

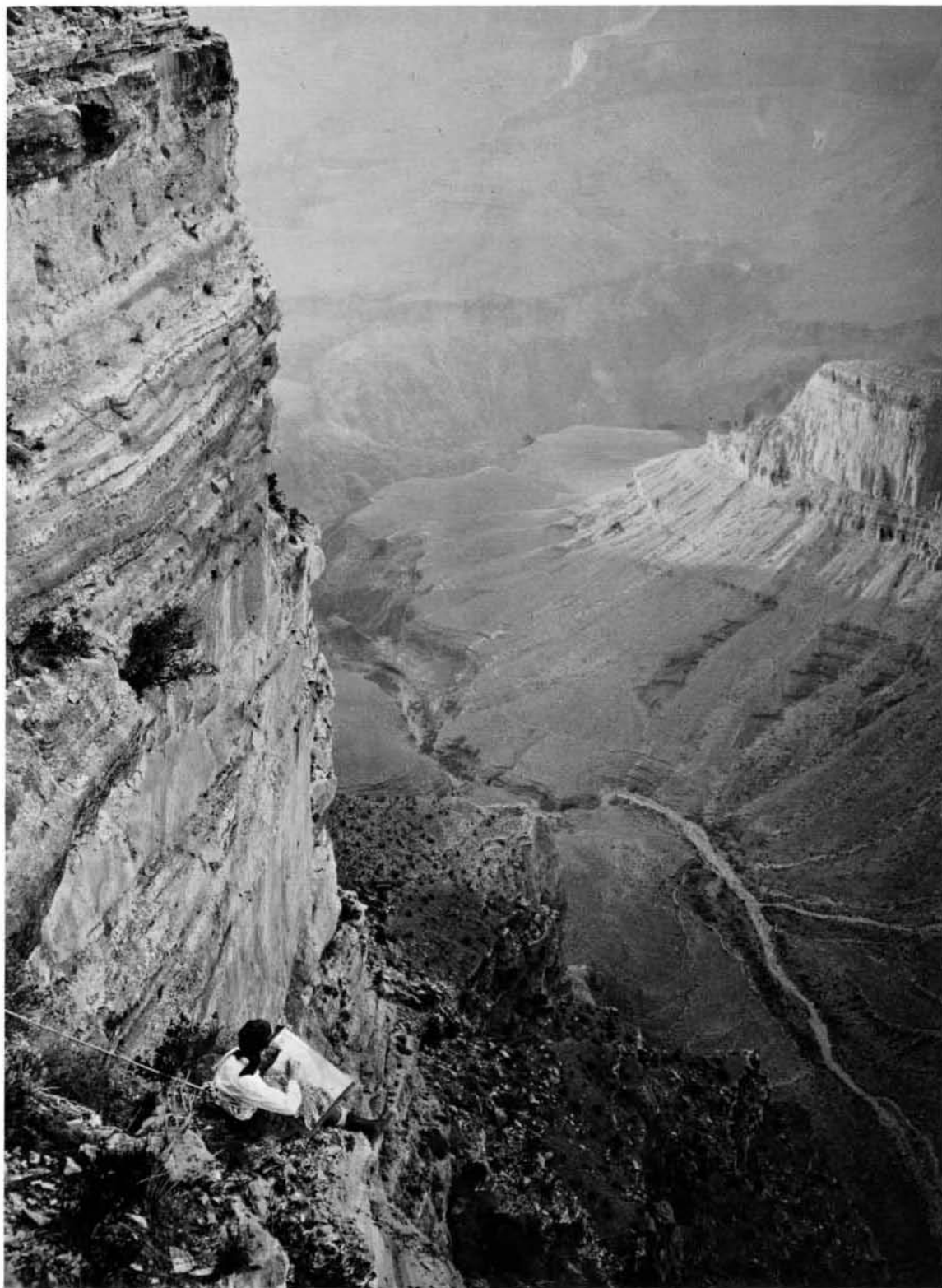
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Barbara Morgan: Philosopher/Poet of Visual Motion

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Barbara Morgan Sketching in Grand Canyon, photograph by Willard Morgan, 1928

Barbara Morgan

PHILOSOPHER/POET OF VISUAL MOTION

By Curtis L. Carter

Barbara Brooks Morgan, born in 1900, is an American treasure whose full scope and importance as an artist is yet to be discovered. She is well known in the visual art and dance worlds for her penetrating photographic studies of American Modern dancers such as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham. Her photomontage and light drawings rank among the classic experiments of modern American photographic art. Morgan's drawings, prints, watercolors, and paintings were exhibited widely in California in the 1920s and in both New York and Philadelphia in the 1930s. She temporarily abandoned these arts and became a photographer in 1935 to allow more time for raising her children. Although she subsequently resumed work in drawing, watercolor, painting, and mixed media, which continued through the 1970s, these other aspects of her work have been largely overlooked since she emerged as a prominent artist photographer in the late 1930s.

An overview of Morgan's place in twentieth century art is long overdue. It is our intent to

provide such an overview with special emphasis on the aesthetics and philosophy exemplified in her works. Morgan's extraordinary verbal gifts, through which she has articulated her aesthetics and philosophical views, are an important supplement to her visual expressions. Very often her own words provide the best texts from which to augment the visual testimonies to her expression.

This exhibition offers a representative selection of Morgan's photographs in a context with her drawings, prints, and watercolors from the 1920s through the 1970s. Many of the non-photographic works, and some of the photographs, are shown here for the first time. In order to give a more defined focus to relationships between the photographs and other works on paper, and to provide a meaningful selection suitable for a travelling exhibition of manageable scope, no paintings are included. The exhibition is intended to create greater awareness of the range of Morgan's accomplishments in art, and to provide the viewer a first hand opportunity to explore the

artist's development of rhythmic forces and other themes in various media.

In some respects the exhibition challenges conventional assumptions concerning photography's uniqueness as an artistic medium by inviting viewers to think about similarities between photographs and other visual arts media as well as differences. For instance, John Szarkowski has argued that photography as an independent medium, when compared to painting and other visual media, offers a radically new picture making process that depicts "actual reality" of the world itself, and attempts to bring significance to its fragmented segments by framing them within a finite picture space.¹ Morgan herself initially refused to consider the notion that photographs could be works of art, because they seemed merely to record rather than to create. By comparing Morgan's photographs to her drawings, prints, and watercolors, the viewer of this exhibition is able to rethink the question of whether,



Barbara Morgan in Her Studio, photograph by Willard Morgan, 1942

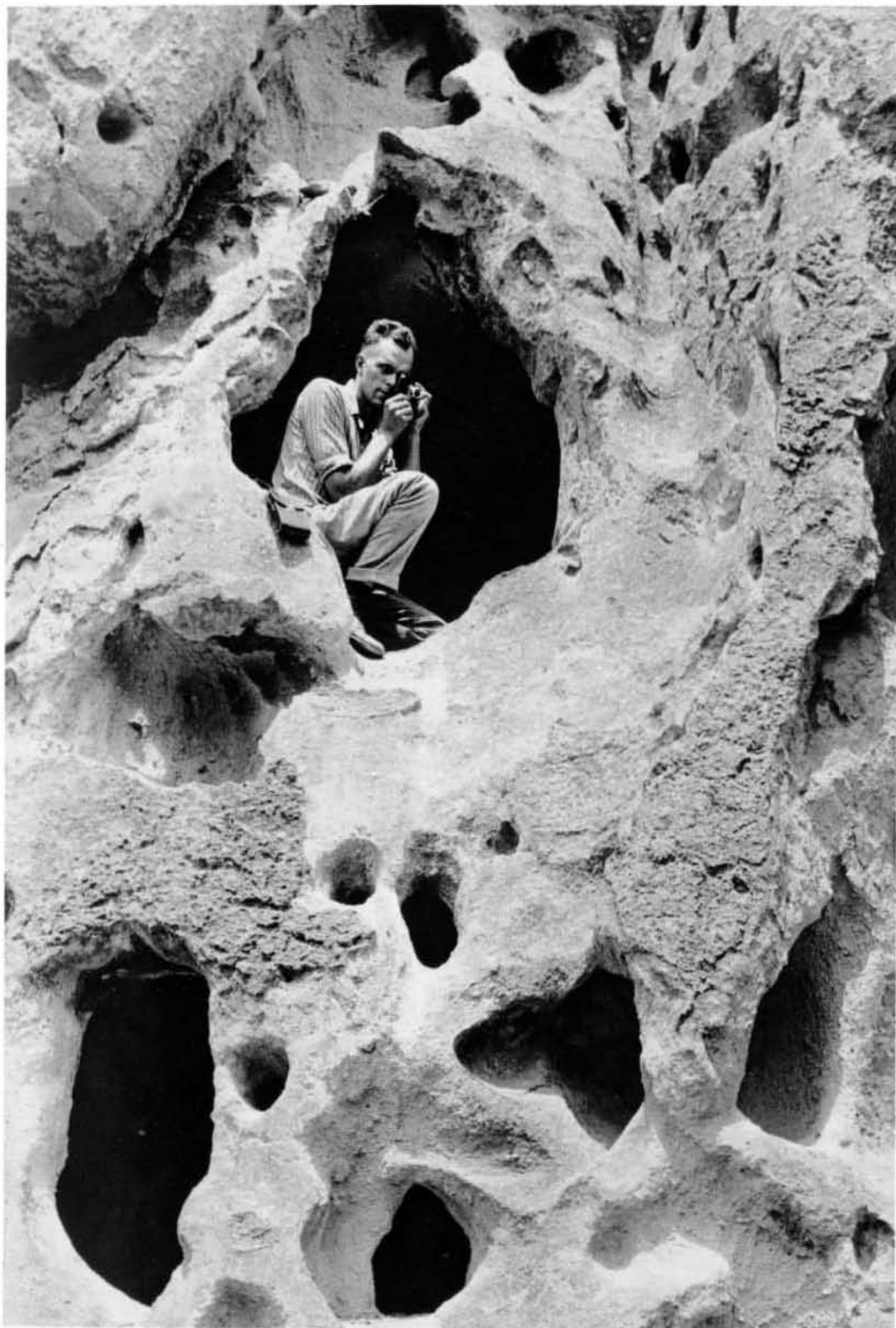
and in what significant ways, photographs differ from other works of art on paper. Our intent in presenting the photographs with the drawings and other media is an invitation to the viewer to explore and consider their underlying themes rather than to impose any doctrinaire point of view.

Our approach is not to deny the uniqueness of the respective media, but to question the absoluteness of this proposed separation of the arts according to media. A review of more than a thousand works by Barbara Morgan convinced us that important relationships exist among her works, in various media. These include a commitment of the artist to modernist experimentation and design, as well as visual expressiveness based on her idea of the "subordination of realism to the spirit, the idea, and the emotion."

BARBARA MORGAN'S PLACE IN AMERICAN ART

Morgan began her career as an artist and teacher at U.C.L.A. in the mid 1920s. She became an advocate of modern art when most of her colleagues in America were oriented to traditional approaches to art. In a 1926 *Los Angeles Times* article, Morgan wrote: "Modern art when at its liveliest is a movement of discovery of the new beauties and new poignancies of our own age and of all ages, as the quick, not the dead, we owe ourselves the creator's thrill of leaping into this search."² A subsequent article by Morgan, published in 1927, further outlines her views on the necessity for growth and change in art:

We get along very well with art as long as it stays in the art histories, for there it is tabulated like the parked cars we pass. But when our own personalities are plastically growing and art, too, is in the modern making then indeed we are in a 5 P.M. traffic jam. . . . It seems strange that although we see the inevitability of changes in the universe we are always reluctant to incorporate it. . . . Now that this peak of leisure yields strange



81. Willard Morgan with Model A Leica in Bandelier National Monument, 1928

*and monstrous creations, there is a great panic and the people fear that their culture is being betrayed by mere capricious novelty seekers and distortionists. But this is only in minds fearful of change. . . . To the elastic mind there is a great urge to grow in the new rhythm of things, to unfold and flower from the soil and seed of our own time.*³

Morgan's identification with modernist concepts locates her work with respect to the main developments of twentieth century art. Her creative years span a broad scope of changes in style and concept. These changes include the German Expressionist and *Neuesachlichkeit* art of George Grosz and Ludwig Meidner; the photomontage of Man Ray, Moholy-Nagy, and John Heartfield; the Avant-Garde Dadaist art centering on Marcel Duchamp; the Futurist art of Carlo Carra and Umberto Boccioni; Surrealism with Salvador Dali and Joan Miró; and the Social Realist art of Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, as well as the Abstract Expressionists' art and later developments. Morgan shares with the German Expressionists a critique of the societal exploitation of mankind. She enjoys the experimental spirit of the Dadaists, and her uses of rhythmic motion are akin to the Futuristic developments in art.

Although Morgan abhors the egoist tendencies of a Salvador Dali, the whimsey of a Miró's surrealist images is reflected in the spirit of her own drawing and paintings. There is also a strong affinity to the organic rhythms found in the works of Abstract Expressionists such as Arshile Gorky and Willem DeKooning. Morgan draws upon these various sources to forge her own place in modern art. She accepts with the pioneers who generated these various aspects of modern art, the necessity for experimentation and individuality as integral components of any serious approach to art. Her occasional stylistic references to these sources only reinforces her own awareness of a rich and varied world of art which had its beginning in the

caves of Lascaux and elsewhere.

From about 1923 through 1929 Morgan exhibited regularly in museum shows at the Los Angeles Museum (1923, 1929), The Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego (1926, 1927), the Oakland Art Gallery (1927, 1929), The Los Angeles Public Library (1929), and other sites in California. She was one of twelve selected to participate in an exhibition of "Paintings by Western Women" held at the Oakland Art Gallery in 1927. In 1929, her sculptural tiles won first prize at the Los Angeles county fair.

Although her watercolors and woodcuts from the 1920s do not appear radical to a late twentieth century eye, Morgan's contemporaries, as reflected in the press reviews of the *Los Angeles Times*, described the work as "experimental." For instance, Prudence Wollet, a Los Angeles critic, wrote the following: "For out and out independence, Barbara Morgan has taken the most liberties yet, in my experience of woodblock art. Every element of her themes, even to the technicalities of framing, contributes ostensibly, in bringing each part into perfect unity of composition and color harmony. . . . I contend that this experimenter bears watching."⁴ Morgan continued to exhibit her prints at the Weyhe Gallery in New York and the Mellon Gallery in Philadelphia after moving to New York in 1930.

In 1955, twenty years after she began her career as a photographer, Morgan resumed painting.

*What a liberation to swing the brush, feel the squish of paint on the tooth of the canvas . . . and smell turpo in the studio. Best of all . . . the unpredictable was coming out of me. . . . I opened up the dike to what had been dammed up . . . the sensuousness of painting which I had deeply missed . . . the making of a tactile, textured 'thing', instead of an illusion under gelatin! Brush motion began a nerve-stream hookup to my imaginary world.*⁵

Morgan's efforts resulted in paintings for several group shows and a one-person exhibition of paintings and drawings in 1961 at the Sherman Gallery in New York.

Her remarks above reveal an understanding of the differences in media, as well as insights into how the artist views the media issue for herself. Was the return to painting a signal that Morgan's true love had all along been painting? Or was it an opportunity for the artist to reconcile for herself certain remaining tensions between photography and painting? Morgan resolved the tension by defining the place of each in her own creative life. Photography is necessary to cope with and adequately present the complexities of our modern environment. Painting, however, enables the artist to present, with greater sensitivity, the interior and personal aspects of human expression:

*For me, photography and painting are two irreconcilably different, indispensable opposites . . . that electrify my creative currents . . . to be 'alive in light', I need the attributes of both silver halides, camera and brush*⁶

PLACE IN THE WORLD OF ART PHOTOGRAPHY

Morgan's decision to "convert" to art photography in 1935 was the culmination of more than ten years of experience with photographing in conjunction with her husband Willard Morgan. The practical demands of caring for two children were but one factor in this decision. More important for our purposes is that she found photography more suitable as an artistic medium to the challenge of capturing her new city environment of New York, with its machine-like structures and energies.

Her subsequent associations with photographers such as Ansel Adams, Beaumont Newhall, and Minor White, all of whom held her work in high regard, attest to Morgan's high standing in the field of art photography. Morgan

shares with Adams a deep respect for symbolism expressed in realistic images abstracted from nature. Morgan realized that realism and abstraction are but contextual points along a continuum of possibilities that can be used for making artistic pictures. She frequently departs from nature's vocabulary to invent her own expressive forms and symbols. To create her own vocabulary, she draws especially upon images of both the city and the dance, manipulating these images at will, as well as the photographic processes, into photomontages or light drawings. Morgan shares with White a poetic, expressionistic vision of photography and a belief that photography, through its artistic modes, is able to convey the essence of the human spirit.

Morgan's photographs fall along two important axes in the history of photography: Expressionist and manipulated image photography. In addition to her previously noted connections with Expressionist photography, her work clearly has strong affinities with artists such as Frederic Somers, and Henry Holmes Smith. Photographic meaning for these artists extends beyond the photograph itself and consists of a symbol expressing personal vision and cultural values. Photography from an Expressionist's point of view is not essentially a vehicle for documentation, but aims for interpretation. Expressionists such as Morgan do not necessarily emphasize visual and pictorial means of description unique to the camera medium, or try to minimize the personal role of the photographer as others of her generation might. An exploration of the relationship of the camera to other visual arts media and subjective transformation of the materials being photographed is essential to their work. Images in photography formed from this perspective are often metaphorical. Similarly, Expressionists such as Morgan argue for a separation of the medium as a fine art from its functional and casual "snapshot" traditions.

The second main axis running through Morgan's

photographs is her experimental uses of manipulated or altered images. Manipulated photographs were very important to Morgan's initial acceptance of photography as an art, because they freed her from any fears that a photograph is a mere record or copy, and demanded of her the highest imaginative and technical efforts. Immediately upon her decision to begin functioning as an artist photographer, Morgan distanced herself from "pure photography" and began creating through photomontage. Photomontage refers to multiple image systems created by such means as combining negatives, double exposures, as well as by cutting and reassembling images to serve a new aesthetic purpose. Morgan's decision to practice altered image photography also extended into experiments with light drawings with a light beam directed by hand motions, and with camera-less photograms.

In pursuing these experimental aspects of photography, Morgan followed a tradition begun by prominent photographers of the mid-nineteenth century such as Robert Demachy in France and H.P. Robinson in England who argued that art photography benefitted from manipulation of the "straight" photographic images. Her more immediate predecessors in photographic manipulations, however, were Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, and John Heartfield, all of whom were innovators who conducted important experiments through photomontage, Rayograms, and solarized prints. Morgan herself took photomontage beyond its prior usage and virtually invented the techniques for photo-light drawings.

Since she began her art photography in the mid 1930s, Morgan has achieved recognition throughout the world.⁷ Peter Bunnell, professor and curator of photography at Princeton University, has written, "Mrs. Morgan is an artist of outstanding ability . . . She has been a significant force in photography for nearly a half century . . . Today she must be considered one of the few living masters of the photographic medium."⁸

AESTHETICS AND PHILOSOPHY OF ART

From what has been stated previously, Morgan falls into the mainstream of modernist-expressionist developments of the twentieth century. Certain concepts necessary to understand her own individual work within these broad categories of modernist-expressionist trends are presented here. These are aesthetic essences, rhythmic vitality, simultaneous multiple perspective, abstraction, and social aesthetics. All of these concepts are expressed both in her own writings and in the various stages of her photographic and non-photographic works.

Aesthetics is the key to understanding Barbara Morgan's art, because she integrates her artistic and philosophical vision inseparably in her art. For the present purposes, "aesthetics" refers to the attitudes, values, and concepts that influence artists and assist in forming the public's responses to their works. With Piet Mondrian, Edward Weston, and other modern artists of the twentieth century, Morgan believes that an artist's role is to search for "aesthetic essences." In a 1927 article she wrote, "The creative person's role, as I see it, is to extract the most significant, most moving aspects—to refine and essentialize them, to get rid of the unnecessary, and to articulate the subtlest, most intense, most profound expression possible."⁹ Returning to this theme in 1971, Morgan wrote, "Essence yes, but even more than essence, I learned . . . that by looking at something and absorbing it emotionally, intellectually . . . that you could inwardly transform it . . . you get symbolism . . . external meaning that goes beyond the individual reality."¹⁰ Morgan believes that the artist's role is to organize that perceived essence or energy into something that speaks aesthetically and communicates some life experience. This is nowhere better exemplified than in her "*Lamentation*," 1935 (No. 63) which expresses an intense experience of grief and anguish.



Barbara Morgan with 4x5 Graphlex, photograph by Willard Morgan, 1942

The discoveries that Morgan uncovers in her search for essences lead her to affirm the corollary expressionist notion that the artist's role is to convert the essence of an emotional vision into artistic means, which then arouse aesthetic emotion in the viewers. This process is especially evident in Morgan's photograph of José Limón in "*Mexican Suite*" (peon), 1944 (No. 78), which portrays the agony of a peon being made a serf by a Spanish Conquistador. In this particular work, the peon appears in a predominantly horizontal position:

*. . . struggling upwards, head back, knees up, toes crunched, hand gripped, his rib cage so tensely arched that the ribs are visible . . . The skeletal feeling of his torso and the encircling darkness symbolize the partial death he is suffering. It is almost like a crucifixion—the physical and spiritual agony of a tortured race epitomized by the body in pain.*¹¹

Perhaps the most central idea in Morgan's aesthetics is rhythmic vitality, or what a gestalt psychologist such as Rudolf Arnheim might refer to as the dynamic forces that apply alike to the visual arts and to the structural orders of feeling, perception, and the entities of the material world. Morgan initially discovered the concept of rhythmic vitality in the Chinese Six Canons of painting. She learned from the Chinese that the goal of artistic expression is to present the essence of life force. Morgan views rhythmic vitality as the central concept which permeates all of her artistic efforts whether in prints, drawings, paintings, or photographs.

Whether my work is large or small, abstract or realistic, the one thing that must be present is Rhythmic Vitality. Sometimes I find it logical to keep the realistic or external form of things and other times I find it more meaningful to eliminate certain details while preserving others. In photo-

*montage I go clear over into fantasy and in my light drawings into total abstraction. It doesn't matter if it is dance or montage or people or nature. There always has to be the presence of energy.*¹²

Rhythmic vitality exists in the flow of human emotions and the dynamic processes of world civilizations, according to Morgan. Similarly, it operates within nature's processes such as geological formations that emerge as the Grand Canyon. These various forms of rhythmic vitality find parallels in the creative processes that produce Morgan's photographs and other art works.

Because of the complexity and multiplicity of the modern world, Morgan recognized a need in her art to express multiplicity in thought and emotion. This need led to simultaneous multiple perspective, which allows the artist to compress into a single image multiple aspects that would otherwise have to be read in a sequence of separate images that could not adequately portray the tensions and interrelationships of various aspects of a situation. Photomontage is the artistic vehicle that best exemplifies Morgan's approach to this concept.

*Photomontage originates in this multiple kind of life we are living . . . the chief function of montage is that of mirroring this complex life. The multiple form which expresses it must not be chaotic but instead it must be channeled until it makes sense . . . Photomontage also originates in the peculiar technical character of the photographic processes. One photographic image can easily be projected over another in the enlarger . . . unlike painting, the negative permits the making of any number of prints of any desired size and these may be cut up, cropped, silhouetted, painted upon, and combined with other materials, and used with great flexibility.*¹³

Especially important to Morgan's work is the

fact that photomontage embraces simultaneity, multiple perspective, and the ability to create both empathy and tension by juxtaposing formal means and discontinuous thoughts and subjects from different images. For example, *City Shell*, 1938 (No. 46) juxtaposes the natural form of a shell aged over possibly millions of years against the newly formed, man-made Empire State Building. Similarly, photomontage can show overtones of fantasy, reality, memory all at the same time. For Morgan this meant that the photomontage was able to give a truer picture of the actual complexity of things than would a single image photograph.

Although photomontage emphasizes multiplicity, the artist must somehow harmonize the multiple aspects into a coherent design for the sake of visual clarity and comprehension. Morgan's genius in this respect make her photomontages a model of aesthetic and visual clarity.

While Morgan's works embrace both abstract and representational images, her art reveals a strong interest in abstraction, which concerns the formal aspects of art emphasizing light, color, line, shape, and texture and their interrelationships. Her early woodcuts such as *Mono Lake*, 1931 (No. 6) and the later drawings such as *Myths of the Future*, 1955 (No. 26), strongly reflect her concern with these matters. Her applications of abstraction extend into the photographic medium as well. This is especially evident in the light drawings such as *Emanation I*, 1940 (No. 58). Photographic abstraction is for Morgan ". . . the form-changing, form-making, expression inherent in the medium by which photography recasts the objectivism . . . to project subjective vision."¹⁴ Early on Morgan realized that variations in lighting created many diverse possibilities for creating abstract designs in photographs as well as for interpreting the subjects. The lighting for each dance image is constructed in great detail in order to bring forth the necessary abstract qualities of the photograph.

The torso composition of Martha Graham in

"*Ekstasis*," 1935 (No. 62) illustrates especially well how Morgan uses lighting to heighten the abstract forms of a dance image:

*. . . the side and back lighting frees and solidifies the sculptural form; the tonal shift of the triangle of light projects distance and supports a rhythmical monumentality.*¹⁵

Especially important to Morgan's aesthetics, is her affirmation of the social role of art. With the philosopher Plato, Morgan affirms that the artist must not only be a good photographer or painter, but must also be a good person. Her belief that the artist has a deep social responsibility to the community and the world is expressed directly in her 1930s images of the city and in subsequent statements on nuclear issues. By contrast, Morgan's non-photographic art reflects her interest in abstract art and, even when figurative, it is notably lacking in images depicting social concerns. This observation reinforces our prior claim that her decision to become a photographer was influenced substantially by her need for a medium that would better respond to the urban social issues found in her New York environment.

*Deeper art influences stemmed from earliest memories of the radiant southern California landscape, with smog undreamed of. Neither rich nor poor, I was not aware of massive human tragedy until later I moved with the crowds in the subway . . . on the pavement of the streets of New York.*¹⁶

Her sensitivity to the tragedies of a nation in depression during the 1930s is reflected in the early photomontages of New York life.

Meanwhile the depression. Day after day men out of work shuffled listlessly through Madison Square. In the west I had witnessed dire poverty, especially among many Mexican families, but

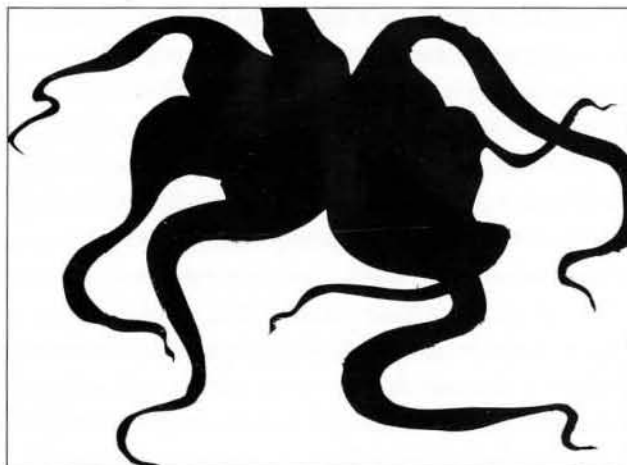
*despite physical want they still enjoyed sitting in their doorways soaking up the sun, singing impassioned songs to guitars. There was not the claustrophobic, spiritual poverty of the city breadlines in a machine world. This was before the Dust Bowl Oakies—before industrialism and smogged out relaxed humanism.*¹⁷

In a 1938 interview, Morgan commented:

There was a challenge for me in New York . . . I felt the conflict between the heroic proportions of the structures as against the people, who were hurried, subordinated, not masters of themselves . . . I wanted to paint it all, but when I tried I could not express what I felt. Painting I decided was not the proper medium . . .

*I want to express the conflict between the people and their environment. . . . to subordinate technology to human values, to dignify and glorify man. There's no justification for our mechanized world unless it contributes to a good way of living. I want to show that in my photographs.*¹⁸

Among the most powerful of these social statements is the photomontage, *Hearst Over the People*, 1939 (No. 44), which is a satiric caricature of William Randolph Hearst with his face distorted and octopus-like tentacles dominating over a crowd of protesters at Union Square in New York. The piece is intended as a commentary on the oppressive power of the Hearst papers to manipulate opinions and affect the welfare of the people in ways not in their interest.¹⁹ In *City Street*, 1937 (No. 43), Morgan contrasts ironically the Empire State Building, a majestic symbol of wealth and power, with the suffering people below, "desperate souls . . . marching across the street in utter despair, searching, not knowing what was their future."²⁰ This photograph depicts Morgan's despair that so little caring and compassion for people could exist along side such achievements of grandeur. A contrast of wealth



Components used by Barbara Morgan in the photomontage "*Hearst Over the People*," 1939 (No. 44).

"Concerned as I was with Yellow Journalism as a distortion of the 30s, I decided to visually distort the consummate Distorter: editor William Randolph Hearst. So, I undulated the enlarger paper for portrait distortion, made an imaginary octopus cut-out and interrelated the two images over a May Day crowd photograph I had shot from a seventh story window in New York."

—Barbara Morgan, "My Creative Experience with Photomontage," *Image* (14:5-6, 1971): 19.

and poverty appears also in her *Macy's Window*, 1939 (No. 83) which portrays a lone woman dressed simply in black staring longingly at a clothed mannequin in the window of Macy's Store. Psychological despair is the theme of *Use Litter Basket*, 1943 (No. 48) which portrays the pressures of a fragmenting urban environment.

Through such works as these, as well as her personal involvement with the causes of American Indians and other tribal people, opposition to the misuse of nuclear power, advocacy of world peace and cooperation, and warnings against pollution of the mind through the mass media, Morgan has lived her belief that artists have responsibilities to mankind beyond the need to make aesthetically moving works of art.

CONTRIBUTION TO DANCE PHOTOGRAPHY

Barbara Morgan's contribution through her photographs to the history of American dance has yet to be fully documented or appreciated. In addition to her artistry in making the exquisite photographs of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Merce Cunningham, and others, she may well be responsible for introducing thousands of Americans to their first images of modern dance. Beginning around 1938 and extending into the early 1940s, her dance photographs travelled to over 150 colleges and other exhibition spaces in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, the West Coast, New England, and many places between. A 1939 article from *New Masses* commented as follows on the tour:

*For communities which have not had the opportunity to see in reality the revolution which has overtaken the dance in our era, these photographs are a revelation. For students of the dance and for future ages, they are an indispensable document.*²¹

A tour of fifty of her American Dance photographs was organized in 1945 by the Inter-American office of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. for the United States Department of State.²² The exhibition, which was shown in Rio de Janeiro, Havana, and other sites, brought modern dance to South America through Morgan's images of Martha Graham and other modern dancers. The accompanying catalogue, published in Spanish and Portuguese, included an interpretive essay by John Martin, dance critic for the *New York Times*. The exhibition opened in New York at the Museum of Modern Art and was shown in San Francisco at W. & J. Sloanes prior to its journey to South America.

Morgan's importance as a photographer of American modern dance is affirmed in a 1939 letter from New York Public Librarian Dorothy Lawton.

*Being essentially a visual art and not sharing the statelier quality of painting and sculpture, its only hope for permanence lies with the modern camera. When this instrument is directed by an artist sensitive to the spark of the dancer's inspiration, the immortalization of the group of solo dancers who are making history in America today is assured . . . At first a painter, she (Morgan) became impressed by the beauty of kinetic art and studied dancing in order to transfer to canvas this illusive quality of motion . . . I foresee in her the founder of an American archive of the dance . . .*²³

Morgan had recognized early in her career her own potential and responsibility for contributing to the history of dance. While attending a commemorative event for Isadora Duncan, Morgan realized a special need for documentation of dance when she noted the paucity of the few remaining momentos assembled as a testimony to Isadora Duncan whose dancing had launched a new era of American dance.

*I realized then that photographers have an opportunity to be of service . . . through documentation that is needed perhaps more for the dance than for other art forms.*²⁴

Although Morgan's statements reveal an awareness of the documentary value of her dance photographs, she is quick to point out that merely recording performances of dance or of dancers is of no interest to her. Instead, she transforms her insights into the dances into photographic works of art in their own stead. This point is eloquently made in her statement for the press release of her 1945 South American tour.

*As a photographer, I have had the joyful responsibility of capturing and communicating these phenomena of the human spirit which would not endure beyond performance. The pictures were composed in action while the dancers performed especially for my modern speed camera and lights. I continually sought to discover the fluid relationships of light-time-motion-space-spirit by which I could release—not the mere record—but the essence of dance into the photographic image.*²⁵

In an article titled, "Dance Photography," written in 1942, Morgan defines the central problem of dance photography as "to express the spirit of dance movement in terms natural to the camera." In order to present dance photographically it is necessary to see dance photographically and be "keyed to rhythmical coordinations in the control of camera and lighting and stage space . . . This means controlling the choice and interpretation of pictorial instant, of shutter timing, of camera perspective, of expressive lighting, of stage spacing, and suitable film and processing."²⁶ Through these means the photographer is able to transcend the mechanical means of mere recording and function as an interpretive artist. The artistic aim foremost in Morgan's thoughts is to make photographs that select and

clarify significant instants and to arrest and preserve these moments for enjoyment and study as only the still camera can do.

Morgan's account of her own process reveals clarity of purpose and means essential to excellence in art. In preparation for photographing dance, she watched the dancers in performance and rehearsal until the music and the flow of the dance structure were firmly in mind, and major instants which symbolized the dance were clearly in her memory.

At this point photographic imagination commences. I begin to think of these dance gestures through the camera finder, framing in active space, framing off dead space, playing the camera straight on, from below, to one side, close up, thinking always of the light . . . I work as a kinetic light sculptor . . . I think of the bodies in their space as a series of convex and concave forms in rhythmic movement. I send light upon these forms, making patterns of light tones, and dark tones; over convex heads, backs, breasts, thighs, bent knees . . . the full emotion of the design in the sum of these parts . . . I demand from myself a combination of an expressive emotional projection and a good abstract design . . .

*I want the full dramatic presentation of emotion that gave rise to the dance conception.*²⁷

Morgan's compassion for people in an era of social crisis extends to the dancers and their role in society.

*I felt that in the anguish of the period, there wasn't enough joy or confidence or hope, and I began to see it in the dancers who were barely scraping along. They had no money, they were doing something they believed in. They were giving out joy, confidence, hope. Here was something human, something warm, something dedicated. They were giving out to people and I began to photograph them.*²⁸



61. Martha Graham, "*Satyric Festival*" (with studio lights), 1940

Morgan's photographs of the dance never appear to be didactic, because their artistic form and technique clearly establish them as profound works of aesthetic interest and merit. Nevertheless her dance images carry the "joy, confidence, and hope" that she finds in the modern dances of Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Erick Hawkins, José Limón, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman and others whose dances she photographed. Throughout her works there is evidence that she joins dancers in their affirmation of creative life forces.

CONNECTING LINKS AMONG MEDIA

The point of the current exhibition has been to suggest connections and relationships between the drawings, prints, and watercolors and the photographs. A shift of her base from California to New York resulted in distinct changes reflecting a contrast of physical and social environments, as



well as a different focus of media. The principal links between the works in her drawings, prints, watercolors, and photographs are developed in greater detail in William Agee's companion essay in this volume, "Barbara Morgan: Painter Turned Photographer." From my perspective, the connecting themes that Agee finds in his comparison of particular works across media lines exemplify the aesthetic themes such as aesthetic essence, rhythmic vitality, and abstraction that have been discussed in greater detail in my essay. On the other hand, multiple perspective and social aesthetics, which are ideas central to her photographs, do not appear to carry over into the non-photographic works. This observation is consistent with Morgan's statements that she found in photography a medium more attuned to the cultural multiplicities and societal complexities of the modern world and better able to portray the human tragedies and hopes of people living within that environment.

Given this realization, it is puzzling that Morgan again chose to return with apparently much satisfaction to the very media that she previously had found unable to express matters so vital to her. Perhaps the answer lies in her own philosophy of multiple perspectives in art and life. In the end she must have realized that no single art medium can adequately portray all of the subtle features of life in the depth that an artist of great breadth and sensitivity requires. If, as she says, "the camera becomes net and channel to trap the latent image . . ." the pen and brush must be the probe and scalpel through which images are formed in a delicate balance between artistic consciousness and technical mastery.

Notes

1. John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 4-9.
2. Barbara Morgan, "Modern Art," *Los Angeles Sun Times* (June 13, 1926, Part III): 31.
3. Barbara Morgan, "The Meaning of Modernism in Art," *Artland* (Los Angeles, February, 1927): 4.
4. Prudence Wollett, *Los Angeles Times* (December 7, 1929).
5. "Barbara Morgan," *Aperture* (Rochester, 1964, 11:1): 35.
6. "Barbara Morgan," *Aperture* (Rochester, 1964, 11:1): 36.
7. For the fascinating details of Morgan's career as a photographer see for example the following: Etna Kelley, "Barbara Morgan: Painter Turned Photographer," *Photography* (September, 1938 vol. 6. no. 73); Jacob Deschin, "Barbara Morgan: Permanence Through Perverseance," *Photography Annual* (1971): 6-24, 108-113, 170, 171, 182; Barbara Confino, "Barbara Morgan: Photographing Energy and Motion," *Saturday Review* (October, 1971 LV, no. 41): 62-66; Casey Allen, "Camera 35 Interview: The Influential Photographs of Barbara Morgan," *Camera 35* (May, 1977): 56-60; *Photographer* (September, 1938 vol. 6. no. 73): 6-7.; Ruth Spencer, "Barbara Morgan," *British Journal of Photography* (13 June, 1975): 512-515.
8. Peter Bunnell, Letter to the Author, September 12, 1977.
9. Barbara Morgan quoted in *Confino*, "Barbara Morgan . . .": 66.
10. Barbara Morgan, *Quadraille* (Bennington College, May, 1971): 12.
11. Barbara Morgan quoted in *Confino*, "Barbara Morgan . . .": 66.
12. Barbara Morgan quoted in *Confino*, "Barbara Morgan . . .": 62-66.
13. Barbara Morgan, "Photomontage," in *Miniature Camera*, edited by Willard Morgan and Henry M. Lester (New York: Morgan and Lester publishers, 1938), 145. See 147-167 for an extended explanation of photomontage processes.
14. Barbara Morgan, "On Abstraction in Photography," *The Encyclopedia of Photography* (I, 1964), 58.
15. "Barbara Morgan," *Aperture* (Rochester, 1964, 11:1): 16.
16. "Barbara Morgan," *Aperture* (Rochester, 1964, 11:1): 36.
17. "Barbara Morgan," *Aperture* (Rochester, 1964, 11:1): 9.
18. Etna M. Kelley, "Barbara Morgan: Painter Turned Photographer," *Photography* (September, 1938, 6:73): 6.
19. Barbara Morgan quoted in Dorene L. Ross, *Photomontage Photography: as Explained and Discussed in the Work of Barbara Morgan*. Masters Thesis College of New Rochelle. (May 27, 1979), 64.
20. Morgan quoted in Ross, *Photomontage Photography*. "Morgan's account, "City Shell" records her humanitarian concerns while also detailing the exact formal compositional means to express this concern.": 62, 63.
21. Elizabeth Noble, *New Masses* (January 31, 1939): 29. Many letters of request and appreciation for this exhibition are in the correspondence of Barbara Morgan, including negotiations for fees and prints at prices that seem astoundingly low by today's standards.
22. Information concerning the planning of this South American exhibition is contained in correspondence between Porter McCray Chief, Inter-American Office, The National Gallery, Washington, D.C., Margaret D. Garrett, Acting Chief, and Barbara Morgan. The correspondence dates from March, 1944 through September, 1945.
23. Letter from Dorothy Lawton to Barbara Morgan, August 2, 1939.
24. Barbara Morgan, quoted in Etna Kelly, "Barbara Morgan: Painter Turned Photographer," *Photography* (September, 1938, 6:73): 7.
25. Press release for the Latin American Tour of Barbara Morgan Dance Photographs, prepared by Margaret D. Garrett, Acting Chief Inter-American Office, National Gallery of Art, August, 1945.
26. Barbara Morgan, "Dance Photography," *The Complete Photographer* (March 10, 1942, 3:18): 1132-1133.
27. Barbara Morgan, "Dance Photography," *The Complete Photographer* (March 10, 1942 3:18): 1135.
28. Barbara Morgan, quoted in Leonard N. Amico and Stephen R. Edidens, "The Photographs of Barbara Morgan," Williams College Museum Art Gallery (March 1-31, 1978): 9.



8. *Growing*, 1932



12. *Detroit*, 1931