

# ARTFORUM

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Adrian Morris, ESSEX STREET, New York

By Chloe Wyma



Adrian Morris, *Bunkhouse*, ca. 1985, oil on board, 35 7/8 × 42 1/8".

Three paintings of mullioned windows, precisely rendered but curiously off-kilter, hung in a row at Essex Street as part of the late British artist Adrian Morris's first solo exhibition in the United States. Behind the imaginary glass there was nothing to see but a dim gray haze. The modernist grid and the Symbolist window (the former, per Rosalind Krauss's influential reading, a traumatic displacement of the latter) were here collapsed, their metaphysics stunted by the opaque, abortive view. In *Window Ledge II* and *Window Sill II*, both ca. 1997, fenestration was party to a ruthless abstraction of architectural space, with apertures giving way to implacable corners and unfathomable cavities. Their indeterminacy is reminiscent of Henri Matisse's most recalcitrant, radically unresolved views of Paris and Tangier, their hardness a reminder of Georgia O'Keeffe's anti-picturesque renditions of her adobe house. Even the titular thresholds of *Open Doorway*, ca. 1989, and *Doorway*, ca. 1987, read as impasses.

In *Compound*, ca. 1998, a Brutalist arcade looks out onto a sandy quad bounded by shed- and barracks-like structures, their windows once again grayed out. The canted perspective and astringent Mediterraneanism suggest a reformation of Giorgio de Chirico's sun-scorched piazzas, which a teenage Morris had admired at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in New York. The son of an Anglican curate, Morris was born in London in 1929 and lived in the United States during World War II. He became a late convert to Surrealism, thereafter spending decades painting sere wastelands and purgatorial enclosures on grainy, gessoed surfaces with a bruise-colored palette. Sometimes these works evoke catastrophic scenarios, as in *Ambulance Truck*, ca. 1994, which features an empty hospital wagon navigating the desert, or regimes of social control, as in *Bunkhouse*, ca. 1985, which depicts a spartan interior appointed with wafer-thin mattresses and institutional metal furniture.

Though Morris worked in his studio nearly every day of his adult life until his death in 2004, he made fewer than one hundred paintings. He had only one solo exhibition during his lifetime, in 1955, and later participated in a small handful of group shows. Reviewing one of these in 1978, Adrian Searle tempered his praise of the artist's "emphatically concrete" facture with a caveat about his subject matter, which, the critic worried, bordered dangerously close to a "stereotyped imagism," one that could easily give way to clichés of alienation and melancholia.

If Morris's evacuated landscapes and foreclosed views, as Searle wrote forty-two years ago, led us to "infer a somehow sacrosanct 'humanist' or 'Existential' content," today they seem almost too resonant with the vacant street I see from my apartment window, the blanketing stillness perforated by ambulance sirens, and the atmosphere of a world hollowed out. This reading—sentimental, ahistorical, unavoidable—is compounded by the flat interface of my computer screen (another window), which so efficiently exchanges substance for appearance, objecthood for representation. Morris labored over his work for years and rarely let anyone, with the exception of his wife, into his studio. It feels obscene, maybe even fraudulent, to write about this private, intense art at such a remove. But this impoverished mode of spectatorship also heightens the contradictions that give Morris's work its tensile charge, poised between repellent surface and seductive illusion, dense matter and mythic image—between the "desire to create a world in one's work in which one could live" (as the artist wrote in 1981) and the knowledge that living there, or anywhere else, means living with distance, mediation, and displacement. As the artist once put it, "We necessarily experience the world through our bodies, we have as it were a view from a house of blood."

— *Chloe Wyma*