“I think of painting as a never-ending process, an investigation into what I find beguiling and mysterious about pictorial structures, which take in the world, are related to it, but have their own language of light, space and boundary.”¹

Mali Morris has been exploring the possibilities of abstract painting for over 50 years. Morris held her first solo exhibition at Ikon in 1979, when it was located on John Bright Street.

“My solo show at Ikon in 1979 was one of the first times I had seen my paintings in a large public space - tremendously exciting for a young artist and also a kind of education - a slightly unnerving way of being a spectator on my own imagination.”²

This exhibition includes works from the last twenty-five years, as Morris’ paintings of the late 1990s mark a break from her earlier work and set the stage for her art ever since. At this time she began to make the series she came to call Clearings. In these paintings - such as [1] Lap (Maroon/Yellow) (1998-2000) and [4] Degrees of Freedom (2003-4) - Morris worked by removing (or ‘clearing’) layers of paint to reveal previously painted layers below. This allowed her to achieve new kinds of space and illusion within abstract painting.

Morris’ earlier work belongs to a painterly tradition including Abstract Expressionists such as Gillian Ayres, Helen Frankenthaler, Adolf Gottlieb and Hans Hofmann. The paintings in this exhibition carefully deconstruct this tradition, in particular rethinking the role of gesture: the visible trace
of the artist’s movements in making a picture. Abstract Expressionism had placed great emphasis on dramatic and direct gestures, whereas Morris’ new approach allows for a more indirect and subtle approach to mark-making.

The two quotes by Morris below show something of the thinking behind Clearings. Like the paintings themselves, the quotes are deceptively simple and direct but suggestive and perhaps even a little mysterious:

“I wanted colour that wasn’t read across a vista. I wanted it to come to meet the eye, in a simple way, through other colours.”

“I became interested in how touch is different from gesture. Touch moves the eye around at a different pace from gesture. It’s slower, and pictorial space seems to open up. That suggested new possibilities for how colour might work.”

The exhibition is not arranged in chronological order, although most of the earliest paintings are in the first gallery space. One of the early Clearings, a work called [6] Pink Cleared Blue (1999), is one of the most simplified paintings Morris has ever made. [8] Peeps (2005-6) shows the Clearings moving towards greater complexity. In revisiting a failed work, Morris painted over an irregular patchwork of bright colour, adding and removing paint until she achieved a lively balance between the field of creamy brushstrokes and the discs of pink and yellow that float ambiguously within.

Looking at the shapes within [9] Voyage (2005) we might ask whether these circles lie in, against, on, or behind its swirling brushstrokes. Rather than being circles, perhaps they are orbs: three-dimensional presences. Alternatively, instead of being positive presences, perhaps some of the circles are holes, spaces through which colour arrives? The point is not to come to definitive conclusions but to draw the viewer into the painting.

[11] Flotilla (2007) makes the underlying grid of Peeps explicit and shows Morris employing the spatial ambiguities of Clearings on a larger scale: the circles positioned within Flotilla appear suspended at different depths from the picture surface, drawn to and repelled from each other by hard-to-gauge tensions; the overall result is clear and luminous.
After 2014, Morris moved away from the premises of Clearings, extending their lessons whilst continuing to rethink her visual language. Layering is still important, as is the creation of colour-filled spaces, visually clear, but full of precisely judged ambiguities. The lively checkerboard colour of [14] Second Stradella (2016) merges a grid and a spiral motif in a manner reminiscent of Matisse’s famous The Snail (1953). [18] Crossings (2014) and [22] Line Dancer (2016) return to a more direct form of mark-making.

[19] Impeller II (2023), the most recent painting in the exhibition, completed this summer, is from her Colour Go Round series. The overlapping central motif has the impression of being a collage, with squares of colour dropped almost at random onto the picture surface, yet landing with complex directional rhythms – a conceit that allows Morris to explore layering, opacity and translucency and fresh, vibrant colour with her characteristic wit and light touch.


IKON EXTERIOR & OFFSITE

In 2022, Mali Morris was commissioned to design a group of thirty-three banners to hang above London’s Bond Street. Morris has donated a number of these banners to Ikon. Two of the banners are displayed on the front of the gallery, and others are at art schools across the West Midlands. The motif explored in Morris’ banners relates to her painting on canvas, Rain In Durango II (2015), included in Ikon’s exhibition.
LIST OF WORKS

   Acrylic on canvas
   40 × 50 cm
   Acrylic on canvas
   20.5 × 25.5 cm
   Acrylic on canvas
   30 × 40 cm
   Acrylic on canvas
   36 × 46 cm
   Acrylic on canvas
   26 × 31 cm
   Acrylic on canvas
   46 × 55 cm
   Acrylic on canvas
   33 × 41 cm
   Acrylic on canvas
   31 × 41 cm
   Acrylic on canvas
   40 × 55 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    25.5 × 13 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    170 × 189 cm
    Courtesy of Stewarts
    Acrylic on canvas
    50 × 60 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    50 × 60 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    198 × 214 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    200 × 220 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    123 × 153 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    40 × 51 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    40 × 45 cm
19. *Impeller II* (2023)
    Acrylic on canvas
    200 × 220 cm
20. *Angelas* (2011)
    Acrylic on canvas
    120 × 150 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    198 × 214 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    70 × 80 cm
    Courtesy of Penny Walker
    Acrylic on canvas
    25.5 × 30.5 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    30 × 40 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    26 × 31 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    18 × 24 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    24 × 30 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    25 × 30 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    16 × 20 cm
30. *As Like As (2)* (2009)
    Acrylic on canvas
    20.5 × 25.5 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    15.5 × 20 cm
    Acrylic on canvas
    50 × 60 cm
    Courtesy of Sir Richard Heaton

---

**IKON**

Wednesday–Sunday, 11am–5pm
Free entry, donations welcome

Stay in touch:

@ikongallery
STAY IN TOUCH

Subscribe to our e-bulletin at ikon-gallery.org

@ikongallery

Open Wednesday–Sunday, 11am–5pm
Free entry, donations welcome

Ikon is supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England, and Birmingham City Council.

Ikon Gallery Limited trading as Ikon.
Registered charity no. 528892.

Ikon Gallery, Brindleyplace,
Birmingham, B1 2HS
0121 248 0708 / ikon-gallery.org