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NOVEMBER 2017

## RICHARD SERRA

MONUMENTAL,  
EPHEMERAL

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# SUZI MORRIS

## The Viral Sublime

November 28 -  
December 17, 2017

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

[www.herrickgallery.com/suzi-morris](http://www.herrickgallery.com/suzi-morris)

*Birth of Pandora*  
Oil on aluminium  
190 x 115 cm  
[www.suzimorrisart.com](http://www.suzimorrisart.com)





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Pipilotti Rist, *Ever Is Over All* (still), 1997, single channel projectors, players, sound system, paint, carpet

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### ON THE COVER:

Richard Serra, *St. John's Rotary Arc*, 1980. Installation view, *Richard Serra: Arc*, New York, 1980

# **PAINTING THE VIRUS**

AS SCIENCE STRUGGLES TO DEAL WITH THE LETHAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE ENTITY CALLED 'VIRUS,' ARTISTS SUCH AS SUZI MORRIS TRY TO LOOK FOR THE SUBLIME IN ITS MORBID UNIVERSE, AND LEND IT AN ANOMALOUS CHARACTER

BY ARCHANA KHARE-GHOSE





Suzi Morris



Suzi Morris, "Waiting for CRISPR," 2017. Oil on canvas and aluminium, 190 cm x 140 cm

**T**ristan Loraine, CEO of Fact Not Fiction films (a film and documentary production company based in West Sussex, England) first met Suzi Morris when she was an art director on his Academy Award-contender documentary, "Shady Lady." Morris had to create a large-scale, accurate replica of a map of Balikpapan harbor for use in a scene in the film where a squadron of pilots was being briefed before a bombing mission in World War II. BBC News was at the scene to film the shoot and interview the lead actors. But the news channel got more fascinated with the detail Morris had created in the map than the lead actors and this became the focus of its news story.

While recalling the episode, Loraine says that it showed him that Morris, despite her problems with her vision (she suffers from keratitis, a viral inflammation of the cornea) "was driven to always produce the highest quality work and had immense pride in her work. This is reflected today in her oil paintings with her trademark lines and a use of color that make her work unique." That also led to Loraine's company making a documentary film, "The Residency," that follows five emerging, leading artists in the UK (including Morris) spending time at the da Vinci residency in Nuremberg, Germany. The documentary, directed by Monika Grassl ("Girls Don't Fly," 2016) and supported by da Vinci and Schmincke, is due to be released next year.

In the meanwhile, the first exhibition by the artists of the residency took place in September in London, which completed the film. The second exhibition ("The Viral Sublime: Suzi Morris"), featuring works by Morris — the lead artist of "The Residency" documentary — will be held November 27 - December 17 at the Herrick Gallery at Mayfair, London.

MODERN PAINTERS spoke to Loraine and Morris about "The Residency" and the very different art that the latter practises. Here are excerpts from the conversation with Morris.

**There are not many artists who use biological science as an inspiration for their art. You have used it to overcome your fear of the condition in your left eye, yet you continue to be worried about your eye. Do you think art has a lot more to do to help you overcome it totally?**

Art helps us all in different ways to overcome life's challenges and I expect to never stop wanting to make art. Part of my inspiration comes from growing up with a scientist father. National Geographic magazines became my sources of inspiration, while feelings of isolation resulting from the loss of my artist mother, fuelled my

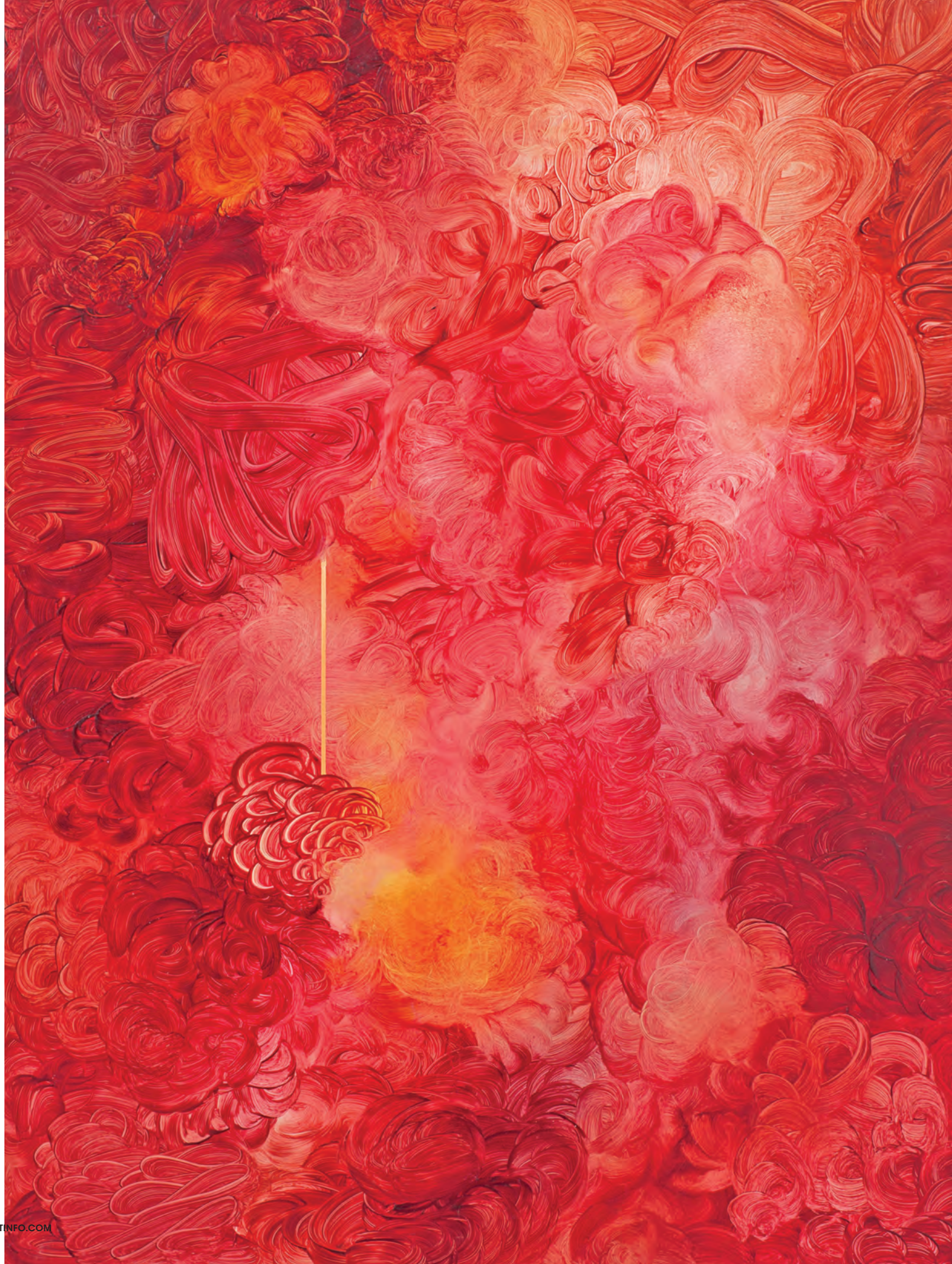


Suzi Morris, "On the Origin of  
Species Homage to Morris."  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 cm





Suzi Morris,  
"Complexities  
of Viscera,"  
2016. Oil on  
aluminium, 61  
X 46 cm





perception of the metaphysical. My eye problems emerged when my mother died and have continued ever since. The only way to relieve the anxiety of worrying about my vision deteriorating is painting. When I'm painting there are periods of time when I'm elsewhere and nothing else matters. I forget the physical world and the problems associated with being host to an unwanted virus. I don't think you ever overcome the gradual loss of a sense, particularly eyesight. It's a case of doing everything that you can in terms of leading a healthy lifestyle to manage the condition. Keratitis can cause blindness and each occurrence causes permanent loss of vision so it's a constant battle against fear. There are no words to describe the thought of not being able to see to paint, and yet having supported charities such as Cam Sight, through exhibitions sponsored by MLM [an engineering consultancy], I've met some amazing artists who are visually impaired. I'm a fairly positive and driven person so I think a condition like mine makes you value every day.

Studying for my doctorate and really "unpacking" what I am doing in my painting practice made me realize why I was driven to make the marks that I make. The experiences of such regular medical interventions and the therapeutic language used in the process of suppressing the virus have seeped into my imagination and practice.

**Your work also reminds one of the anatomical and botanical drawings and illustrations that helped make sciences visually understandable a few centuries ago. Have you ever been inspired by those drawings and illustrations?**

Absolutely. Before the advent of photography, artists were key to making science visually understandable. Advancements in medical research and science had such broad implications on painting that it's been fascinating to research and understand how artists throughout history have responded to the science of their time. I'm drawn to many of the artists of the 19th-century when the discoveries in science, astrophysics and medicine marked a historical shift analogous with the science of epigenetics and the discovery of ribonucleic acid (RNA) modifications, which are becoming one of the key conceptual revolutions today.

I'm inspired by the drawings of the artist and pioneer of modern neuroscience, Santiago Ramón y Cajal. I admire the fragility of his drawings: how he depicts the axon lines that wrap around the bulbous soma and its dendrites. He made groundbreaking discoveries about nerve structures and their connectivity, no doubt playing a part in my painting, "Burden of the Dendrite."

I've also come to understand how the influence of the new sciences and genomics is as key to situating my practice as the discovery of microbes, X-rays and unseen



Suzi Morris, "Burden of the Dendrite," 2017. Oil on aluminium, 61 X 46 cm





Suzi Morris, "The Nakes Virus," 2017. Oil on canvas, 190 X 120 cm

energies was for artists such as the French Symbolist painter Odilon Redon, and the Czech painter and graphic artist, František Kupka. Redon represented invisible microbes and what would be regarded today as viruses. Some of his works evoke the terror from pressures resulting from the Industrial Revolution as it brought diseases. Kupka was one of the earliest artists to pioneer abstraction so he is a strong influence. He studied the new sciences at the Sorbonne, particularly electromagnetism thus his interest in the objectivity of science and the subjectivity of unseen energy resonates with my thinking. In my diptych, "Waiting for CRISPR/Cas9," [CRISPR/Cas9 is genome-editing technique that could herald a cure to genetic disease] the curved shape of the substrate echoes thoughts of the curvature of a lens, space-time curves, or of the virus without acting as a direct reference.

**The very word "virus" stands for most things negative and the word "sublime" is in just the opposite spectrum. Did this juxtaposition baffle you initially?**

I don't see them as being antithetical to each other, however it has taken my entire doctorate to begin to understand the complex interrelationships between the virus, the notion of the sublime and my painting practice. The main turning point in my research was discovering how science is now harnessing the lethal powers of certain virus families using new technologies of genetic engineering to develop cures for cancer. A virus being put to therapeutic use is a paradox: its "kill" or "cure" properties afford it a far greater status than it has been used to. This understanding not only generated thoughts of disembodiment and resurrection in my painting: it led me to question if viruses can be engineered for specific purposes where does this lead and how will it affect being human in the future? Furthermore, it is effectively the birth of advancing technologies in the digital era that have enabled science, as a consequence of the Human Genome Project, to reveal the human blueprint. Until now orthodox medicine has tended to treat the symptoms of diseases as opposed to seeking out their underlying causes and eliminating them. The implications of genetic engineering techniques are vast, generating questions about the proximity of Huxley's "Brave New World" where the natural processes of birth, ageing and death are no longer recognizable. As scientists delve deeper into previously misunderstood biological systems, the prospect of being human in the future or, indeed post-human, is increasingly hypothesized. This insight paved the way towards my taking the virus from being something more commonly perceived as degenerative or as you mentioned "negative," and offering it new life as something awe inspiring. **MP**