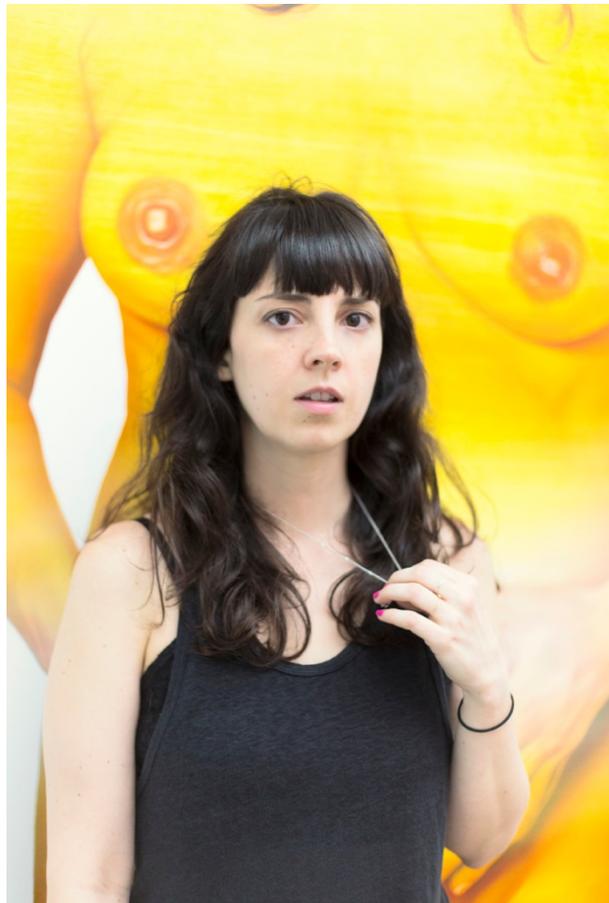


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Jenny Morgan: Catch Me If You Can

Kurt McVey



Jenny Morgan, photo by Monet Lucki

It is difficult these days to recognize a truly masterful piece of artwork, as our eyeballs are bombarded with thousands of images a day, most of them easily digestible, like mushy, lukewarm nursing home cafeteria food riddled with not so secret laxatives. As we stumble through a blurry haze of art fairs and poorly hung and overpopulated group shows, works tend to mesh together, like strangers on the street, and in the worst possible Jim Morrison context,

with some perhaps a tiny bit more attractive or interesting than the last, though for the most part, ultimately forgettable. That is why it is vital to take a moment to declare that Jenny Morgan's 2015 work "Dark Star" essentially a portrait of a young, in demand art model currently living in New York named Syrie Moskowicz is one of the most well crafted and emotionally striking paintings to immerse in the last quarter century and should by all rights and means stand alongside John Singer Sargent's "Portrait of Madame X", or even Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" which the piece instantly recalls, as a work of art that will endure the ages. What makes "Dark Star" special, and this is somewhat the case for all of Morgan's work in "All We Have Is Now", her second and refreshingly impressive (remember being impressed by art?) solo show at Driscoll Babcock Gallery, is its ability to perfectly straddle the line between the classical, figurative, and representational approach to image making, while catering to an immediate contemporary urge to be vibrant, Pop, sexual, slightly conceptual and even graphic in an almost advertorial sense. "Dark Star" hits all the markers of what a great piece of art should be; fun, timely (women retaking control of their bodies and careers from a patriarchy) and hypnotic to look at, an emotional catalyst for the viewer, as well as a timeless and ever-evolving story told within a 70 x 40 inch frame.

"Dark Star" actually came to be after Morgan sent her young model to Chinatown to have her "aura read", presumably in some weird little shop somewhere. Syrie returned with a Polaroid, essentially a two-dimensional image based mood ring that in conjunction with the artist's own photograph of her model, merged to become the important (remember when that word meant something?) work that it is. To stand in front of "Dark Star" is to surrender completely and utterly. It's almost impossible not to be completely absorbed and this is truly impressive as it comes at a time in the history of art and humanity when a great percentage of the population is only interested in being absorbed in themselves. Perhaps this is why portraiture has fallen away from the contemporary dialogue, especially considering photography has, like painterly portraits, had its day. Could we be truly afraid of looking at ourselves and exploring our humanity, our faults and failures as opposed to our strengths and successes? Are we frightened of introspection despite an endless flood of selfies and an emphasis to create a personal brand in an increasingly social media based tech driven marketplace? Have we lost sight of who and what we actually are? Are we ready to look in the mirror once more and see our true reflection? What is it about "Dark Star" especially you ask? Syrie's (or the goddess she evolved into) desperate, vulnerable and sensual gaze, the highlights in the eyes, the pouty ripe lips, her young, supple body, nude and frozen in time, the inquisitive fight or flight stance, the simple composition, the sensitive but salient color gradation, beginning with her stark, comic book red hair, her diluted Technicolor blue face, neck and torso fading into a wash of purple, pink, orange, and ultimately yellow, as the background, an art deco explosion of vanishing lines cutting outward through a thick wash of royal blue to a deep oceanic green, all emanating from Syrie's abdomen, a deep naval Sacral chakra, an inexhaustible well of untold human and otherworldly possibilities. The work is simply magical, powerful, the show's obvious standout, a outright masterpiece, and one should not be afraid or deterred by aging art world hipsters or jealous artists posing as bloggers to call it like it is.



Jenny Morgan, "Dark Star" 2015 Oil on canvas 70 x 40 inches

Morgan is all too aware of the obstacles she faces in making works of this nature. Even John Driscoll, the gallery's owner, expressed how difficult it would be to package and ultimately sell this particular body of work to a collective consciousness of buyers still caught up in the vicious cycle of the market driven deification of "Crapstraction" and "Zombie Formalism" or whatever you want to call indiscriminately throwing paint on a canvas. It's a testament to Mr. Driscoll and the gallery's young director Tess Schwab for standing behind Ms. Morgan and her work, which varies quite a bit from her first show at the gallery, 2013's "How To Find A Ghost"

which showcased portraits that were considerably more “damaged” in a conceptual sense, and therefore, paradoxically, more accessible to modern viewers and buyers.

“All We Have I Now” which concludes July 2nd, takes its name, somewhat ironically from perhaps the best and most popular (can these things coexist?) Flaming Lips album, *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* (Warner, 2002). Like the album and each of its tracks, Morgan’s works tackle the ephemeral nature of existence and the larger themes of life, death, rebirth, motherhood, cultural hierarchy, quantum theory—all that go for the jugular stuff lesser artists only talk about but are too afraid or too unskilled to put on the canvas. Also, like the album, the message is packaged in bright, almost fluorescent colors, hence the Pop. It’s a shame as Morgan’s own thoughts on her style are still polluted by the larger art world peanut gallery, as she often sites her style as “pejorative” or an immature MFA technical crutch out of which she’s yet to graduate, despite leaving SVA in 2012 with the glowing praise of professors and ongoing mentors like Marylyn Minter, who also deals in the figurative and remains kooky and weird (remember when artists were kooky and weird?). All this, while simultaneously admitting that she made “the most genuine article of her creative spirit that she possibly could.” What more can we ask from our artists? Why are we so afraid to glower them with praise when they succeed in being completely honest with themselves, those closest to them, and their inner artistic spirit?

“Dark Star” is only the shining crown on an otherwise stellar show. Similarly, Syrie is only one out of several models and personal friends Morgan features in the exhibit. Adriane Schramm and her daughter, *Love Psychedelic*, make several striking appearances, as well as the lithe and shamanic Natalia Yovane, who brings a balletic playfulness to works that could have easily been overshadowed by the presence of a full skeleton. Lastly, is Jenny Morgan herself, who is featured in several stunning self portraits, which were influenced greatly by a strange encounter the artist had with a real life doppelganger, a young woman named Heather who the artist met and photographed in their shared home town of Salt Lake City, Utah. This experience shook Jenny to her foundation, from which she rebuilt a personal manifestation of the self, which one can witness in “Shadow Play” a self portrait with a dark, creeping hand in an alien shade of blue, perhaps the artist’s own, which seems to be pulling away a veil or flaming red hair, which would obscure a face that is decidedly coming into focus and not the opposite.

Much can be said about this show, as each individual work contains a story that links to a specific Shamanic experience, a daunting omen, the loss of a family member, an ongoing interaction with a poltergeist, and other influences both dark and light. The one thing that must be said, however, is twenty-three days remain before these works come down. The artist herself claims to not be returning to this territory anytime soon. Much like a fleeting ghost, catch it if you can. **WM**