

Sarah Morris Brings "Strange Magic" to Art Basel's Unlimited show

The artist Sarah Morris is the director of one film and the subject of another at the mother of all art fairs in Switzerland this week.



SARAH MORRIS, STRANGE MAGIC, 2014. RED EPIC MX, 90 MIN

by KEVIN CONLEY JUN 17, 2015

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Sarah Morris hit the scene in the 90s as a painter of beautiful architectural meditations on the [corporate canyonlands of New York City](#)—part Mondrian, part Piranesi—that captured the Modernist midtown energy and allure in one off-kilter grid after another. She moved on to other cities—she nailed the interplay of light and ambition [in Las Vegas](#) and the mythic curvilinear hodgepodge [of Rio](#) too. The paintings seemed to be definitive, as close to mathematical proofs as you can get with sharp geometry and glossy house paint, but the more she kept at it, the more she seemed to lure you into her world view. "I recognize that the work plays with architecture, and with the history of architecture," she told me during a studio visit on a rainy day this winter. "But I can use it, and learn from it, and take the strategies and use them as a painter. These buildings, they're Paine Webber today, UBS tomorrow, and down the tubes the next week. They're icons of power, but they're nobody's. It's public. It's up for grabs!"



SARAH MORRIS'S PAINTINGS IN A PRIVATE COLLECTION

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In the intervening years, her shows have often included films that transfer her obsessions, her careful habits of mind, into short-form films, [on Los Angeles](#), for example, or [Beijing](#). They're all beautiful—Morris can't seem to help herself in that regard—but they also offer new avenues for her curiosity. "The films are an excuse to travel," she admits and then quickly clarifies. "They're an excuse to place myself in many situations that an artist would not normally be in." The films also allow her to use one powerful tool in her artistic kit: her persuasiveness. "How do you get into the Oscars? How do you get into the Beijing Olympics? People don't want to say 'no' to art. You look like a loser, first of all. I think art has a very strong ability to make people say yes. And I think your role as an artist is to push that and to make people understand that there is nothing to fear."



SARAH MORRIS, IN GRASSE, FRANCE, WHERE DIOR GROWS THE FLOWERS IT USES FOR ITS PERFUMES.

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IDOWNTON ABBEY/I WITH AMERICAN ACCENTS IS ABSOLUTELY HYSTERICAL

This week, her latest film, *Strange Magic*, which first appeared at the opening of the Fondation Louis Vuitton last October, is one of the anchors of the *Unlimited* show at Art Basel. (The *Unlimited* is a stand-alone exhibition that accompanies the art fair and acts as a tacit recognition that many of the most significant currents in art today don't fit tidily into the souk-like atmosphere of gallery booths in the fair proper.) For this endeavor, Morris exercised her persuasiveness on the Vuitton empire, visiting the fields where Dior gathers the flowers for its fragrances, the acres of cellars where Dom Perignon stores its Champagne, the Gehry workshop, the Louis Vuitton headquarters, the sidewalks outside the Bois de Boulogne, in the shadow of the new museum, where the French prostitutes wander at night.



A FILLE DE JOIE NEAR THE NEW FONDATION LOUIS VUITTON.

The film is dreamlike and mesmerizing: we fly inside the trusswork of the Eiffel Tower, illuminated and golden; we watch two young girls in the Tower's observatory scanning the City of Light; we see processions of bottles filling systematically with perfume; a scrawl appears on paper and it's Frank Gehry's. It's a moody working method that Morris has perfected to such a degree that the *Unlimited* includes another example in the style, this one by Anna Gaskell, who chronicles Morris filming or attending openings or moving about her own home, which is, not surprisingly, a modernist jewel of its own, a landmark Paul Rudolph apartment [on Beekman Place](#). Gaskell's homage is cheeky and loving at once but one thing that the work, *Echo Morris*, certainly accomplishes is to reflect the accomplishment of its model—if you're going to go to the trouble to appropriate an artist's tone and rhythm, it sure better be recognizable, influential, and meaty enough to leave you something to chew on on your own.

Morris continues to think in parallel, splitting her time between painting and film. She's been scouting locations in the United Arab Emirates—a new arena for her particular brand of fearlessness. "The country is 43 years old!" she says. "That boggles my brain. So what would it be like if an artist ended up at the Crown Prince's national day parade, with the tanks rolling by?" Part of what draws her to her latest location is this suddenness, a whole country invented out of nothing—a Formula 1 racetrack that goes straight through a hotel on a ten-mile-square island that simply didn't exist a decade ago. "In other places, like Paris, there's a long history, but I'm going to show you a photo of me in the desert where you can see it. You realize it's all just an idea."



MORRIS SURVEYS THE VASTNESS.

Top photo: Sarah Morris, *Strange Magic*, 2014. Red Epic MX, 90 min.

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