

In the studio of Jeremy Morgan—

We looked at many paintings—mostly large to it seemed to me some very large. They were in a manner of speaking landscapes, although there were hardly horizons anywhere. Earth, sea and sky, mountains and rivers and plains—and cloudscape, many cloudscapes. They were not the classical landscapes of Poussin and Claude; there was little or none of the compositional geometry of the founders of the French landscape tradition. Nor was Corot's Italy or *Mortefontaine* present in Morgan's work, and also not the bourgeois country weekend of the French Impressionists. Of the Romantic landscape of Caspar David Friedrich there was perhaps a trace of his wanderer standing on a crag above the clouds, and maybe some of the immediacy of Constable's cloud studies and—certainly—some of Turner strapped to a mast in a blizzard at sea. There were, yes, traces in Morgan's work (or in my associations to it in our conversation), yes traces but no "influences," no "progenitors" of any easily identifiable kind.

There was, however, one overarching characteristic in Morgan's work that is shared by all landscape painters—the indomitable beauty of the earth. But here in Morgan's work as in I think few others, man and his works and lives were utterly absent. Surely, in some 19th C. Americans—the Easterners Fredrick Church and Albert Bierstadt, and the Californians Thomas Hill and William Keith—there are few or no people... the occasional Indians don't count for they are only part of the "indigenous" like waterfalls and trees. Those 19th C. American landscapes, however, were painted for purchase by American men as emblems of a new world to conquer, whereas Jeremy Morgan's landscapes are of an experience of the earth and sky not as places for us to conquer but rather as experience of the earth and all its places to conquer us.

"To conquer us." We looked and looked, Morgan and I standing rather silently, and then at last sat on the usual decrepit studio furniture and began to talk about the work and his unusually complex and sophisticated acrylic technique that makes these paintings possible. And, although technique is always interesting to discuss among artists, it is also something not easy to copy from one artist to another unless it's taught from master to apprentice as in the olden days of oil painting... that is to say, nothing he said could I use myself nor describe for anyone else to use.

Finally, having done with the "objective" issues of art criticism—what the paintings are of and how are they made—we came to talk of the "subjective" questions, the artist's own inner experience that drives the work and shapes what it is.

And here it was I began to understand why Morgan's paintings, though landscapes, give little or nothing from all the great landscape artists that have come before. It's that issue, "How did you get into art [the profession without a clientele] in the first place?" that told the origin and now the maturity of Morgan's work.

“I was in school,” he said, “I guess early teens, and we had to play Rugby which I hated anyway and it was very cold outside and raining hard and one day I refused to play. There was a great commotion—about like in the 1950’s declaring membership in the Communist Party—and I was told by the Head that it’s Rugby or goodbye. A teacher came to my rescue, persuading the powers to let me do my PE (you call it in America) as Judo, in which he was himself a Black Belt. I found in that work a dynamism of my body in space which surely I had never found in Rugby rain or shine, a dynamism which I had never felt before and which became my overarching desire to experience each day and my driving ambition to make more powerful each time. Well, it was incidental to Aikido but a determinate of my future career, that my judo teacher was also the school’s art teacher. So, out of the rejection of a hearty boy’s sport like Rugby in the rain, came my body in space in Judo and, soon enough, sculpture in space vital and twisting like the joy of my body in Judo—and soon enough later came paintings to make that vital twisting in color in the imaginary spaces of paintings on a wall. Thus it came to be that a path was formed leading to education at the Royal Academy and a Harkness grant for study abroad and then a position at SFAI.”

But, we all know, time passes and the passions of youth are solved or obliterated by maturity—as Henry James put it, “Life brings us all down, somehow or other.” Morgan’s and my conversation went on, that morning in his studio, to recent experience. Surely that first unification (I’ll have to call it that) of his body in action with the space it occupies was inspiring, but what about here now 30 years later in a warehouse studio in nowhere San Rafael? What keeps that early experience alive in maturity, despite all the daily chores of daily life that bury everything?

Our conversation turned to a few years ago and a faculty grant from SFAI to travel and backpack in the Himalaya in Nepal... and the heights, and perhaps the lack of oxygen, and the altered state of consciousness those heights and their consequent lacks might induce—dizzy, exalted, transcendent, at one with the cosmos—oh, God, I thought, those mystical extremes all rational people and the art world that is theirs deny/destroy—that same experience in maturity the youth experienced when against all odds he transcended Rugby in the rain.

Get near here and it’s time to watch out—cosmic kitsch and oozy spirituality come down like a warm sauce as sickening as a day of wet Rugby.

But get near here with the Judo knowledge in one’s bones and muscles that we are one with the energies of the space we live in, and then prove it to oneself by personal experience in the high mountains of Nepal—and that it has happened to others before one confirms the authenticity when it happens to oneself.

So, where does art come from? Sometimes from Beyond. And when sometimes Beyond makes landscapes, sometimes it makes the paintings of Jeremy Morgan.

—Fred Martin
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