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## The Visionary Art of Morris Graves

John Zarobell

*University of San Francisco*, [jzarobell@usfca.edu](mailto:jzarobell@usfca.edu)

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## 1.12 / Review

# The Visionary Art of Morris Graves

By *John Zarobell*

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I feel that Morris Graves is one of the great unsung heroes of mid-century American art, but saying so makes me ask: how great? Why unsung? The best answer to both questions comes perhaps from John Cage, who wrote, “Just as Morris Graves lives in the country, not in the city, so his work stands apart from the most recent concerns of American art and the New York School in particular. His paintings, in this connection, are not paintings. They are invitations.”<sup>1</sup>

Cage’s characterization of Graves’ works is apt; they are invitations that confront us in the current exhibition of Graves’ work, organized by Peter Selz, at Meridian Gallery. The first two floors of Meridian’s Victorian townhouse and the group of individualized spaces they contain well suits the forty-five works by Graves that comprise this exhibition. A lavishly illustrated catalogue accompanies it and is a triumph in its own right. There is a power of incantation present in the best of Graves’ work, but the key to this exhibition is the encounter—the direct and serious engagement with individual works—that the show allows. Each work of art draws the viewer into a vivid domain crafted from this world, but that exhibits characteristics of another.



Morris Graves, *Fig in Red Moonlight*, 1940; tempera on paper. Courtesy of Jay Rosen and Michele Theberge.

Perception and experience are deferred because the subject is not what the artist wants to show the viewer, but what the artist attempts to see. The works convey the experience of looking, but not looking the way one looks at art, rather the way one looks through art. This is what many would call visionary art. Perhaps this ought to be called visionary practice, since the works on paper or canvas are the residues of the artist's activities. We might consider them as the vehicle to achieve vision, but they are not the goal. This is how Graves stands apart, and why he will never be seen as what many would call an important painter.

The exhibition at Meridian is serious, considered, and aims at being thorough, if not comprehensive. The works are drawn from both public and private collections, including the Lucid Art Foundation; the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; and the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon, Eugene, where Graves left his archives and many works of art. In fact, the show is highly selective, and in that sense, it is full of treasures, some small and others major. It amply demonstrates why we should know more about, and look more closely at, Graves' body of work.

The show starts at the beginning of Graves' career, with a William Blake inspired watercolor, *If Eye Be Lifted Up* (ca. 1930), but the early decades are more thoroughly represented than the later ones. Pictures from his *Purification* series (1938-39) are spread throughout the galleries, but being unable to see them as a group compromises the potency of the ensemble. Still, one can perceive how Graves began with an interest in Surrealist picture games, but soon found his way beyond them into a pictorial world that is uniquely his own.



Morris Graves, *Bird of the Spirit*, 1943; gouache on waxed paper. Courtesy of the Lucid Art Foundation.

*Fig in Red Moonlight* (1940) is a mature work that demonstrates the artist's abiding passion for depicting the world beyond the visible. In this tempera painting, an archetypal fig is at the core of the composition—as a fruit, only the apple carries more symbolic freight—and it is surrounded by a frenetic painterly field, part juicy red splashes, part “white writing” à la Mark Tobey. It is hard to avoid the feeling that the fig at the center of this image is a heart engulfed in the energy of the cosmos that dances around it. Moonlight, what the title tells us this field represents, has never looked so full of energy, so shot through with invisible currents.



*Bird of the Spirit* (1943) produces a similar effect, but the energy is manifested materially through a wrinkling of the wax paper on which the bird is rendered in gouache. Graves spent much of his career depicting animals and, more often, birds. These wordless creatures served the artist both as surrogates and partners, visible manifestations of nature that responded to human presence. Graves' representations of animals seem to be endowed with supernatural powers. Almost always represented alone in his artwork, they are delicate, but forceful symbols of the world beyond our analytical grasp. This bird is animate, it stares back at the viewer with wide hypnotic eyes, and the electric pattern that surrounds it is the result of the encounter between human consciousness and animal force.



Morris Graves, *Roadside Plants and Machine Age Noise*, 1957; watercolor on paper. Courtesy of Jay Rosen and Michele Theberge.

*Roadside Plants and Machine Age Noise* (1957) is a classic composition from a later period. For years, Graves had made images of machine-made noise and its effect upon the natural world, but 1957 was the year he sold Careläden, the house he had made by hand. His reasoning was partially due to the noise from a nearby airport. Here, the destructive force of man-made technology disturbs the balance of nature. In this watercolor, Graves used various methods of painting to create a complex overall effect. One finds carefully rendered plants, large forceful abstract brushwork, and splashing of black and red

pigments. If the New York art world at this point was locked into a struggle over the relevance of figuration versus abstraction, it seems clear that Graves could care less. He was willing to pick up the techniques that suited him in order to generate the desired effect. What is compelling about Graves is the effect he desired and how distinct, yet in many ways similar, it was to other artists we now see as a necessary part of art history.

Before splitting the world into materialists and mystics, New Yorkers and West Coasters, it makes sense to ask why we perceive Graves the way we do, and what the relationship might be between the mystical and the avant-garde. His close friend John Cage bridged that divide, as did Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich, and Mondrian before him; but what history remembers is that silence and those forms, not the structure of the cosmos that they sought to evoke. Do we give more value to the artist who seeks spirit than the artist who seeks art? For Graves, these domains of artistic strategy and spiritual sensibility were inseparable and that is the lesson his works continue to convey.

“The Visionary Art of Morris Graves” is on view at [Meridian Gallery](#) in San Francisco through May 15, 2010.

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## Notes

1. John Cage, “Morris Graves,” in Wulf Herzogenrath and Andreas Kreul, *John Cage, Mark Tobey, Morris Graves: Sounds of the Inner Eye* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2002), 202.

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