

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
August 1986

FACT SHEET

- EXHIBITION** MORRIS LOUIS
- DATES** October 6, 1986 - January 4, 1987
- ORGANIZATION** John Elderfield, Director of the Department of Drawings and Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art.
- SPONSORSHIP** The exhibition is made possible by a grant from GFI/Knoll International Foundation.
- CONTENT** This exhibition of forty-five paintings is the first full-scale retrospective of American artist Morris Louis to be shown in New York and the second to be seen in the United States. It surveys the artist's development through his brief but highly prolific career. From 1954, the date of his first Veil paintings, to his death at the age of forty-nine in 1962, Louis created a unique, late form of Abstract Expressionism, then radically transformed it in a way that prepared for the reductive art of the sixties.
- Included are major works from three main series: the lyrical Veils (1954 and 1958-59); the dramatic, highly innovative Unfurleds (1960-61); and the coloristically refined Stripes (1961-62). These paintings, together with a number of transitional works, trace the artist's preoccupation with combining drawing and color and with creating an exhilaratingly open and unimpeded pictorial space. The exhibition comprises as large a group of Louis's mature paintings as have ever been shown together. Many borrowed from private collections have rarely if ever been exhibited. Others, drawn from major museum collections in this country and in Europe, are among the artist's most famous works.
- THE ARTIST** A contemporary of Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell, Morris Louis was born in 1912 in Baltimore and studied at the Maryland Institute of Fine and Applied Arts, graduating in 1932. He was employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), first in Baltimore in 1934 and then in New York where he moved in 1936. He remained uninfluenced by contemporary artistic developments in New York, and in the early forties returned to Baltimore where he lived with his parents until he married in 1947.

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For the first five years of his marriage, Louis lived in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., where he painted obsessively but in relative isolation. In 1952 he moved into Washington and met Kenneth Noland when both were teaching at the Washington Workshop Center of the Arts. Through Noland, he met the New York critic Clement Greenberg. His first solo exhibition opened in Washington in 1953. Prior to its opening, however, Greenberg had introduced him to the work of Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler, among others. Profoundly affected by their art, Louis determined to change his own direction. He destroyed much of his earlier work and began a period of conscious experimentation. This included working together with Noland, even on the same canvases, in techniques derived from Pollock's poured pictures and Frankenthaler's color-stained approach.

Then, early in 1954, Louis began pouring waves of thinned acrylic paint down canvases loosely tacked to a wooden framework, producing fields of richly modulated, luminous color, overlaid by a final darker scrim. He thus produced the sixteen paintings that comprise his first series of Veils.

Impatiently moving on, Louis spent over three years making pictures in an aggressively painterly style. After seeing a selection of these exhibited in New York late in 1957, however, he destroyed the more than 300 works he had produced in this style and returned to making Veils. Comprising 125 works, the new Veil series of 1958-59 was far more precisely structured than before. At first somber and severe in their dark "bronze" coloration, the paintings gradually brightened as the artist began abandoning the use of the final darker scrim. This led him into a new period of experimentation, which produced among other works, the vivid Florals of 1959-60.

In 1961, Louis began his extraordinary series of Unfurleds in which roughly parallel, linear streams of pure color were poured diagonally from the sides of often immense canvases leaving open, unpainted centers. He produced nearly 100 of these ambitious works in about ten months. Louis emphasized color even more in the series of Stripe pictures of 1961-62. Composed of abutted vertical stripes, poured and guided down the canvas--which on a few occasions was stretched so as to make the stripes horizontal or diagonal--this series of over 200 paintings gave to stained pigment the intensity and velocity of light. Louis died in September 1962.

PUBLICATION

Morris Louis, the first book-length study of the artist written by John Elderfield, is supported by a generous grant from Marcella Louis Brenner and published by The Museum of Modern Art. 46 color and 40 black-and-white illustrations. 192 pages. Clothbound, \$40.00; distributed by New York Graphic Society Books/Little, Brown and Company, Boston. Paperbound, \$18.95; available in the Museum Store.

TRAVEL Following its premiere at The Museum of Modern Art, MORRIS LOUIS will travel to The Fort Worth Art Museum, Texas (February 15 - April 12, 1987) and to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (May 21 - July 26, 1987).

LECTURE In conjunction with the exhibition, the noted critic Clement Greenberg will discuss the artist's work on Tuesday, December 9, 1986, at 8:30 p.m. Tickets are \$7.00; Museum members, \$6.00; students, \$5.00, and are available at the Museum's information desk or by sending payment with a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Department of Education, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019.

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No. 64

For further information or photographic materials contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.