

# MALI MORRIS CALLING

*“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.”<sup>1</sup>*

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.”<sup>2</sup>*

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."*<sup>3</sup>

*"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."*<sup>4</sup>

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.

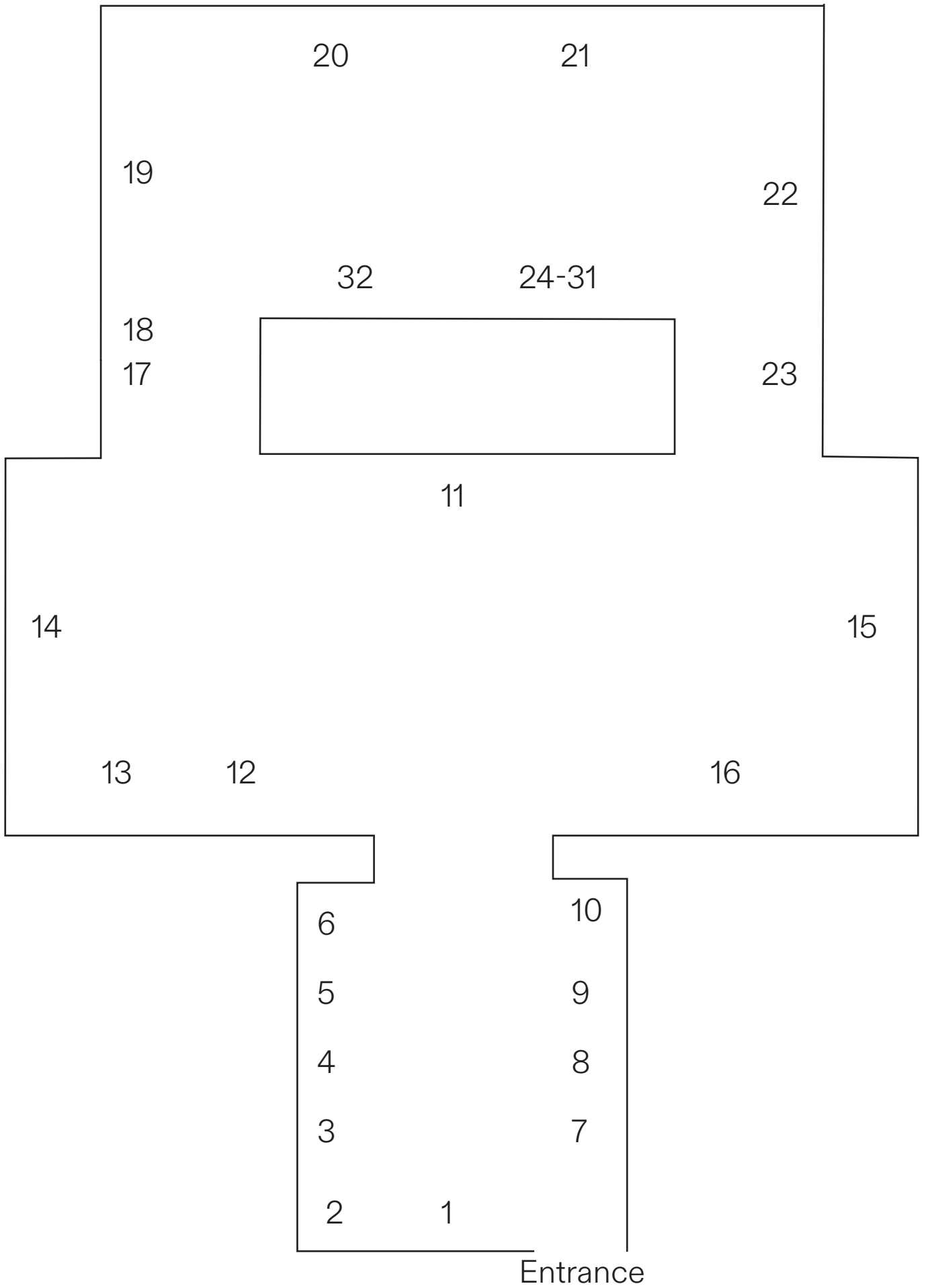
[19] *Impeller II* (2023), the most recent painting in the exhibition, completed this summer, is from her *Colour Go Round* series. The overlapping central motif has the impression of being a collage, with squares of colour dropped almost at random onto the picture surface, yet landing with complex directional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

1. Mali Morris, *Back to Front*, notes on the exhibition, Eagle Gallery, London (2012)
2. In conversation with Mali Morris (2023).
3. Mali Morris quoted in Karen Wilkin, 'Construction Through Seeing', introduction to Mali Morris: Paintings from Four Decades, Poussin Gallery (2005).
4. Mali Morris interviewed by the poet Tamar Yoseloff, *Art World Magazine* (August / September 2008).

## 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.

FIRST FLOOR



# LIST OF WORKS

1. *Lap (Maroon/Yellow)* (1998-2000)  
Acrylic on canvas  
40 × 50 cm
2. *Through* (2004)  
Acrylic on canvas  
20.5 × 25.5 cm
3. *Crusoe's Parasol* (2007)  
Acrylic on canvas  
30 × 40 cm
4. *Degrees of Freedom* (2003-2004)  
Acrylic on canvas  
36 × 46 cm
5. *Surfaced Later* (2010)  
Acrylic on canvas  
26 × 31 cm
6. *Pink Cleared Blue* (1999)  
Acrylic on canvas  
46 × 55 cm
7. *Lap + Clear* (2000-2001)  
Acrylic on canvas  
33 × 41 cm
8. *Peeps* (2005-2006)  
Acrylic on canvas  
31 × 41 cm
9. *Voyage* (2005)  
Acrylic on canvas  
40 × 55 cm
10. *Act* (2007)  
Acrylic on canvas  
25.5 × 13 cm
11. *Flotilla* (2007)  
Acrylic on canvas  
170 × 189 cm  
Courtesy of Stewarts
12. *Rain in Durango II* (2015)  
Acrylic on canvas  
50 × 60 cm
13. *Swingback* (2012-2013)  
Acrylic on canvas  
50 × 60 cm
14. *Second Stradella* (2016)  
Acrylic on canvas  
198 × 214 cm
15. *Ghost* (2017)  
Acrylic on canvas  
200 × 220 cm
16. *Bird / Ghost* (2007)  
Acrylic on canvas  
123 × 153cm
17. *Reply* (2011)  
Acrylic on canvas  
40 × 51 cm
18. *Crossings* (2014)  
Acrylic on canvas  
40 × 45 cm
19. *Impeller II* (2023)  
Acrylic on canvas  
200 × 220cm
20. *Angelas* (2011)  
Acrylic on canvas  
120 × 150 cm
21. *Spinning* (2007)  
Acrylic on canvas  
198 × 214 cm
22. *Line Dancer* (2016)  
Acrylic on canvas  
70 × 80 cm  
Courtesy of Penny Walker
23. *Blue Valentines* (2002)  
Acrylic on canvas  
25.5 × 30.5 cm
24. *Uncovered* (2009)  
Acrylic on canvas  
30 × 40 cm
25. *Blue Flame* (2004)  
Acrylic on canvas  
26 × 31 cm
26. *Under and Over* (2011)  
Acrylic on canvas  
18 × 24 cm
27. *Hoopla 2* (2008)  
Acrylic on canvas  
24 × 30cm
28. *Cornered (Dark)* (2006)  
Acrylic on canvas  
25 × 30 cm
29. *Setting* (2008)  
Acrylic on canvas  
16 × 20 cm
30. *As Like As (2)* (2009)  
Acrylic on canvas  
20.5 × 25.5 cm
31. *Rosie Blue* (2009)  
Acrylic on canvas  
15.5 × 20 cm
32. *Bells of St Clements* (2017)  
Acrylic on canvas  
50 × 60 cm  
Courtesy of Sir Richard Heaton

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