

Tamsin Morse

Re Jerusalem exhibition at Dean Clough: was the painting Land of the Flies exhibited then? If so, reference can be made to it on the page. AL

“The mark-making is a bit obsessive, and I think that’s quite unnerving. That obsession is kind of disturbing, when you look at it.”

TAMSIN MORSE, by her own admission, paints weird and obsessive pictures. Her subtly-coloured landscapes may initially seem inviting, but closer inspection reveals a hostile world. These paintings, depicting imagined realms and ancient civilisations, evolved through the artist’s interest in anthropology and archaic belief systems. In September, she appeared in Sobe!, part of the Istanbul Biennial. Her otherworldly work has also featured in Jerusalem, an exhibition examining William Blake’s visionary poem and hymn about England. INTERVIEW: Vici MacDonald and Carla Yarish

We are also featuring in this issue an artist called Simon Morse. Is it a common name?

I’ve never heard of him and I don’t know any other Morse’s – a lot of them went to America. But I am pretty sure it is a Cornish name, from Somerset.

Your first solo exhibition was at One in the Other gallery in 2006. Did it take a long time to build up to this show?

I did my MA, and then I went travelling in South America. It opened up what I was trying to do with landscape. It was vast – you could see 50 miles in every direction. It just became a different arena for me. I got very interested in the indigenous religion, and I brought these ideas back and my work became more ambitious.

So were you already working with landscape before you made that trip?

Yes, but they were much smaller paintings. Seeing volcanoes in the flesh, and four different weather patterns going on, I really came to understand the relationship between the landscape and the weather and the way it dominated early belief and religion.

Did you travel all around South America?

From Ecuador down to Chile – I travelled around and up to Brazil. It was stunningly beautiful. There were these Pachu Mama shrines everywhere, and every time someone went out into the landscape they would leave a gift to mother earth. It’s very ancient mythology, which we don’t have in society today. We no longer depend on the land, we use it for pleasure and tourism. That allowed me to pull a lot of ideas together – just going away, looking, thinking, and writing down ideas. So the work came as a result of that trip, that’s what pushed it towards where I wanted to go.

Are your landscapes entirely imagined?

Yes, totally. Almost as though, from an anthropological point of view, I am trying

together the common ground that runs through every culture: a relationship to the landscape, the myths and the fetishization of objects. I’ve made up a common, suggested civilization.

Does an idea for a painting come into your mind fully formed?

I used to do a lot of drawing first – they were made up of very tiny dots, and they related to early etchings that Europeans would make in South America. So some of the paintings came out of quite structured drawings, but I’ve moved away from that.

Do you have an imaginary tribe that inhabits this world you’ve created?

There is evidence that they were there – abandoned huts and so forth. I knew they were there somewhere! People have asked me whether my work is about the future or the past. For me it’s probably both.

The colours are almost reminiscent of Morandi. Is that very singular palette a conscious distancing device?

Probably. If I had made those paintings in greens and browns they would have been about something completely different. They would be pretending to be a real place, whereas I was making a painting of a place that had a particular reference, and a particular reason for being. Some landscapes are meant to be aesthetically appealing and the palette is quite beautiful, yet there is often something in the landscape that’s quite sinister.

Do you intend them to be unsettling?

Definitely. They’re not utopian. They’re meant to be quite sinister. There’s quite a lot of phallic imagery, but I don’t set out to do phallic paintings – that’s not what they’re about.

Your work also suggests grand 19th-century landscape paintings.

When I started making landscape paintings

that’s what I was looking at, particularly Caspar David Friedrich – that slightly sinister “sublime” that Friedrich had. But I think the whole reference to the sublime in my work is a bit of a red herring. I could use it as a tool to steer the viewer towards the aesthetic principle, only to repulse them because it’s weird. It turns the holy into something much darker.

Do you have any particular concerns with the environment?

Personally, yes, but the work isn’t environmental. That’s a very easy assumption to make, and that was my one concern, since I was doing rare or extinct animals. If I paint things like felled trees and barren wastelands, it’s because they are quite weird and dark, not because I am trying to say, “Stop chopping down the rainforest”.

Your titles, such as Land of the Flies and Nightwatch, also reference literature and art. Do you intend your titles to guide readings of your work?

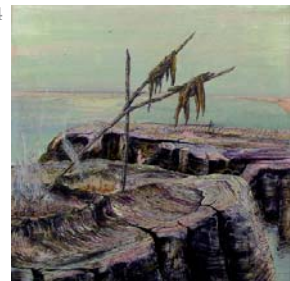
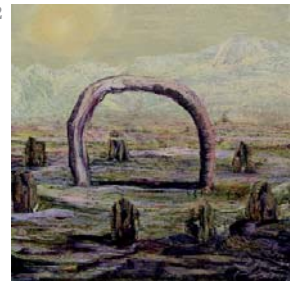
To some extent, otherwise they’d all be called “Untitled”. But most of the time the title comes to me as I’m making the work. And it could just be something that I put in at the last minute that I feel sums up the painting.

Is there any element of obsession in your intricate mark-making?

The mark-making is a bit obsessive and I think that’s quite unnerving. That obsession is kind of disturbing when you look at it.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

Probably a Rembrandt, a self-portrait from when he was a bit older. Or maybe a Caravaggio. One of the most beautiful paintings I’ve ever seen was a Bacon triptych self-portrait at a show at Gagosian. I could live with a Bacon. The most fascinating thing for painters is when they get up close to another painter’s canvas and they can’t understand how it was made. ☺



1 **Land of the Flies** (2005)

oil on canvas, 181 x 164cm

2 **Fertility** (2006)

oil on canvas, 45 x 45cm

3 **Nightwatch** (2006)

oil on canvas, 40 x 40cm

4 **Toy Soldier** (2006)

oil on canvas, 45 x 45cm



The Magic Mountain (2007), oil on canvas, 168 x 180cm



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All images courtesy of Tamsin Morse



Serenade (2007), oil on canvas, 40 x 40cm



Buffalo (2007), oil on canvas, 154 x 168cm