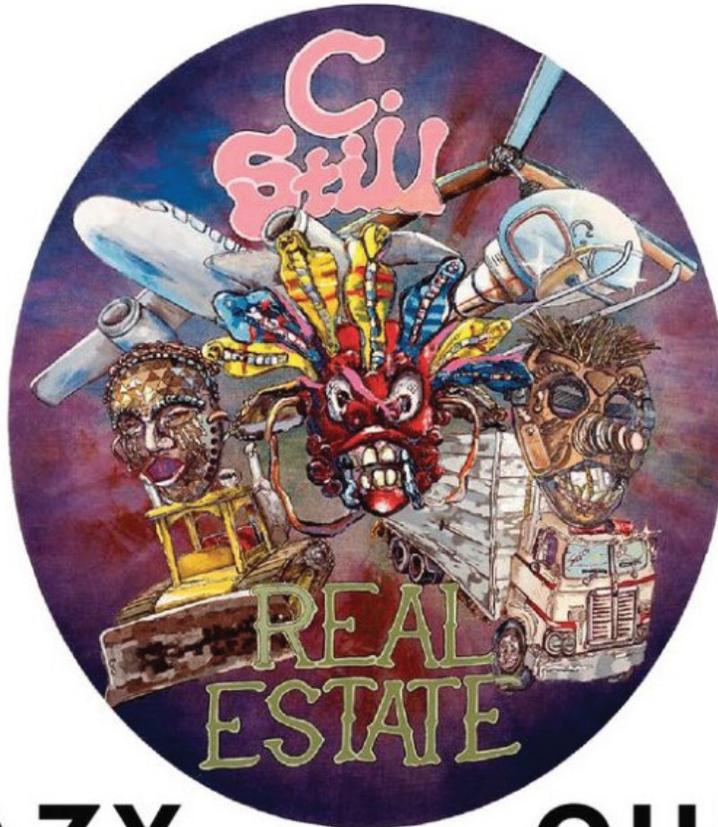


ArtReview

FEATURE
Ivan Morley



CRAZY QUILT

THE FIRST THING THAT STRIKES YOU ABOUT THE ART OF IVAN MORLEY

is its distinctively bipolar affect. There's a feverish narrative jones wedded to a seriously retinal sweet-tooth; an obstinate and ostentatious craftiness articulating the exhausted post-slacker painting malaise (a sort of chronic fatigue syndrome of the aesthetic faculty); an urgent demand for structural historical integrity that threatens to become something more akin to the incoherent ramblings of a senile ghost-town prospector – codified in a visual and pictorial language that seethes with simultaneous lollipop joyousness and gothic funereality (when I spellchecked this, my computer suggested 'fun reality'). From the sumptuous embroidered tapestries of accomplished original compositions in the half-century-redundant abstract expressionist style to the illegible mash-ups of symbolic objects –

brass knuckles, backwards signage, gravestones, rodents, hammers, masks, etc – painted in a pop-surrealist illustration style on standardised oval panels, Morley's work seems to be saying at least two uncomfortably contradictory things at any given time.

It's a set of polar coordinates that run deeply through every aspect of Morley's practice, but that are manifested most immediately in its tangible, aesthetic, sensory manifestation: its objectivity. As objects, Morley's works – I hesitate to use the word 'paintings' because of the eclectic technical and material vocabularies put to use in these wall-hung pictures – tread a fine line of subversively beautiful anti-formalist critique. Morley's – OK, for convenience's sake – paintings are informed by the same scepticism and ambiguity that energise the art of many of his contemporaries (and probably by an even more dense collateral briar-patch of implied verbiage), but the dedicated rendering of his barbed visual repartee into patently sensual physical idioms betrays a profound and stubbornly adversative engagement with art history (including its contemporary field of reception) and with his own senses.

IVAN MORLEY'S INSOLUBLE PICTORIAL CONUNDRUMS

words DOUG HARVEY

Logo, 2005, oil, acrylic dye, K-Y Gelly and UV varnish on linen over panel, 110 x 91 cm. Collection of Kourosh Larizadeh and Luis Pardo, Los Angeles

Harvey, Doug, "Crazy Quilt: Ivan Morley's Insoluble Pictorial Conundrums," *Art Review*, January 2007, pp. 105-108



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In spite of Morley's latent anti-painting expertise, the initial impression is one of generously shared optical pleasure – an innate talent for visual communication underscored by a sophisticated, experimental engagement with such hardwired tropes as bright saturated complementary colours, dark leaden outlines, precariously symmetrical graphic compositions, alluringly tactile surfaces, and detail, detail, detail (not to mention the unparalleled *trompe l'oeil* hook of pictorialism and the lure of narrative – although Morley's paintings have a way of tickling the narrative faculty that preempts any inherent resolution; they are effectively flattened into potential-laden teasers and rendered to the brink of being design elements). In a very real sense, the paintings insist upon their atemporal, anti-narrative suchness, an immediacy that deflects linear interrogation and indefinitely postpones the possibility of dismissive categorisation. The bottom line, though, is that Morley's paintings are immediately very rewarding and invite further engagement without making any promises.

The second thing you notice is the paintings' obsessive craftsmanship – one of the most loaded and unspoken-of contemporary art-historical topics – and an almost ritualistic sense of deliberate execution. Undoubtedly, Morley's embroidery and batik skills would be considered inspired amateurism in their respective Thunderdomes (if you think the artworld is ruthlessly competitive, try crashing a knitting bee sometime), but they're dazzlingly accomplished in the context of what passes for paintingcraft in these dark times. More to the point, their significance in the context of Morley's work has more to do with these very connotations of ritual and obsession – and with the occluded function of such processes as conveyors of meaning in modern art – than in appropriating the specific agreed-upon history or criteria of excellence from another tradition. Except, of course, inasmuch as those histories and criteria have been excised from the history of modernism.

Indeed, Morley's position as a contemporary practitioner in the European and American tradition of painting is deliberately and exactingly precarious, predicated as it is on a handful of structural signifiers – stretched canvases and oil paint; a self-conscious, patently alienated facility with abstract motifs and pop-cultural illusionism; their white-cube friendliness. These are, in a way, the cheesiest props in the modern arsenal – the lowest common denominator of acceptable painting praxis. Like a highwire aerialist, Morley stacks these entrée-guaranteeing conventions on one side of his balance pole. At the other end he arrays as many disruptive discontinuities as he can muster – the most prominent being impure craft technologies that unavoidably reference the collectively authored, never-divided-from-Life traditions of tribal indigenous peoples as well as the colonial-tainted appropriation of such traditions by suburban hobbyists and the psychedelic subculture of the late twentieth century.

Left: Tehachepi (sic), 2006, oil and leaf on tempered glass, 107 x 76 cm. Collection of Soo Jin and Patrick Painter, Los Angeles

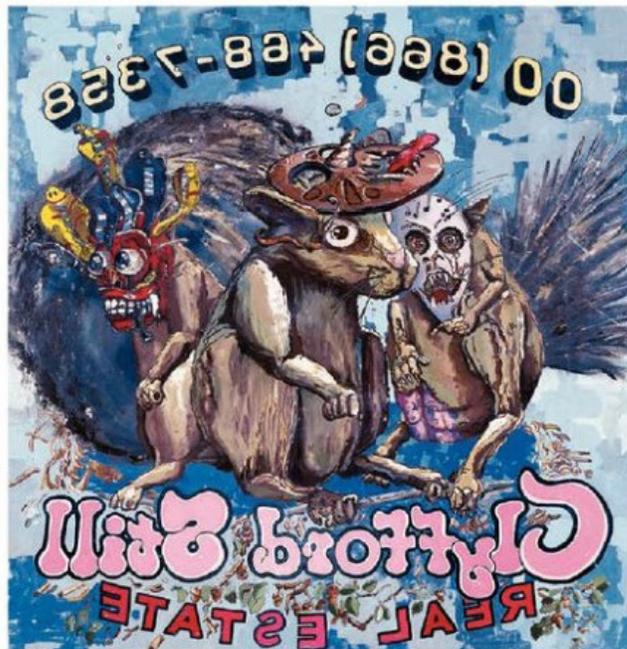
Facing page: Tehachepi (sic), 2005, oil, acrylic, batik, thread and UV varnish on canvas, 145 x 95 cm. Collection of Dean Valentine and Amy Adelson, Los Angeles

Morley's incorporation of embroidery carries an even more complex set of baggage, evoking associations of both the disparaged 'women's work' of needlecraft (a staple of the vernacular culture of the nineteenth-century West, from which much of Morley's narrative content derives) and the 1970s reclamation of the same means and materials by feminists, fibre artists and the Pattern and Decoration movement – all of which function as decidedly incorrect and potentially destabilising reference points in Morley's practice. Other risky indicators – harnessed with the same degree of unfrivolous immersion – include his obvious affinity for psychedelic art, his ambivalent and ambiguous commentary on Clyfford Still (and, by extension, the New York School version of twentieth-century American art history – particularly its problematic relation to California), his flirtation with folkloric and illustrative narrative modes, and his deployment of a frequently kitschy pictorialism.

IF YOU THINK
THE ARTWORLD IS
RUTHLESSLY
COMPETITIVE,
TRY CRASHING A KNITTING BEE

FEATURE

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All of which opens up a whole other can of worms. After the powerful – and in spite of the internal conflicts, essentially reassuring – initial impressions of formally accomplished, labour-intensive paintings with a something-for-everyone range of decorative abstract and narrative pictorial subject matter, we arrive at the most complex and remarkable layer of Morley's practice: his – pardon my French – semiotics. Ostensibly positioned in the role of storytellers – depicting or embodying artefacts that refer to some larger discourse – Morley's paintings are nevertheless relentlessly unintelligible, even when the tall, cryptic pseudo-folktales they derive from are provided. Oscillating between sunshine and noir, Morley's disjointed fabulisms channel a preverbal frisson of menace and awe that shares more with the cinema of Alejandro Jodorowsky and the bent avant-garde hillbilly music of Caroliner than with most of his visual-art contemporaries.

One can begin piecing together aspects of some kind of storyline, or some underlying associative connection between a narrative fragment and a particular choice of materials, but these relationships are unstable and slippery – navigating the constantly shifting symbolic contingencies is like hopscotching across the jostling mosaic surface of an ice floe. There may be a perfectly logical explanation why the *Logo* (2004) for Clyfford Still Real Estate consists of three crazed squirrels wearing a variety of frightening masks, and were rendered in part in K-Y Jelly – best known as a sexual lubricant. There is undoubtedly a reason why, in a later version of *Logo* (2005), the squirrels have been replaced by a steam shovel, a tractor-trailer, a jet and a helicopter, and why the hockey mask has been replaced by (I think) an African one. But damned if I can figure it out. Or want to, for that matter.

Morley's use of K-Y Jelly, wax and soap as media link him to both Matthew Barney and Joseph Beuys, and his paintings on glass to Marcel Duchamp – all artists who have used complex networks of cross-referential hermetic symbolism as vehicles for containing and directing creative attention. But where these artists employ relatively coherent, internally consistent allegorical vocabularies to insinuate their particular spiritual/political/aesthetic agendas, Morley deliberately interrupts the grandiose mechanisms of archetypal signification – triggering a figure-ground shift that emphasises the interplay of a number of phenomenologically identical systems for ordering visual information. By embodying this derailment in the form of de facto paintings, Morley expands his insistence on the mutable, polyvalent nature of history to include the history of art and the history of each of his own artworks' coming-into-being. In the midst of such instability and uncertainty, the will to create artefacts takes on an aura of existentialist abandon unthinkable since the simpler heyday of the Abstract Expressionists.

Logo, 2004, oil, wax, K-Y Jelly on polyester over panel, 61 x 64 cm. Collection of Sylvie Winkler, Brussels. All images courtesy Patrick Painter, Inc. Los Angeles

While this is all fascinating and conceptually rewarding, the bottom line remains the fact that Morley has articulated these concerns in dazzlingly beautiful, richly humorous and – in spite of the teleological interruptus – narratively satisfying *objets d'art*. We ought to know from television sitcoms that intelligibility, coherence and temporal verisimilitude are entirely expendable elements of storytelling. Morley's sceptical subversion of the semiotic house-of-cards underlying modern painting history ultimately results in a stronger and more flexible foundation for what – arbitrarily arrived at or not – amounts to a poetic, formally exquisite psychedelic-surrealist translation of the polar frontier mythologies of the Old California and modern art. Only minus – but not missing – the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow. ■

MORLEY'S USE OF
K-Y JELLY, WAX AND
SOAP AS MEDIA LINK
HIM TO BOTH
MATTHEW BARNEY
AND JOSEPH BEUYS, AND HIS PAINTINGS
ON GLASS TO MARCEL DUCHAMP