

Carmengloria Morales: Rome, London, Milan, New York, Sermugnano

Carmengloria Morales (born in 1942 in Santiago, Chile) titles her paintings with a series of numbers and a letter. When working on canvas the number indicates the year, month and day that the work was started. When the painting is on paper, the number indicates when the work was finished. The letter, however, indicates the place where Morales made the work, whether city or village. Morales grew up and studied art in Milan. In 1960, she moved to Rome, where her professional career began. After her move, she divided her time between both Italian cities, before traveling twice for extended periods to London in the late 1960s. She then settled on a working pattern that took her predominantly between studios in Milan, New York, and the village of Sermugnano in Italy.¹ The peripatetic nature of Morales's practice, captured in her titles in such a beautifully understated way—with the simple prefixes R, L, M, NY, and S—illustrates both the rigor and continuity of her project and its international connections. Indeed, to fully understand the significance of Morales's paintings, one needs to appreciate how her interest in the language of painting relates to these different shifting contexts.

In Rome, Morales began to make large colourful abstract paintings and build a supportive network. In 1963, she sold her first painting to one of the country's most renowned artists, Lucio Fontana (1899-1968). She developed lasting friendships with many of the other artists working in the city, most notably with Carla Accardi (1924-2014) and Marcia Hafif (1929-2018), both of whom had, like Morales, begun to turn towards abstraction in their own work. Like many European artists of her generation, Morales was inspired by the scale and audacity of recent American painting, and in particular by the works of Mark Rothko (1903-1970), which she saw exhibited in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome in 1962. However, she was also drawn to more contemporaneous discourses. Together with artists like Accardi and Hafif and writers associated either with Mara Coccia's gallery Arco d'Alibert or those showing with the Galleria della Tartaruga near Piazza del Popolo, she sought—through a competitive atmosphere of talks, panels and discussions—to re-think the connections between European and Mediterranean culture and ideas of post-war modernity.

Whilst in Rome Morales experimented with a variety of different media and made paintings with oil, tempera, enamel, and dry pigments with a glue binder. By 1966 she had for a few years, settled on working with acrylic paint for both her works on paper and canvas. The subsequent Roman paintings employ bold areas of colour which are laid down carefully by hand. The paintings were painted, like all of Morales's work, in what she describes as an 'analogue manner'. That is to say, she painted them by hand and with brushes, without the use of masking tapes, or any other mechanical methods of application. The surfaces of Morales's paintings from this period are flat, and mainly unmodulated. Her hand—and how it moves when applying paint—is therefore barely visible in each of the different areas of colour. However, this is not the case in the shapes she

¹ Morales also worked briefly in Paris and other Italian villages and towns – but none were as conceptually and personally important to her as Rome, London, Milan and New York and Sermugnano.

employed within these early works. The round, irregular or circular outlines, the biomorphic forms, or the soft bands of colour that she used to compose these works, delicately reveal her hand gestures and have a natural quality, with some paintings seeming to hint at ideas of landscape, or indeed the contours and space of the human body. Morales's early Roman paintings were well received, and exhibited in important solo exhibitions at the time, such as at the Galleria Alpha, Modena (1966) curated by Marisa Volpi, or at Arco d'Alibert (1967). In this exhibition, we have gathered a number of small works on paper from this period, as many of the canvases have, alas, not survived.²

Morales describes her time making paintings in London, over two extended stays between 1967 and 1969, as a necessary means for her to lose, and shake off, what she feared was an old-fashioned type of classicism in her previous Roman paintings.³ In London, the forms in Morales's work became more angular, geometric and taut. She came to the city having befriended the British sculptor Anthony Caro (1924-2013) whom she had met in Rome with the American colour field painter Kenneth Noland (1924-2010). On Caro's invitation, and through her own tenacity, Morales soon became firmly ensconced in the London artistic scene, as she aligned herself to the colourful graphic formalism associated with Caro, the New Generation sculptors, and the pop-enthused abstract painters who had the year previously exhibited in the British Pavilion at the Biennale. Morales rented a studio space through Caro, a room to lodge in from Michael Bolus (1934-2013), and befriended painters such as Jeremy Moon (1934-1973), all of whom she would stay in close contact with after her departure.

Whilst in London Morales began working on large paintings depicting a stout, arrow-like form, or emblem. This shape tended to encroach the painting from its right-hand edge. It was built with three or four bands of colour, and would be placed on a single field of a related colour, such as a bright red or ochre. This emblem seems diagrammatic, but it is also ambiguous. Through its position, which always bisects the painting into two halves, this arrow-like encroachment seems to connect to the idea of horizon-lines, or of movement itself, akin perhaps to the go-faster stripes on a custom car. For Morales, this form resonated less with pop-graphic insignia than with a way to express the experience of vision itself. The painting's bands of colour seem to offer a self-reflexive meditation on the act of looking—as one's eyes trace along their length, just as one might look across, or pan, a wide horizon. Morales sees her interest in this experience of vision as partly drawn from her earliest memories of the vastness of the Chilean landscape, which she encountered as a child, before her family's move to Italy when she was ten. She also connects this experience with her sympathy for Spanish landscapes, which due to their larger scale are quite unlike those in her adopted Italy and are more evocative of her idea and understanding of landscape from her childhood.

If the phenomenon of vision is embodied in Morales's arrow-like emblem, so too was another corporeal vestige—that of her body, arm, and left-handedness. The fact that in these paintings her form has its apex on the right-hand side of the canvas, and seems to continue beyond the opposite left-hand edge, corresponds at least initially, to the way her arm and hand would most

² Tragically Morales lost much of her personal archive in a fire in 2016.

³ Morales went to London twice, from December 1967- March 1968, and then from December 1968 - February 1969. Email to the author 24 March 2022

naturally draw each shape. In her London paintings Morales can be seen to have started to focus on ideas redolent with both the acts of vision, and movement—ideas which have been on-going concerns for her throughout her whole career.

In late 1969 when Morales returned to her studio on via Montoro in Rome, she placed one equally sized canvas on top of the other, with a small gap between each one. Her 'visual arrow' acted as a bond in the composition, linking the two canvases. In *Dittico R.70-5-7* (1970), one of the last paintings in this series, Morales's emblem has now been split, and both canvases contain elements of it. The tapered bands of colour on each canvas are different, and physically and visually they have been bisected by the pristine white of the gallery wall on which the painting is hung. On both the top and the bottom canvas, there is also a sliver of the raw unpainted linen. This bare canvas acts like an unpainted pause in the composition, and together with the visible splitting, speaks of the physical and material act of making.

Later, while moving a similar, large two-panel painting in her studio, Morales stumbled upon a format that has proved hugely significant for her career, and to her understanding of painting as a visual and conceptual medium. By momentarily placing two equally sized canvases vertically next to each other, rather than having one panel horizontally on top of the other, Morales understood how an idea of time and potentiality could enter her work, how one could conceptualize a painting as whole—by considering first one canvas, and then the next.

Dittico R71-12-13 (1971) is one of Morales's signature diptychs in this format. Two equally sized canvases have been placed next to each other. The right-hand canvas is completely empty—and is raw canvas. The left-hand one is painted and is full. Although the painted canvas contains no recognizable forms it does hold content—which is centered around the conceptualization of the artist's touch, and on the painting's making. Although dark, this canvas contains colours—a blue, a pink, a green—each painted in thin coats, one on top of the other, to create a rich light-absorbing surface. The individual colours are occasionally visible and reveal themselves at the painting's edges. The surface holds an indexical trace of the movement of Morales's body and left hand, with the density of colour celebrating the nuances of perception and vision, and the physical materiality of the act of painting. When encountering the work as a whole, and reading it from left to right, one seemingly moves from fullness to emptiness, from the present to the past, or from the actual to the abstract. From the concrete record of a painted activity, to a pristine vacancy that speaks of the act of looking, and of potential. As Morales put it, "you are looking at a painting knowing you are looking at a painting. Being sent backwards, where the painted part catches you whilst the unpainted part brings you back to this awareness of the fact that it is painting that you are looking at."⁴

All of Morales's subsequent diptychs follow this format. The two canvases are vertically aligned, with the left-hand one painted, whilst the one on the right-hand side is left intentionally blank. During the development of the diptychs in the 1970s, Morales tested new ways in which to paint the left-hand canvas. For example, she painted a left-hand canvas with her left-hand, and a

⁴ Carmengloria Morales. Interview by Maria Morganti, Sermugnano, November 2013 <https://vimeo.com/127777549> [accessed 1.1.22]

diptych that, although unified, could be read from the left to right—from activity to otherness.

As can be seen in DitticoR73-6-1 (1973) or DitticoR 75-11-1 (1975), each permutation of Morales's diptychs during this period is different. Each work explores a specific process, with the canvas treated in a unique manner. In these works, and in what could be seen as a constrained format, and with colour increasingly expunged, Morales is hugely experimental. Some paintings are made in acrylic paint, others in oil paint and wax. Some of the diptychs are painted by Morales with her fingers, others with a specific type of brush, or they are constructed and drawn upon in grey graphite. Each work, therefore, is marked or painted differently, but in a manner that shows no other form but that of the method of marking or painting. The application of the paint, then, is everything. It is of itself. It is unified. As such, all the diptychs illustrate, through their making, the fundamental aspects of painting—the materiality of the medium, and the temporal and autographic presence of the artist herself.

Through this focus on process, and the artist's own subjectivity, Morales's diptychs radically positioned her painting in a new terrain. These are paintings that are not aligned to what Morales saw as an 'old-fashioned' type of pictorial classicism, a trait that the artist sought to shake off in London, nor the Greenbergian formalism that she encountered there and was arguably drawn to, and which many in Caro's London circle still promulgated. Morales's diptychs offer something new—a pictorial clarity and indeed severity, which questioned the fundamental characteristics of painting as a medium and making process. Although in dialogue with other Italian paintings, such as those by Giorgio Griffa (b.1936), who like Morales is associated with the Italian Pittura Analitica movement, Morales's works are very different in idiom. They must be understood outside of a solely Italian context. They are more stoical, less celebratory and calligraphic than Griffa's canvases, and have a toughness that is more closely aligned to those artists in France associated with the Supports/Surfaces movement who were interested in deconstructing the physical, historical and conceptual frameworks around the act of painting. Alternatively, they connect to paintings by Morales's friend Martin Barré (1924–1993), who similarly isolated and worked with the individual components of a painting—the gesture, mark, and frame. For Supports/Surfaces such an undertaking was imbued with strong social and political content, and although Morales's position is far less overt, more Beckettian and wonderfully unswerving, the fact that as a woman she was using painting—and abstraction—in such a manner cannot be ignored. Morales's paintings have an attitude that understands and contests prevalent ideas associated with painting, such as much of its history—and subsequently language—being gendered. Two of her diptychs were included in documenta 6 (1977) where they were shown alongside the gestural abstractions of de Kooning (1904–1977), as well as works by Frank Stella (1936–2024). Morales's paintings can be seen to agitate, and rub-against the lyricism and formalism of such positions, as they seek to expand such a language of painting.

Morales first visited New York in 1979, and that year she attended the initial meeting of the Radical Painting group, that Marcia Hafif hosted in her SoHo studio. Now independently, and after an absence of ten years, Hafif and Morales's practices again converged. Both artists, each in a different way, found a new radicality in a reduced or essential form of painting. For Morales colour became an increasingly significant element which she reintroduced into her work. Initially

limiting herself to a palette of red, yellow and blue, Morales explored the physical ways pigment and colour are held in paint, and how colours visually and formally interact with each other and reflect on historic and poetic associations. Morales's specific choice of colour can be seen to nod to the early modernism of De Stijl and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), and to answer the challenge that New York painter Barnett Newman's (1905-1970) series of four huge canvases (*Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*) posed in the late 1960s.

The blues, reds, golds, and browns in Morales's diptych, *Dittico M85-9-1, Dafne*, (1985), which is painted in bold, thick brick-like brushstrokes elicit other art historical associations. The diptych's sub-title, *Dafne*, refers to the story of the Greek nymph, who, unwilling to be seduced by Apollo, asks for help and is transformed into a laurel tree. Morales's colour palette resonates with the emotional content of this story—one she encountered through painting the work whilst listening to the Strauss opera of the same name—with the final jarring red strokes that complete the painting's composition seeming to point to the raw emotion of *Dafne*'s experience.

Morales adopted a technique in these works of layering, with a standardised brush, single broad thick brushstrokes—one on top of the other. Captured within the slight arcs and arrangement of these brushstrokes is the movement of Morales's body, as she stretches high, stoops low, or even stepped up onto a ladder to reach each part of the painting. Such a procedure makes explicit the relationship between the artist's presence, and the size and format of the chosen 'space' for painting. As such Morales's brushstrokes can be seen as a development of the previous methodologies which she had used when laying down her paint. In earlier paintings such as *Dittico R71-12-13* (1971) she conceptualized and employed a constant non-hierarchical and multi-directional manner of painting—with the paint being applied all at once, and in all directions. Whereas in later works this rationale changed, and after 1972 she used a free, open and loose diagonal gesture whilst painting, that the artist likened to that "of cleaning a window".⁵

In the diptych *Dafne*, both the artist's colour palette and her distinctive use of brushstrokes connect to aspects of European culture. Morales sees her stroke's form as deriving from a very Mediterranean understanding of painting, learnt through the faceted brushstrokes of Cezanne. Indeed, even the emptiness of her diptychs's right-hand panels seems to connect with a similar quality employed by Cezanne and Matisse, where parts of their canvases may sometimes be left untouched. This emptiness is at times manifest in southern sunlight that obscures what is visible, and at other times, it seems to revel in a horror vacui that deprives the painting of ever becoming a finished statement.

Morales has also found inspiration through Spanish and Italian Mannerist and Renaissance art, with the development of her tondo paintings and in her arched works. Morales developed her first circular painting in 1986. She was seeking a new physical format which like her diptychs, could be conceptualized. As a circle, the tondo does this for Morales. In the painting *TondoNY98-1-1. 0150* (1998), there is no beginning and no end. It is a space in which to paint, but also unlike a rectangle or square formatted painting—and completely unlike a fresco or wall painting—it is not delineated by powerful right-angles or architecture. It is, in her words "a detail, or a moment" and suggests a space outside of itself, both formally and art-historically. The tondo, as a circular

form, defies a linear or narrative reading. It is geometrically complete but can also be understood conceptually as a detail or fragment. However, through the painting and the imposition of marks and material—which for Morales are always bodily-angular, structural and temporal—that very contradiction feels held in tension. The tondo's painted surface, and its structural format are therefore, for Morales, always in a shifting dialogue with each other.

In the smallest tondos, such as *TondoS17-07-2,030* (2017) which is just 30 centimetres in diameter, the thickness of Morales's brush marks becomes acute. They physically possess a rough, sensual brutalism, where colour, material and the autographic coalesce around this idea of completeness. Since the 1980s, Morales has explored the physical and perceptual qualities of metallic and iridescent colour within her work. In the artist's hands these metallic paints, which are visually unstable as they reflect light, are laid down decisively with her standardised brush mark. In doing so, the instability of the painting's colour is coupled with the very physical and considered nature of the mark, and the gesture the mark captures. This adds another contradictory quality, which Morales seems somehow to be able to unify.

Morales's arch paintings are realised in series and are always to be viewed in dialogue with each other. She is a studio-based painter and thus these works directly speak to their architectural setting. Nowhere is this more visible than in Morales's magisterial *Stanza dell'Entierro* (1996-99) installation. This work is comprised of four huge arched painted panels, each measuring 350 centimetres in height. The work takes its title and format, albeit in a smaller size, from *El entierro del Conde de Orgaz* (1586-88), a well-known work by El Greco, who was one of Morales's favourite painters. Morales's quartet of paintings were created to be hung in a square room, with a single painting placed on each wall. As one enters the installation, from one of the room's open corners, one is encircled by the paintings. However, through their size, shape and heavy format, the paintings also seem to 'ground' the spectator to the floor. *Entierro*, in Spanish, means both burial and earth. Morales's paintings and their installation respond emotionally and contextually to such ideas. Like all of Morales's paintings, the *Stanza dell'Entierro*, or the multipaneled arched series the *4 Stagioni* (1995), reflect on what is inside and outside of the canvas. This reflection considers the ambience of the painting's full context, the way it is encountered architecturally and physically, but also how the work reflects on its own art historical precedents. That the artist can represent these encounters through emphasising her own subjectivity is important. In doing so, Morales offers us a truly rich, and unique, tripartite understanding of painting—built of the physical, historic and personal.

Daniel Sturgis, October 2024