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Sea change of styles

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MALCOLM MORLEY at Hayward Gallery

DUE to an unfortunate childhood incident involving masturbation, a model boat, a German V1 bomb and an angry stepfather, Malcolm Morley, painter, septuagenarian and winner of the first Turner Prize, has had a lifelong obsession with all things nautical and salty. Which is fortunate, as the boats that pop up all over this retrospective provide light relief from what would otherwise be a tedious lesson in stylistic change in his painting style from 1960 to the present day.

Morley has lurched from one self-contained stylistic phase to another. In the early Sixties he was a card-carrying abstract expressionist, then sparked off the photo-realist painting movement with a number of precise, brightly coloured acrylic paintings of cruise liners and their fishy contents, ie onboard dinner parties. The summer of love clearly got to Morley, as he swapped acrylics for oils and photo-realism for a looser expressionist style, which culminated in another movement he is credited with initiating, the neo-expressionism of the Eighties. Classic Morley pieces from the period, such as Aegean Crime with its loud colours, loose figuration and a postmodern pick-and-mix approach to content and subject, capture the essence of the Eighties perfectly.

But stocks of hair mousse and redbraces ran out, as Morley took note. The caring-sharing Nineties were upon us and a new focus on psychoanalysis led him into what can only be described as his neo-infantile phase, in which the boats make a triumphant return. The final gallery is filled with massive, pop-art comic-style paintings of flat-packed model aeroplane kits, so simply rendered you could cut into the canvas and build yourself a Messerschmitt or Spitfire. And lurking in a vitrine as you enter are several model boats that Morley has recently made. At least it's a happy ending.

Until 27 August. Hayward Gallery, South Bank Centre, SE1.

