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Jenny Morgan: Growth and Renewal

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I've been holding off writing about Jenny Morgan's work because I've had trouble figuring out how to look at it. It is very beautiful, but of a kind of formal beauty which tends to push me out of a painting. This is a weakness of mine and I am working on it.

Until very recently, I hadn't actually seen her work in person. Let me share with you the experience of seeing it at a remove, and then describe how physical presence adjusts that impression.

Here's a painting from her current solo show, "All We Have Is Now." This piece is fairly typical of the aesthetic she's developed over the past few years.



LINK, 2014
Oil on canvas, 84 x 60 inches

Familiar elements include the layering of a nearly monochrome, front-lit tonal rendering of the female nude over a sherbet-like varying color field, hyperclarity and darkness of hair, nipples, and belly button, blurring of the face, and crisp edges where figure meets flat, bright ground. There is a kind of industrial perfectionism to this approach. The delicate layering allows no corrections to errors made during the rendering. The pristine ground prohibits the canvas from getting even slightly dirty during the painting. Stephen Jay Gould remarks that a perfect evolution erases its own history, and Morgan paints to erase the history of her work; process is nothing, goal everything.

So fierce is her will to control that she has recognized and incorporated into this aesthetic her own, and the viewer's, need for mistakes, for chaos. She provides two safety valves to avoid total procedural determinism:

First is the unevenness of her sherbet-field. The gradient from red to pink to orange to yellow under the two women is uneven and washy. It could be perfectly smooth, but it isn't, it never is in her work. It lets in a little breeze of the unpredictable.

The second valve is the blurring of the faces. As far as I can tell, she's sanding down finished renderings, wiping away her own work and possibly augmenting the faded features with dark streaks. This too is an unpredictable procedure, this attack on completed work. Apart from any narrative meaning it holds, it transmits a sense of danger, of risk -- the face is the most important part; how much will she wipe away before her painting is destroyed?

And yet, each of her paintings makes use of this same toolkit, with most of the elements under total control, and the messy bits corralled in their right places. I have found their foregrounded graphic design and their utterly polished quality alienating. I could see that they were beautiful, but I did not want to look at them.

When I finally got around to seeing them in person, though, I was reminded of something my friend Kelly Nichols once said. I was guiltily confessing to wanting some new Apple product for no particular reason except that it was awesome. Kelly, who is a brilliant and enigmatic designer, said, "Since when is awesomeness not a valid consideration in evaluating a technology?" I hadn't considered this point of view.

I had occasion to consider it a second time looking at Morgan's work in person. It is, if anything, more perfected in person than in photographs -- she is quite willing to place a highlight on a single point of the canvas where warp and weft overlap to create a tiny bump. Her figures are scaled monumentally, at perhaps 1.5 times life size. Morgan herself is very small, and if she is anything like many other small women I have met, she is interested in strategies for claiming the space she deserves in the world. Many of her paintings are self-portraits; in them, her grand interior scale leaks outward, like the TARDIS on Trenzalore. To me this is very likable, her transmutation of a personal circumstance into an aesthetic of authority.

It is easier, in person, to make room for what Morgan's work is offering, and to stop asking it for what it does not have to give. It has tremendous formal beauty, focused ambition, a strange but first-rate set of technical skills, and a charged creativity of composition. Its intense graphicality, coloring, and proficiency give it a Cupertino feeling; perhaps it references psychedelic posters, but for me, it is more sympathetic with the iPod or the Balloon Dog, and

their finite and distinct catalogues of colors. Awesomeness, as we use that word now, seems like a fair way to describe it.

Morgan's work has so rigorous a degree of precision that it exhibits a bias toward fixed literary meanings conveyed through visual symbolism. Consider HEAVENFACED, completed not long after LINK:



HEAVENFACED, 2014
Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

Here we have the classic scenario of a figure and its reflection, in which the figure's gaze is offset from our own and yet, uncannily, the reflection meets our eye. Atop this narrative proposition, Morgan layers a scenario in which the real figure exists in a world of hard edges, and the reflected figure in a spooky fading world where the individual features wash away. Only the intense but distorted eyes remain, which is to say, awareness remains. The reflection lives in a haunting world of awareness which is different from our own familiar plane. And yet, the right eye of the real figure is beginning to exhibit the same blur as the reflected image. The reflected world is bleeding back into the real one. So what are we to make of the direct contact the reflected gaze makes with us, the viewer? Must we blur too? We have here three figures -- two of her and one of us -- in a striking evocation of a familiar literary concept, aphorism 146 from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*: "when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you" -- or, more generally, you will tend to become the thing you gaze upon -- including yourself, including enlightenment.

For all that seeing these paintings in person reconciled me with them, I do not think I would feel so compelled to write about them if Morgan were not already growing past them. This is no small thing. If you go to her website, and study her work from 2009 to 2014, you will see her refine the toolkit we've been discussing. There used to be more elements to it, and less skill. Sometimes roughnesses crept in at the edges. With each painting, she has thrown something away, and improved her execution of the elements that remain. Having reached, at

last, a purified form of her initial impulse, you would think she'd stick with it for a while. It is testimony to her seriousness as an artist that she grew restless right away.

We turn now to early 2015, and find that she has brought a skeleton into her studio.



IN THE MOMENT (DEATH HYMN), 2015
Oil on canvas, 56 x 38 inches

Well this is very interesting. You can tell it's her first time, or close to it, dealing with this skeleton, because it has the same awkward kind of pose as a model one works with for the first time. You don't know your new model, and your model does not know you, so between the two of you, you choose a weak or obvious or generic pose. Morgan hesitantly bends the skeleton back, letting the arms hang, and starts from there. She's trying a new subject, and doesn't know what it does yet.

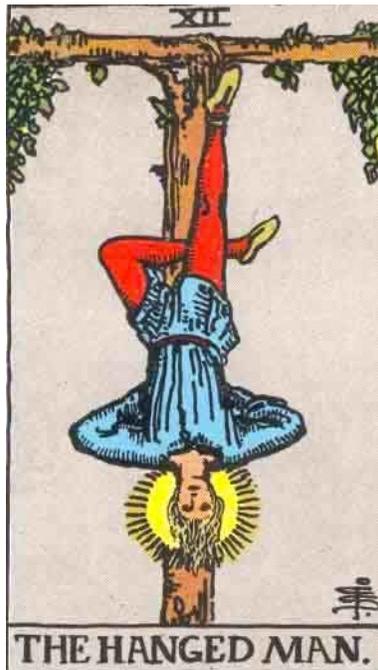
She is also trying new tools, or at least mixing up the ones she's got. She tries a new thing in each part: here jet black, there rendering without color, here a new algorithm for the sherbet-field, there a stain edging into the pristine yellow ground. It does not especially work for me, and yet I like very much that Morgan is so clearly laboring to shock herself out of her assumptions about how to make a picture and what to make a picture of.

Next she takes a stab at synthesizing the elements of this new paradigm with her literary sensibility:



POV, 2015
Oil on canvas, 56 x 38 inches

We see some but not all of the elements of the first skeleton painting. The handling is surer now, the pose decisive, the color coordinated. In fact, she has imported the hanged man from the Rider-Waite tarot deck:



Even as she is groping her way toward expression in this new territory, her choice of the tarot tells us that she is becoming preoccupied with magic. Magic takes many forms, but I think one of the important ones for artists lies in making the leap from *explanation* to *assertion*.

Artwork that *explains* comes stammering up to you, wanting to account for every little thing. It feels a need to justify its contents, setting up clockwork cosmologies which can only be grasped for a moment before artist and viewer alike forget their intricacies.

Artwork that *asserts* is content merely to be. Often it can be explained, but explanation is not its goal nor its mode of creation. It comes from a blazing core of creativity, and the artist has matured enough to trust it -- to step out of its way. I think of Francesco Clemente and William Kentridge as two modern masters of assertion.

Morgan soon stops thinking about magic and begins simply performing it: she asserts.



IN THE MORNING OF THE MAGICIANS, 2015
Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches

Consider how much lighter this is than the work we have been considering, how fluid in composition and effortless in aspect. The jumpy background color -- gone. The rendering of the figure -- gone. The individuation of the face -- gone. Both the hesitation and the overdetermination of the pose of the skeleton -- gone. This painting falls into the exact configuration natural to it, without the index finger of the artist nudging all the bits into position. Morgan trusts her minimal elements, and tells a very simple but open story of a dance of life and death, of weight and weightlessness, burden and flight and letting go. She reconciles in this piece the strict perfectionism of her method, which survives intact, with the demands of art, which makes so much of its home in mystery and a dreamlike flux of meaning.

This is not to say that the maturity of this piece cancels out, or even precludes continuing, the kind of work that Morgan made before. Let's look at one last piece from the show, painted during the same period that Morgan was trying to figure out what to do with the skeleton.



DARK STAR, 2015
Oil on canvas, 70 x 48 inches

To me this is one of Morgan's strongest applications to date of her earlier idiom. The range of values is more pleasing, the coordination of colors more beautiful and more ambitious. The match of hue and expression on the face, that mix of vulnerability and catastrophe which seems to give the painting its name, suggest to me that the literary skew of Morgan's work has developed into a psychological skew, a more complex and trusting means of perceiving and expressing the humanity of her figures. At the same time that she commands the medium, she surrenders to the work.

What we see, then, is that the new revitalizes the old. There was nothing wrong with what Morgan did before, except that she already knew how to do it. She was close to seeing that line of image-making, so clearly a labor of love spanning many years, wither away. In setting out to question what she did and expand what she could do, she breathed new life into her first mode of working.

This is a standing dilemma of art as a process of making. Mastering the means of making the work leads to great creativity, because creativity feeds on basic obstacles. But overcoming those obstacles often long pre-dates the heart of the artist losing interest in the given mode of working. Resolving the formal and technical problems does not mean one is done with the thirst to make the work.

Most artists, as they grow, should abandon what came before. Many do not, and go on rehashing the same few motifs for many decades. The ones with integrity let go of the past. There is a tiny third category: a few who blaze alternate paths to keeping their labors fresh. Morgan is pursuing this more difficult goal. Her path has bifurcated, and at least for now, her new ideas and her established ideas are talking to each other and helping each other along.

So this was what was so exciting for me about "All We Have is Now" -- not only the specific qualities of the work, but what the body of work tells us about the still-developing process of its creation. It is a show full of discipline, creativity, growth, and hope. It vibrates with possibility, it is an unfinished, exhilarating story. Well done, Ms. Morgan, and best wishes for many years of new roads.