

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
October 1986

MORRIS LOUIS

October 6, 1986 - January 4, 1987

The first full-scale exhibition to be shown in New York of the work of American artist Morris Louis (1912-62) will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from October 6, 1986, through January 4, 1987. Organized by John Elderfield, director of the Department of Drawings and curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, MORRIS LOUIS features forty-five paintings produced between 1954 and 1962. Made possible by a grant from GFI/Knoll International Foundation, the exhibition documents the evolution of this prolific artist's work, from his first Veil paintings to his later canvases that foreshadowed the reductive art of the sixties.

The exhibition consists of the largest group of the artist's mature paintings ever to be exhibited together, many of which are from private collections and have been rarely exhibited to the public. These are enhanced by examples of Louis's most important paintings borrowed from leading American and European museum collections. 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.

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

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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.

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 of lung cancer in Washington, D.C., in September 1962. One year after his death a memorial exhibition was held at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Morris Louis is the first book-length study of the artist written by John Elderfield. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, the 192-page volume contains forty-six color and forty black-and-white illustrations. The clothbound edition is available for \$40.00 and distributed by New York Graphic Society Books/Little, Brown and Company, Boston; the paperbound for \$18.95 is available in the Museum Store.

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).

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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