

## THE THRILL OF THE CHASE

They call themselves tornado chasers, cyclone sighters, vortex spotters, and hurricane watchers. The internet is teeming with web sites which serve as trophy rooms for extreme weather enthusiasts. Some are hobbyists while others, an enviable lot, have dedicated their lives to the thrill of the chase. These are people who look to capture the dynamism of atmospheric change with the use of the latest technological means. Armed with video camcorders, digital cameras and even live internet feeds, they follow and record dramatic events. A short time later, the captured footage is edited and disseminated onto television airwaves. They are incorporated into programs which have dedicated themselves to the display of extreme weather. The audience for these pursuits, here at the beginning of the new millenium, is growing and everything is done to satisfy the interests of thousands of couch aficionados.

For many of us, technology acts as a bridge to nature and global weather patterns. We look to the television screen or the computer monitor to provide us with a physical interface or window onto extraordinary conditions that we will never see. Like many other aspects of contemporary society, we find comfort in a passive and safe place from which to look while directly experiencing very little.

For artist Jeremy Morgan, himself a “chaser,” the interface or mediated space is a painterly arena. His richly colored, large-scale paintings which depict abstract forms are in fact explorations of that unclaimed, shifting space. What makes his work unique is his ability to address contemporary issues of the digital interface while using a medium, paint on canvas, which can only be experienced directly, one-on-one, in person. By doing this, his paintings clearly straddle the past and the present moment. They are simultaneously about the fleeting and the eternal experience as it is contained within the painted image of nature.

Early in his career, Morgan painted *en plein air*, often capturing the rocky Welsh countryside of his forefathers. Today, his works have lost that type of specificity of place. They are no longer portraits of particular places. Rather, they are more open, conveyers of feeling and energy. They evoke a type of atmospheric place which can be found both in the physical world as well as within the internal landscape of the viewer’s imagination.

Morgan's influences are multivalent and layered. He was born in Cambridge, England educated at Oxford and the Royal Academy in London. Today, even after living for almost two decades in the States as an ex-pat, the force of British landscape painting remains evident in his work. The first artist that comes to mind, especially in reference to Morgan's small, intimate works, is John Constable (1776-1837). The famed landscapist was a painter who even though he rarely left his immediate home of East Anglia, had a very encompassing kind of outlook on the land and an "intimate contact with place."<sup>i</sup> Constable himself thought that "through concentrating on skies, he was sketching the bolder phenomena of nature, unattached to any experience of place, and not necessarily seen as illuminating any particular landscape."<sup>ii</sup>

But, even more than Constable, his well-travelled contemporary Joseph Mallord Turner (1775-1851), comes to mind most clearly. Turner's interest in the landscape and the effects of the atmosphere was so intense that it ultimately merged into abstraction, influencing many non-objective artists of the twentieth-century. Turner created in his paintings "an impalpable world that was nothing but shapes colored with light and in most cases very pale, masses."<sup>iii</sup> In his work, "each object is transformed into a luminous vapor, and imponderable transparency, as if ready to fade and disappear."<sup>iv</sup> Turner's use of color was equally abstract going "beyond any naturalistic basis. It produces a dynamic unification, which is at once aesthetic and emotional."<sup>v</sup>

Moving a little further from the British shores, it is also apparent that the romantic work of German painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) was also a great influence on Jeremy Morgan. Looking at Friedrich's luminous canvases one can see that he was "an artist concerned more with feeling and spirit than with palpable objects and paint surfaces."<sup>vi</sup> He was able through the subtle manipulation of color to "depict an awesomely still, silent, and unbounded void."<sup>vii</sup>

However, even with such powerful influences which entered Morgan's consciousness through his education at Oxford and the Royal Academy, he decided ultimately to immerse himself into a very different type of work. An American painterly style, embodied in the post-war aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism caught his attention. In the work of artists like Armenian-born Arshile Gorky (1904-1948) Morgan found a tremendous affinity. Gorky's late landscape painting display "different hues, glimpsed as through

the white foam of cascading water, appear as minor touches, a palette of refracted prismatic colors seen glittering amidst spray.”<sup>viii</sup> The painterly gesture and the movement of the artist’s body, in Gorky’s work and that of his fellow Abstract Expressionists, became tremendously appealing and when combined with the earlier Romantic landscapes fused to produce a dynamic mix. The work of the Americans was abstract, but also athletic, a physical manifestation of kind of energy and gesture.

In order to study the work of these artists first hand, Morgan applied for and was awarded the prestigious Harkness Fellowship. In 1985, this provided him the opportunity to come to the San Francisco Art Institute. It is here that he studied and stayed and where, after several years, he was appointed professor and later chair of the painting department.

To add to his eclectic aesthetic, Morgan, a longtime follower of judo and other martial arts, traveled to mainland China. Over the course of several trips, Morgan studied the Chinese countryside and landscape paintings firsthand. Morgan’s work has a distinct affinity with that of his Chinese colleagues. He employs a physical space which relinquishes the traditional Western division between foreground and background. In his paintings there is no hierarchy between close and far. It is much more about the harnessing of energy forces or *ch’i*. Like the early Chinese masters, “etherial landscapes [are seen] as an expression of the Buddhist idea that all phenomena, the very evidence of the senses itself, are illusion, *maya*, akin to a dream.”<sup>ix</sup> This is paralleled and contrasted in some ways by Taoist beliefs that “nature is no mere illusion, but a manifestation of the Real, to be identified with and felt in his innermost being.”<sup>x</sup>

Looking at Morgan’s paintings in his well-light waterfront studio it becomes apparent that they are hybrids. Part Taoist, part Romantic, part Abstract Expressionist, while consistently remaining quite contemporary and consistent with their own time. His enigmatic works, often dark and layered with subtle gradations of color, provide the viewer with a kind of screen upon which to project themselves. They are sympathetic with familiar, yet subtle, cinematic practices (as those found in Ingmar Bergman’s films) which use the screen as a window onto an atmospheric world. But they are also modern-day mandalas allowing one visual access to different levels of, not only perception, but of time and space. In Morgan’s work the viewer activates the paintings. He gives them life. The viewer is far from a passive observer of the phenomena around him. Rather, he is empowered and a

necessary collaborator in the aesthetic process. To view Morgan's works, is to find yourself in the eye of the storm.

Anna Novakov

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<sup>i</sup> P. 2. Michael Rosenthal. Constable: The Painter and his Landscape. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

<sup>ii</sup> P. 142. Michael Rosenthal. Constable: The Painter and his Landscape. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

<sup>iii</sup> P. 69. Jean Selz. Turner. New York: Crown Publishers, 1975.

<sup>iv</sup> P. 70. Jean Selz. Turner. New York: Crown Publishers, 1975.

<sup>v</sup> P. 39. Jack Lindsay. Turner: The Man and his Art. New York: Franklin Watts, 1985.

<sup>vi</sup> P. 3. Sabine Rewald, ed. The Romantic Vision of Caspar David Friedrich. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990.

<sup>vii</sup> P. 6. Sabine Rewald, ed. The Romantic Vision of Caspar David Friedrich. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990.

<sup>viii</sup> P. 92. Harry Rand. Arshile Gorky: The Implication of Symbols. Montclair, NJ: Abner Schram, 1980.

<sup>ix</sup> P. 137. Michael Sullivan. Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979.

<sup>x</sup> P. 137. Michael Sullivan. Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979.