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AUTUMN ARTS

'The last wild man of modern art'

Andrew Lambirth talks to Malcolm Morley

The Ashmolean Museum has taken the radical step of embracing contemporary art, and is currently hosting (until 30 March 2014) a mini-retrospective of Malcolm Morley's work, curated by Sir Norman Rosenthal and borrowed entirely from the prestigious American-based Hall Art Foundation. Morley (born London 1931) was the first winner of the ever-controversial Turner Prize (apparently David Sylvester threatened to resign as a judge if Morley was not awarded the prize), but has lived in America since 1958 and visits these shores rarely. The last time he was here was in 2001, for a full-scale retrospective of his work at the Hayward Gallery. We haven't seen enough of his art in this country over the past decade, so this show is a most welcome event.

Critics have described him as an abstract painter, a Pop artist, a photorealist, and an expressionist. Morley accepts all these designations, for really he's just an artist, a painter who modifies his style to fit the subject. (As he puts it: 'The imagery calls forth the surface.') The work he is doing now is closer to the pictures of ocean liners he painted in the 1960s, which first established his name, than to the expressionist paintings he made in the 1980s. 'There's a sort of synthesis which has taken place', says Morley, 'and the paintings now are much more visionary. I work from a number of different sources [such as magazine photos] but they all get squared up and cut up into little pieces and I just look at each piece separately.' In this way Morley distances himself from the content of the image and can concentrate on its formal abstract qualities. His philosophy might be adumbrated thus: if you look after each part with the right degree of truthfulness, the whole will look after itself.

'I like to think of it as fidelity,' he says. 'Two words characterise my art: diversi-

ty and fidelity. Fidelity somehow binds the diversity. And although the paintings might look very different from each other, you get the feeling the same artist painted them.' There is certainly an overriding personality behind the varied handling, from brushless photorealism to brushy expressionism. The Ashmolean display is dominated by a magnificent oil-and-encaustic painting entitled



'Red Arrows', 2000, by
Malcolm Morley

'French Foreign Legionnaires Being Eaten by a Lion in the Sahara Desert' (1986). On the left of the canvas the legionnaires raise their guns, while from the right comes a huge consuming lion like a bushfire, painted in a very different style of near-abstract spatter. Nearby is one of the museum's Assyrian reliefs of a winged demon, a juxtaposition that Morley relishes. I am reminded of that

favourite quotation of Bertie Wooster from Lord Byron's poem 'The Destruction of Sennacherib':

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Morley certainly bodies forth the wolf (lion) with dazzling virtuosity, against the blue waves of the foot soldiers. Around the other walls are paintings of warships and liners, airplanes and model kits, refugees and sportsmen. Violence is coolly treated, banality rendered passionate. The range of image and handling is impressive.

Robert Hughes referred to Morley as 'the last wild man of modern art', and there are numerous stories about him, from an early spell in prison to destroying a painting in front of a collector who'd just given him \$40,000 for it. (Morley returned the cheque.) Much is made of Morley's youthful detention, but that episode is chiefly important because it introduced him to the world of art. Fired by reading *Lust for Life*, Irving Stone's fictionalised account of van Gogh, Morley took a correspondence course and grew increasingly excited by the possibilities of painting. He went down to St Ives because 'that's where I heard the artists were', and worked as a waiter in one of the hotels. Peter Lanyon was the painter he got closest to, though he remembers seeing Roger Hilton (an artist he still much admires) 'very very drunk in a pub'.

Back in London, Morley studied at Camberwell School of Art and then at the Royal College with such students as Peter Blake and Richard Smith (now a neighbour of

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Malcolm Morley in his studio: 'Two words characterise my art — diversity and fidelity'

Morley's in America). Then he met a girl on a bus who invited him to visit her in America, which he did. After that first visit he moved permanently to the USA in 1958. It was not a planned career move to relocate to New York — he didn't even realise that it had taken over from Paris as the centre of the art world; 'I found that out later.' But he met Barnett Newman and Salvador Dalí, who became a great enthusiast of his photorealist paintings. Dalí said to him: 'You paint a photorealism of the consciousness, and I paint a photorealism of the unconscious.' Morley comments: 'I learnt a lot from him and Barnett Newman, who was very encouraging and came down to my studio. He said: "All of the artists working here [in America] are involved in the bullfight and sticking in the stiletto." He was five foot four, wearing a little black suit with a monocle and a silver-headed cane. He drew himself up. "Whereas I'm interested in Excalibur — removing the sword from the stone, emptying Renaissance space." I had never come across that

scale of thinking before, and now I could see him, with a shovel, emptying Renaissance space. I was very taken by him — he became a mentor really.

'One of my closest friendships was with Richard Artschwager. That's when I had my revelation. I was still doing a version of Abstract Expressionism, slightly Cy

Morley never makes corrections — once it's done it stays done — and every bit leads to the next

Twombly-ish. I felt cursed by the need to make imagery, because I believed the most significant art being made was abstract. Keep in mind that my tutor at the Royal College was Carel Weight, and he painted crazy paintings — witches coming out of little semi-detached houses. So there was a little bit of that in me, but it took me quite a while to make the move. Imagery seemed to be filled up. Warhol had done all those Coke bottles — there wasn't much left. What was I

going to do? What I did was paint an ocean-going liner. I went down to Pier 57 and looked at a huge liner but it was impossible to organise it as a picture. So I got a postcard of it and used the grid — which was what I'd seen at Richard Artschwager's. He used the grid. But I used it in a particular way and finished each piece as I went.'

Morley never makes corrections — once it's done it stays done — and every bit leads to the next. 'Even if a mistake gets made, I turn it into something positive. For example, I made a painting of Raphael's "School of Athens" and I got one grid in the wrong place. So for Plato and Aristotle the skull is over here and the rest of the head here; I said I lobotomised Greek philosophy. The wit comes from the unconscious. As somebody put it to me, you make friends with your unconscious life, as a collaborator.'

In fact, this may be his greatest resource as a painter, which accounts for the lasting resonance of his work. Welcome home, Mr Morley!