

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.

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