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AGAINST THE GRAIN: REBECCA MORRIS AND PETER BRADLEY'S ART 'ABOUT NOTHING'

by Jonathan Griffin



Peter Bradley's exhibition at Karma gallery in Los Angeles, "Ruling Light: Paintings From the 1970s," gathers work from the first big period of commercial success for the artist. Credit: Elon Schoenholz

Created half a century apart, two exhibitions in Los Angeles by two painters make ardent cases for abstraction.

"Art should be about nothing," my friend, the abstract painter Liam Everett told me recently. "It should be an encounter with a U.F.O., an unknown object you have to work out how to come to terms with."

It's a provocative, hard-line position, one more fitted to an artist than a critic. But given art's recent turn toward the figurative, the literal, and the narrative, I too often find myself hankering for art that doesn't try to tell me things. What the critic Peter Schjeldahl, writing on Piet Mondrian, recently termed "obdurate mystery."

Two exhibitions of abstract paintings are currently up in Los Angeles that fit that bill. At the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA), "Rebecca Morris: 2001–2022" is a tour though this L.A. artist's joyful and tenacious pursuit of invention and reinvention in abstract painting — a genre considered, when Morris set out, to be moribund.

At the newly opened Karma gallery in West Hollywood, Peter Bradley's exhibition "Ruling Light: Paintings From the 1970s" gathers work from a short-lived period of commercial success for the artist, before he was abandoned in art's critical hinterlands. (Three exhibitions in 2021 have helped turn Bradley's fortunes.)

Made half a century apart, these exhibitions might, in places, look superficially similar. But they come from vastly different perspectives. One is by a Black man, born in Connellsville, Pa., in 1940. The other is by a white woman, born in Honolulu, in 1969. One is modernist, the

other postmodern.

Both artists are ardent devotees of abstraction, however — fashion be damned. And neither artist has ever intended their art to be about their identity.

Morris first caught the art world's attention with another deeply unfashionable move: In 2004, she wrote a manifesto, and published it as an ad in *Artforum*. "Abstraction never left," she declared, appending an expletive. The manifesto reads like a bullet-pointed pep talk. Some of her points are tongue-in-cheek — "When in doubt spray-paint it gold" — while others are universal: "Fight monomania," and "Wake up early, fear death." She concludes "Campaign against the literal" then, in capitals, "ABSTRACTION FOREVER!"

The manifesto is not reproduced in the ICA LA exhibition, which is deftly curated by Jamillah James, a senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, who initiated this show when she was a curator at the ICA LA. But Morris's spirit of goofy irreverence and openhearted sincerity is everywhere.

Like Bradley, Morris is a self-proclaimed colorist. This exhibition is anchored by two giant paintings made two years apart, "Untitled (#04-18)" (2018) and "Untitled (#03-20)" (2020), each 10 feet high. (She follows the same calendrical system when titling all her work.) Structured by similar zigzagging compositions (evoking patterned fabric swatches cut with pinking shears), these paintings are chiefly differentiated by their color schemes — the earlier work in the key of red, the other blue and green.

Morris's willingness to revisit compositions, techniques and motifs from earlier works betrays her rigorous and near-athletic dedication to honing her craft. It is clear she is after something — but what? She would tell you she just wants to make a better painting. For my money, the later blue-green painting outstrips the red.

Consummately skillful, Morris doesn't always seem to want you to view her as such. The grid — a modernist pictorial device that she deploys with postmodernist bathos — is rendered in wonky, spray-painted lines or a loose pink and brown checkerboard. A number of paintings — including the sublime "Untitled (#09-05)" (2005) and the magisterial red "Untitled (#01-22)" (2022) — appear to have begun life as drop-cloths catching messes on the studio floor.

It's possible — indeed, fun — to compile a list of aesthetic references for Morris's abstractions. One could probably include Memphis design, terrazzo, public bathroom décor, casino carpets and fast-food restaurant signage. (In her manifesto, Morris adds: "Never stop looking at macramé, ceramics, supergraphics, and Suprematism.")

But, for me, Morris's art doesn't stop at referentiality. It is ethical as well as aesthetic. Her paintings are egalitarian and pluralistic, not to mention frequently very funny. Morris lampoons the oversized gilt frames of old masters in paintings such as "Untitled (#12-13)" (2013), in which a hyperbolic enfilade of colorful, scalloped and patterned borders encases a few desultory dabs of black on white.

There's little joy in evidence in Bradley's show of atmospheric paintings at Karma, even though one senses his love for the painting process. Acrylic paint is blasted across his canvases and sloshed into wayward puddles. In some instances, it drizzles down the canvas in rivulets; in others it amasses in thick crusts into which Bradley gouges with a stick or a rake. There's an all-over quality to most of them; only rarely does he suggest a figure-ground relationship. ("Ruling Light," from 1973, is one such example.)

What are they about? Arguably, nothing. Sure, there are intimations of topographies viewed from above, and of the kinds of artificially colored photographs of deep space later produced by the Hubble Telescope. They might equally be said to resemble tiny sections of grubby concrete. This pendulum swing between the micro and the macro ultimately leaves

us at a statistical average, a 1:1 scale at which the paintings look like nothing so much as themselves. Even though Bradley does title his paintings, often with place names such as “Tharsis Ridge” (a region of Mars), he has also described them as “complicated dreams that have nothing to do with reality.”

Bradley’s subject, he has said, is color itself. In this exhibition, most paintings are dominated by muted, aggregate shades of clay, green-gold, mustard or salmon. (“Color different than it’s ever been seen before,” as he once put it.)

Despite the occasional ferocity of Bradley’s paint application, they are cool tempered, too. Which, judging from past interviews, is not an epithet that applies to their maker. Bradley is unfiltered in his opinions and rightly scornful of an art world that at first tokenized him, then ignored him. After the 1970s, Color Field painting — the movement to which he most closely hewed — fell out of favor; artists of color, on the whole, were then, as now, expected to make art that represented aspects of their identity.

For Bradley, to make paintings about nothing was, paradoxically, an act of political resistance. While Morris makes space not only for abstract painting but for other variously condescended aesthetic forms, Bradley, not having had the luxury of such freedom, makes space only for himself.

Against the chatter of our narrative-dominated visual landscape, both exhibitions offer the possibility of a different mode of looking. I welcome the arrival of more U.F.O.s.