. Photo: Cathy Carver

On View

## **Petzel Gallery**

*Painting as Model*

June 20–August 2, 2024

New York

Malcolm Morley's career divides into three episodes. As a boy, Morley (1931-2018) makes a balsa wood model of H.M.S. Nelson only to have it obliterated by a German bomb during the Blitz. Then comes crime and incarceration for housebreaking. In prison, he reads Irving Stone's 1934 novelization of Van Gogh's life, and is moved by grandiloquent passages like this:

He worked because he had to, because it kept him from suffering too much mentally, because it distracted his mind. He could do without a wife, a home, and children . . . But he could not do without something which was greater than himself, which was his life—the power and ability to create.

A prison-sponsored art program rehabilitates Morley and reveals his vocation. Initially, he is enthralled by American Abstract Expressionism, especially by the deviant variety produced by Barnett Newman, whose work eschews passionate gesture in favor of controlled Color Field painting. Morley, working as a waiter after moving to New York from London in 1958, meets Newman, who encourages and advises him.

That earliest period of Morley's career is invisible to us—the parameters of the Petzel show are 1959–2014—but we must be aware of it because it links him to a historical apprenticeship process: just as Matisse begins painting in an academic mode and then moves on to Impressionism and Fauvism, Morley assimilates a painterly idiom, American abstraction, and then rejects it. His embrace during the sixties of figuration marks the moment he achieves his artistic identity, his personal style. New York's "anything goes" art scene probably gave Morley that opportunity because of its anarchic nature: a style like Abstract Expressionism could dominate for a moment but would inevitably yield to Pop or Minimalism.

Morley called this new work, his second phase, Superrealism, a term that links him both to Richard Estes's Photorealism and Andy Warhol's Pop Art. Morley's work is vastly different because it is always paint, always the product of an inimitable hand. During the seventies, as he enters his third and final phase, Morley becomes more flamboyant, as if an Expressionist-Futurist impulse jolted his Superrealism into motion by linking it to memory: the child creator of the model ship persists in the grown man who would always longing for that lost utopia.

The panorama contained in these thirty-three works, the chronicle of Morley's career in New York, begins in 1959 but also includes the toy soldiers, model ships, postcards, and even the grid-covered glass he used to frame his pictures. *Studio Interior* (1959) is a 50 by 40-inch oil on canvas of singular importance because it marks Morley's stepping away

from non-representational painting. In composition, it recalls Velázquez's *Las Meninas* in that we are looking into the studio from the same vantage point enjoyed by Velázquez's monarchs, who are viewing the handmaids and the artist at work. There is even, as in Velázquez, a mirror inset in the armoire at the rear of the studio, but there are no human figures, no reflection of the artist painting the scene. Objectivity is key here, along with a muted palate, as if to subdue passion.



Installation view: *Malcolm Morley: Painting as Model*, Petzel, New York, 2024. Courtesy: © The Estate of Malcolm Morley. Courtesy of Petzel, New York. Photo: Daniel Polonsky.

Moving nine years into the future, 1968, we find a completely different Morley. *Coronation and Beach Scene* is a large, 89 by 90-inch composition that combines Surrealist juxtaposition with a potentially satiric social point of view. In the upper half of the landscape-format canvas, Morley paints from a photograph of Queen Elizabeth II's 1952 coronation; the lower half is a scene at the seaside, with a vaguely lascivious couple finishing their beachy lunch with coffee. What to make of the paired images? First, memory: for some reason the Morley of 1968 dredges up an event that took place sixteen years earlier, the pomp and circumstance of monarchy, which the newsreels of the day would have recorded in black-and-white, infuses it with the color only an eyewitness could recall, and brings it into proximity with a totally meaningless day at the seaside. Is Morley denouncing the triviality of both tradition and personal pleasure, or is he allowing the free associations of memory to dictate his subject? He simply presents the viewer with the artistic fact.

Equally non-committal yet equally powerful as social statement is *At a First Aid Center in Vietnam* (1971), 66 by 107 inches. A diptych, like a two-page *Life Magazine* photograph, it bears a caption: "At a first-aid center during Operation Prairie, a wounded G.I. reaches out toward a stricken comrade." Operation Prairie took place in South Vietnam between August 1966 and January 1967. Three years after the event, Morley paints in almost pointillist style a Baroque interpretation of the photo: the scene, following the magazine format, divides into two sections, the division heavily delineated by a landscape-style path leading to the vanishing point. The wounded Marine on the left extends an arm toward a man flat on his back on the right, the distance between them marking his despair at not being able to reach or help his friend. Along with the allusions to the Baroque, the style is very reminiscent of German Expressionism, especially Otto Dix. Again, Morley presents us with a situation and leaves its meaning to us.



Installation view: *Malcolm Morley: Painting as Model*, Petzel, New York, 2024. Courtesy: © The Estate of Malcolm Morley. Courtesy of Petzel, New York. Photo: Daniel Polonsky.

Expressionism becomes Abstract Expressionism in the stunning 60 by 98 inch *Seastroke* (1986). No politics or social commentary here, the painting captures an undefinable human experience. If sunstroke is heatstroke caused by too much sun, then seastroke must be some sort of delirium caused by overexposure to the ocean. Whatever it is, in Morley it generates a Fauve-like riot of color strokes, perhaps a happy death. *Shipwreck* (1994) imposes order on the chaotic passions of *Seastroke*: as in his Vietnam painting, Morley carefully divides this composition into two segments: crags on left and right, a pathway in the center leading back to a vanishing point. Compared to *Seastroke*, this is a

tempest in a teacup, with toy boats foundering left and right and the boy's model biplane flying over a deep-blue sea. No longer an event plucked from the news, but a fantasy mixed with childhood memories.

The twenty-first century reveals Morley in all his glory: ships, motorcycles, athletes colliding, paintings modulating into sculpture—all of Morley's signature elements. *Rules of Engagement* (2011) (45 by 58 inches) is a fitting capstone for this marvelous show: F-86 Sabre Jets in a dogfight during the Korean War: Malcolm Morley retrieves an image from the past and leaves us up in the rarefied air of his imagination.