

## **OPTICALITY AND THE WORK OF MORRIS LOUIS (1912–1962)**

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2007

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>i</i>	Acknowledgements
<i>iii</i>	Introduction      Opticality and the work of Morris Louis (1912–1962)
<b>1</b>	Chapter 1          Situating Morris Louis 1912–1962
<b>21</b>	Chapter 2          Opticality and Abstract Expressionism: 1939–1959
<b>37</b>	Chapter 3          Positioning opticality into the 1960s: Clement Greenberg’s “‘American–Type’ Painting’ (1955–1958)
<b>55</b>	Chapter 4          Situating the text ‘Louis and Noland’ (1960)
<b>72</b>	Chapter 5          Overturning traditional focuses in writing on Morris Louis
<b>90</b>	Conclusion
<b>99</b>	Images Works by Morris Louis
<b>145</b>	Contextual images
<b>168</b>	Morris Louis exhibition history
<b>171</b>	Bibliography Texts on Morris Louis
<b>173</b>	Clement Greenberg
<b>175</b>	Modernist painting

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis owes much to the support and encouragement of many individuals, without whose generous assistance and support it would not have been possible:

Dr. Keith Broadfoot, for offering knowledge and insight into the art historical context of Morris Louis' works, and providing guidance on many issues concerning the day-to-day tasks involved in writing this thesis; Adrian, for companionship and support, insightful discussions on Louis' work, and reiterating the value of pursuing the things that we consider important; to family and friends for ongoing encouragement; Kate and Heather for advice, support and editing assistance; The University of Sydney, for a travel grant to visit New York, Washington D.C. and London to view works by Louis in major international collections in 2002; and colleagues at the Queensland Art Gallery for discussions about Louis' work.

The work of Diane Upright has provided the most valuable information on Louis, his lifetime and works produced from the 1930s until Louis' death in 1962. This has resulted in not only a comprehensive biographical, but also interpretive insights into Louis' working methods, which has consequently opened the possibility to investigate many of Louis' lesser known works. Thanks to Diane for initiating research on Louis, for discussing his work with me, and for supporting new generations of research.

I am thankful to Marcella Louis Brenner for her generous hospitality and the unique opportunity she provided me to gain insight into Louis as an individual, as well as an artist, in 2002.

Finally, thank you to the many collections, curatorial and library staff at various art museums in Australia and internationally for assisting with the organisation of viewings of Louis' works and providing access to research material, which has been valuable.

INTRODUCTION

**OPTICALITY AND THE WORK OF MORRIS LOUIS (1912–1962)**

The following study of the work of North American artist Morris Louis (1912–1962) aims to review aspects of the artist’s work in relation to the interpretation of his paintings by major critics such as Clement Greenberg (1909–1994). This aims to provide a view of Louis’ work that takes up the many different sides of his production rather than a single view, which is often adhered to in the mainstream literature on the artist. The period of the mid–1950s to the early 1960s in which Louis produced many of his mature works, coincided with some of the most significant changes in modern art to have occurred in the United States to that point. During this period, Clement Greenberg was focusing on gaining support for new styles of painting that broke with Abstract Expressionism, which had been the dominant style of American art since about 1945. Greenberg thought Louis’ paintings to be indicative of a possible new direction in modernist painting following their initial meeting in 1953. He advocated Louis’ work in print from May 1960 and after the artist died in September 1962.

The subsequent history developed around Louis’ life and works has been difficult to disengage from the reasons behind Greenberg’s support of Louis’ work. Specifically the critic used Louis’ work to support a movement away from the gestural ‘painterly abstraction’ of the Abstract Expressionist period of the 1950s to a new style of geometric abstraction, or ‘post–painterly’ abstraction of the 1960s. This later style is often brought together under the banner of ‘Colourfield’ painting to show links with the ‘field’ artists or precursors of the first period, such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, whose works were less gestural than others from the period, such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Interestingly, Louis’ works have been rarely discussed amongst the original group of ‘gestural’ or ‘expressionist’ painters. His first recognised series, the ‘Veil’ paintings of 1954, became linked to the all-over ‘colourfield’ paintings of the 1960s, despite the fact that many of his works from this series and others throughout his career engaged with ideas of gesture and expression intrinsically linked with the abstract expressionist era. Louis was also a similar age to the American abstractionists such as Pollock (1912–1956), and Clyfford Still (1904–1980) and produced most of his works in a period comparative with the first generation. Therefore, as Louis’ works were increasingly written about to signal new styles of abstraction, certain of his works were precluded from analysis and criticism. This has undoubtedly affected the major perception of Louis’ works amongst scholars and viewers, which has often been reaffirmed through exhibitions of Louis’ works

that follow the established narratives on his artistic influences and production of a certain style of abstraction.

This thesis aims to explore some of the influencing factors that contributed to the established discussion of his work up to the present. Secondly, it aims to provide some context for considering a broader view of Louis' work that encompasses ideas other than the major perception of Louis' paintings as a signal of post-painterly abstraction. The introductory chapter provides the context of Louis' development as an artist from the early 1930s, to the major biographical moments in his career and the details of Louis' long-term involvement with Clement Greenberg from the early 1950s until the artist's death in 1962. An important purpose of this introduction is to raise discussion of aspects of Louis' work that have been generally overlooked from his developmental period. Specifically, lesser-known aspects of Louis' career such as the drawings produced on the cusp of his mature painting from the late 1940s to the early 1950s, provide an important context for his later paintings. There are over 500 existing drawings that signal certain tendencies in Louis' later works, however these are rarely discussed in the context of his major work. When discussed, the majority of texts dismiss Louis' graphic work or use it to signal the major change that his work underwent when he embarked upon his new 'stain' painting style in 1954. This chapter also briefly outlines Louis' exhibition history to illustrate the types of works that were privileged over others, and the effects of this upon the general perception of Louis' achievements and his artistic aims.

Chapter Two begins to investigate the theoretical discussions on Louis' work that developed throughout the 1940s and 1950s, creating the foundations for the major interpretations of his works in the 1960s. Critic Clement Greenberg began to publish essays on the emergence and significance of a culture for abstract painting in the United States from the late 1930s, such as 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939). Abstract painting developed in the United States during the period of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Surrounding these events, the activity of art was largely related to the dominant social issues. The federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) art projects that flourished throughout the country provided important support for visual artists, and also guided the style of works that were produced in artists' individual practices. This resulted in social realist painting as a dominant style during

the period. Within this context, The Museum of Modern Art opened in New York in 1929 and provided access to the work of European modernist painters. An influx of artists from Europe came to live in New York during the war period, some of which joined or were associated with the American Abstract Artists group (AAA), which was established in 1936. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Greenberg's writing explored the development of abstraction through focusing on the significance of elements of abstract painting such as flatness, colour, and scale.

By the mid-1950s, as American abstraction was increasingly more accepted as part of the culture of the period, these elements became used in Greenberg's writing in such a way as to focus on the quality of the work being produced at the time. This period is explored in Chapter Three, and is specifically related to the revisions that Greenberg made to his 1955 text "'American-Type' Painting' in 1958, to be included in his book of collected essays, *Art and Culture* (1961). At this time, Greenberg's writing strongly developed what we might term the critic's 'theory' of 'opticality'. His revision of "'American-Type' Painting' revealed that his suggestion of the imminent decline of the 'Abstract Expressionist' period was related to the evolution of his theory of opticality. As such, the revised text put an increased focus on the issues of quality, flatness and colour, and explored these issues through alternative artists, such as Barnett Newman, over the major artists of the period, Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. At this time, the role of 'technique' in abstract painting became distanced from the 'gestural' style of Abstract Expressionist painting, and reoriented towards flatness through Greenberg's suggestions that a more 'disembodied' technique, or what was termed 'field' painting, enabled a more pure engagement with the roles of flatness, colour and scale.

Clement Greenberg came into contact with the work of Morris Louis during the period in which his theory of opticality was undergoing major development, including Greenberg's decision to reassess the work of artists that he once proposed as leaders of the American abstract movement. The two met in 1953 through Louis' colleague and friend Kenneth Noland. Chapter Four takes up a discussion of Louis career during the period 1953 to 1960, in which he created the first of his major series of paintings, the 'Veils' (1954). This is situated alongside Greenberg's reassessment of the role of opticality in abstract painting through his texts such as "'American-Type"

Painting'. The period culminated in the publication of Greenberg's major essay 'Louis and Noland' in 1960, which was to be the only significant piece of writing on Louis during his lifetime. The text was also important in strengthening Greenberg's move away from the gestural abstraction of the Abstract Expressionist era, and proposing the importance of 'optical' painting. As Louis' paintings were related specifically to these major changes occurring in Greenberg's work, his works have subsequently been linked with Greenberg's theories. Louis' died in 1962, and with 'Louis and Noland' as the only authoritative account of the development of his work, many of the narratives surrounding Louis' works have continued to influence our perception of his style as related to the major themes in Greenberg's writing. Greenberg proposed that Louis' work provided a standard of quality for other artists of the new generation of 1960s' abstract painting.

Several major features of Louis' works attracted Greenberg's interest, particularly Louis' engagement with colour and scale, and his technique of 'staining' pigment into his canvases. Consequently, only those aspects of Louis' works that conformed with Greenberg's view of opticality were included in 'Louis and Noland' in 1960. The elements of Louis' body of work that were overlooked at this time have remained under-explored in the key texts on Louis that have been published by major critics such as Michael Fried in the decades since. We find that the decision to not focus on certain aspects of Louis' body of work was related to moments in Louis' mature career when he engaged with 'expression' or 'gesture'. This suggestion confronts some of the longstanding ideas about Louis' 'opticality'.

Chapter Five examines some of the ramifications of Greenberg's focus on the aspect of the 'disembodied' nature of Louis' stain painting technique. It is proposed that this was a deliberate focus by Greenberg in order to confirm his suggestions of Louis' relationship to opticality. When we look at a broader view of Louis' body of work, beyond the major series, we see that there were elements of his work that confronted the suggestion of 'disembodied opticality' and therefore the positioning of Louis as an artist of the 1960s generation. When these works are considered alongside Louis' major series, many issues are raised, including how Louis' work links not only with 'field' painting, but also the integral nature of 'expression' in his paintings. This suggests that there are numerous ways of exploring Louis' work that link suggestions



of gesture and expression. This chapter elaborates upon some of the issues raised in Chapter One concerning privileging of certain aspects of Louis' paintings over others, which raises the crucial question of how we can begin to create a wider understanding of Louis' entire body of work through understanding the effects of the critical attention focused upon his paintings in the 1960s.

The final chapter aims to incorporate the discussion points raised throughout the thesis to examine Louis' two series of 'Veil' paintings, from 1954 and 1958–59. It takes up some of the themes of 'gesture', 'expression' and 'repetition' in Louis' work to analyse works from the 'Veils', which are considered amongst Louis' most famous series. Louis produced this series in two stages: a small series of sixteen paintings in 1954 and a larger series of 'Veils' from 1958–59 that comprised over 100 works. This chapter attempts to illustrate different ways that we can add to our appreciation of Louis' major works by looking at aspects provided by his lesser-known works and integrating these with his major series. The text aims to not only discuss the major works and ideas that are accepted in our view of Morris Louis' work, but also those which seemed to counteract the major philosophies that his works were explored in the 1960s, but also those which seem to counteract the major philosophies through which his works were explored in the 1960s.

## **PUBLICATIONS AND EXHIBITIONS**

As Morris Louis was well known through his personal link to Clement Greenberg, when new styles such as conceptual art and minimalist sculpture confronted Greenberg's significance in the mid-to-late 1960s, despite the already-established reputation that Louis been granted in art historical terms, very few essays explored the significance of Louis' work from the 1950s or earlier. Sales of his works dropped significantly, and exhibitions began to confirm some of the most misleading aspects of Louis' concerns that were established in the decades earlier.

Michael Fried's *Morris Louis* (1970), which was based upon his introduction to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts exhibition in 1967, followed many of Greenberg's ideas such as the narrative surrounding Louis 'breakthrough' with his first 'Veils' series in

1954 and the impact of New York painting on his work in the mid-1950s. Following Greenberg, Fried did not illustrate any of Louis' so-called 'gestural paintings' that he produced from 1955 to 1957, as they did not fit with the viewpoint made popular by Greenberg about Louis' 'colourfield' interests. Only in the late 1970s and 1980s, with more large-scale exhibitions and in-depth study into Louis' works did diverse interpretations of Louis' concerns occur in the criticism on Morris Louis. John Elderfield's major catalogue *Morris Louis* was published in conjunction with the retrospective held at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1986 and it explored some new connections between Louis' works and major art movements of the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Extensive research into the artist's work resulted in other publications such as Diane Upright's *The Drawings of Morris Louis* (1979), which studied the works on paper Louis produced throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Upright also produced *Morris Louis: The Complete Paintings* (1985), a catalogue raisonné on the artist's work from the 1930s to 1962.<sup>2</sup> These interpretations coincided with the termination of Greenberg's role as the advisor to the Morris Louis estate in 1970.<sup>3</sup>

## INTERPRETING MORRIS LOUIS TODAY

Only recently has there been a gradual upsurge in interest in Louis' work and re-evaluation of his significance through exhibitions and gallery dealings of Louis' work. Paul Kasmin gallery in New York's Chelsea district and Riva Yares Gallery have staged exhibitions of Louis' works and currently promote his work along with that by contemporary artists such as Nancy Rubins, David Hockney and Kenny Scharf.<sup>4</sup> In 2004, the Riva Yares Gallery re-staged a major exhibition of Louis' works originally curated by Greenberg at the French and Company gallery New York in 1960 and re-acquainted audiences with the works and approaches to Louis' work.<sup>5</sup> This recent interest in Louis' works has coincided with increased attention towards Louis' paintings at auction.<sup>6</sup> The Christie's New York Post-War and Contemporary Art department auction in December 2002 featured an *Untitled* work from Louis' 'Floral' series of 1959-60<sup>7</sup> (**Image L-33**), a sub-series created by Louis in-between two of his major series, the late 'Veils' and the 'Unfurled' series. This series experimented with the 'veil' technique in a more experimental and expressionist

manner. The *Untitled* work from the series reached the price of US\$1,659,500, which was well above the US\$900,000 estimate. In 2006, two works by Louis gained high prices at auction: A 'Floral' painting of 1959–60<sup>8</sup> (**Image L-34**) achieved a record price for painting by Louis (US\$1,808,000, with an estimate of US\$900,000), and the 'Stripe' painting *Bellatrix* (1961) (**Image L-40**) sold for US\$1,360,000 (estimated US\$700,000 – US\$900,000).<sup>9</sup>

With significant changes to the reception of Louis' work possibly emerging, it could be suggested that it is a suitable time to contextualise some of the misgivings about Louis' work that have existed since the 1960s. New interpretations of Louis' works are possible through exhibitions such as the High Museum of Art Atlanta retrospective exhibition in late 2006, which provides the opportunity for many new interpretations of Louis' works to emerge in relation to contemporary abstract painting. This exhibition is the first retrospective of Louis' works in twenty years since The Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Morris Louis* in 1986. The discussion that follows throughout this thesis pays particular attention to the period in which the major perceptions of Louis' works were developed in the critical writing of Clement Greenberg and subsequent critics. This aims to provide various perspectives on Louis' work in order to engage with the potential renewed interest in this artist's work.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> John Elderfield, *Morris Louis*, exh. cat [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1986]. Elderfield says that Louis' '1953 paintings are not, in fact, wholly discontinuous with those made before Louis saw *Mountains and Sea* and [...] they do not completely repudiate the underlying assumptions of the earlier work.' (15). He also suggests that Louis' experience of the painting actually enabled him to discover the work of other artists, primarily Matisse, which provided relevance for his own style (13).

<sup>2</sup> Diane Upright's work seeks to initiate a broader understanding of Louis' emergence. She states that critics sight the increased scale, colour and stain technique as indicative of Louis' breakthrough in the 1954 'Veils', and attach his work to Frankenthaler's, however, each of these elements emerged during 1953, prior to the 'Veils'. See Diane Upright Headley, 'In Addition to the Veils', *Art in America*, vol. 66, no.1 [Jan–Feb 1978] 84–94.

<sup>3</sup> See Florence Rubenfeld, *Clement Greenberg: A Life* [New York: Scribner, 1997], particularly Chapter 16: 'Imperial Clem' (276–278) on the events leading to Greenberg's termination as advisor to the Morris Louis Estate.

<sup>4</sup> *Morris Louis: Major Paintings 1953–1962* [Scottsdale: Riva Yares Gallery, 31 March–19 May 2001; Santa Fe: 17 Aug–21 Sep 2001].

<sup>5</sup> *Morris Louis: 2004: The French & Co. Show of 1960* [Santa Fe: Riva Yares Gallery, 13 Aug–27 Sep 2004; Scottsdale: 6 Nov–27 Dec 2004].

<sup>6</sup> The sales of Louis' paintings were also slow to happen – it was only after 1958 that Louis made significant sales to those beyond his family and friends. In many cases, the sizes of Louis' paintings restricted the possibilities for sales. Following the 1960s, sales again gradually decreased, particularly for Louis' large-scale works. Diane Upright, in conversation with the author, New York, 6 Nov 2002. See also Diane Upright, 'Introduction: The Emergence of Morris Louis', in *Morris Louis – the Complete Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985] 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Untitled*, 1959–60, Magna on canvas, 251.5 x 359.4cm. Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, cat. no. 279, p.215, ill. 158. This work was exhibited in 1965 and 1971 at the time of publication.

<sup>8</sup> *Floral V*, 1959–60, Magna on canvas, 274.3 x 365.8cm. Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, cat. no. 271, p.214, ill. 157. This work had not been

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exhibited at the time of publication of Upright's catalogue raisonné. Auction: Christie's New York. Post War and Contemporary Art Evening Sale, 15 November 2006 (lot.42).

<sup>9</sup> *Bellatrix*, 1961, Magna on canvas, 217.8 x 177.8cm. Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, cat. no. 426, p.226, ill. 172. Auction: Christie's New York. Post War and Contemporary Art Evening Sale, 9 May 2006 (lot.53).