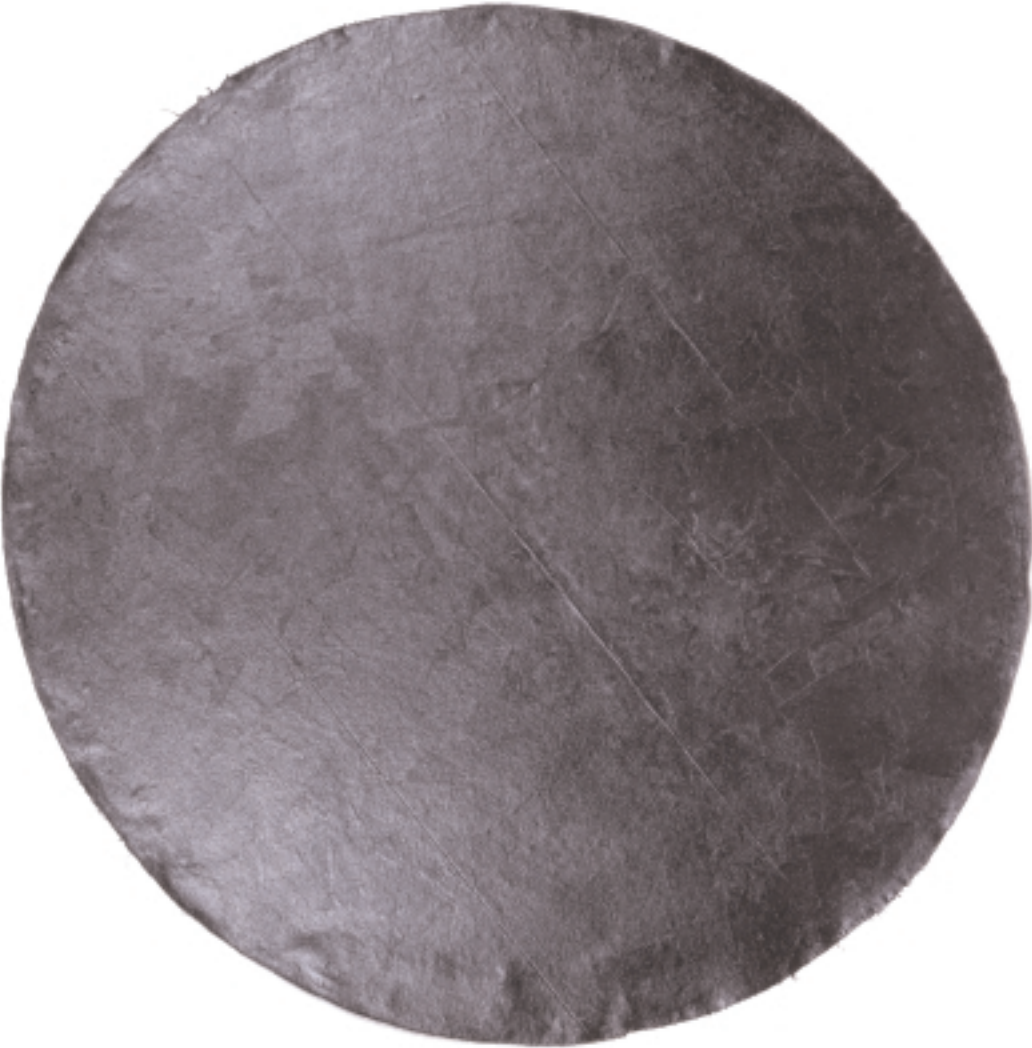
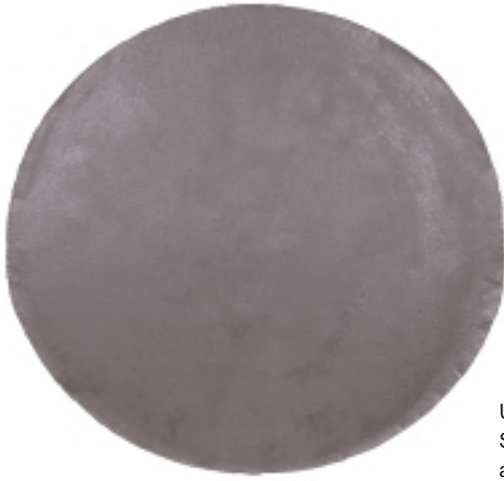


Morris Gallery

# QUENTIN MORRIS



# QUENTIN MORRIS



Untitled (June 2003).  
Silkscreen ink and polymer  
acrylic on canvas, 72" diameter.

*"I am exploring monochromatic painting... exclusively black; using a myriad of tonalities and textures to present black's intrinsically enigmatic beauty and infinite depth; to refute all negative cultural mythologies about the color; and ultimately to create work that innately expresses the all-encompassing spirituality of life."*

Quentin Morris

The forty-four words comprising Quentin Morris' artist's statement offer some insight into his work, yet what is not said in them is perhaps as important as what is. Enigmatically, both paintings and statement contain by excluding and both reward close reading.

*"I am exploring monochromatic painting... exclusively black..."*

That this exploration has been going on for the better part of forty years is not insignificant. Morris represents an unusually stable point in an art world that has been through literally dozens of "isms" in that time. Volumes have been written exploring the origins and relations between Pop, Minimalism, Conceptualism, Neo-Expressionism, and the other movements and fads that have come (and largely gone) while Morris has steadfastly worked on his project.

Understandings of monochromatic painting can be divided into two general tendencies.<sup>1</sup> A quasi-spiritualist contingent, exemplified by the work of Russian Suprematist Kasimir Malevich, would have us regard the uninflected surface as a statement of material essence and form of transcendental escape from imagery. But monochrome has always lent itself to a more nihilistic (or at least ironic) reading as well. It has been regarded as an expression of Dada-like antipathy toward art, radical political negativity, or a reflection of endgame thinking that has driven avant-garde painting. Ad Reinhardt's works and writings can be seen as expressive of these positions.

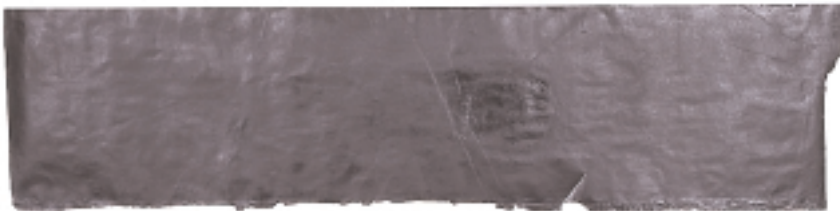
Of course, the history of monochromatic painting is not entirely encompassed in this binary formula. There are other milestones and interpretations. Early monochromes by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns have been credited with emphasizing painting's objecthood and pointing the way toward Pop art.<sup>2</sup> Robert Ryman's career-long engagement in the materiality of white paint, Gerhard Richter's cool and distancing grey monochromes, and the identity-oriented issues raised by artists like Byron Kim, Glenn Ligon, or William Pope. L.<sup>3</sup> all suggest territories into which an "exploration" such as Morris describes might lead.

Despite these alternative readings, monochromatic painting remains difficult to read because it is equally tied to two diametrically opposed worldviews: one transcendental and spiritual, the other cynical and material. By relying exclusively on black—a hue with considerable cultural connotations in Western culture—Morris complicates readings of his work. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

*"...using a myriad of tonalities and textures..."*

Here one is tempted to simply list the materials and methods of application that Morris has employed in the making of his seemingly homogenous output. A sample: spray paint, roof coating, screenprinting ink mixed with acrylic polymer, powdered pigment bonded with Roplex polymer, oil-based printing inks, Flexographic ink, graphite, and numerous other materials. These are applied with rollers and squeegees, or by spraying, pouring, rubbing, and countless other means.

Curiously, there is nothing in this statement about the supports on which Morris works, though they too are varied. The canvas Morris purchases is seventy-two inches in width, and that limit defines the scale of his recent circular paintings (earlier canvases were occasionally larger). He soaks the canvas and irons it before preparing it with four to seven coats of white gesso. Then he sets to work on the floor of his studio. Though the paint skin often obscures the texture of the canvas weave, recent paintings have small, indelible creases resulting from manufacturing processes. These lines are like faint equators and tropics dividing dark worlds.



Untitled (July 1992). Spray paint on paper, 18 1/8 x 71 1/2."

The statement also omits the fact that Morris chooses to present his paintings unstretched and unframed. Rejecting these conventions (as well as titles, which he's described as "pretentious"), Morris allows irregularities of shape and edge to play subtle roles in the effects of his work.

When he works on paper, Morris employs a wider array of supports. Using artist-quality papers or sheets of Mylar, accountants' ledger paper, old architectural plans, and assorted other found papers, Morris applies a range of media with both delicacy and force. In some instances, graphite has been burnished on to the paper with such rigor that the support almost vanishes—the paper is transformed into a sheet of otherworldly shimmering iridescence. Tattered edges of heavily worked papers impart a feeling of antiquity, as if they were recently unearthed, not recently drawn or painted.

*"...to present black's intrinsically enigmatic beauty and infinite depth;"*

Morris speaks of the elegance and mystery of black as a hue, and indeed it has held a fascination for many artists, from Manet to Matisse to Malevich. Hokusai, the nineteenth-century Japanese printmaker, observed in his treatise on color that "There is a black which is old and a black which is fresh. Lustrous black and matte black, black in sunlight and black in shadow."<sup>4</sup>

But looking at Morris' paintings, one immediately enters a game in which one tries to determine what is *really* black. A shiny passage here? A matte passage there? This cool area? That warm one? This indeterminacy is an essential aspect of Morris' enterprise, which emphasizes relationships and subtleties over absolutes or declarations.

*"...to refute all negative cultural mythologies about the color;"*

Accepting that Morris' four-decade-long exploration of black is entirely formally motivated requires that the viewer turn too blind an eye to the cultural landscape within which that investigation has occurred.<sup>5</sup> As an artist, Morris has stood firmly amidst tides of aesthetic fashion. As an African-American man, he's seen the

cultural landscape swirl around even more spectacularly in that span of time. The Civil Rights Movement, including historical landmarks such as the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the birth of the Black Power movement, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, occurred within the span of Morris' career. It is rare that an artist merges what appear



Untitled (September 1992). Spray paint on paper, 17 1/2 x 70 1/8.”

to be purely formalist concerns about painting and drawing with identity politics and spirituality, but Morris has accomplished this feat remarkably.

It is obvious that the meanings of black (or of any color) are not inherent but culturally determined. Nonetheless, within the realm of Western art there has long been a considerable context allying black with negation, prompting Kandinsky to write:

...the groundnote of black is a silence with no possibilities...black is something burned out, like the ashes of a funeral pyre, something motionless like a corpse. The silence of black is the silence of death.<sup>6</sup>

Barnett Newman saw black as something fundamental when he commented that “when an artist moves to black, it is to clear the table for a new hypothesis.”<sup>7</sup>

Theories about color treat black (along with white) as an absolute. “There is only one maximal black...” Itten wrote in his treatise on color “...but an infinitely large number of light and dark grays.” This may be seen as an improvement on the nineteenth-century view of black, which regarded it as a coloristic non-entity or “achromatic color.” Van Gogh in an 1882 letter to his brother, took for granted that “absolute black does not exist,” but conceded that it was “present in almost every color.”

For Morris, black is not about shading the meaning of an image, death, emptying out, “clearing the table,” exclusion, or absolutes. In fact, black’s astonishingly mystical and inclusive properties are implied in his conclusion.

*“...and ultimately to create work that innately expresses the all-encompassing spirituality of life.”*

This is the core of Quentin Morris’ work. All aspects of the execution of his work are carefully controlled to achieve this objective. It would be a mistake to refer to Morris’ means as limited, as they are selected for the way they encompass a range of forms and concerns. The circle is a near-universal symbol of wholeness and an allusion to a cyclical theory of time. Black is not an absence of color but a hue Morris sees as embodying all hues on any other artist’s palette.

But what stands out most about Morris’ work is that he succeeds in accomplishing his objective and then sets about to accomplish it again. Perhaps we’ve grown accustomed to a kind of restlessness in contemporary art that often appears to be about nothing so much as seeking, struggling, and failing. Because Morris’ paintings don’t travel the predictable arc from one “problem” to another or show any clear “progress,” one might mistakenly infer that they are nihilistic rather than affirmative statements.

Such a linear view, with its emphasis on progress, would be out of keeping with Morris’ artistic—and personal—vision. Long before he took up the practice of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, Morris was attracted to and influenced by Asian art. Morris’ paintings could be likened to a mantra whose repetition and subtly shifting inflection intend to reveal all that can be seen through the most economical of means. As a spiritual exercise, they model a kind of behavior for the viewer, encouraging vigilance and attention, lest important experience pass unnoticed.

Quentin Morris’ installation of paintings at the Pennsylvania Academy reflects many of the themes of his statement. It is a unique opportunity to see a body of paintings in one exhibition, and therefore a valuable chance to meditate on the subtle differences between them that the artist



Untitled (October 1992). Spray paint on paper, 18 x 72 1/2."

regards as essential to the content of the work. By extending the use of black paint beyond the edges of his canvases, Morris has enlarged on the ideas of his work, creating a chapel-like space for contemplation of his paintings against subtly varying tones and sheens of black. This overall approach encourages the viewer to see relationships between the works rather than regarding them as separate entities. In this installation, the gallery is no longer a sterile white cube but an active element in framing the works, facilitating comparisons between them.

By incorporating the individual canvases into a larger installation, Morris' work conjures recollections of other painting installations, such as the Rothko Chapel at the Menil Collection or

Barnett Newman's 1958 *Stations of the Cross*. Like these canonical modernists, Morris creates a space for contemplation and a form of secular sanctuary.

The objective Morris claims for his work is that it induce a state of "aesthetic arrest." He jokingly refers to Stanley Kubrick's 1968 epic *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the effect the black monolith had on the early humans in the film's classic opening sequence. Encounters with Quentin Morris' paintings are occasions for consternation, mystery, transformation, and transcendence.

Gerard Brown  
Artist and writer

<sup>1</sup>This extremely schematic opposition and its examples are outlined in Michael Corris' entry "monochromatic" in *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online* ([www.groveart.com](http://www.groveart.com)).

<sup>2</sup>David S. Rubin suggests numerous reasons artists have been attracted to black and white, complicating the binary nature of Corris' schematic definition. See Rubin and David Steadman, *Black and White are Colors: Paintings of the 1950s-1970s* (Claremont, Ca.: Pomona College), 20.

<sup>3</sup>Philadelphia audiences will remember seeing William Pope. L's *Bad Monochrome #12* and similar works in the Institute of Contemporary Art's summer 2004 exhibition, *The Big Nothing*. Pope. L, like other contemporary artists, utilizes monochrome as yet another rhetorical form in the field of painting and larger discourse of art. Such an approach may be antithetical to Morris' longstanding commitment to the monochrome, but it casts light on the way Morris' work functions in contemporary art.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 229.

<sup>5</sup>Morris is clearly highly conscious of the social implications of his work and deliberate in their use. In response to a question about the negative mythologies of black in the February 19, 1998 issue of the *Philadelphia Weekly*, he addressed "the whole idea that black is supposed to be something macabre, negative, dirty, filthy. There are also racial stereotypes in there as well, and the whole thing about it being funereal." Although Morris is careful not to over-emphasize race's role in the conceptual framework of his painting (preferring to locate it at the intersection of aesthetics, social content, and spirituality, as he says in the same interview) it is a powerful dimension of his work and should not be subordinated to an effort to locate the work in an art historical context.

<sup>6</sup>Kandinsky quoted in Rubin, *Black and White are Colors*, 8.

<sup>7</sup>Rubin, 11.



# QUENTIN MORRIS

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Front Cover:  
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