

# Art issues.

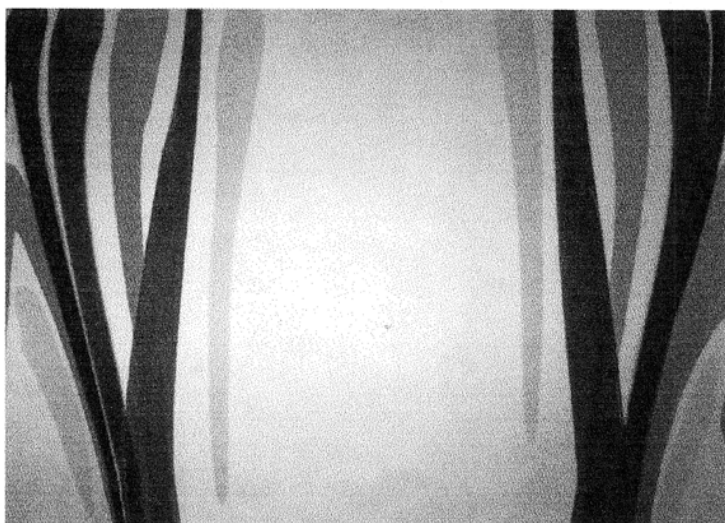
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Looking at Morris Louis's paintings is like standing on a road: Coming from one place and going to another, what you know of the road is the ground in view and under your feet. For Louis, liquid, ground, and the body were equal elements. In six large paintings from 1958-1962, they tug at each other, causing viewers to regard his paintings in at least three different ways: traditionally (as windows onto another world); Modernist (as flat surfaces that his generation grappled with); and performative (as lifesize litmus tests that make visible the painter's body and the forces of gravity, liquidity, absorption, and evaporation that surround it at a particular point in time).

*Lambda II* (1960) triggers all these ways of looking. Bright blobby vectors of acrylic flow into an expanse of raw canvas, forming a giant "v" that has the uneven symmetry of a human face. The yellow rivulet stands alone; the translucent blue

## Morris Louis

at MANNY SILVERMAN, 13 January-28 February



Morris Louis  
*Lambda II*, 1960  
Acrylic resin on canvas  
102 1/2" x 102"  
© 1993 Marcella Louis Brenner

and orange ones overlap but do not mix; and the purple and black ones are cinched in with red and yellow again. The experience is like stepping into a rainbow forest, and it's hard to reconcile what you know about the historic claims made for these paintings and what went into their making: the artist's handling of weighty swathes of unprimed canvas like huge origami over which acrylic flowed freely. Its out-of-the-tube colors and organic geometry have the familiarity of child's play and pop culture.

I must admit that I have never been a fan of Louis's works. Their stylishness too much reminds me of tacky design elements from my childhood in the nineteen seventies. And their expectation of greatness makes seeing them that much more difficult.

(It's like understanding a parent as a person.) Craning my neck to see Louis's canvases bookended by Helen Frankenthaler and Clyfford Still in the gigantic upstairs room of the Lila B. Acheson Contemporary Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art hasn't helped me get a fresh view, either.

But standing inches away from *Seal* (1959), my perspective was much more intimate. The details of sediment caught in the weave of the canvas palpably betray Louis's intention and action on the other side of the looking glass. Threadlike lines of pigment remain where planes of liquid overlapped, soaked in, pooled, and slid off. Like impressions of waves on the sand of the shore, this sediment records motion and time. The gentle lifting of unstretched canvas caused sections of watery moss green, black, and blue to roll across its surface. Large fields of color disintegrate. Tiny rivulets indicate where ultramarine blue quickly ran off, while evenly dispersed areas of black pigment were left by slow evaporation.

*Para IV* (1959) gives me style-shudders, but looking beyond its resemblance to lava lamps and the Macy's bed linen it influenced, the idea of its pictorialism is quite interesting. Jarring skeins of red, yellow, blue, and green are distinct, each soaking in as a dye and recording the activity of its making. Where the skeins overlap (almost dry fire-engine red sucked up a pool of wet-grass green), the resulting color is a mingling of these two colors ( $1+1=2$ ). *Green Shade* (1958), on the other hand, mixes all colors into a monolith wash of indistinct, unnamable color ( $1+1+1+1=1$ ). It is both a colorless drawing in paint and the most colorful painting in the show. All colors are mixed together in the first action—pouring paint in a wide river down the center of the canvas—and washed off with the second. Watery fingers of un-color disperse across a third of the canvas's length. The paint is something of a black hole for color; the word "green" in the title is more distinct than the visual experience of it.

As a group, Louis's paintings invite viewers to reconstruct the activity that went into their construction. Once his canvases are stretched, they become pictures of their own making, indexes of their physical histories. By reading the pictorial clues, a viewer links up with a sequence that begins with the artist and includes actions, forces, and materials. There is radical solitude in these pop ghosts.

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