

# CHARLIE SMITH london Ltd.

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United Kingdom

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direct@charliesmithlondon.com  
www.charliesmithlondon.com

Wed-Sat 11am-6pm or by appointment

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## ALEX GENE MORRISON

### Dark Matter

Private View

Thursday September 2<sup>nd</sup> 6.30pm–8.30pm

Exhibition Dates

Friday September 3<sup>rd</sup> – Saturday October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010

Gallery Hours

Wednesday–Saturday 11am–6pm or by appointment

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CHARLIE SMITH london is delighted to present Alex Gene Morrison with his first London one person show since 2006.

In this new collection Morrison employs a highly personalised language in order to engage with a universal cosmology. Suspended delicately between representation and abstraction, forms advance and recede to suggest an outer worldliness that is somehow beyond and even pre or post human. Morrison creates an inter-dimensional realm that is at times enticing and other times foreboding. Complimentary and subtle colour combinations might project stillness and harmony whilst abrasive, electric codes suggest the clinical, infirm or incubatory.

But whilst Morrison maintains a stance of implication and illusiveness he still affirms a sapient presence by means of absence or in suggesting transitory movement. A stone slab in an empty room tells us that something was once here, most likely extinguished, and warns of an ultimate finality. Portals, gateways or corridors convey a journey, a point of crossing over from one state to another. Human or sentient beings were or are present in primitive or futuristic form.

Whilst nodding towards now retro futuristic film such as Stanley Kubrick's '2001: A Space Odyssey' or Franklin J. Schaffner's 'Planet of the Apes', both of 1968, Morrison also references 20<sup>th</sup> century abstract painting. Glimpses of Kazimir Malevich, Ad Reinhardt or Peter Halley can be traced in Morrison's layering of form and colour. There is an acute awareness of the materiality of paint where subtle shifts in tone, texture and direction of application combine to create spatial and perspectival shifts; and underpainting and repainting bring our attention to the built surface. An inquiry into the equivocal, therefore, is underpinned by a rigorous investigation into paint itself.

Please contact gallery for images and further information

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### Biographical:

Born: 1975

Education: 2000 – 2002: MA in Painting, Royal College of Art; 1997 – 2000: BA (Hons) in Fine Art, City and Guilds of London Art School

Selected Exhibitions: 2010: The Term "Reality", Paul Stolper, London; New British Painting, Gallery Kalhama & Piippo Contemporary, Helsinki; 2009: The Future Can Wait, Old Truman Brewery, London; 2008: John Moores Contemporary Painting Prize 25, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; 2007: Adrift (one person), The Fishmarket, Northampton; Nature and Society, Dubrovnik Museums, Croatia; 2006: Vile Lure (one person), Rockwell Gallery, London; Artists Choice, Leisure Club Mogadishni, Copenhagen; 2005: Maji Jabii!! Fucking Brilliant!!, Tokyo Wondersite, Tokyo; Hydrophobia, Zinger Presents, Tilburg; New London Kicks, Wooster Projects, New York; Faux Realism, Royal Academy Pump House Gallery, London; The Darkest Hour, Leisure Club Mogadishni, Copenhagen; 2004: Search and Destroy (one person), Rosy Wild Gallery, London; If You Go Down to the Woods Today, Rockwell Gallery, London; Uneven Surfaces, temporarycontemporary, London; Zombie, Gallery Ude, Düsseldorf; Born Cry Eat Shit Fuck Die, Rockwell Gallery, London; 2001: Modern Love, Hobbypop Museum, Düsseldorf; Modern Love, VTO Gallery, London; Rockwell, Rockwell Gallery, London

Collections: David Roberts, London; private collections in Germany, United Kingdom & United States

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## STORIES OF THE DEATHLY ABSTRACTS

**By Paul Carey-Kent**

Those who saw Alex Gene Morrison's last solo show in London, 2006's 'Vile Lure', may be surprised by his new body of work. Four years ago there were paintings and videos of gloopily comical, pastel-coloured characters who seemed to have zoomed in from some unspecified sub-culture: we were in an alternate universe with equal measures of seduction and repulsion. In contrast, Morrison's new show is of paintings only and is dark, serious, restrained and apparently abstract.

But not so fast. A closer look at the biggest canvases in 'Dark Matter' reveals that these may not be so abstract after all. 'Sentinel' suggests a door, a tomb or some Cyclopic presence. 'Mass' could be a dark planet, a black hole, a ball of flies or an opening into the void: an earlier version even started as an ironically black Smiley face. 'Static' could be a another dark opening, but also a huge close-up of a medal with ribbon, a computer screen or even two green faces in profile shouting each other down.

Nor is Morrison all that restrained. Far from disguising the artist's hand in the flat style of much minimalism, there is a hand-drawn wobble to the shapes and plenty of painterly effect. The black centre of 'Mass' has a swarming, crawling texture. The reading of 'Static' as a screen is supported by the horizontal static-like striations of paint. 'Sentinel' contrasts areas of gloss and matt paint. Several smaller paintings make playful use of dark on dark colouration so that shapes are evident from some angles only.

These apparent abstracts, then, all from the last few months, are openings – literally, in those which depict portals, doors and screens – but also metaphorically. Openings into what?

First, they are openings to other places. The visual language echoes the worlds of science fiction and computer games and the urban landscape – all consistent with Morrison's background and previous interests. Perhaps his characters may yet be ready to occupy these spaces. The paintings in 'Dark Matter' also suggest the more abstract world of artists such as Malevich, Rothko and Reinhardt to which they clearly refer.

Those three are spiritual painters, which may be another clue. Morrison's father died shortly before he embarked on these paintings. That, not surprisingly, affected him profoundly and explains why tombs and coffins can be seen in the paintings, too. It is also consistent with the dark tonality and serious atmosphere of the work, and suggests that those openings may be into the possibility of an afterlife. The solar and planetary elements and the presence of hovering – or possibly rising – forms fits in with that.

The portals may also lead us into different times. The science fiction reference recurs if we see the paintings as depicting a form of time travel. References from the past – eighties technology, primitive video games, classic abstraction – are thrown forward into an imagined future. A future in which – as is the way – it seems the looks of former times have come around back into fashion. It's a sort of primitive retro-futurism.

The emotional and scientific implications of 'Dark Matter' are, then, present throughout. The stage is set for these apparently abstract paintings to imply a surprising amount of narrative content – historical, personal, spiritual, transformational, and speculative. It's not so much that Morrison has discarded his previous content, as that he's testing how far he can move away from its figurative characteristics and still refer to it. I get the sense that this game works both ways: some forms start from the narrative, others emerge for themselves and Morrison then has to puzzle out whether and how they fit in. That keeps the process open and fresh.

Abstraction often arrives through a paring-back of references to the world in favour of concentrating on the work of art as an independent object in itself. In one way Morrison has started from that point by concentrating on geometric forms, but then added back the links to the world. Yet one could at the same time say that the result is rather closely related to Rothko's intentions, for he saw himself not as an abstractionist but as a painter of human emotions.

Morrison's latest work, then, gives us subtly lush paintings which pilfer the history of abstraction, but also provide openings into other times and places. They are abstracts activated by the to and fro of their stories.

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## ALEX GENE MORRISON talks to PAUL CAREY-KENT

*What's with the 'Gene'?*

It's basically practical. I've always been called Alex, though my actual first name is Eugene, but there's also an American artist called Alex Morrison. That was confusing online, and when I got asked for information about his forthcoming show I decided to do something about it!

*Where did you grow up?*

In Birmingham in the eighties and nineties. Then I did my degree in London, so I'm very much urban. Birmingham was a brilliant place for what were then the sub-cultures of skateboarding and alternative music. That's reflected fairly directly in my earlier work, and especially in the videos. My older brother, John, was a bass player in the band Hefner for some years and now collaborates with me by providing the sound tracks to my videos.

*How did you come to be an artist rather than a musician?*

Music has always been really important to me and I was in a few bands, but was pretty crap. So I don't think there ever was a point where I was going to be a musician rather than an artist - I left the music to my brother. As a kid I was constantly inventing games and worlds for myself by drawing, and I was always encouraged in that by my parents.

*The pastel colours and human-like characters of your videos and previous paintings don't feature in this new show. Why is that?*

In part it was a conscious decision to change my approach and palette, but without question the enormity of losing my Dad in 2009, which was a strange and affecting experience, was bound to have an impact on the work.

*So your father's death reinforced changes which were already occurring?*

Yes, I already wanted to make the shift from one kind of alternate reality to another with a different feel to it – more solid, or maybe the same world but with the lights turned off: with dark things in dark spaces rather than light things in light spaces. Perhaps a world in an in-between state, like something evolving. And it feels nice to show something that's the start of something – I didn't want a show that felt like the end of something I was exhausting.

*And the change in colours?*

That was a real decision to do the opposite of paintings which were getting lighter and lighter. I wanted a conscious shift. I wanted a stronger palette with a dated feel but which still felt modern – parallel to the way fashions come around again.

*The new paintings look rather like abstractions. Are they?*

No. As well as being form, colour and shape buzzing against each other, I want them to be readable as things. That – as well as my love of sci-fi films like '2001: A Space Odyssey', may also lie behind the presence of gateways and portals. I wouldn't want to get rid of all those things I am interested in: I don't feel I could get up in the morning just to work on pure colour theory or geometry. I want to take that stuff and then try to do something with it. We have the liberty nowadays to appropriate things and then look to do something with them – but you do need to *do* something to justify it.

*Though there is one face in view?*

Yes, 'Self Portrait as the Skull of an Apeman' is the oldest painting in this show and something of a link to earlier work. Despite references to the 'technological sublime' and an interest in new technology in relation to painting I still want the paintings to be expressive, physical and sort of primitive. So 'Self Portrait' relates to

that more bluntly in a symbolic way. However by depopulating the spaces and making them less specific I have allowed myself to be freer with the exploration of painting processes.

*So the science fiction could stand in for the creative process?*

Yes, definitely. You're never settled with your own paintings – you can't have that experience of finality which you have with other people's work. One painting is always a step in moving on towards the future paintings. You're always looking to move on. But things also tend to be cyclical and old ideas come back up again in new forms.

*Are you deliberately referencing abstract artists?*

Yes, I like playing games with art history and its genres. Here I'm absorbing a different kind of painting history, which has always interested me but I haven't directly used before. I wanted to use it to create a new language, recognizing it's impossible to make a painting that doesn't refer to other paintings. I like the kind of time travel aspect of referencing Malevich, Rothko and Reinhardt while still keeping the viewer in the present.







