

# SIMON MORLEY AND THE PERFECT WHYTE

by

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A catalogue essay, such as this one, is usually a eulogy. Simon Morley is a suavely able, intelligent artist, whose works are paradigms of painterly sophistication. I myself am clever and erudite. The Percy Miller Gallery is an exceptionally advanced centre of artistic excellence. And you, the reader, are not bad looking yourself. Were anyone to dispute these truths, they might reasonably be assumed to be either a grunting cretin, or one of the commonly embittered persons of the art world - jealous and vengeful - whose opinions may be safely disregarded.

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Whyte lead ground with Nutt oyle maketh a perfect Whyte. Edward Norgate, *Miniatura, or the Art of Limning* (1650)

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I once read a description, in a natural history book, of the hunting technique of the polar bear. Flattening and hiding its white coat against the white of the snow, the bear seeks to sneak up on its preferred prey, the seal, but is given away by the black of its nose. The book described how, to overcome this, bears would advance on three paws, carefully placing their fourth paw over their nose - the seals now defeated by this clever strategy.

I have described this to others. However, to my surprise, no one has ever believed me, thinking I have invented the information as an entertainment. Look out behind you! Look out behind you!

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As an ill educated person might audibly mumble the sounds of words as they read them, making them appear less intelligent than they actually are, so a critic mumbles the sounds of a picture as they respond to that which is signified. Which means it is a mystery why critics often appear more intelligent than they actually are. Personally, I love to consider my own importance, in being favoured to discuss paintings that are as white and

intellectually elegant as Morley's are.

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In his work, Morley silkily conjoins a number of disparate elements. The regular rhythm of his evenly sized paintings and their impeccable whiteness is in some sense a paen to modernist principle, especially minimalism, but this is richly contradicted by his choice of George Orwell as subject. By his fastidious collecting and crafted facsimile copying of the title page texts of this author's books, Morley summons a particularly English intelligence and intellectual tradition, which is that of a virtuous moral justice and humility. It is a tradition of ideas rather than artistic form - not a tradition of the artistic perfections we see in Henry James, say - and is necessarily untidy and often inelegant. In this sense, Morley's stylistic fusions might be overly comic, were it not for the formal perfectionism of his practice.

A further fusion occurs as a consequence of Morley's restricted palette of whites and off-whites. This weakens the involuntary compulsion to distinguish the visual field into figure and ground, the physiological stimulus causing a loss of differentiation, and so causing a temporary dissolution of a precise, stable picture plane. The consequence of this is an insubstantiality, an apparent blankness, which induces a kind of dream perception. Reduced to this critical threshold, a sort of meditative union occurs, leading to a mystic orison comprising the modernism already mentioned, as well as elements of aggrandising socialism and capitalism, Englishness, poverty, social issues, painterliness, and even a little religious holiness. Which is not bad for a show that looks like a lot of blank canvases when you walk in the door.

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Morley is a learned scribe of high rank. He is an upholder of a great ceremonial tradition and interpreter of artistic law; a professional scrivener and a faithful copyist of classical works. His is a monastic calling, in which he serves his Christendom well; a scrupulous project requiring a scrupulous, humble subject to execute it.

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School teachers: either smelly young Marxists with bits of breakfast egg yolk in their beards, or smelly old Tories with bits of breakfast egg yolk in their beards. And that's just the women. So how is one to relate Orwell, for a while himself a teacher, to this unlovely tradition? It occurs to me that the answer must be, in the first instance, their common wearing of coarse

woven clothes, usually of olive, leaden, or other fuscous colouring. Thereafter, institutionalism, or a theoretical interest or enthusiasm for it, would seem to be their shared commonality; Orwell is someone I think of as having an exquisite awareness of the dread corridor smell of cold cabbage. Which is not to say that he sought a compensation for this in the more enjoyably sensual, and in fact manifests a strong fear of bodily physicality or other kinds of sensuality. So thank God for Elizabeth David, with whom his books should ideally be read in strict alternation - preferably in the identically sized Penguin editions. Orwell's principle communication is of horrible - beastly - privation and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, especially, is an acutely defeatist work in this respect. It would be interesting to consider the book that Orwell would have written had it been him instead of Huxley - another of Morley's subjects - who fucked around with mescaline, and suffered the plenitude of hallucination that Huxley describes.

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It is difficult to read a catalogue essay about the contemporary fine arts which does not gain stature by invoking the name of - a usually French - philosopher. I do so here for readers who prefer this: Bataille, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard. I would also mention the psychoanalysis of Lacan and, as it is prudent to do so, the German philosophers Hegel, Heidegger, Kant, and, probably, Nietzsche.

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The following list is offered in the context of Simon Morley's work; neither oppositionally, nor as an alternative to those names above, but simply as some kind of a furtherance of possible understanding: William James, Brahms, Iggy Pop, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, The Flaming Groovies, Meister Eckhart, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, U-Roy, Zen Buddhism, Jesus of Nazareth, the anonymous author of '*The Cloud of Unknowing*,' Lao Tzu, Subway Sect, Nelson Mandela, John Coltrane, Plato, and Joy Division.

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Before I told him what the colours were . . . I asked him, which of the two whites were best? Newton, *Optics* (1721)

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There is a great deal to be said about white.<sup>1</sup> It is the colour of cocaine, probably the biggest single influence on contemporary art practice over the last fifteen years, exceeding even that of alcohol, cigarettes, and Michael Craig-Martin. It is the colour of the polar bear, who we have already mentioned in relation to Simon Morley's work, and about whose hunting technique nobody will believe me. It is what identifies the great wonder of leucopathic albinism which, when it occurs in people who would otherwise be darkly pigmented, prompts the exclamation 'Look! There's a white black person!' It is the colour of semen - at least on a good day - as well as of breastmilk, leucorrhoea and sputum. It is also the colour of the habit of certain ecclesiastical orders; I once spent an enjoyable hour or so in the area of the Rotterdam railway station, watching from the high vantage point of a restaurant the many pallid junkie faces below, bargaining their wares. A monk or friar circulated amongst these skeletons, conspicuous in his impeccable white hooded habit with matching drawstring and sandals, offering service of some kind of voluntary welfare provision. I could not fail to observe that the monk was wearing his white habit like a superhero, swirling it in a style of mannered affectation, and thoroughly enjoying the camp effect. Suddenly, he fell into a dispute and imperiously stormed out, forcefully parting a way through the supplicating black-clad junkies, like a white Brancusi sculpture scattering crows.

Finally, passing over the lead and titanium whites, blank paper, salt, sugar and choirboys, white is a recognising definer of hallucinatory vision, which is sometimes holy. Of the many whites invoked by Morley's work - whites not necessarily included in those mentioned above, of course - it is the holy whites that require the greatest sensitivity in their discussion. But it is exactly this sensitivity to symbolic purity that eludes me, and which requires I bring this short text to a close, here.

<sup>1</sup> For example, David Batchelor has made some interesting observations about white recently, in his book *Chromophobia*. (Reaktion Books, 2000)

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