SouthwestArt

COLOR FIELDS

Gail Morris was always thinking about landscapes, and a decade ago she determined her own style of minimalism for painting them | By Virginia Campbell



LATE SUMMER STORM, OIL, 18 X 18.



SUNLIGHT, OIL, 54 X 54.

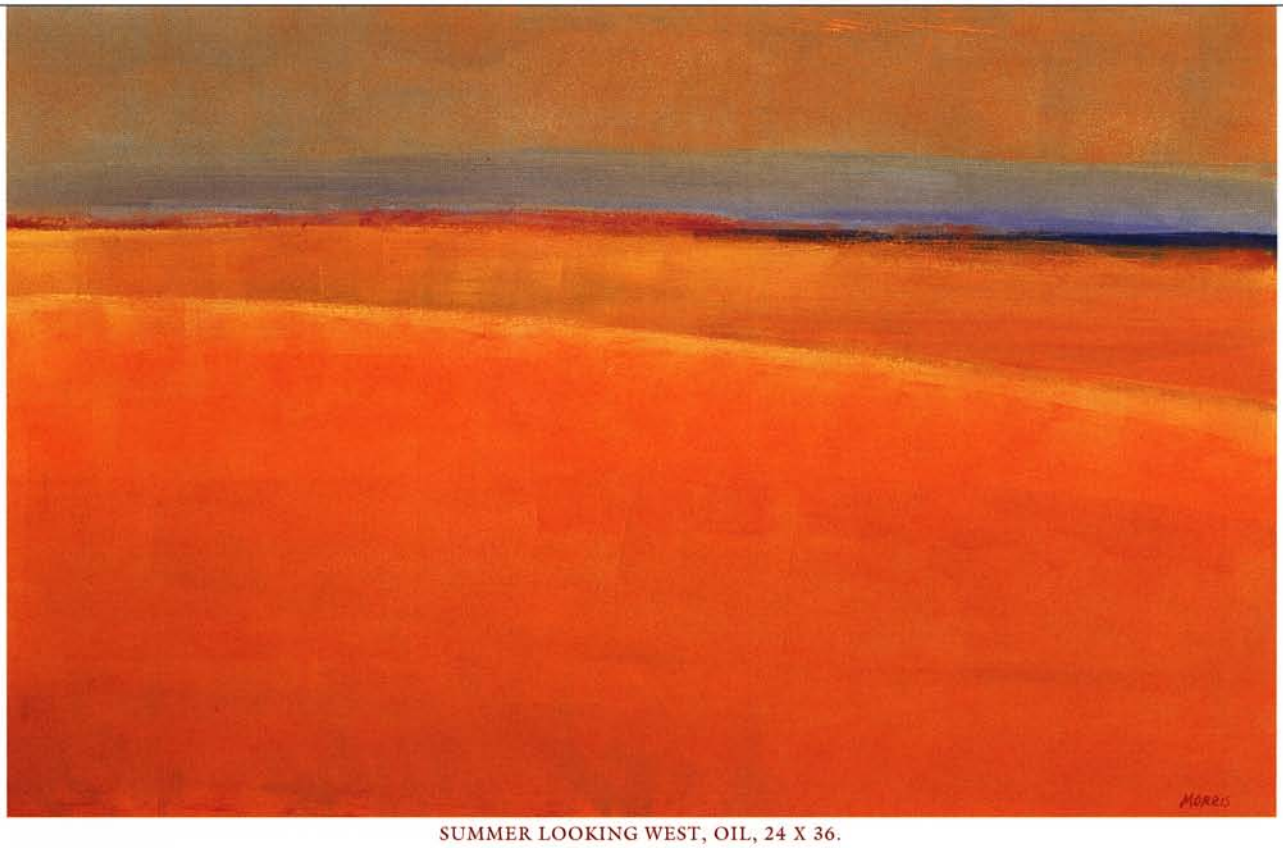
"EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE WHEN I'M PAINTING, I can't make a wrong stroke," says Gail Morris, who creates spare, color-saturated landscapes in her large Sausalito, CA, warehouse studio near her home just north of San Francisco. "Everything the brush does is just right." For Morris, as for all artists, the near-magical state of creativity in which art is not just possible but actually easy is rare and almost always short-lived. The rest of the time, art is work—a summoning of skill and quelling of doubt that must go on in rain or shine. Still, Morris' oil and acrylic landscapes—soundly composed in a spirit of resonant minimalism and steeped in layered fields of colors—display a clarity of purpose that may be as close as an artist can get to a constant state of inspiration.

In her best landscapes, Morris moves with uncanny instinct directly to the horizon between realism and abstraction, boldly subtracting detail to enhance the intensity of the whole, so that fields, hillsides, and bodies of water seem to vibrate in stillness like afterimages on the back of your eyelids. In these paintings of golden meadows, green marshes, and cerulean skies, you recognize a familiar terra firma lit by the sun in its various positions and locked into the scheme of time, while at the same time you feel privy to a vision of eternity, something permanent within the universe we know to be relentlessly ephemeral. Your eyes sink into the images as if into a transcendental state. The labor behind the complex simplicity of these paintings is plain enough if you think about it (and look closely—in Morris' work you see the trail of razor blades and the effacement of sandpaper), but the paintings themselves don't make obvious the process by which they've come into being. However, the truth is that it's quite difficult to gain this appearance of inevitability, to invoke a notion of the romantic sublime.

The commingling of effortless instinct and hard work that gives Morris' canvases their depth has influenced the rest of her life as well. Morris has been painting seriously for only a decade, but the 20 years between her 1975 graduation from Webster University in St. Louis, MO, and her decision to paint were an apt, if circuitous, apprenticeship in art.



THROUGHOUT A COMFORTABLE childhood and adolescence in Michigan and a lot of other Midwestern locations (her father was an engineer in the automotive industry), Morris drew and painted. But in college, she shifted to art history out of sheer lack of confidence



SUMMER LOOKING WEST, OIL, 24 X 36.

that her talent could sustain a career as a painter. She also took up photography and, following college, used her camera to support what she describes as "a gypsy life." Through friendship and serendipity she ended up becoming the photographer for the Joe Cocker Band for a few years, doing long stints in London, Amsterdam, and Jamaica, as well as tours, with time left over for random fascinations with everything from the Dogon people of Africa to voodoo in Haiti. "It was my camera that saved me from being a ne'er-do-well," she says about this phase of her life. Supported by a loose but increasingly steady agenda of assignments to pursue with her camera, Morris segued into the life of a photojournalist, selling both photographs and stories to magazines and newspapers on a freelance basis.

By 1980, Morris had become less inclined to wander and moved to San Francisco, where she began doing the film and TV commercial production that would support her over the next 15 years. In this capacity she scanned thousands and thousands of miles of landscape all over the country in search of perfect locations for car and truck commercials. "I was always looking for the perfect S-turn or the perfect hill for the truck to come over," she recalls. To an eye already sensitized to issues of composition by years of photography, Morris added an enhanced awareness of landscape shape and color.

In 1983, she married a man she'd met when he came to her for a job interview. "He'd worked for George Lucas on the *Star Wars* movies, and when he came in for the interview I thought, 'What a nice guy.' He wasn't at all the kind of guy I was usually interested in—I always liked flashy rock-and-roll types. But I kept thinking about him."

The next decade brought two daughters, continuing commercial work, and little painting. But in 1995 and 1996, a series of losses shifted Morris into the life of an artist. Her father died, and then her best friend passed away, too. "This friend was an artist," Morris explains, "and my father was an amateur artist. When they both died, I just started painting. It felt like I had to pick up the torch." There were, of course, other forces gathering behind Morris' determination to become a painter. For one, ever since coming to California, she'd sought out California Impressionist paintings and studied the way these early 20th-century artists captured the West Coast's unusual light. She'd go to auctions just to see the hundreds of examples, good and bad, of their work. "Landscape was all I cared about from the beginning," she says.

Morris' first proactive steps toward responding to her urge to paint were workshops with contemporary painters she admired. "I started noting artists I liked, and that led me to Matt Smith's workshop. I thought, 'If I could paint like this guy....'" In addition to taking classes at places like the Fredericksburg Artists School in Texas, Morris did at least two weeklong workshops a year with such artists as Wolf Kahn, Michael Workman, William Hook, and Ray Roberts. "With each artist's workshop I

asked myself, 'How do they approach their work?' More specifically, I'd ask, 'How do they make those big buttery brushstrokes?' or 'How do you get that really dark green?'" In the midst of this learning curve, Morris began to sell her own work. "The first painting I sold was a nice one, 12 inches by 12 inches, for $400. The next was 24 by 24 inches and was a harbinger—more of a color-field painting, and bold." As Morris worked through questions of technique, color relationships, and the myriad other formal issues that are the life-breath of painting, her works quickly reflected lessons absorbed. "Then, 1999 was a really good year for me," she says. "I sold six or seven paintings right away at a juried show."

Once painting became the focus of her energies, everything Morris had learned aesthetically through other means and media came into play. From the beginning, her paintings showed the compositional finesse that years of photography had honed. Photography also contributed to her painting by leaving her ill-disposed to do with paint what she could accomplish with camera and film. "I still do some paintings with detail in them, but often I'd look at a detailed piece and think, 'It's so fussy. I could take a photograph of that.' And I'd scrub it out. Whenever something got too detailed, out came the sandpaper and razor blades." Meanwhile, all the miles of landscape she'd scouted for car commercials left her with a terrific eye for the most elemental and evocative shapes in the topography around her.

What you see when you look at Morris' paintings, and those of other gifted contemporary landscape artists with abstractionist and expressionistic tendencies, is a reasserted faith in external subject matter itself, for one thing, and also a relationship to the American landscape that is particular to our time. In Morris' "spare and elegant" paintings (those are her teacher Wolf Kahn's adjectives), you feel at once the assertion of landscape beauty in its most fundamental state, the admission of nostalgia for a time when the landscape was less threatened, an insistent reaching beyond nostalgia toward hope within the present, and the appropriation of this imagery to represent our awareness of ourselves as earthly creatures.

Morris' paintings have reached a surprisingly large audience in a short time, another aspect of her current career that owes a lot to her previous life. "Early on I started sending out slides to lots of art shows," she says. "Having been a freelancer for years, I never had a fear of rejection. And I remembered what actors and actresses had told me about sending out postcards. They'd send out their headshots on postcards over and over, because there'd come a time when they'd be in an audition and somebody would say, 'I've seen this actress. I like her.' I'd send out hundreds of postcards." (Morris has also published a book, *Horizon Lines: The Paintings of Gail Morris.*)

The not-ready-for-prime-time artist who embarked from college on a gypsy trail and arrived at her new calling two decades later also got some first-rate advice in dealing with doubts about talent and fear of failure. "I spent some time years ago with Henry Miller," says Morris. "He told me not to worry about failure, that some of my best paintings would come out of failure. And he was right."



CENTRAL VALLEY, OIL, 12 X 12.

So, while Morris sometimes gets into that zone where she "can't make a wrong stroke," the fact is she can't lose even when her strokes do go temporarily wrong. That is undoubtedly because, as she says, "Landscape was all I cared about from the beginning." ❑

Virginia Campbell, the former editor in chief of *Movieline*, has also written for *Elle Décor*, *Departures*, and *Traditional Home*.

Morris is represented by Bonner David Galleries, Scottsdale, AZ; Stein Gallery, St. Louis, MO; and ArtSourceLA, Santa Monica, CA.