

Rebecca Morris, *Rebecca Morris: 2001–2022*

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
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Curated by Jamillah James

Rebecca Morris: 2001–2022 is a twenty-one-year survey of Los Angeles-based painter Rebecca Morris (b. 1969, Honolulu, HI), an artist best known for her large-scale paintings and inventive approach to composition, color, and gesture. The exhibition is the artist's first major museum survey presentation since 2005, and her first of this scale in Los Angeles, a city where she has lived and worked for over twenty years. This presentation also marks Morris's return to the ICA LA (formerly the Santa Monica Museum of Art), which hosted the artist's first museum exhibition, titled *Frankenstein*, in its Project Room in 2003.

Morris's practice demonstrates a rigorous commitment to experimentation and abstraction. Her canvases are complex—simultaneously loose and expansive yet also considered and controlled. Rather than present Morris's work in chronological order, the exhibition highlights several recurring formal tendencies and motifs that she has developed and revisited over the course of her career, resulting in a distinct and recognizable visual language. With the tensions and contradictions presented by her embrace of organic patterns and energetic color, anchored by an iterative process, Morris's paintings are invested with a dynamism that challenges the confines and historical foundations of abstraction, making space for experimentation in the expanded field of painting.

Morris's longstanding commitment to abstract painting can be seen, in some ways, as an act of resistance or refusal. Her 2004 essay "Manifesto (For Abstractionists and Friends of the Non-Objective)" suggests that, for the artist, abstraction functions not just as a strategy but as an ethos. When Morris first began making abstract work in the 1990s, painting—stuck in a purported cycle of death and rebirth throughout its history—was decidedly unpopular as a mode of artistic production. At the time, her dedication to (or, in the artist's words, "stubbornness" about) painting, and especially nonrepresentational painting, signaled a refutation of the medium's purported lack of relevance and meaning.

While recalling the legacies and influences of artists as diverse as Kazimir Malevich, Robert Ryman, and Mary Heilmann, or stylistic movements including Chicago Imagism, Supports/Surfaces, or Pattern & Decoration (P&D), Morris's own work evades categorization, never fully aligning with one viewpoint or another. This contradictory tension is one that emerges throughout Morris's oeuvre, visible in her idiosyncratic lexicon of mark making and her continual rupture of its logic. In this way, her work can be understood as at once an ode to, and a pushback against, the tradition of painting and related notions of hierarchy, beauty, and taste—including those of her own.

Morris often uses grids and lines as an organizing structure, nodding to their important position within the history of painting and drawing, and following a generation of conceptual artists who routinely deployed grids to organize visual space, structure and contain ideas and information, mark time, and create discrete systems that rejected representational modes of production. As art historian Rosalind Krauss's foundational 1979 essay, "Grids," points out, the grid is a visual paring down to the essentials, referring to nothing but itself. Its use on the surface of a painting clearly demarcates where the artwork begins and ends, though, as an open-ended and repeatable form, it can suggest an infinite space or set of permutations. Furthermore, the geometric nature of the grid functions as an unmistakable reference to, or symbol of, modernity.

With her consistent evocation of the grid, Morris connects to the lineage of Modernism to which abstract painting is indebted, yet her brushwork—irregular and broken in places—renders her grids with a deliberate imperfection. At times, a faint grid appears beneath an atmospheric dusting of marks or dominantly in the foreground; other times, the grid functions as a border or remains contained inside a geometric shape. The grid becomes a way for the artist to compartmentalize gestures and ideas within a single painting or in relation to other works. Moving across time and approaches, Morris deconstructs and reconstructs the grid within her paintings in an ongoing cycle of revisitation and reinvention.

Another reoccurring theme in Morris's work is an absence of any overtly visible organizing structure—nearly the inverse of the grid. Without a reference point or visual hierarchy, the viewer's eye is allowed to travel freely across the canvas, lingering over moments of interest. By encouraging a slower pace of looking, Morris's works, such as *Untitled* (#09-05) (2005) or later works like *Untitled* (#08-18) (2018), gain the atmospheric quality of a Color Field painting, reminiscent of canvases by Washington Color School painter Sam Gilliam. Here, her dispersed marks appear to float in space, atomized like particles of the spray paint or diluted oils that she uses as medium.

The presence of atomization in Morris's paintings shifts in scale from minute marks to larger drifting shapes, which often contain smaller fragmented patterns as evident in *Untitled* (#02-05) (2005) and the patchwork organization of *Untitled* (#10-20) (2020), two works made fifteen years apart. Morris's paintings provide a window into an infinite expanse—seeming to describe either an immeasurable vastness or an impossible intricacy—that stops only at the edge of the canvas.

Morris often plays with the basic elements that make up a painting: the mark, the surface, and the frame. She treats the borders and sides of her paintings with careful attention, imbuing them with details such as patterns or scalloped edges, effectively creating a painting within a painting. In works such as *Untitled* (#12-13) (2013) and *Untitled* (#04-20) (2020), the proportion of these accentuated frames threatens to overtake the content that they enclose. By giving such weight to what lies on the edges of the canvas, Morris overturns the conventional hierarchy in painting—one that traditionally favors the contents within the frame—and gives serious consideration to the border. The artist's emphasis on the painting's border also heightens the viewer's awareness of the physicality of the painting itself, pointing to its ability to be read as both a window and a frame, as a flat surface and a physical object.

Morris also uses lines as a framing device, sometimes at the very edges of the painting's surface. The standard definition of a line—as a geometric form connecting two points on a two-dimensional plane—belies its potential for complexity. Morris uses spray or piped paint to make her lines, which not only lead the viewer to consider the underlying elements of pressure and distance held within these marks, but also guide the viewer's eye across the canvas.

In building the surface of her paintings, Morris sometimes upends the process of slow, gradual accumulation with one dramatic move that appears to paint a single field of color over layers of painstakingly considered details. This additive gesture becomes an act of erasure. In *Untitled* (#03-18) (2018), a checkerboard peeks through a brilliant expanse of red, while the details along the edges of *Untitled* (#08-19) (2019) are painted out in a muted gray, and a thick, weblike application of metallic silver paint on *Untitled* (#18-20) (2020) functions as a vein of precious metal streaking through the canvas. While these moves divide the canvas into separate and distinct areas, their expansive presence in the composition reverses notions of foreground and background, subverting the viewer's initial understanding of the painting's positive and negative spaces.

Among a backdrop of abstract geometric forms that populate Morris's works, one distinct shape emerges—a jagged, pointed form that the artist refers to as a "lobster claw." The reference to a specific, yet unexpected, object from the real world within the space of an abstract painting adds a sense of surprise in Morris's approach. The "lobster claw" appeared as early as 2006 in *Untitled* (#01-06), and the artist explored the shape further in the mid-2010s. While akin to a triangle or wedge, the claw's organic composition simultaneously challenges and softens the rigid conventions of historical geometric abstraction. With a slicing trajectory that cuts through the composition, the claws are reminiscent of the edges of a torn page, allowing Morris to layer different textures, depths, and colors along the painting's surface in bold, unexpected ways.

Rebecca Morris: 2001-2022 is organized by Jamillah James, Manilow Senior Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and former Senior Curator, ICA LA, with Caroline Ellen Liou, Curatorial Assistant.