

A Note of Thanks

Andrew Morrow, November 26, 2021

Sitting down to write thanks for this exhibition feels like an impossible task. Having come to understand painting as a collective act with almost boundless parameters, I'm not sure how I can adequately give thanks for all the things-big and small, direct and incidental-that go into a painting. But I'm willing to try.

It seems silly to give thanks to an abstract concept, but I'd like to start by thanking the act of creation itself (or however we chose to define that thing beyond the self that keeps the artist company in their studio). When I listen to it, it elevates the work, making it unknowable, even to me. As for painting, we're almost 20 years in now together. We've been through it all, and I still feel like I'm just at the beginning.

I would like to thank everyone who took the time to share a word or gesture of support over the past year. You've quieted the persistent studio mate of doubt. And to everyone who shared photographs from their lives, I thank you for your trust, and for freeing my work from the echo chamber of my limited voice. And to the sitters. You kept me company in the studio. You appeared, as yourselves, and in this honesty, gave me so much to paint. Our sessions straddle the commonplace and the transcendent in such surprising ways and I have learned so much about painting and friendship through them.

To Mick Wilson, Steven Henry Madoff, and my classmates at the SVA, I can't thank you enough for sharing your incredible minds with me. Your influence on my thinking was profound and enduring.

And to Sky Goodden. What a gift to see my work through your words. Thank you for the beautiful text.

To the team at Studio Sixty Six, thank you for making all of this come together. Sachi, thank you for being the care-taker of my work, and Sam, thank you for your vision for the show. And Carrie, knowing you've got my back means the world to me.

And lastly, to my friends. I can't thank you enough for understanding the erratic, and sometimes selfish rhythms demanded by a life in art. You keep me grounded, happy, and continually growing. Thank you.

And to my mom, who other than my sister Alison, is probably the most talented artist in the family, thank you for those early lessons, and for being my constant and vocal champion.

To my boys, Gavin and Cameron, thank you for your blues and your pinks. You were with me at the easel and now you're here in the room in each brushstroke and every dab of colour.

Lastly, to my wife, Sheila, a beautiful soul and the balance in my life. Thank for understanding what it is to be an artist, and for the unending support that makes this all possible.

To everyone who's reading this letter. Thank you for your time, your attention, and for your belief in art. Love to all.

Being Together in Time

by Sky Goodden

Final: Oct. 27, 2021

We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.

- Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

Before I sat down to look at Andrew Morrow's paintings and write this text, I couldn't tell you what I was doing. I was conscious, but in the way we all are, at home, moving in a sort of half-waking flow. I believe my cat swished around my ankles as I stood in the kitchen, waiting for toast (a lucky guess.) I might have moved to the piano in an act of procrastination that is typically un-volunteered? The days pass like this, without much sense of conscious punctuation.

We have spent the past twenty months shorn of the casual witness: the anonymously-known but intimately-felt presence of the peripheral observer. Your fish monger can serve as this; your local variety-store owner; the Italian neighbour whose name you still don't know, but you trade in tomatoes and plums. We have read about how much these relationships affect us, and how much their absence can be measured in our own diminished sense of ourselves. And conscious or not, we have likely noticed it.

Andrew Morrow – who would really rather this text not be about Covid, and I get that completely – has done something remarkable in the time of Covid. (Sorry, Andrew. I'll keep this tight.) The casual witness he has brought to his 'sitters', who are largely unknown to him, manifests a shared relationality – that quiet, observational exchange – that so many of us have been missing.

It reminds me of the French writer, poet, and philosopher Édouard Glissant, who famously put his attention to the "common-place," or what he termed "source reality," as a font for the imaginary. Morrow made similar grist of a fallow mill. Beginning with a call-out on Instagram, he brought strangers

together for “studio sessions” where they were invited to live their lives near their screens – eating dinner, watching a movie, playing guitar, reading, petting the dog (there is much loving attention paid to our loving animals). Morrow painted them in real time across this intimately-shared space. Having only worked occasionally from live models before, these new challenges also introduced new invitations. Within a sitting there is the requirement to get the image down more quickly, Morrow told me, moving through the value and tones of his drawings faster, and then deepening and arranging the various sitter “satellites” back in his studio. And you can see it: the paintings vibrate with their own gestural making, a loose but alert confidence in hand; art possessing the same life it discerns.

Glissant’s ideal poet is a real-time “builder” of a grammar and syntax, and while this attention to construction can produce an ultimate *langue*, it’s the act of building that received the crucial status. He emphasized the “poet writing” over the “poet thinking.” Morrow has moved his hand through a time of stillness and forged passive connection with strangers in a period of isolation. (He’s ambivalent about whether the paintings are the trace to the event, or the event themselves.) A redistribution of significance, either way, is always interesting. And the paintings remain an essentializing principle – without them, these are just people hanging out on Zoom, after all, one party observing another that pretends not to notice. But the process of their coming into being, bringing people together for passive friendship, for peripheral attention, for quiet connection ... the work contains the social *doing* that holds their pulse.

Inviting variety and chance encounter into the space of painting (an activity typically single-authored and often isolated), Morrow also sourced the “commonplace” at home. Putting to work leftover latex paint from his children’s bedrooms, he patches over pewter-grey tracks that signal joint, gesture, and foundation, and shifts in daisy yellow, streaks of Carolina blue, shimmers of blush and coral pink, all interchangeable and overlapping. The palette suggests an interior universe whose whorls of energy, like dust motes soughing in the kitchen light, cohere us around even our dullest, most puttering activities. They swirl out of open windows and across alleyways, a ripple of buttery yellow ribboning around a woman’s arms as she pulls up her hair; surfacing across another’s couch, as she regards her cat. Legs go tucked beneath a writer at her kitchen table, a blue waving calmly by to help sustain a day’s diminishing light. From pink-faced dawn to sun-drawn afternoon to the inevitable, inner-lit and navy night, Morrow’s Brueghel-like *mélange* of joyful, contemplative, searching scenes – altogether distinct to this time of isolation (sorry, again, Andrew) but also eternal – continue to reflect back on their making. “All these people supporting my practice; it’s not me,” Morrow says; “it’s not the painter alone in his studio making their work. There’s this network sustaining it, which feels very, very different.” He takes a moment more, to reflect. “My job is to find the painting.”

Andrew Morrow: an appreciation

It is a rare thing, over a lifetime of looking at art, to have a jolt - a moment of recognition. When, ten years ago, I first saw Morrow's paintings, I had such a shock. Now here's a real painter, I thought, a bold artist, in both form and content, and here's a challenge to this historian, formed in the reassuring orthodoxies of Modernism and its children.

Those works were apocalyptic in tone and confrontational: embattled and intertwined beasts and men; desperate humans copulating in lunar landscapes, struggling to survive in an imagined, but possible future disaster. I was spellbound and intrigued. The technique was masterful, seemingly effortless, expertly controlled. The content was explosive and perhaps transgressive.... and yet there were bucolic details, and the paintings' seductive painted surface always asserted its presence.

Morrow has committed himself to engage with history painting, not only with its forms but also its grand narratives. This kind of painting has a long pedigree of the most glorious kind: imagine conversing with the likes of Rubens or Tiepolo! He has tackled both these artists, as well as others, with virtuosic gusto, in the full understanding of their power, that is, the power of myth and allegory in the telling of human stories. But this artist's iconography extends far beyond a simple restating of well-worn visual tropes. Unlike other contemporary artists who mine the history of art as if it were simply a pattern-book to be recycled and rearranged, he looks deeper, and his paintings reveal to us our humanity. This revelatory quality is the true, but rare mark of any meaningful art.

His imagery stems from multiple sources: classically-inspired yet very actual nudes jostle with wild beasts; in an idyllic landscape, a Mountie looms over men labouring as well as indifferent nude bathers. Seemingly paradisiac scenes hint at impending conflict and death. Odd shifts in perspective and in the scale of figures unsettle the mind. Myth and reality always interplay in these elusive and contradictory narratives.

What is obviously graspable in Morrow's paintings, what is in plain view, is the beauty of their oil paint laden brush strokes, their colour harmonies, their balanced composition, their unifying quality of light. One singular painting leaves out all overt human presence: two looming, rocky islets float in a sea of light, connected by bridges. Caspar David Friedrich could not have done better in reaching for the symbolic and the sublime. The work is ravishing in its mystery, in its scale and luminosity.

Not long ago, Morrow returned to basics, drawing from life, experimenting with the cubist prism, with collage, avoiding colour. These drawings and paintings are disturbing and taxing, as if he wishes to test his talent and purge his excesses. Closely observed bodies entwine in a sculptural mass, piled up against the picture plane, like the Laocoon turning from sinuous mass to line and back to frozen stone. In the collages, bodies are savagely dismembered and adroitly reassembled. There is no exit here, no innocence in this Sartrean world. One of the monochrome paintings fills the plane with a single monumental three-legged female figure, dominating a fantastic landscape. Is she goddess or monster? Morrow's underlying hints at classical mythology and form are back in play.

As it is with us all, I don't think Morrow can ever avoid facing himself and conflict. For the painter, the battlefield is the blank canvas, writ large, challenging him to engage in constant exploration and fearless adventure.

Anna Babinska October 2019