

## Jenny Morgan: Painting Body and Spirit

By Emily Colucci



Jenny Morgan, SHADOW SISTER, 2016. Oil on canvas, 38 x 26 inches

"I think of it as two sides of the same coin," reflects artist Jenny Morgan on her combination of realism and surrealism, "one side is structure and routine and the other is chaos and uncertainty." Mirroring her own observation, Morgan's haunting paintings merge almost classical portraiture with hallucinatory elements ranging from bright shocks of color to blurred renderings of facial features. Harnessing the tension between these two seemingly disparate fields of painting, Morgan's works exude a palpable psychological nature, capturing how emotions and experiences can be written on the flesh.

I first encountered Morgan's ghostly paintings during a sweltering Bushwick Open Studios weekend in 2013. Turning a corner in an overstuffed industrial building, I glimpsed one of Morgan's evocative and penetrating monumental nude paintings, which provided quite a

welcome surprise even in the overpopulated open studios. Years later after two solo exhibitions at Chelsea's Driscoll Babcock Galleries, Morgan's work has evolved while still maintaining the essential significance of her exploration of the body's internal and external worlds.

With a deeper exploration of color in her recent paintings including inverse color schemes that create a painterly X-ray of the body, Morgan spoke with me about the evolution of her use of color, her choice to largely paint both women subjects and self-portraits and how she confronts death in her work.



Jenny Morgan, LINK, 2014. Oil on canvas, 84 x 60 inches

**Your use of intense colors adds an otherworldly effect to the paintings. Looking at your newer works, you are even beginning to use inverse or negative color schemes such as in *Role Reversal* and *Helpful Specter*. When did you start experimenting with unexpected colors in your paintings and how has it evolved over time?**

Color has played a role as an emotional cue or atmosphere for my subject matter since I started working with the figure. Over time, color has evolved to function as a second skin for the body—first layered on top of realistic skin tone through glazes, but more recently, the color has merged with the body and a surreal palette has replaced realistic skin tone. The further I move away from the realism of the body, the more otherworldly the subject matter becomes. It's been a slow process because there is always a part of me that wants to honor the real, but I push myself to let go and allow the subject matter to move further and further into unknown psychic and emotional space.

The experimentation with inversions gave me a profound insight into how the work functions on deeper levels. I understand that there is true power in the work and I have started to view my creative process as a form of sympathetic magic. When starting the inverted self-portrait *Helpful Specter*, I felt that I was turning myself inside-out, turning white-to-black and vice versa held strong symbolic meaning psychologically. I started to dream about the paintings. They came alive and communicated to me why they needed to exist. It was actually pretty intense. Making that last body of work had some real life effects and altered my

external environment. I learned making the work is a collaboration—the paintings now have a discernable voice and are able to independently communicate with me.



Jenny Morgan, HEAVENFACED, 2014. Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

**In discussing your work with color, experimentation seems to play a large role in your practice. What is your artistic process?**

My process starts first with being inspired by someone in my life. I will feel a connection to someone and ask him or her to pose for me. I photograph them and rely on our conversations and emotional exchange during the photo session to supply me with the conceptual material that will influence the direction of the painting. The foundation of the paintings relies heavily on the photo reference. I build up layers of the realistic structure, giving myself a familiar ground to jump-off and experiment. The experimentation comes in the form of blurring wet layers of paint, glazing with potent color or sanding down layers of paint using sandpaper. The playful and destructive nature of disrupting the finely painted realism is where I feel most alive during the process. Altering the realism is what places the subject matter in otherworldly or spiritual spaces. I have moments when I can push the techniques further and times when I cling to the realism for more stability or comfort.

**Even though you do have portraits of men, your subjects tend to be women. Why do you choose to largely paint the female form?**

The simple answer is that I am most interested in the female form. It could be a matter of self-imaging, but also identifying with the female body and having more access to the psychology of the subject matter. The deeper understanding of the female allows me to go farther into the psychic spaces I want to explore. I also feel passionate about presenting the female nude with self-possessed power and ownership. It's a way to express the sexual power of a woman in a way that negates the male gaze and asks the male viewer to look upon the nude female with respect and admiration. I pay attention to how men respond to the fully nude work and gauge their understanding of gender politics based on their reaction.

With that being said, I am opening myself up more to the male nude and have some portraits lined up. It's a growth-oriented process and I'm challenging myself to explore new territory.



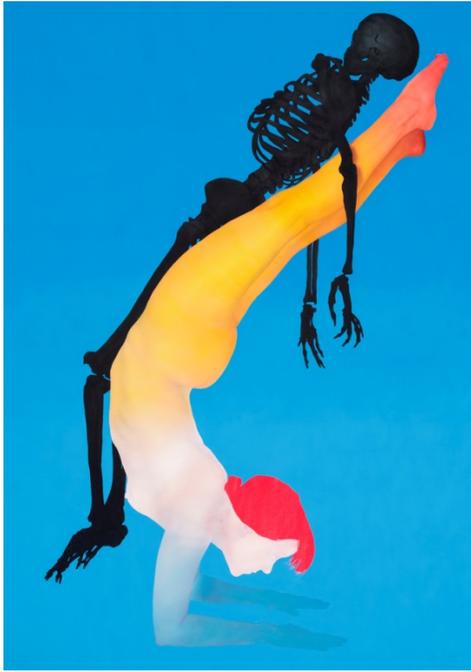
Jenny Morgan, TURNING THE TIDE, 2016. Oil on canvas, 21 x 20 inches

**Similarly, self-portraiture remains a constant thread throughout the evolutions of your painting. What interests you in self-portraiture?**

I use the self-portraits as a way to check in with myself. They also serve as anchor-points within any body of work, allowing me to understand on a deeper level the themes and narratives that I'll be working with psychologically. It gives me a safe space to dive into my own mind and ruminate on what's going on in my life—and hopefully I can work through some things emotionally. I feel freer with the self-portrait as well because I don't owe myself anything and I often can explore new techniques more freely.

**The specter of death appears quite frequently in your work including skull and skeletons, which recall classical still life as much as human anatomy. What is the role of death in your paintings?**

I believe that you can't talk about life without also addressing death. It's present in the work because I want to examine the human experience as a whole. Loss, transition, pain and fear appear as often—if not more so—than the lighter side of life because the work is so often a place of healing and processing. My 2015 show with Driscoll Babcock Galleries, *All We Have Is Now*, dealt directly with the theme of death because I was grieving the loss of a family member. As I addressed these feelings of grief and loss through the work, I found that I was able to come full circle and I began painting about sex and rebirth. Death as a concept became animated through the use of the full skeleton, using this symbolism transformed death as an idea into death as an entity. Death became a "He" and actually felt like a comforting

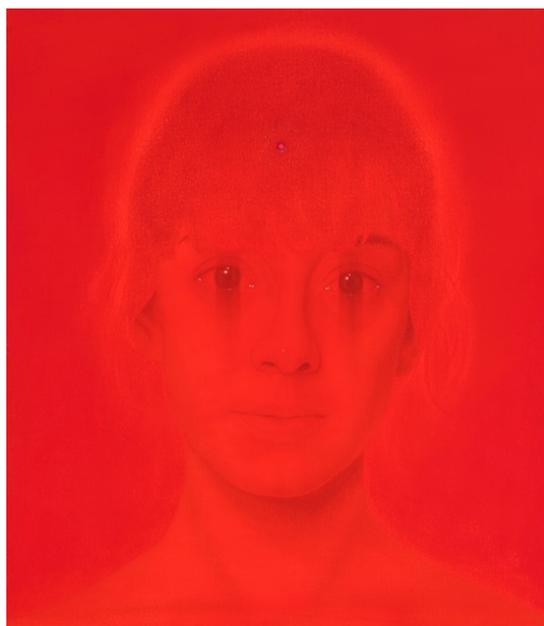


Jenny Morgan, SKELETON WOMAN and YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE, 2015. Oil on canvas, 82 x 58 inches

figure who guided me through the grieving process. I've learned that painting is truly a spiritual practice and my goal is to continually deepen my relationship with my work.

**Parallel to your own ongoing interrogation of your relationship to your art, the viewer unquestionable senses that they are regarding something more intimate than a traditional figural painting. How would you like to affect the viewers of your work?**

Above all, I would love for the viewer to find space in the work to reflect on their own well being and to see something mirrored in the painting that they can relate to on an emotional level. My intent is to leave the viewer a bit haunted. I want them to feel as if they have just met someone.



Jenny Morgan, OMEN, 2015. Oil on canvas, 32 x 28 inches