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INTERVIEW: JEREMY MORGAN THE BACK LIGHT OF SPACE

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JEREMY MORGAN is Associate Professor and Painting Department Chair at the San Francisco Art Institute.[1] A highly esteemed instructor, he is a sought-after lecturer and influential international artist. His painting practice is inspired by physical surfaces of the earth and our solar system. The unremitting power of weather, geological structures, and interstellar systems are interpreted in Jeremy's work as a dynamic language of form and energy infused with improvisational processes to achieve innovative visual experiences. His monumental paintings invite the viewer to share in a creative world of psychic landscape. In an *SF Weekly* interview, the artist says of his work: "I desire to create a moment as sensation rather than record."[2]

Jeremy creates abstract paintings in his studio located in an abandoned candle factory in Marin County, California. During my visit on February 17, 2020, I stood in the natural bright light of the large loft gazing at his stacks of large-scale artworks leaning against the walls. Viewing the multiple paintings at once, I felt immersed in a canyon of form, space, and color. When I looked at the many stretched canvases, a stunning ambient light glowed from a mysterious inner dimension in the backgrounds. From a distance, the paintings appeared to be thick impasto surfaces of abstract expressionism. I discovered, up close, that this is an illusion. The massive forms and deep inner spaces of the paintings are constructions of delicate layers of thin paint.

As his former student and teaching assistant, I wondered what perspective Jeremy might convey in relation to artistic creativity and offer on the theme of the fourth volume of *Ursa Minor,* entitled "Punctuated Equilibrium." My underlying focus was

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1 Founded in 1871, the San Francisco Art Institute is a private college dedicated to the creative study of contemporary art and is one of the oldest art schools in the United States. SFAI degree programs were interrupted in May 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic. Jeremy Morgan has been a professor of painting at SFAI for the last thirty years.

2 https://www.sfweekly.com/culture/jeremy-morgan-of-the-s-f-art-institute-mixes-eastern-sensibility-with-western "Jeremy Morgan of the SF Art Institute Mixes Eastern Sensibility with Western Tradition," by Kate Sommers-Dawes, *SF Weekly,* 03/21/2011.

the contemplation of a theory that evolution is characterized by long periods of geological stasis interrupted by short bursts of rapid change, and likewise, I proposed the practice of painting could be a cultural system of evolution. Indeed, in my following interview with Jeremy Morgan, I discovered a deep connection between geology and art.

Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

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Stephanie Baker: I see an aspect of deep geological time in your work. When I look at your paintings, I always see organic forms, which seem to be in a state of flux. Why is that?

Jeremy Morgan: My father was a geographer. I experienced early in life the idea of geological deep time. So, I learned a lot, primary things about the landscape from him. Like, we would be walking in the Welsh landscape, at our place in Wales, and I'd ask him why certain valleys were the shapes they were. He'd explain physical concepts of geomorphology, such as glaciation and hanging valleys—fundamentals of rudimentary aspects of geological forms.[3]

So, I realized I was not only recording space in my paintings but also timescape. My personal revelation is that landscape is a timescape. I became privy to an idea of a residue of things as overlapping timelines that are both present and long gone, as if a glacier set down ancient moraine[4] to create the shape of a "new" valley form, which continues alteration through multiple processes of time. [The] culmination is

3 Geomorphology: the study of the physical features of the earth and their relation to its geological structures. Glaciation: a mass of ice on a land surface that moves under its own weight. Hanging valleys: a tributary valley that is higher than the valley of the main river.

4 Moraine: a mass of rocks and sediment deposited by a glacier to form a valley.

that a renewal of the landscape maintains a time relationship to present and long-gone organic forms as a single composition of an organic unity.

When we are in any given moment in time, we're actually in multiple times—once you start to understand it. Like walking into a forest, you are witness to a timescape from the moment of origin, when seeds or leaves grew to become massive trees or foliage. So, my sense of the landscape is an evolving location in time as a readable place.

I feel a connection to J.M.W. Turner [1775-1851] the English romantic painter of landscapes. His vision of the world makes sense to me. The space in his later paintings is a geological record of elapsing and overlapping time—a timescape of disintegrating form. Turner most definitely was involved in that. The making of a painting, by definition for me, is a form of archiving through the artistic process—a relationship with a certain space and time. And because we live in a world obsessed with urgency, obsessed with what's new and contemporary, the effect eclipses a viewpoint of a slow rhythm of change unrecognized in the urgent necessity of the contemporary moment. I have become interested in the idea of the artist engaging a slower moment as the archivist, which I consider equally important. The artist-as-archivist navigates a sense of evolving continuity in the timescape of the contemporary moment.

[It is] a concept I try to instill in my students, because they get very preoccupied by the idea invested in the urgency of the contemporary moment necessitating their painting style as a proscriptive of relevant contemporary work. I often say the goal of an artist is to really understand your relationship to the contemporary moment—don't run after it. An artist is permitted to draw on studies of different time periods, any subject of interest, to develop their creative expression. It is not required that, to be a contemporary artist, you must achieve a certain look associated with painting in a contemporary style. It was my study of Turner that allowed me to explore my own form of abstraction that became my contemporary expression of landscape as timescape.

SB: So, any contemporary moment of painting is built on previous explorations of creativity that continue to change or evolve as time moves constantly forward?

JM: Historically, perspectival structures were a pictorial system based on separations of space —the space we're in, as opposed to the space we look into.[5] Twentieth-century cubism fractured that separation of space between the viewer and the image. The perspectival dimension of pictorial depth is eliminated in modern art. A viewer's eye entered a cubist artwork differently, as an immersive visual experience within a foregrounded shallow space. Ironically, we go back to Turner, who predated later

5 Perspectival: a technique of depicting volumes of spatial relationships on a flat surface.

cubist concepts of twentieth-century modern art, when he discarded the repoussoir in painting[6]—those elements of "wings" that dominated seventeenth-century painting, which direct the viewer's eye into the deep space of a painting's composition. Repoussoir the technique of bracketing a painting composition integral to the artworks of Claude Lorrain [1600-1682] and Nicolas Poussin [1594–1665]—artists Turner studied. Repoussoir is an element of perspectival structure used in theatrical stage design, which Lorrain and Poussin employed as visual strategies of reality in their paintings. So, initially painting, theater, and opera had a visual connection.

SB: When you say "wings," are you referring to an actual frame on a painting, or the contrivance of trees, or something else, framing the compositional edge of a painting's scene?

JM: Perspectival technique defines relationships of space as well as a perception of time. So, when we view the composition of a Lorrain or Poussin painting with a framed edge of woods as the repoussoir element, the viewer's eye is directed to a distant point towards the middle of the painting. This is an infinity point, usually manifested in mountains and sky—a direct spatial relationship of time related to the edge of woods framing the composition. Customarily, there is a pathway or river that leads the viewer's eye from the timeframe of the here and now at the edge of the woods (which is the foreground dimension of the painting) to the infinitive observed behind the mountains and sky, as if peering directly into the deep space of the world in the painting. This brings me back to the fundamentals of the initial creation of space within the Renaissance: the moment of "ousia."[7]

A sense of ultimate reality, ousia (for want of a better term) is a philosophical realm of phenomenon exemplifying all that is possible, simply put. The perspectival structure of stage-set design of "wings," used in painting compositions by Lorrain and Poussin, present phenomena that are viewed as if through an apparition of time, or veil, to become appearance. Turner was an artist interested in de-concretizing the time structure of foreground, middle ground, and background in painting as part of his studies of nature. Turner was interested in the forces of nature as an energy more important than form, and the effects of energy as a dematerialization of form. The process of change or transformation of a moment we can see through the veiled appearances of the world to make a painting that comprehends timescape.

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6 Repoussoir: a contrived object placed along the right or left foreground of a painting to direct a viewer's eye into the deep space of the composition, in effect bracketing the edge of the painting like a framed stage set.

7 Ousia: a term used by ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, to refer to concepts of essence or substance in the world.

In my own work, I conduct an ongoing study of materials as a source of innovation in my painting. Very rarely do I use gesso while painting. I use materials which I then stain with inks and thinned-down acrylics so that my painting is actually formed as integrated with the surface. Traditionally, the canvas is a substrate, or panel, then you have the gesso on top, which is the surface to use. I want to take away that gesso surface so there's no separation between the paint and the surface. So, I'm fusing my painting materials with the canvas on most of my paintings.

SB: Sounds very much like a geologic structure.

JM: Yes. And I refer to it as what I call "psychic geology" because the time element, to me, is very important. The way I see it, my paintings are chronological as much as they are spatial. Landscape has a subliminal effect on me, as the theater of the divine sacred spirit, a magical effect—whatever the hell you want to call it—the only place where our sense of time meets the endlessness of the reality of the physical world and the infinitive. Painting, for me, is the re-engagement of , you know, the internal discussion of our relationship to the world throughout time. So many of my paintings, even if they're varnished, have textures that appear to be near the surface, yet are actually the first images I painted on the surface. It's like that idea when you see a form in the garden and it's snowing. It can be a flowerpot shape, which will continue to grow with the fullness of snow. The form is amplified, even though it's hidden under snow, because the form of the flowerpot shape is still visible by virtue of the layers of snow on top—elements that integrate the organic processes of nature with form as a disintegration of the concrete world.

SB: Is the act of painting an important process beneficial to human experience?

JM: Yes. Art is a constant form of inquiry, and painting is the meeting place for the viewer and the artist. And I think that's the key: painting is a continuous exchange of ideas. The public is often locked into a singular concept of literal appearances as a visual goal in creating art, but my point is appearances are merely a touchstone for interpretation by the creative process. Painting, to me, is a means of negotiating our world as a basis of ideas. The benefit to culture is to record human experience as our unique relationship to space and time.

SB: Is the creative process of art reflecting on a geological system of habitable earth--of a world that is eternally suitable for humans, even if they are not represented in the artwork? I am thinking about the concept of geologic time as a deep time of space and form that is always archived in the present moment. A philosophical idea developed

in the eighteenth century by Scottish geologist, James Hutton [1726-1797], proposed a system of habitable earth as a deistic mechanism sufficient to maintain the world as eternally suitable for humans.[8]

JM: That's basically the Gaia Principle.[9] You know, [humans] are actually a virus: a living entity corrupting the very thing that is hosting us. Our eternal dilemma is how to achieve the correct balance between systems of natural organisms and our inorganic structures of civilization. My paintings have an aspect that hopefully reflects in their non-narrative abstractness of timescapes—the possibilities of human danger if we don't start thinking quickly about the environment. Paradoxically, the beauty of nature is increasingly contemplated the more we damage it, the more we ravage it. I am not trying to paint paradise; I am trying to speak to that which is beyond us, which we rely on totally for our existence, and I'm spiritualizing that dimension of the inner glow of my paintings as the Back Light of Space.

8 Deism: a supreme being exists based on evidence of reason and nature, rejecting the belief in a God who created the world and has since remained indifferent to its existence.

9 The Gaia Principle, also known as a theory or hypothesis, proposes all organisms and their inorganic surroundings are integrated on Earth to form a self-regulating system that maintains conditions for life on this world.