

ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE EXHIBITION

Tapestry
{Radio On}

Victoria Morton

ISABELLA
SEWART GARDNER
MUSEUM

Tapestry (Radio On)
January 19 – May 28, 2012

Victoria Morton was Artist in Residence at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 2009. Born in Scotland in 1971, Morton studied painting at the Glasgow School of Art, where she earned her MFA in 1994. Along with her painting, she has been involved with performance and installation work, as well as playing music with the band Muscles of Joy.

During her residency in the Museum's galleries, Morton immersed herself in the collections of paintings and rare books, engaging with the Old Masters in the Museum and with Isabella Gardner's distinctive and idiosyncratic installations. She returned to the Museum in 2010 and 2011 to continue her exploration and to prepare for her exhibition *Tapestry (Radio On)*. Morton divides her time between Glasgow and Fossombrone, Italy.



Victoria Morton interviewed by Pieranna Cavalchini, Gardner Museum curator of contemporary art, at the artist's studio in Fossombrone, Italy.

Q: *We live in a culture where everyone is in a hurry—it's our way of life—but here in this small Italian town, many things seem to move more slowly. In most of America it's the opposite: people are all over the place. Look at the way people approach museums: they come in for their "museum bite" and then go on to the next thing. I wonder if there's a need today to offer the possibility of slowing down, of returning and looking again and again?*

A: As a viewer, you can't read these paintings in an instantaneous way. And sometimes people don't spend that much time looking at works of art. You cannot fully absorb what's going on in the work all at once—and

you shouldn't have to. It has to do with trying to create a sense of permanence within the work while at the same time understanding it's got a life of its own, and can be part of a life that exists beyond the gallery at this particular point in time.

Coming to Fossombrone was for me, in the first days, about stopping a lot of things, and reflecting. And also conducting a personal experiment, I suppose: how would it feel to be completely focused on the activity of making? It was like being on a retreat. I really wanted to make some changes in my work, to not have to exhibit anything for a while and to be able to question through making without having to talk about it—to be constructive and absorbed in a way that suited me.

Q: You have said that one of the wonderful things about working here is being able to connect everyday life in art. For you, it was almost an ideal form of painting.

A: I love the idea that I can wake up and go straight into the studio in my pajamas and pick up a brush without having had any other thoughts about anything. So the boundary between what is art and what is routine living becomes blurred. That's the ideal situation.

I am very interested in the choreographer Pina Bausch's method of taking actions from real life and reinterpreting them into dance. I think all these ways of working should be able to exist together. For me, this relates to a kind of female consciousness, which I think is important to represent.

Q: You have spoken about the idea of the time that is built into a painting, and your

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feeling that a viewer will never be able to see, to comprehend, the time that has gone into the work.

A: I like the idea of different speeds in painting: some works can move very fast and happen quickly—almost in one movement, while others require a period of *nothingness*. You can't represent that stillness, that nothingness, in any obvious way; it's just part of a way of working.

I'm always working on several pieces simultaneously. I can come to a point where I know a work is not finished, but I don't know what to do next. So rather than forcing it forward, it can be helpful just to leave it for a while, even a long time, until possibly my perception of what's happening has changed or my relationship with the piece has changed. Or coming back to the work, in another frame of mind, I'll see it differently and then I can pick up and continue. It has to do with just letting something be, and living with it, and having a relationship with it over a long period of time without having to change it just because you can. Also practically, by just leaving something be, it can become part of other works that are being developed.



La Monte Young · Marian Zazeela. *Dream House Sound and Light Environment*, a time installation measured by a setting of continuous frequencies in sound and light, MELA Foundation, New York City, 1993-present. Photo © Marian Zazeela 1993

Q: So elements from one work might end up feeding another work?

A: Or one kind of activity in a work might help make another piece suddenly make sense and I can come to understand new ways of working. Also if I let something rest for a while it gives me space to do a kind of subconscious processing—when you're not directly focused but it's ticking away at the back of your mind. I think I do a lot of that. It's the *not-doing* part of the work.

Q: Tell me about your earlier work—what led you to what you're doing now?

A: I've always had this idea about ongoing composition. In the early days that interest was partly inspired by the La Monte Young–Marian Zazeela "sound and light environment" *Dream House*. What struck me about that project were its immediate abstract and physical qualities. When you go into the *Dream House* room the sound is so loud and the magenta light so saturated that right away you are *inside* the work and the work is *inside* you. You cannot escape it. All the tones open up in your head as you move—your body becomes an instrument. I had gone to New York to look at abstract paintings. But I found that

the way they were categorized in museums made them feel like examples of historical objects. It was difficult to have an immediate engagement with them. When I went to the Young/Zazeela piece, the heightened experience, immersive detail, and freed perception were all aspects that I felt I could relate to in a different way with painting.

There's a sort of methodology in the way some of my paintings happen that can be quite pragmatic; it can be quite systematic and rudimentary. And then there comes a point where specific things come alive for me, and I become absorbed in that. I find that point interesting to define: what happens here, when you're completely engaged, you're merged into the work and it's a part of you; it's a kind of self-obliteration through a process of repetition. I'm attempting to extend that experience and sustain it, and for that to be a situation that the viewer can be engaged in as well, being now at the center of perception. So in a way that comes back to the idea of a time-based element. For me this does connect to the Young/Zazeela piece—though in a very roundabout way.

Q: *When did you first see Dream House?*

A: I've been many times, but first when I was a student, in 1993. It's at the Mela Foundation in New York. Initially *Dream House* was supposed to last seven years—but it's been going for at least twice that long.

For me, that piece is a connection between two worlds. I was already interested in music and the experience of music, but I wasn't using it in my art then. I was really quite a traditional painter when I first experienced it (I still am in a lot of ways)—but it made me think about duration, detail and composition, and how I could find a new way of composing within the restrictions of a canvas. To me, it's about creating impulses or pulses or vibrations of feeling on the surface of the canvas. I'm very interested in those ideas. And so the purpose is not just to do this by showing you a picture of something; it's creating an emotional experience or a situation. Which music does as well.

Q: *You're aware of the impact on the viewer's perception. You're nudging the viewer to look at things in a different way.*

A: Yes, but not in a premeditated way. I suppose I'm interested in the idea that you can try to create the kind of expanded perception that might relate

to your sense of body space and the fact you can never see yourself as a *whole* being, so the idea of becoming merged with other objects makes sense to me. The objects define your boundaries.

Q: *Has this idea ever translated to figurative work for you?*

A: The musician Ben Knight approached me to ask if I'd make an album cover for his project *Towering Breaker*. (It's an interpretation of a Terry Riley piece—beautiful music.) I wound up really listening to and painting *with* the music. In the end, it turned out to be more obviously figurative. There are a few little phallic figures in the painting—the imagery turned out to be quite sexual. I thought maybe an LP cover needs an edge, so I just left it like that.

So that can happen ... and then I move away from it, because I don't always want to have anything too strongly described in the paintings.

Q: *You don't want things to be explicit in your painting?*

A: I do want things to be explicit, but in a different way. Paintings are full of desire.

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Victoria Morton, *ibpm*, 2009, artwork for *Towering Breaker*, *Paper Motion*, LP cover.

Q: *Because explicitness narrows?*

A: Yes, in a way. That's a good way of putting it. I suppose I feel if you have a painting that's showing you a fixed image then you automatically recognize that and create a whole series of associations to that image.

Q: *In some of the work that you did during your Gardner Museum residency, you seemed to be considering different possible*



Victoria Morton, *Her Gudam*, 2011, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Modern Institute, Glasgow

views of the Museum spaces. But there were also figures in the paintings. They were nearly invisible if you looked at the work quickly, but with time you could discern these human forms. It was a voyage of discovery. For a viewer it was a fantastic experience but you really needed to spend time with the work to have it.

A: You do need a lot of time. I wouldn't paint directly from the museum but I do think that rooms can be containers for emotion and existential sensations. I don't think I need to paint a picture

of something that looks like a person for there to be a figurative experience in there. That's not really what I'm looking for now.

I was taught to be a figurative painter at school. I had very strong teacher who was great. She was interested in painters like Goya and Egon Schiele, and the Weimar artists and Käthe Kollwitz. She taught me that art is about the human condition. And she taught me how to paint in a certain way—which I rejected in the end,

although I learned a lot from it. I only started to feel comfortable with what you would call the "abstract" language of painting when I discovered it myself—I was never taught that in college. I just found it and thought: "What is this? I feel really good about it."

Q: *So you moved from more figurative painting to your own way of reaching for something that was less precise...*

A: I would call it a different kind of precision—it's less about observation and more about interiority, feeling, and stimulation. It was about having a direct relationship with something, both physical and psychological. In that sense I think of the paintings as personalities.

At the Gardner, I was interested in everything that was there—obviously the paintings, but most importantly the way it was all put together: the books, the textiles, everything. Initially, I admit, I had a bad reaction to the collection—in a way, it seemed so ostentatious, everything is so opulent—but once you get past that you can see that it's incredibly creative and adventurous ... and even generous, forward-thinking in a way.

Q: *Yes. I think Isabella Stewart Gardner's idea, on some level, was to leave something for everyone to access and enjoy. Again, it's a place that slows you down and makes you want to really look again. A lot of thinking went into it.*

A: It is literally impossible to take it all in in one go.

Q: *I'd like to ask about your painting technique and approach. You paint with oils and also watercolors. Do you feel you are more experimental or freer with one or the other?*

A: I tend to do watercolors when I want to do something quickly, and I don't want to be confined to being in a studio. With oil paintings sometimes I think there's a kind of—what do you call it?—*gravitas*. "This is an oil painting, so it must be taken seriously." Watercolor is not like that for me because although you can add lots of layers, it's more fresh and spontaneous: like a single thought.

Q: *Do you find that you use the same pigments or that the color system is very different for the two media? What is your approach to pigment generally?*

A: As a student, I was interested in the idea of the readymade in painting: that

system of deconstructing the act of painting for the viewer. Color is part of that because the whole basis of your perception of the space and movement within the painting is largely founded on the color. It's the pragmatic side of the "psychedelic" part of painting. I never studied color theory so I've made it up as I've been going along. Now my early interest in *pure color*—applied in a quasi-mechanical way where you can see every mark sitting on top of the next one—has changed. It has evolved into something more organic. I suppose I wanted to develop that language, to have more options, to stop painting everything in quotation marks and to work more intuitively. It's like the vastness of a forest, or the constant flow of a green river: paintings can have this kind of expansive effect on your mind. And color has this effect—it can put you in all sorts of places.

Of course, color is tonal, atonal—it has definite correlations with music. To a certain extent, color is like a formless material. It can be highly optical but also very physical. Seeing the mosaics in Ravenna influenced that idea. Also I'm drawn to the feeling of ancient permanence; I don't want the

paintings to look refined. I like them to seem quite elementary.

Q: *You have said that, as you develop the language of a particular painting, there's always the presence of the precious languages. Whatever language you're using now is a composite of many languages—some of which you have embraced and some that were pushed back.*

A: Yes. In a way, each piece it has its own history.

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Q: *Do you listen to music when you're working?*

A: Sometimes, but I don't always listen to music; it can be distracting.

Q: *Here in your Fossombrone studio, you have a set of drums. Would you ever put a drum set in Glasgow? Are your two studios very different?*

A: I could never practice the drums in my Glasgow studio—it's a completely different setup because I'm working next to other artists. The place where I work in Glasgow is more of



Giotto, *The Presentation of the Christ Child in the Temple*, about 1320, tempera and gold on wood, 45.2 x 43.6 cm, Gothic Room, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

a production space. Obviously, it's a thinking space as well, but I have a different relationship to it than I do to this studio. I work well there, I think, because it's very focused. There are no windows; there's no view. But there's amazing natural light from above, and I can see what I'm doing clearly, especially in my larger paintings. I couldn't work on those here.

Q: *The light here changes constantly.*

A: It's difficult. It's shifty. And that can be an issue—because I can be doing something and the light will go, and I will have to wait for two days before that same light comes back. Or

if there's a week of rain (which there always is at this time of year), then you know that week is going to be wasted.

Q: *Do you take advantage of the fact that you're in Italy and go look at art a lot? This light. These mountains. Umbria nearby. Giotto and Cimabue, Piero della Francesca....*

A: Effectively, I'm painting in the same "metaphysical" light they painted in. And I understand their frescoes in a different way, having lived here and traveled through the landscapes that you see in their backgrounds.

There are particular paintings that I've visited quite a lot. In Urbino, for example, the very small *Flagellation* by Piero in the Palazzo Ducale. Also in Urbino, the church of San Giovanni Battista is filled with frescoes by the Salimbeni brothers; at one point I was going there about once a week to look at them. And I was very interested in Giotto several years ago—I'd read Julia Kristeva's essay "Giotto's Joy," and I went to Padua to visit that fresco cycle. I've been to Assisi a couple of times to see the Giotto frescoes there.

Q: *When you visited Urbino repeatedly to look at the Salimbeni fresco cycle, was that something you did on your own?*

A: Yes. The feeling I have about the paintings in that chapel is ... it feels very *natural*. It's dark in there, but the paintings are luminous, seductive. The pigmentation is earthy and there is an immense amount of detail—plants and nature, the expressions on faces—all these ordinary little parts painted in there. There's the architecture within the architecture, which gradually becomes replaced by rocks, trees, and the river. And it's all kind of flattened out, so people can read the progression of events. It flows off the wall. There's a contemplative quality in the paint and the light and the size of the space and the repetitious unfolding of the narrative across the chapel and there's an expression of ordinary life within all that. Giotto interests me because his frescoes were painted with an awareness of how people were going to move through the space and encounter them. An awareness of the physicality of congregation. And the perception

of the viewer. How amazing those images must have been for people. This was before film. I'm not a religious person, so ... I can see the storytelling aspect from an objective distance.

Q: *The theatricality of it.*

A: Yes, it's all encompassing. And the idea of an unfolding of events and the way spaces can reflect feeling; the time-based arrangement of composition and the kind of beautiful simplicity as well. It was painted with such rudimentary precision.

Q: *What would you say underlies your work? Nature? Spirituality? Mathematics?*

A: The desire for a heightened perception of the fragmented self in relation to day-to-day experience underlies the work. That seems like a kind of reality to me.

RIGHT: Victoria Morton, *Tapestry (Radio On)*, 2011, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Modern Institute, Glasgow



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Exhibition Checklist

RIGHT WALL, CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT OF GALLERY WALL

1. *You Hit It And It Takes You There*,
oil on canvas
2. *Tambourine*,
oil on canvas
3. *Fall, Fall Again*,
oil on canvas
4. *Sleep, Break, No Sleep, Yellow*,
oil on canvas

CENTER WALL

5. *Salome*,
oil on canvas with ladder
◀ 502

LEFT WALL

6. *Her Guitars*,
oil on linen
7. *River Meeting*,
oil on canvas
8. *Two Figures*,
oil on canvas
9. *Tapestry (Radio On)*,
oil on canvas

FLOOR PIECES

10. *Swinging Sleeves For An Unmarried Woman*,
mixed media
11. *Dress - Edit Without Garden*,
mixed media with sound
12. *Upsetter Makes You Better*,
mixed media
13. *Kimono*,
mixed media with sound
14. *Then Do The Head*
(second version),
mixed media

All works are from 2011 and are courtesy
of the Modern Institute, Glasgow.

BACK COVER: Installation view, *Tapestry
(Radio On)*, January 19–May 28, 2012,
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.



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