

sarah morris

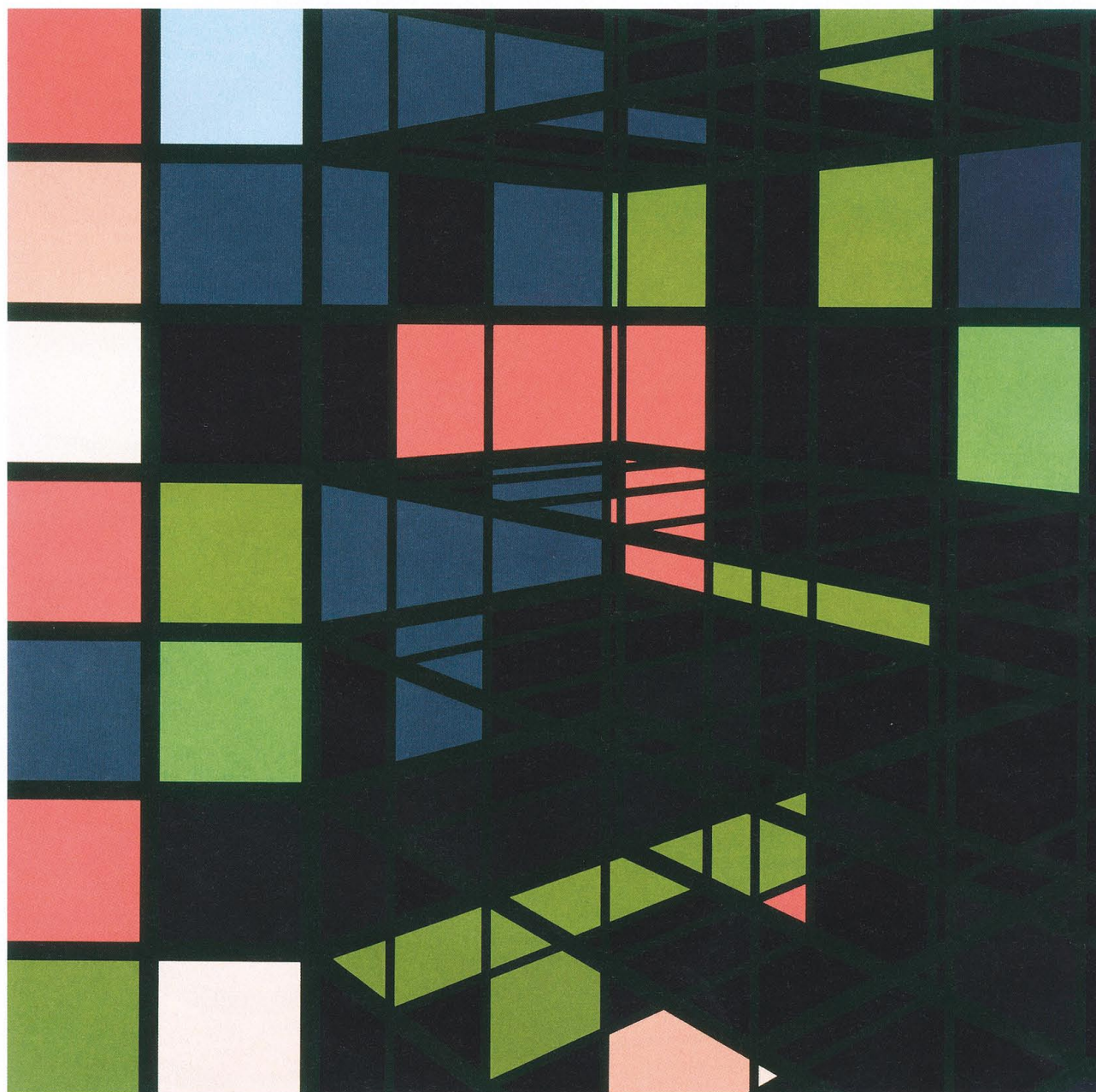




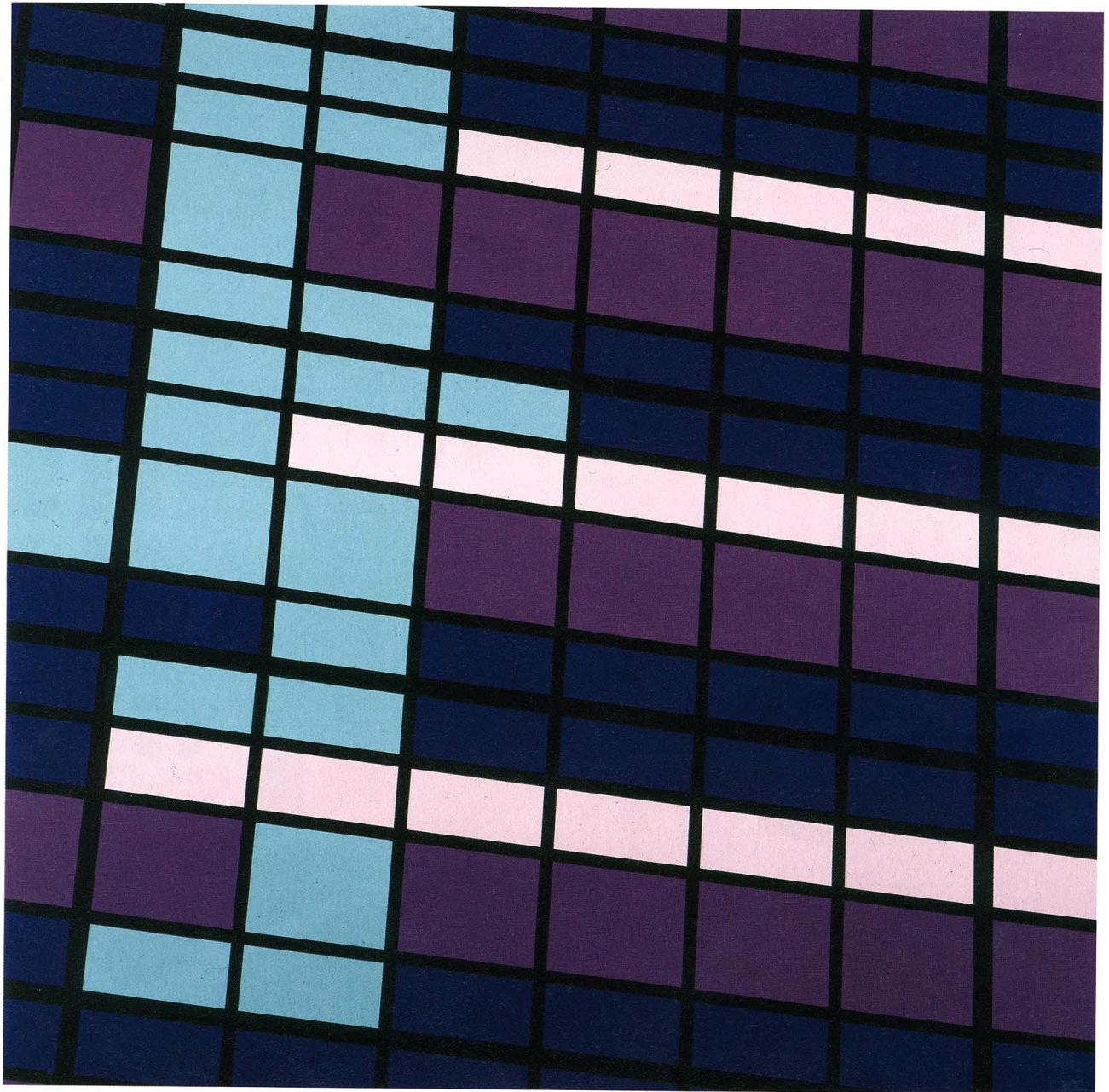
urban semiotics

Words | Philippe Pourhashemi

Philippe Pourhashemi, *Sarah Morris, Urban Semiotics*, in *Gatsby*, summer 2008, pp. 124 - 129



Few contemporary artists have managed to depict our urban surroundings with the beauty and ruthless concision that seems to come so naturally to Sarah Morris. For over a decade, Morris has been addressing the complexities of American cities, exploring their architecture and carefully deconstructing their signs and dynamics through both films and paintings. Using vibrant blocks of color and often toying with perspective, Morris' architectural paintings hover between conceptual art and geometric abstraction.



Born in 1967, Morris grew up in the US and studied semiotics before enrolling in the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art. A knowledge of semiotics may not be par for the course of a painter, but Morris' background and interest in theory factors largely in her cityscapes. If semiotics is a general philosophical theory of signs and symbols (which pays particular attention to their function in artificially constructed languages), Morris' paintings might easily be cast as a visual analysis of the language of the city, and the man-made structures that it's comprised of. During the mid-90s, Morris started developing her own abstract language with

large-scale paintings dedicated to the urban landscapes and architecture of America. Since then, her work has focused on five major cities: New York, Las Vegas, Washington DC, Miami and Los Angeles. Morris first made her mark with her 1998/99 Midtown series. In the paintings, she exploits Manhattan's modernist architecture via grids of color and geometric patterns that immediately recall Mondrian's oeuvre. Sleek and stylish, the Midtown paintings also suggest a new way to look at urbanism. Morris refers to well-known landmarks, re-appropriating them and deconstructing their architecture.

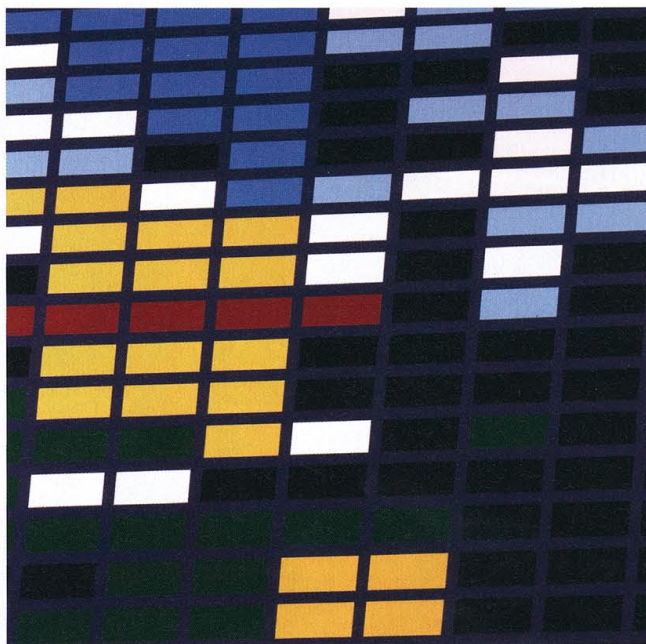


Throughout her work, she manages to synthesize complex layers of meanings and visual information. Urban landscapes are de-coded and re-coded as they're translated into energetic and vibrant canvases. Morris masterfully employs lines and angles to give a sense of (often steep) perspective and height, echoing the dizzying scale of American urbanism. She's clearly fascinated with the power of cities, and the visual impact of their buildings. Yet, although Morris plays with perception and creates visual rebuses, her artworks still pack a lyrical punch. In one of her Miami paintings, she uses grids of white, brown and aqua rectangles to suggest the variegated depths of an empty swimming pool. Through her clever use of color and fine under-

standing of shape, Morris can create volumes of depth within what looks, on the surface, like a very simple and abstractly alluring artwork.

She also appears to be exploring notions of desire, spectacle, and power dynamics through the prism of urban architecture. One cannot help but think of Guy Debord's 1967 work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, an essay exploring these concepts while relating them to Western societies. Debord, who was at the origin of a short-lived political and philosophical movement called the "Situationist International", understood society as the division between the passive subject who consumes

Left Page: Sarah Morris "Pools - Bel Aire (Miami)" 2003 - Household Paint on Canvas. Right Page: Sarah Morris "Pools - Fontainebleau II (Miami)" 2003 - Household Paint on Canvas / Sarah Morris "Conde Nast (Midtown)" 1999 - Household Paint on Canvas / Sarah Morris "Los Angeles" 2005 - 35mm DVD Film Still Copyright by Parallax 2004 / All Images Courtesy of Sarah Morris and Air de Paris (Paris)



**BORN IN 1967,
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the spectacle and the spectacle itself. However pleasant and attractive they may be, Morris' works are nevertheless preoccupied with the power of the image and illusion. Lurking beneath the surface of her precise, beautiful compositions is a challenge to the viewer to reconsider the iconic structure (or structures) pictured.

Morris' interest in spectacle is best illustrated in her 2004 film, *Los Angeles*, which deals with Hollywood and celebrity culture. The film takes a behind-the-scenes look at the film industry while presenting its leaders in action. Images of actresses walking down the red carpet in fancy gowns seem to emphasize the transient and artificial nature of Tinseltown, while branded

designer goods punctuate the film's highly fetishized vision of contemporary life. Are the stars themselves not the ultimate commodities in Western culture? Are they becoming part of the urban landscape and therefore reduced to mere objects? Or are they key signs within capitalism that are flaunted and worshipped? Morris' work might reject overt didacticism, but she nevertheless identifies key ambiguities, raising issues around our notions of the urban environment and the "everyday". Like Mondrian, Morris encourages us, through juxtaposition, geometry and abstraction, to reconsider what is familiar.

Sarah Morris will have a solo exhibition opening at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, Switzerland, from May 29.