



The Viral Sublime | SUZI MORRIS

SUZI MORRIS

The Viral Sublime

28 November -16 December 2017



da Vinci
ARTIST BRUSHES

Catalogue published by Suzi Morris Art

Portrait image by Bill Gidda

Photography by Paul Greenleaf

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, without prior permission. © Suzi Morris 2017

www.suzimorrisart.com

pressoffice@suzimorrisart.com

[Twitter](https://twitter.com/suzimorrisart) [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/suzimorrisart) @suzimorrisart

ISBN 978-1-5272-1566-5

Herrick Gallery
Mayfair
London
W1J 7NQ
+44 (0) 20 7493 9929

www.herrickgallery.com/suzi-morris



The Viral Sublime and the Bodily Experience of Oil Painting

"The painter takes his body with him", according to Paul Valéry. Indeed, we cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations, Merleau-Ponty theorises the need to delve into 'the working, actual body (...) that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 162). Valéry's famous statement above resonates in various ways.

"Art has many functions, and I have increasingly come to understand to varying degrees, that my paintings are the result of a process of embodying my imagination's relationship with what I experience within my body".

Suzi Morris



Suzi Morris in the studio with Hermann Meyer, CEO da Vinci Artists Brushes and Luke White, Fact Not Fiction Films.

Introduction by Cherry Smyth	09
Thresholds into Invisible Worlds	12
The Families	40
The Instructions for Life	54
Shapes	56
Acknowledgements	62

Of Blooded Things: the paintings of Suzi Morris by Cherry Smyth

Landscape painters have long tackled the notion of the earthly sublime that awakens both terror and awe with its immense beauty or vast, uncontainable vistas. A key trope of the Romantics, the sublime has since been vigorously interrogated and dismantled, yet the spiritual yearnings that underpin it continue to draw artists to its potential for expressing the ineffable experiences of the human, faced with the wonders of the natural world.

In many ways, the sublime is a genre of the lonely – it is the vision of an individual not a collective, but it is its capacity to speak for the ‘we’ that brings us back to view and review it. It is thanks to artists like Suzi Morris that the concept of the sublime is being refreshed and reinvigorated for a post-Romantic age when the natural world is under such cataclysmic threat, and our atomized lives force a solitude that many would rather avoid. These bold, resplendent paintings explore where postmodern ideas of the sublime survive and thrive in the fields of bio-technology, medicine and science.

Painter Mark Francis found that his interest in mycology delivered a fertile and inventive visual vocabulary that he made his own, blurring the distinctions between figuration and abstraction. It seems that the deeper Morris’ research led her, driven by her own body’s response to viral keratitis, the wider the ideas spread into the microbiological advances in DNA sequencing and the ethics of genomic medicine, the more her style developed and expanded. As poet Jorie Graham puts it:

*‘who is that listening, who is it that is wanting still
to speak to you
out of the vast network
of blooded things,
a huge breath-held, candle-lit, whistling, planet-wide, still blood-flowing,
howling-silent, sentence-driven, last-bridge-pulled up-behind city of
the human, the expense -
column of place in
place humming...To have
a body. A borderline
of ethics and reason.’ (1)*

Morris has coined the phrase 'the viral sublime' for her painterly investigation of viral landscapes, these hidden, almost fantastical worlds that will either support or destroy the organism that hosts them. One of Morris' most powerful and enigmatic paintings, *The Naked Virus*, (2017), perfectly captures the artist's acute understanding of the nature of the virus to act as either as a benign or malicious force that can radically determine our lives. The tender bluepurple hues and the delicate mobility of the brushstrokes invite us into something that seems surprisingly warm and sympathetic. It has the grandeur and elusiveness of the work of Ross Bleckner, a New York painter who was drawn to represent his emotional response to AIDS and loss. Like Bleckner, Morris moves nimbly between a surface beauty and a darker undertow: the healthy-looking body and the unseen deterioration under the skin. Is this sumptuous image in *The Naked Virus* a ghoulish lair or a regal Jacobean neck ruff? Would the ruff adorn or choke? Are those zombie-like roses tumbling out or into it? There is a smug and chilling omnipotence about its presence – its ability to live without air, to cause death so soundlessly. Morris' ability to hold the poles of viral power to bestow or betray life so in balance is astounding.

There is a similar intensity and sense of utter self-sufficiency to the life form in *On the Origin of Species, Homage to Darwin*, (2016). In the foreground pulses a coiled form, intestinal in appearance, with the heft of luscious growth. Behind it lingers a shadow cloud of pale green-blue that deepens the painting's perspective and suggests that we could be in either inner or outer space. Beyond that stands the vertical bar, which is one of Morris' trademark interventions. Breaking out of the lyrical, gestural abstraction of the foreground, Morris pulls the vertical line of the modernist heyday out of colour field painting. Artists like Barnett Newman used the vertical stripe to create tension and vitality in the colour field and play out different compositional colour harmonies. Like the first person singular, Morris' 'I/eye bar' acts like a definition of the self, a halt to the proliferation and precious beauty of the virus' life. It becomes a resilient measuring stick, drawing in the eye, offsetting the seductive but moulding bloom of the lyrical viral life. It seems to say 'I am here too.' It is quite a thing to set up the setting and apparatus of what is seen as an otherworldly sublime and then posit within it an earth-rod mark, a human scale reality, to withstand its potency. Could the vertical bar be perceived as a minimalist figure within the abstract universe?

Morris continues to upend the genres of art history in *Waiting for CRISPR/Cas9*, (2017), where the interruption of the yellow-white bar on the left is magnified and reinforced by the curved grey aluminium canvas on the right of the diptych. The shapes have the look of cross-sections of an organ which also suggests the splicing of CRISPR, the genome-editing technique that could herald a cure to genetic disease. Just as DNA holds a memory bank of remnants of all the viruses that have attacked its bacteria, Morris' work responds to a memory bank of art history in which formalist and abstract tropes are intermixed and revived. German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote his long series, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, after a friend lost her daughter to a long illness, aged only nineteen in 1922. After reading the girl's

journal, he was fascinated by 'the two extreme borders of her pure insight': her pain and suffering matched by her open acceptance and 'the appropriation of herself into the whole, into a far more than her.' (2) Rilke compared the changes wrought by death to a consuming fire that we ironically cannot live without.

*'Chose to be changed. With the flame, with the flame be enraptured,
where from within you a thing changeably-splendid escapes:
nothing whereby that earth-mastering artist is captured
more than the turning-point touched by his soaring shapes.'* (3)

The sublime has never been without its concerns – whose sublime is it and who is oppressed or excluded for that vision to exist and persist? By inhabiting the viral sublime of her imagination, Morris' paintings take us into 'a far more than her', an immensely rich seam of knowledge at a new turning-point in medical science which is rarely represented in visual art. Morris' anti-Romantic reworking of the sublime keeps terror, or at least an unsettling queasiness, in mind, rather than surrender totally to awe and beauty. We are always aware that while the beauty she creates is undeniably seductive, it can be fatal. Morris builds a unique and stunning visual vocabulary out of that dynamic paradox.

1. Graham, Jorie, 'The Bird that Begins it', from *Place* (London: Carcanet, 2012)
2. Rilke, Rainer, Maria, introduction to *Sonnets to Orpheus*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1946), p.12
3. Rilke, Rainer, Maria, 'Sonnet xii', *Sonnets to Orpheus*, *ibid.*

Cherry Smyth is an art writer and poet.

Thresholds into Invisible Worlds

Finding a visual language to account for the experiences of the mind and body is an extraordinarily complex undertaking. Painting is a voyage of discovery: an exploration that depends on sensations and physical gestures rather than language. The following works are partly informed by Morris' sense of boundaries having been dissolved between the virtual and physical world that we inhabit. Each canvas is composed of veils of glaze, applied through an experimental process of addition and erasure of paint that forms the history of the painting. Through translucent pools and denser areas of colour, the works are full of internal thresholds which evolve towards an intermediary threshold, or a deeper reality between visible and invisible worlds.

I prefer not to make finite plans before starting a painting. In this way I can free the unconscious and the work can become an excavation through colour, each colour demanding the one that follows it.

The In-Between
2014, oil on canvas
190 x 100 cm
Private Collection. England.



I've come to understand how notions of the threshold and the energy of light offer a place of silence and an awareness of consciousness that is fundamental to my practice.

*Homage to Morris,
2016, oil on canvas
160 x 105 cm*



Painting is a bodily experience, a remarkable merging of the invisible internal mind and the visible and invisible external world that we inhabit. It is an extraordinary process of not knowing what will emerge or how.

Mama Virus,
2016, oil on aluminium
61 x 46 cm

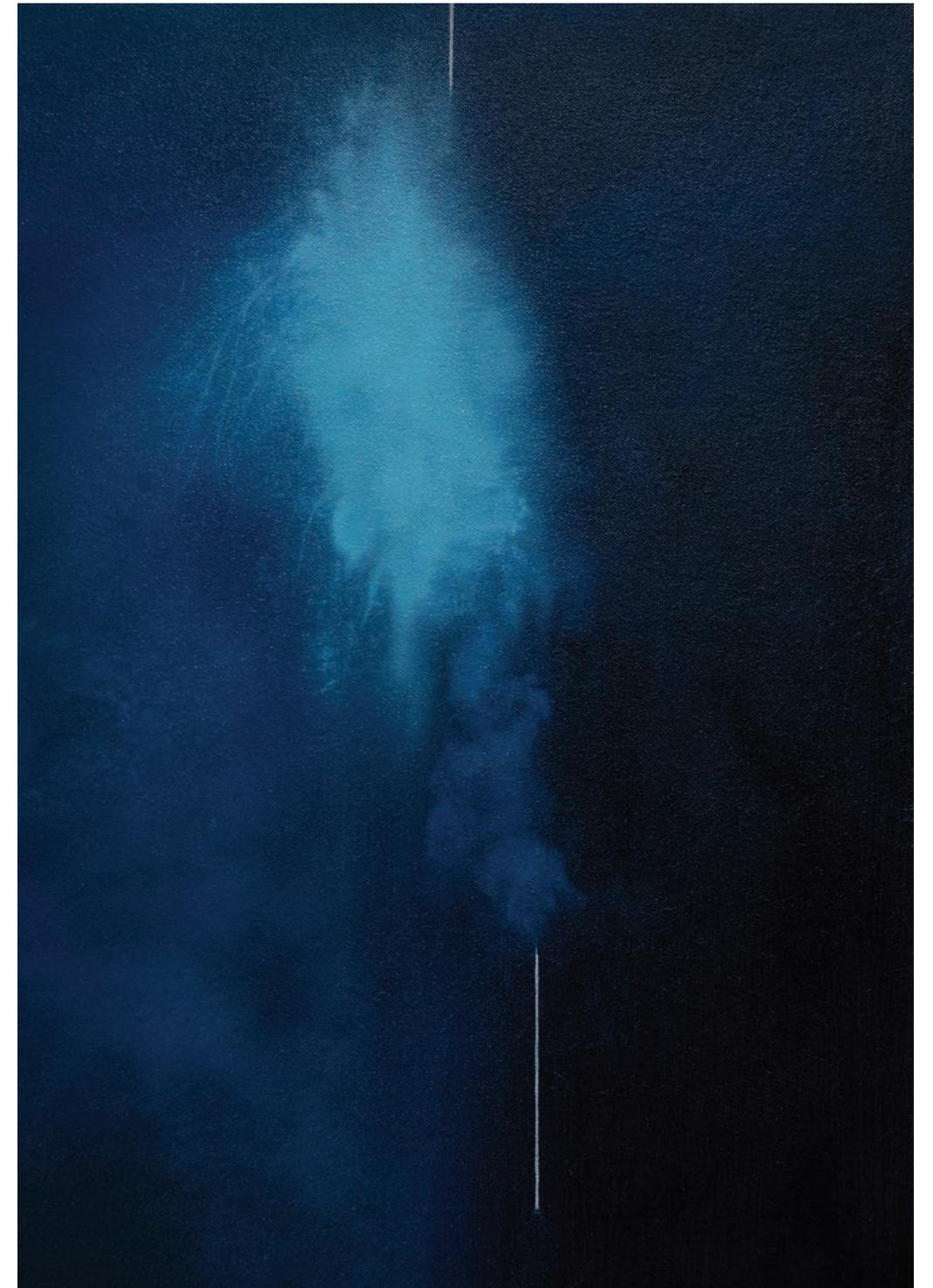


While viruses may appear sublimely beautiful in their forms when viewed through the lens of an electron microscope, there is an indescribable terror in witnessing them actively destroy. Their beauty also pertains to their "life cycle" and ability to overcome any obstacle to replicate incessantly. The paradox of their ability to kill or cure increasingly intrigues me.



On the Origin of Species
Homage to Darwin,
2016, oil on canvas
30 x 30 cm

In the beginning there was one...



Baby V
2013, oil on canvas
50 x 35 cm
Private Collection.

The act of painting is magical in the way that it becomes a co-emergent process as paint and body enter into a dialogue. Manipulating paint somehow unlocks the gateway to the unconscious allowing meaning and effect to come forth.

*Truth Lies in the
Hidden Realms*
2016, oil on canvas
190 x 130 cm



It's the inherent natural qualities in oil pigment that are so exciting to work with. The moments of unpredictability as paint seeps into the weaves of the canvas, conjure up thoughts of the virus and its inborn ability to silently spread and ensure its evolution.

Fumarole ii
2016, oil on canvas
160 x 130 cm
Petrofer Collection, Germany.



Viruses are everywhere and yet they are often misunderstood. Each one of us has around seven percent virus in our bodies, so they play a vital role in the evolution of life on Earth.

The Infected Ocean
2016, Diptych oil on canvas
215 x 160 cm



*Blue is a colour that has stirred human emotion for centuries.
It has a natural ability to evoke illusions of unbounded
infinite space.*

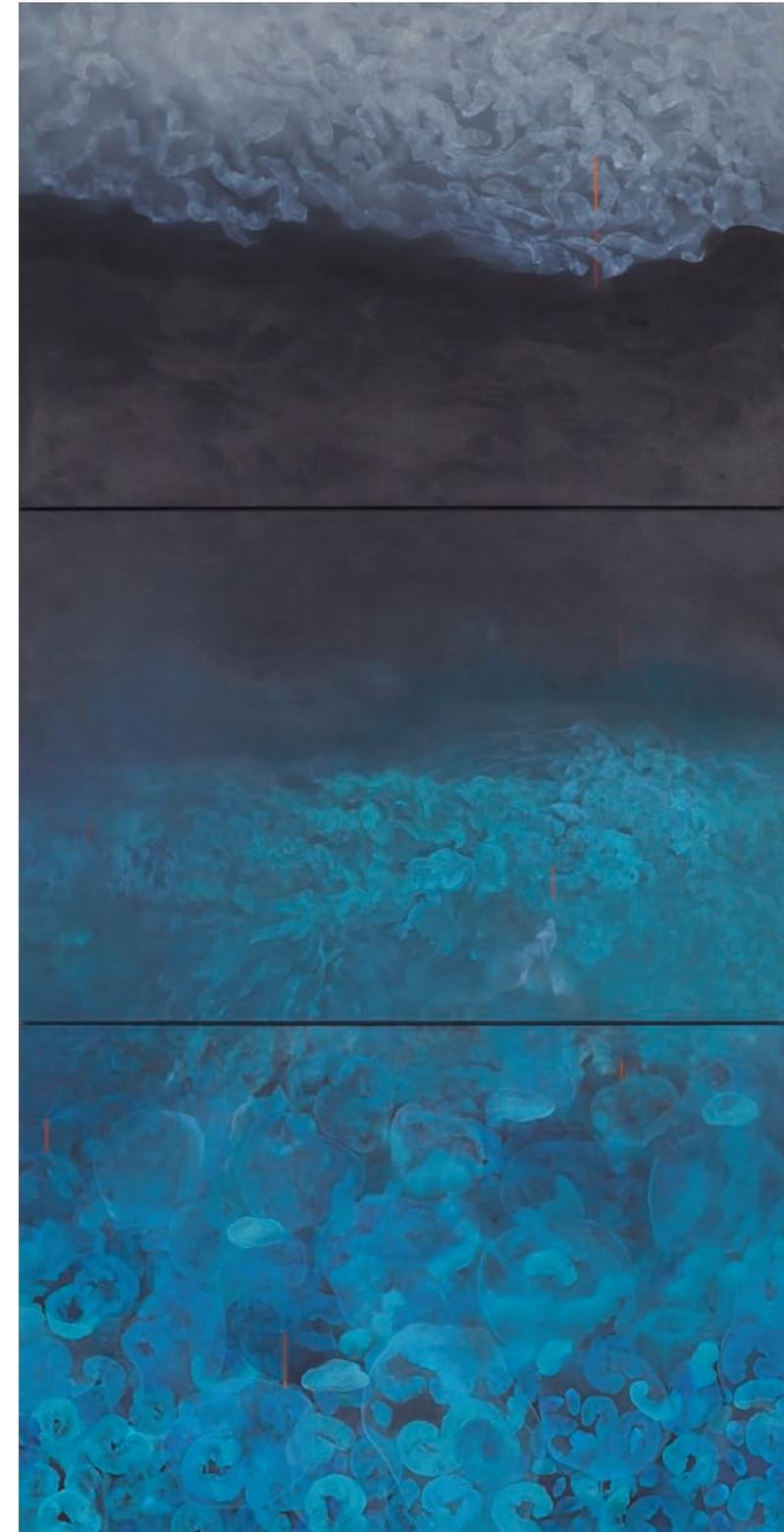
Transcending the Abyss
2016, oil on aluminium
61 x 46 cm





It's a combination of history, theoretical concerns, and collaborations with scientists and doctors, together with an exploration of the properties of oil paint that has a profound effect on my imagination. On reflection, these experiences seem to have fused together in forming decisions in my painting.

War Against Beauty
2015, oil on canvas Triptych
315 x 160 cm



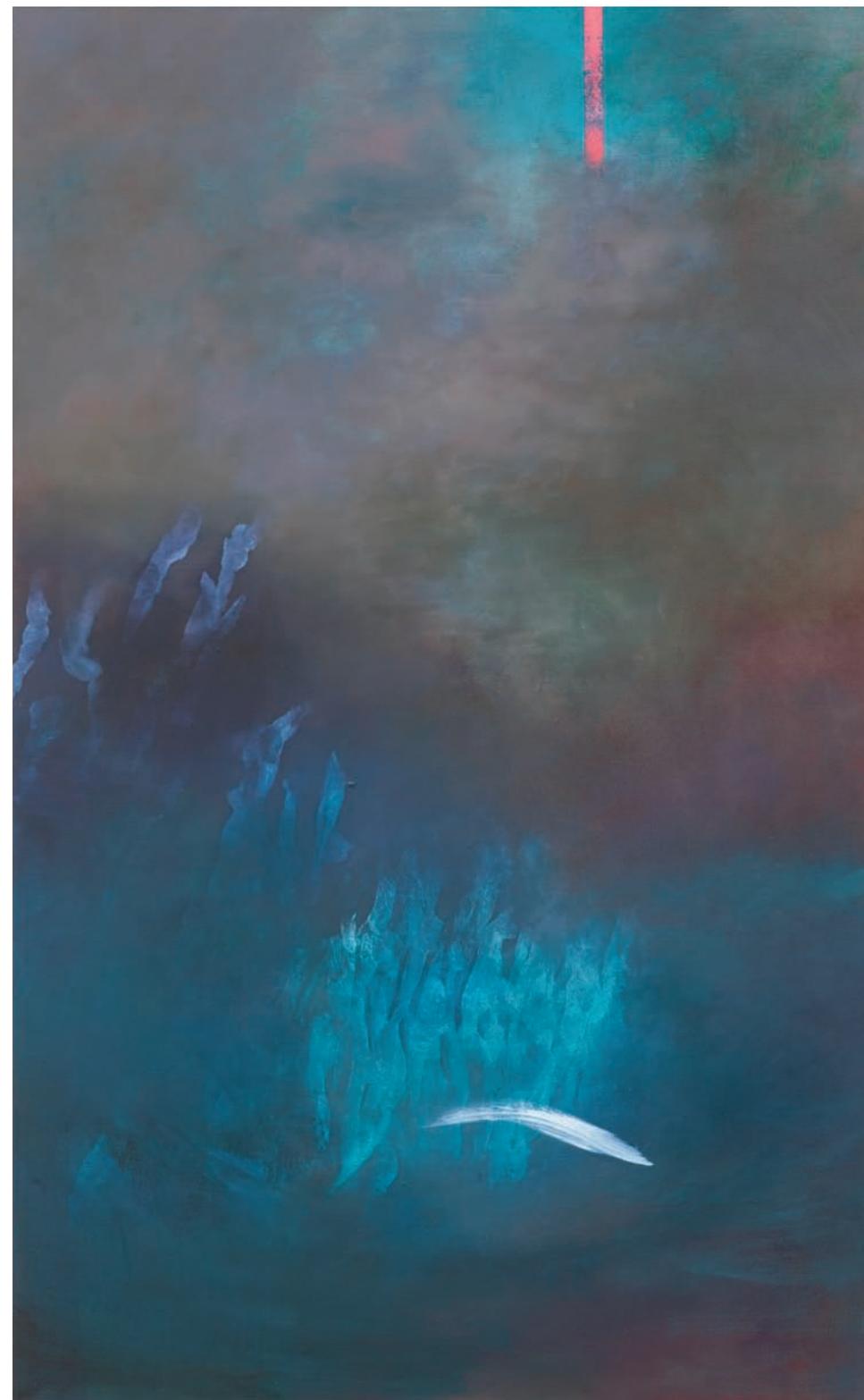
Through the act of painting, there occurs a self-awareness of the performance to capture and articulate the experiences of my body. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, I am 're-learning to look at the world...(it) is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being' (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p170).

The Naked Virus
2017, oil on canvas
190 x 120 cm



It is only on reflection after a painting is complete and I am fully present in my studio, can I make sense of the culmination of personal bodily experience, history, theory and new sciences that came together to create it.

Catch Me if You Can
2016, oil on canvas
190 x 130 cm



The birth of new technologies is revolutionising the history of whole genome sequencing and paving the way towards personalised medicine. As an artist with an interest in science, I want to create art that will resonate with the world health crises and scientific discoveries of my time.



Genetic Drift
2017, oil on aluminium
35.5 x 28 cm
Photography by Carmen Alemán



*Resurrection
from Latency*
2017, oil on
aluminium
35.5 x 28 cm
Photography by Carmen Alemán

I imagine that interpreting our own genetic information will become part of our everyday conversation sooner than we think.



Absence of Light
2016, oil on aluminium
35.5 x 28 cm



*Sequencing
the Genome*
2016,
oil on basswood
61 x 51 cm

Realising the healing potential of viruses generates thoughts of disembodiment and resurrection in my painting, particularly in my use of light and line as signified by the line exposing the vulnerability of Homo sapiens.

The Holobiont
2017, oil on basswood
61 x 51cm



The Families

In 2015 Morris met with scientists at Imperial College London, where she was researching reports of live viruses being used in the treatment of terminal diseases. A virus being put to therapeutic use is a paradox. The beauty and destructiveness of viruses increasingly became a source of fascination as she began to notice that there are inherent characteristics of oil paint such as spreading and unpredictability, that are not disparate from the conduct of viral behaviour in the body. Scientists are successfully unleashing the power of certain viruses in creating therapies to cure cancer. Learning how the particular virus that has blighted her sight over decades is now being used in a regenerative and healing sense, marked a turning point in Morris' research and inspired the following series of work: The Families

At the time of painting, nine viral families were being explored: Rhabdoviridae, Herpesviridae, Poxviridae, Reoviridae, Paramyxoviridae, Picornaviridae, Adenoviridae, Parvoviridae and Retroviridae. Each of the following panels corresponds to a viral family under clinical investigation using viruses as avatars in the treatment of cancer.

The influence of the new sciences and genomics is as key to situating my practice as the discovery of microbes, X-rays and unseen energies were for artists such as František Kupka and Odilon Redon.

The Non-Coding Genome
2017, oil on aluminium
61 x 46 cm



I'm interested in the problems of the body and the problems of painting. Merleau-Ponty proposes the analogy that understanding one is indispensable for understanding the other. This clearly resonates with my thinking.

Complexities of Viscera
2016, oil on aluminium
61 x 46 cm



*Painting can humanise and enhance scientific content,
infusing scientific findings with empathic understanding.*

Phylogenetic Tree of Life
2016, oil on aluminium
61 x 46 cm

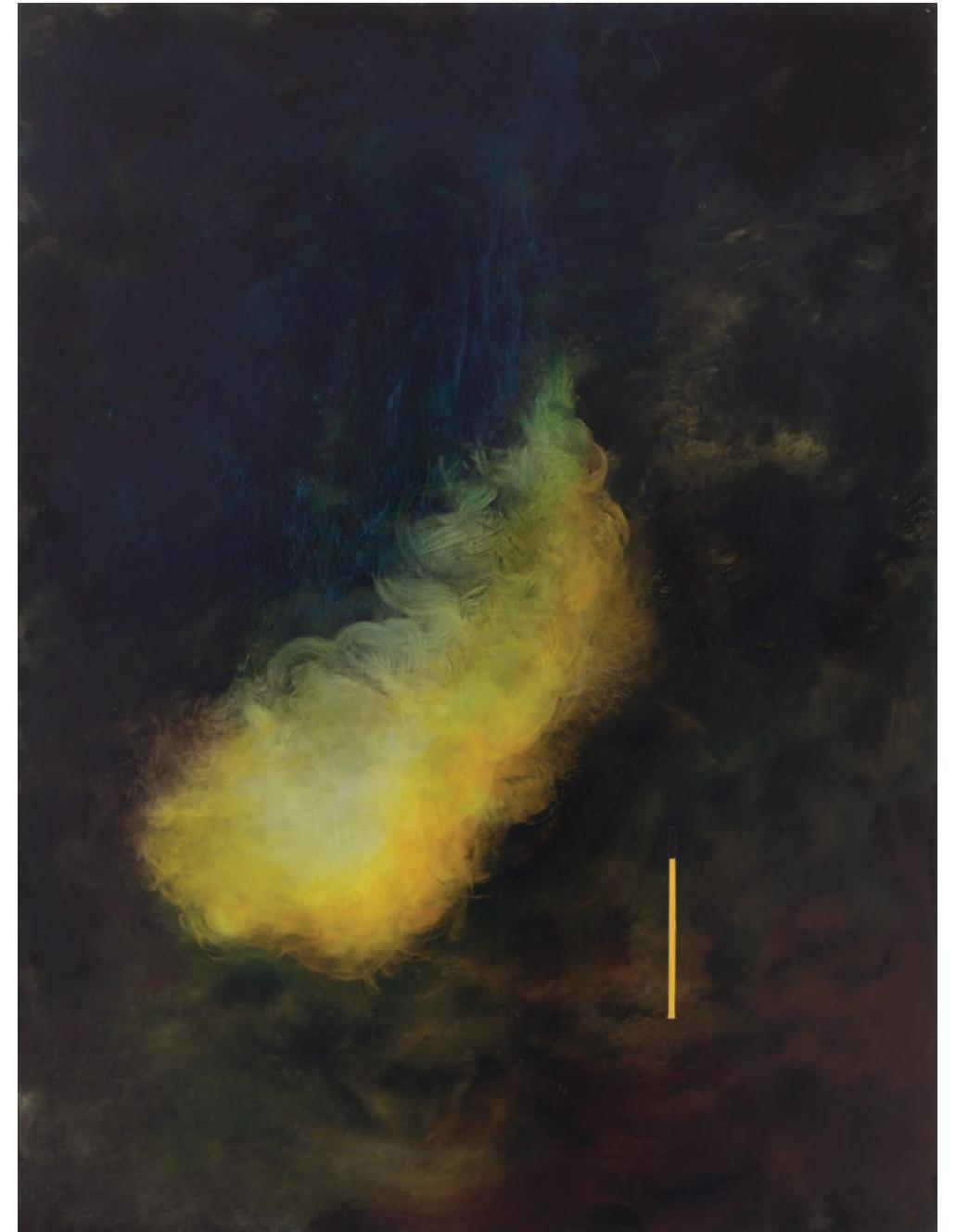


Sharpness of line presented within an amorphous space is something that seems to be a necessity in my paintings.



Silencing the Neurons
2016, oil on aluminium
61 x 46 cm

My work does not seek to illustrate; rather an underlying reference is of my perceptual view of scientific reality within the 'invisible' world, one objective being to transmit ideas and generate discussion. Through investing the paintings with a sensibility, they become a game of interpretation.



The Progeny Virion
2016, oil on aluminium
61 x 46 cm

Verticality of line is important, and one aspect of this appertains to defining the space and more crucially, to point towards the human figure and ascension.

The Genome Forest
2017, oil on aluminium
61 x 46 cm

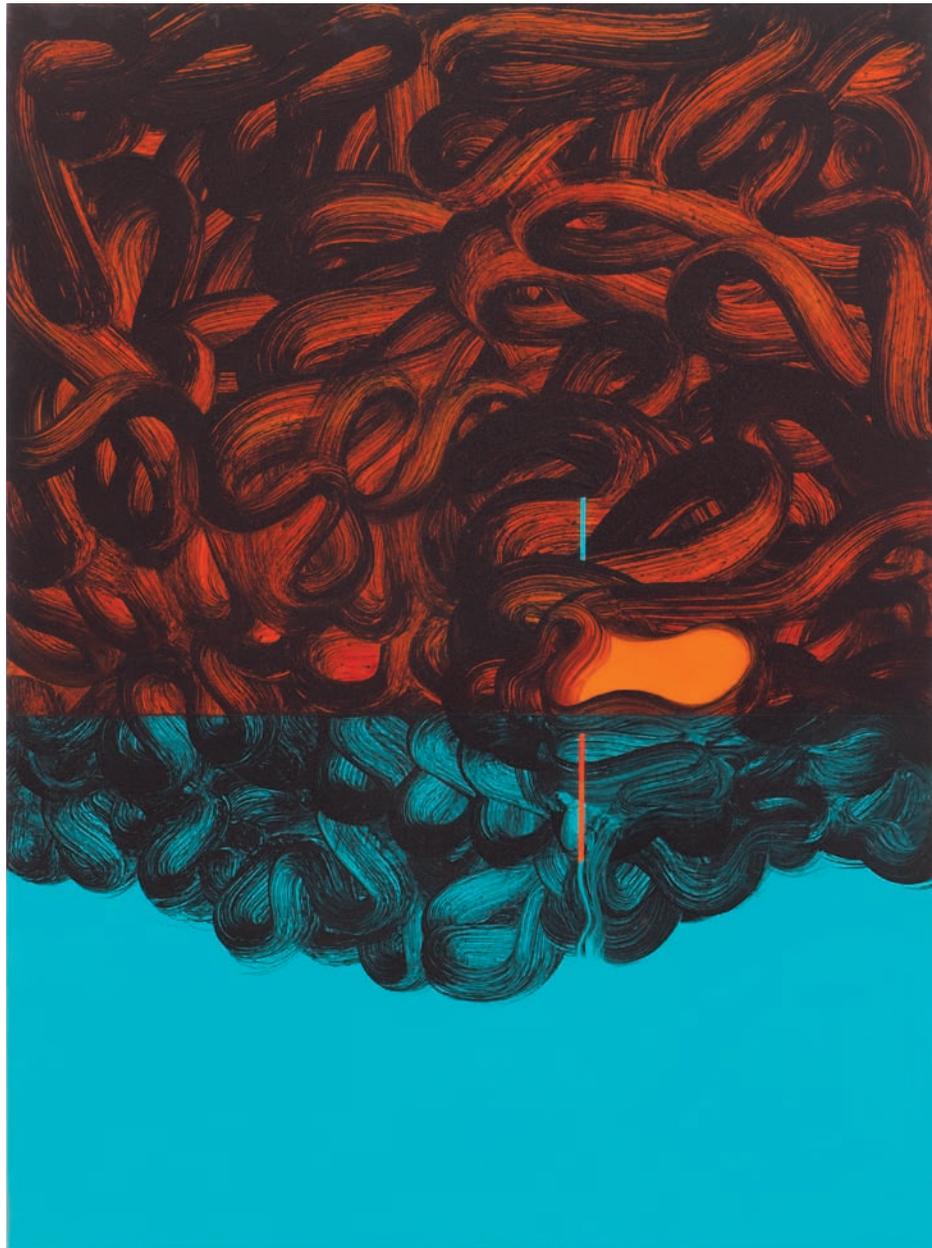


It is the viral characteristics of invisibility; the intangible, the unknown, and the ability to replicate and mutate that engender an imaginary relationship with this microorganism, which seeps into my practice through paint(ing). This understanding has become central to my practice.

The Invisibility of Inheritance
2016, oil on aluminium
61 x 46 cm



The destructive dimensions of the virus becoming constructive marked a turning point in my research. I was interested in the 'cloaking' mechanisms of viruses in how they hide from the immune system. Much as in the painting process, through the laborious accretion and removal of paint there is much that lies hidden before the final image emerges.



Reverse Transcription
2016, oil on aluminium
61 x 46 cm

My approach to colour and my fondness for blue are both personal and potentially universal: ultimately it signifies the colour of the Earth, and for me, it echoes silent introspection. I question my use of colour to evoke meaning: drawing upon darker hues such as indigo or atrament to create a sense of mystery and pale tones of white to suggest the energy of light.



Burden of the Dendrite
2017, oil on aluminium
61 x 46 cm

The Instructions for Life

The following four works represent the four chemical base pairs that make up our DNA in the body. Cytosine, Guanine, Thymine and Adenine, are in a metaphorical sense, the building blocks of life; carrying all the instructions and codes that form the strand of DNA and tell the DNA that makes up the cells how to operate. These are how Morris imagines them as they are not visible – they are nothing but chemical signifiers that trigger various biological actions in the body.



If we could look deeply within every thread of our DNA we might see more clearly as to who we are: our physical vulnerabilities, our behaviours, fears and our desires?

*Clockwise from top:
Cytosine, Guanine, Adenine, Thymine,
2017, oil on basswood 35.5 x 28 cm each*

Shapes

Art and science both share the desire to see beyond what is obvious, manipulating reality to understand it. In science, the scientist must raise questions while the artist must find ways to express these investigations through materials. In 2015, with news of the discovery of Pithovirus, which was found to be over thirty thousand years old, Morris became interested in how 'giant' viruses are raising questions about life as we know it. She sought out Chantal Abergel and Jean-Michel Claverie, Professor of Medical Genomics and Bioinformatics at Aix-Marseille Université, the discoverers of Pandoraviruses.

The introduction of shapes evolves out of Morris' visit to Marseille, and her research into the airborne nature of the virus and the understanding of vectors in science. Questioning how her work could be situated in a gallery space to suggest the jumping of viruses from one substrate to another generated ideas of multiple substrates using different grounds. Subsequently this developed into organic forms that on occasion either borrow from the rectangle or burst forth from it.

Breaking away from the rectangle offered the opportunity to venture into new territories.



Birth of Pandora
2017, oil on aluminium
190 x 115 cm

Living in the Genomic Era and developing an understanding of the meaning of new technologies, in particular, the implications of powerful new gene editing tools like CRISPR/Cas9 are a source of wonder for me. The idea that science can turn specific human genes on or off opens the doors to discussions around what it will mean to be human in the future.

Waiting for CRISPR Cas/9
Diptych, 2017, oil on canvas and aluminium
190 x 140 cm



The genesis of a painting, particularly one where there is more than one substrate, is more about subtracting and editing thoughts and ideas rather than the immediate projection of a concept.



A Genus of Viruses
Triptych, 2017, oil on polyester and aluminium
120 x 210 cm

Biography

Dr Suzi Morris was born in Ayr and now lives and works in London. This work coincides with the completion of her Professional Doctorate in Fine Art at the University of East London, kindly supported by Schmincke and da Vinci, following on from her Masters Degree in Fine Art from the City & Guilds of London Art School.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Cherry Smyth for her introduction to the catalogue in the form of her essay 'Of Blooded Things: the paintings of Suzi Morris'.

The leading German companies of Schmincke Paints and da Vinci Artists Brushes have been most benevolent in championing my doctorate and as a consequence these paintings. Their support has enabled me to explore painting materials in greater depth and push the boundaries of my practice. I am honoured by the production of the da Vinci Mottler Series 538 in my name and to exhibit this brush at the Herrick Gallery.

Finally my appreciation goes to Robin Arrowsmith for his belief in me, and to Fact Not Fiction Films for their fiscal assistance in introducing me to Laylah Perrin who assembled this collection of works for the catalogue to accompany the exhibition; The Viral Sublime, Herrick Gallery, Mayfair, London, 28 November -16 December 2017.

Recent Selected Exhibitions

- 2017 'The Viral Sublime', Solo exhibition, Herrick Gallery, Mayfair, London
- 2017 'The Residency', Herrick Gallery, Mayfair, London
- 2017 'Professional Doctorate Showcase', Viva Exhibition, University of East London
- 2017 A.V.A Gallery, University of East London
- 2016 'From the Studio Floor', Guild Hall Cambridge. Charity exhibition sponsored by MLM in support of Cam Sight.
- 2016 'Landscapes of Mind', Atelier- und Galeriehaus Defet, Nürnberg, Germany
- 2016 'Trumped', UEL Art Auction Group Show In support of University of East London BA Fine Art
- 2016 Professional Doctorate Showcase, University of East London
- 2016 Interior, AVA Gallery, University of East London
- 2015 Recent Graduates Section AAF Battersea Park, London. Selected as one of twenty recent graduates in the UK to exhibit eight oil paintings
- 2015 Artmasters, Truman Brewery, London
- 2015 'From the Studio Floor', Anise Gallery, Shad Thames, London
- 2015 Platform 1 Gallery, London SW12
- 2015 Joint exhibition with Ali Darke
- 2015 Professional Doctorate Showcase, University of East London
- 2014 Art of Angel Candid Arts Trust
- 2013 'Red Thread', MA Show, City & Guilds of London Art School
- 2013 Selected for Recent Graduates AAF Battersea Park London
- 2013 The Other Art Fair, Truman Gallery London
- 2013 Selected for Henley Festival of Arts
- 2012 Modern Artists Gallery, Whitechurch

Curation

- 2017 'The Residency', Herrick Gallery, Mayfair, London
- 2016 'Landscapes of Mind', Atelier- und Galeriehaus Defet, Nürnberg (Group show of oil paintings)
- 2015 'From the Studio Floor', Group show Co-curator with Jess Oliver Anise Gallery, Shad Thames, London

Residencies

- 2016 Co- Founder - da Vinci Painting Residency, Atelier-und Galeriehaus Defet, Nürnberg (Sponsored by da Vinci Brushes and awarded to five artists representative of The Royal College of Art, The Royal Academy Schools, Kingston University, The Glasgow School of Art and University of East London)

Conferences

- 2016 Wellcome Trust, Cambridge, Virus, Genomics and Evolution, Poster Presentation, 'The Viral Sublime'
- 2016 University of East London, ADI PGR Research Event, Poster Presentation, 'The Viral Sublime', 24 June
- 2015 University of East London, Presentation, 'The Viral Sublime', 22 April

Public & Corporate Collections

- Da Vinci Artists Brushes, Nürnberg, Germany.
- Schmincke Paints, Germany.
- Petrofer Chemical Industries, Hildesheim, Germany.
- Sedgwick Park House, England
- Sky Arts, London
- Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Aix-Marseille Université

Other private commissions held in collections in London, Turkey, Thailand, Hungary and Germany.

Recent Media & Awards

- 2017 Documentary in production, The Residency. Fact Not Fiction Films
- 2017 Da Vinci Special Edition Series 538 Suzi Morris mottler brush
- 2016 Co-founded Da Vinci Artist Residency Award for emerging painters
- 2014 - 2015 Production of 50 short films for Da Vinci Artist Brushes
- 2014 Doctoral work supported by Schmincke German Paints and Da Vinci Artist Brushes
- 2014 Presented 26 short films for Schmincke Paints in association with Da Vinci
- 2013 'Catching up with Suzi Morris' Kingston University Alumni
- 2013 Art Director – Academy Award Contender documentary film Shady Lady
- 2012 A.G.F Award for painting
- 2012 Selected film interviews for documentary: Gordon Cheung. Frieze, London, Rose Hilton. Messum's Cork Street Gallery, Frieze London

Publications

- 2015 Darrow Creative Commons Online. Article outlining my previous occupation as an art director for film. Available at: <http://darrow.org.uk/2016/01/25/art-direction-film-location-suzi-morris/#>
- 2013 'Parallels of the Sublime' – ISBN 5 060151 960191

Public Art Projects Film and Media Commissions

- 2016 'Trumped' - UEL Art Auction. Donation of work towards a group show providing fundraising for the BA Fine Art Degree Show and Catalogue
- 2016 A series of 45-second artists brushes demonstrations for da Vinci Nürnberg, Germany. Accessed online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZA6kC8L9b-J8&list=PLfGWveH7sacWEk4ZjY EJ1aHjafmV3f9M>
- 2016 H. Schmincke & Co.-GmbH & Co.KG. 26 originally English short videos translated into German for worldwide release teaching the use of oil painting materials. Accessed online: <http://www.schmincke.de/en/information/videos/oil-colours.html>
- 2015 Künstlerpensefabrik DEFET GmbH Nürnberg Art director in the production of a 2-minute commercial emphasising the handmade Accessed online: <http://www.davinci-defet.com/englisch/artist-brushes/media-centre/videos/da-vinci-handmade-in-germany.html>
- 2015 Künstlerpensefabrik DEFET GmbH Nürnberg Presentation interview: da Vinci DUROPLUS 2 minute commercial highlighting the company's direct involvement with professional artists Accessed online: <http://www.davinci-defet.com/englisch/artist-brushes/media-centre/videos/da-vinci-duroplus.html>
- 2015 Künstlerpensefabrik DEFET GmbH Nürnberg Production of twenty-six, thirty-second videos demonstrating professional artists brushes
- 2014-2015 Completion of a series of 26 short films promoting Schmincke products Released in 2015-2016 in English and later released over 2016-2017 in German with other languages potentially to follow Available at: <http://www.schmincke.de/media/mussini-yellow.html?L=1#6974> and: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjHbcxiWz_o

Herrick Gallery

www.suzimorrisart.com

ISBN 978-1-5272-1566-5



9 781527 215665 >