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Urban Explorer

Looking hard at architecture, painter and filmmaker Sarah Morris finds a host of questions and contradictions

Text by Julie L. Belcove/Artwork Courtesy of the Artist
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Portrait by Christopher Sturman

To make her series of impressionistic films exploring modern metropolises from Washington, D.C., to Los Angeles to Beijing, [Sarah Morris](#) has wheedled her way into some pretty unusual places—including President Clinton’s Cabinet Room and Fermilab’s massive particle accelerator outside Chicago—and has charmed the likes of Brad Pitt and Chinese despots into submission. “If you make them feel embarrassed about saying no to the idea of art,” Morris says from her studio in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood one chilly morning, “you can successfully get into any situation.”

Well, almost. While making her latest film, *Chicago*, slated to premiere at Capitain Petzel gallery in Berlin next month, she came up against the Queen of All Media. “Oprah was, I have to say, more difficult to deal with than the Chinese government,” says Morris, who has dark, intelligent eyes and a deep voice. Clearly Winfrey was not compliant. The artist will only hint that she got what she needed.

Morris has forged an international practice encompassing both film and painting. She comes to architecture, her primary subject, less from the aesthetic standpoint one might expect and more from a psychological and political perspective; her work subtly mines architecture’s inextricable links to power—to corporations and governments, not to mention the inevitably enormous egos behind its creation in the first place. She is also curious about what she calls the cinematic qualities of the built world, or “how we read ourselves moving through it, how we read others moving through it.” Her own phobia of public spaces does not inhibit her fascination with how buildings—and even Vegas-style lighting and other distractions—can lure people in. “You see that Chase bank uses this now,” she says. “It looks like a casino as you go into the ATM.”

Her paintings, as well as site-specific installations like one she did at New York City’s Lever House in 2006, are abstract and boldly graphic. After “building” templates of thickly outlined geometric patterns on her computer, Morris plays with colors, plugging in shades of glossy household paints. “It’s actually quite Zen, even though I’m not,” she says of her paint-by-numbers method, which is similar to that of her onetime boss Jeff Koons.

Sometimes Morris’s canvases are inspired by her films—the John Hancock building, featured in *Chicago*, is a jumping-off point for new work—and sometimes not, as with her recent paintings riffing on the brilliantly functional paper clip. “I like choosing a form that’s so everyday, that’s had such a role in bureaucracy,” she says. “It seems very antiquated, but it’s still such a beautiful thing. Before the paper clip [people] used to use pins, but that, of course, became very bloody.”

Morris discovered this factoid during the course of her typically copious research. In preparation for *Points on a Line*, her 2010 film on the intertwined careers of architects Philip Johnson and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Morris delved into the making of Mies’s Farnsworth House and Johnson’s Glass House. She welcomed the chance to study Mies, the modernist master whose decision in 1938 to immigrate to the U.S. from Nazi Germany, she says, “affected the image and the physical reality of America, of how our country looks, how corporations are built, what public space looks like.” Johnson and Mies’s professional relationship—which Morris compares with that of curator and artist, or student and mentor—also provided rich fodder.

Like most of her films, *Points on a Line* is dialogue-free and plays out in a sequence of exquisitely framed, nearly still images and abbreviated action: the wall-to-wall curtains being drawn at Farnsworth; aging businessmen lunching at Manhattan’s Four Seasons restaurant, which is a Johnson interior in a Mies building. (Artist Liam Gillick, Morris’s husband, composed the music in segments, which she then arranged into a soundtrack, as is their routine.) While clearly enamored of Mies, Morris is ambivalent about Johnson. “It was interesting to me how many people don’t view him as a serious architect,” she says. “He is in some ways a more interesting character than Mies. More compromised, less talented, but maybe more interesting.”

Combing the mainstream for material may be Morris’s forte, but she has no interest in joining it. She has turned down Hollywood offers: “The little I understand about it slightly scares me.” And horror films aren’t her thing.

[Click here to see an extended slide show of Sarah Morris’s work.](#)