

BROOKLYN RAIL

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Adrian Morris, Essex Street, New York
By Brian T. Leahy



Adrian Morris, *Bunkhouse*, c. 1985. Oil on board, 35 7/8 × 42 1/8 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Adrian Morris and Essex Street / Maxwell Graham, New York, and Galerie Neu Berlin

One of the last paintings I saw in person before New York’s stay-at-home order took effect on March 22 was Adrian Morris’s *Bunkhouse* (c. 1985). It portrays a spare gray room, illuminated only by four small windows inset high on a white wall. Two racks restate the chamber’s strict geometry. Ahead, a metal frame bolted to the wall offers sleeping platforms with meager, skinny mattresses; on the left, more bunks are neatly tucked below a darkened storage shelf.

This was one of 10 paintings included in the British painter’s posthumous show at Essex Street, his first in the United States. Each wall of the main gallery focused on one type of architectural threshold. The paintings to the left of the entrance depicted windows, complete with casings and mullions. In each composition, Morris sets the opening askew. In *Windows* (c. 1990), the combination of thinly painted architectural details with the dense, sedimented white of the wall makes the scene dreamlike; a blue-gray horizon seen through the open portal heightens the ethereal feeling. Across from the gallery’s door were two paintings fixated on sills, including *Window Ledge II* (c. 1997), a voyeuristic, off-kilter view into a shadowy interior. Images of entryways anchored the right wall, including *Doorway* (c. 1987), which sets a peach-tinted hatch within a rectangular field of dark pigment restating the painting’s edge, one of Morris’s signature compositional devices. *Bunkhouse* hung alone.

Criticism is a poor home for the confessional mode. But you’ll forgive me, I hope, if I tell you that the small room *Bunkhouse* portrays—with its slack, interior air—has been much on my mind the last few weeks. This painting, as well as the show’s two other outliers—*Compound* (c. 1998) and *Ambulance Truck* (c. 1994)—have become repetitive features of my mental slideshow, arising as I scroll through images of hospitals and emergency quarantine centers or when I see the cramped spaces of friends’ apartments squished into the small virtual box of a video conference. In Morris’s paintings, “hope and dread go hand in hand,” the painter Merlin James tells us in the April-May issue of *Mousse Magazine*. But it is the dread that has felt most vivid recently; the way a painting like *Ambulance Truck*, with its two foreshortened cots pointing towards a limitless horizon, implies the pain of loss that has occurred already and will occur again.



Adrian Morris, *Compound*, c. 1998. Oil on board, 35 7/8 × 41 7/8 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Adrian Morris and Essex Street / Maxwell Graham, New York, and Galerie Neu Berlin.

Thresholds define our world now. Yet Morris could not have foreseen the particular connotations these images bear in the current crisis. Educated at the Putney School, a progressive boarding school in Vermont, the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris, and the Royal Academy in his native London, Morris was no outsider. But after his professional apogee, a substantial presentation of his work at the 1978 Hayward Annual, a mixture of his own reticence and the shifting moods of the art world ensured his paintings were never again exhibited during his lifetime. Nevertheless, Morris painted constantly, reworking images over many years.

Since his passing in 2004, Morris's paintings have found new audiences, largely thanks to James, the painter Carol Rhodes, and a handful of adventurous European curators and dealers. Maxwell Graham, the founder of Essex Street, adds his name to that list with this presentation, providing a tantalizing introduction to the artist for North American viewers. Even still, Morris's work fits uneasily within the current painterly ecosystem; his images feel as untimely today as they must have in the 1970s. Artists who do not quite fit the critical narratives of their era are not unusual—indeed, they are what make art historical work meaningful. But Morris's paintings seem peculiarly hard to pin down, harmonizing and clashing in equal measure with the early 20th-century surrealisms of Tanguy and Giorgio de Chirico and the complex realisms of his contemporaries such as Sylvia Plimack Mangold and Vija Celmins. Even in 1978, critic Sarah Kent wrote that “Adrian Morris's work cannot easily be located in contemporary art,” a statement that still rings true.

Morris's paintings are timely precisely because of this untimeliness. Our current moment is one of temporal disjointedness: the slowing of everyday life and the economic machinery that powers American society has produced a bizarre situation. Clock time no longer corresponds to the lived experience of crisis; emergencies abut interminable periods of waiting. This is the situation Morris's work enacts: a process of living in constrained space through distended time. One final work, a small drawing from 1969, hung next to the gallery entrance. It is a sheet of studies for a painting of a window with a crank handle. In one version, the window is shut tightly, a lone building visible in the distance. In the other, the window is cracked open. Morris's laconic images provide a means to encounter the complexities of time, space, and mourning in our current crisis. For a different viewer, in a different time, they might also signal the promise crossing thresholds can hold.

Contributor

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