



# The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago  
5811 South Ellis Avenue  
4th floor  
Chicago, IL 60637

**Museum Hours**  
Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5 pm  
Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5 pm  
Closed Mondays  
<http://www.renaissancesociety.org>

## Rebecca Morris: Paintings 1996 - 2005

May 8 – June 19, 2005

**Opening Reception: Sunday, May 8, 4:00 - 7:00 pm**  
Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00 - 6:00pm

**The Renaissance Society  
at The University of Chicago**  
5811 South Ellis Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois 60637  
Phone: (773) 702-8870

Non-Profit Organization  
US Postage  
PAID  
Chicago, IL  
Permit No. 2336

### Abstract This

"[When] anything goes,' and 'it makes no difference whether art is abstract or representational,' the artists' world is a mannerist and primitive art trade and suicide-vaudeville, venal, genial, contemptible, trifling."

Ad Reinhardt, *Art as Art*, 1962

Let there be no mystery as to what Reinhardt's ghost would say: LIVE FREE OR DIE! For him, abstraction was anything but a choice. It was a matter of historical necessity, as abstract painting was considered the penultimate expression of an era defined and driven by a logic of essentialism, and in his case, an essentialism that gave way to a deep mysticism. Before devolving into a turf war with minimalist sculptors, abstract painting was viewed as an untrod summit whose pioneers arrived at their signature styles in an empirical struggle of existential, if not epic, proportions. Reinhardt could hold pluralism in casual contempt in part because it did not define a painterly struggle the way it would for a later generation.

Rebecca Morris' commitment to abstraction lies somewhere between the poles of fierce and rabid, a prerequisite for coping with a pluralism arising not only from across disciplines but from within the discipline of painting itself. Abstraction is now a given, an option that is taken for granted as one chooses rather than fights to become an abstract painter. It is a choice, however, within a discipline that has become a field of specialization by virtue of taking on the characteristics of a language. If the closure of modernist painting is taken as the closure of painting itself, then under the aegis of postmodernism, painting's history is a finite collection of styles readily offering itself up for quotation. In other words, paintings are read in and through reference to other paintings begging the question, once abstraction has acquired legibility is there such a thing as an abstract painting?

Judging from Morris' work, the answer is a resounding "Hells Yes!" Hers remains a rudimentary language of shape, line, color, gesture, surface and composition, that quotes so as to reduce its references to an alphabet. In this respect, her paintings function as an *Ur* or *proto* language of abstraction through which one can discern the compositional logic of Frank Stella's black

paintings, an isolated Pollock-like splatter or a Hans Hoffmanesque approach to the discreet juxtaposition of color. The earliest paintings in the exhibition feature Morris' signature device of layering a shape that is an undifferentiated hybrid of square and circle. Executed flat on the floor, these paintings look as though they have emerged, face-up, from a boiling cauldron of protozoan possibilities dating back to the Flintstones. Between these and her paintings consisting exclusively of lines, her early vocabulary was indeed one of sticks and stones. When not registered as a scrubby stain or a series of wavering, spray-painted lines, her touch consists of a redundant slathering of viscous paint that builds in thickness, going from painting as a verb to painting as a noun. On stretchers deeper than required for paintings of their size, these canvases assert their objecthood so literally they become rhetorical. Fracture is determined by gravity and the drying properties of oil which contracts as it congeals, forming a skin with an unctuous, hive-like wrinkling that seems to emerge from within the paintings. With a life of their own, the paintings become susceptible to disease and aging, forms of corruption well beyond any irony.

Morris' earlier paintings could hardly be said to escape such irony which is endemic to any and all questions of legibility. Whatever irony may be attributed to her intent, however, corresponds to history's larger irony which was already well in effect. Submitting abstraction to a process of quotation that reduces stylistic specificity to very basic and general features is to craft a generic abstraction, one that cannot fail to signify abstraction's utter ubiquity. Little wonder these early paintings resemble a species of abstraction found in transient public spaces—fast food dining courts, airport terminals, the DMV. Once considered an ideal complement to public spaces because of its universal appeal, abstract art came



to be read as a gratuitous effort to beautify impersonal spaces of rote functionality. These spaces, with their accepted levels of vagrancy and dereliction, often resulting from the public's very absence, were in effect non-spaces. Abstraction spoke for no one, becoming a vacant language. Referring to figurative elements lacking a place within abstract paintings, Clement Greenberg coined the infamous phrase "homeless representation." If the dialectical pendulum of history has undergone a full cycle then it is safe to say Morris' early paintings are examples of "homeless abstraction."

Morris' predilection for a scathed abstraction is a way of welcoming it and its subsequent fate, arms open wide. As for an attendant irony, let there be no mystery as to what she would say. BRING IT ON! For painters who share Morris' commitment to abstraction, the challenge is to reinvent on terms that are relevant and relative the spirit and dialectical conditions that make abstract painting urgent and necessary. For the better part of the Twentieth Century, this struggle was defined by a dialectical tension between abstraction and figuration. In Morris' case, the struggle is defined by an irony residing exclusively within the domain of abstract painting. In short, abstract painting has nothing to overcome but itself. This is an irony Morris is bold enough to instigate and even bolder for transcending as the paintings, over the past few years, have increased in scale and complexity on every front—palette, paint handling, and composition, including notable forays into crafting deep space—making them robust enough to dispel any question of whether this is painting for painting's sake.

The struggle from one generation to the next might be different, but the goal of making paintings of which nothing is asked other than that they be paintings remains the same. Indeed, Morris' paintings are anachronisms. Her method of

reducing any attributable stylistic specificity to rudimentary painterly concerns negates the idea that abstract painting would, could or should evolve. Her sticks and stone period could just as easily serve as a paean to Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane* as it could be said to reference the New York School. Although the advent of pure abstraction is a thing of the past, it was not marked as belonging exclusively to the early years of the Twentieth Century or the New York School. Abstraction belonged and belongs to moments of an indeterminate future. This would problematize any claims to contemporaneity made on abstraction's behalf. Hovering outside an historical dialectic, abstraction operates at its own speed. At times, it has been ahead of its present, and at others behind. Several of Morris' paintings circa 2000 might recall the 1980s better than a painting actually executed during that decade ever could. Whatever nostalgia they induce, however, is strictly incidental as is it more symptomatic of the ever present desire to see beyond immediate appearances and know the world in all its brazenly abstract glory. This would make abstraction a permanent fixture of modernism, and by default postmodernism. Nothing to mourn, and in the absence of any shame, nothing to redeem, these paintings are a call looking for a response. So say it loud, I'M ABSTRACT AND I'M PROUD!

#### Related Events

**Concert  
Tuesday May 10, 8:00pm  
Phantom Limb and Bison**

Jaime Fennelly (electronics), Chris Forsyth (guitar), Shawn Hansen (EMS Synthesizer and radio feedback), and Chris Heenan (alto saxophone, contrabassclarinet) have formed a common language while sharing a number of outside projects. Together they wrestle with the sonic possibilities of their instruments on the fine line between composition and improvisation, producing long form pieces influenced by noise, free improvisation, icy electronics, and old school minimalist composition. This event is FREE and will take place in the gallery.

**Concert  
Thursday, May 19, 8:00pm  
Maverick Ensemble**

Works by Mario Davidovsky (Argentina), Hanns Eisler (Austria), Leonid Hrabovsky (Ukraine), Witold Lutoslawski (Poland), Paul Oehlers (U.S.), and Kaija Saariaho (Finland).

For the third concert in their *Intimate Music* series, presented at The Renaissance Society during winter and spring 2005, the Maverick Ensemble, a relatively young music group quickly gaining glowing reviews, continues its focus on small chamber works and solo pieces. This event is FREE and will take place in the gallery.

**Panel  
Thursday, May 26, 6:00 - 8:00 pm  
Abstraction Now!**

The topic (Abstraction) and the time (Now) are forthrightly stated as this outstanding local brain trust makes no bones about the matter at hand. Abstraction, is it relevant? Are there stakes? (No promises, but if it gets hot enough there'll be a manifesto drafted.)

Panelists include:  
Darby English, *Assistant Professor of Art History, The University of Chicago*  
Kathryn Hixson, *Adjunct Associate Professor Art History, Theory and Criticism, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago*  
Lane Relyea, *Assistant Professor of Art Criticism, Northwestern University*

This event is FREE and will take place in Cobb Hall 307 (directly below the gallery).

This panel is being sponsored by Holiday T. Day in honor of Jane Addams Allen, a founding editor of the *New Art Examiner*, and a champion of abstraction.

**Concert  
Thursday, June 9, 8:00pm  
Cube Ensemble**

**with guest composer Robert D. Morris**  
works by Robert D. Morris (U.S.), Stefan Wolpe (U.S.), Shulamit Ran (born Israel, living in U.S.), Ruth Lomon (born in Canada, living in U.S.)

In addition to an outstanding bill, we are pleased to have present the Senior Eastman School of Music Professor of Composition Robert Morris. Morris has bridged an important gap between the rigorously academic and the highly experimental. Morris has composed over 100 works including computer and improvisational music. Much of his output from the 1970s is influenced by non-Western music and uses structural principles from Arabic, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, and early Western musics. In its 17th season, Cube is one of the most long-lived, and well respected contemporary chamber music ensembles in Chicago. Led by instrumentalist/composers Patricia Morehead and Janice Misurell-Mitchell, the group is known for its eclectic taste, and the wide variety of its repertoire, from the most challenging electroacoustic to the most intricate and subtle chamber works This event is FREE and will take place in the gallery.

*Rebecca Morris: Paintings 1996-2005* has been made possible with funding from Helen Zell.

Additional support has been received from a UChicagoArts grant from the Arts Planning Council and funding from Alphawood Foundation; Chicago Community Trust; the CityArts Program of The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, a municipal agency; Christie's; The Danielson Foundation; Gayford and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation; the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; LaSalle Bank; The LLLWW Foundation; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; The Peter Norton Family Foundation; the Provost's Discretionary Fund at The University of Chicago; The Pritzker Foundation; The Siragusa Foundation; and our membership.



**American Airlines** is the official airline of The Renaissance Society's 2004-2005 season.

[ this side ]  
**Rebecca Morris**  
**Untitled, 2003**  
**oil and spraypaint on canvas**  
**90 x 72 inches**  
**photo by Fredrik Nilsen**

[ that side ]  
**Rebecca Morris' color chart**