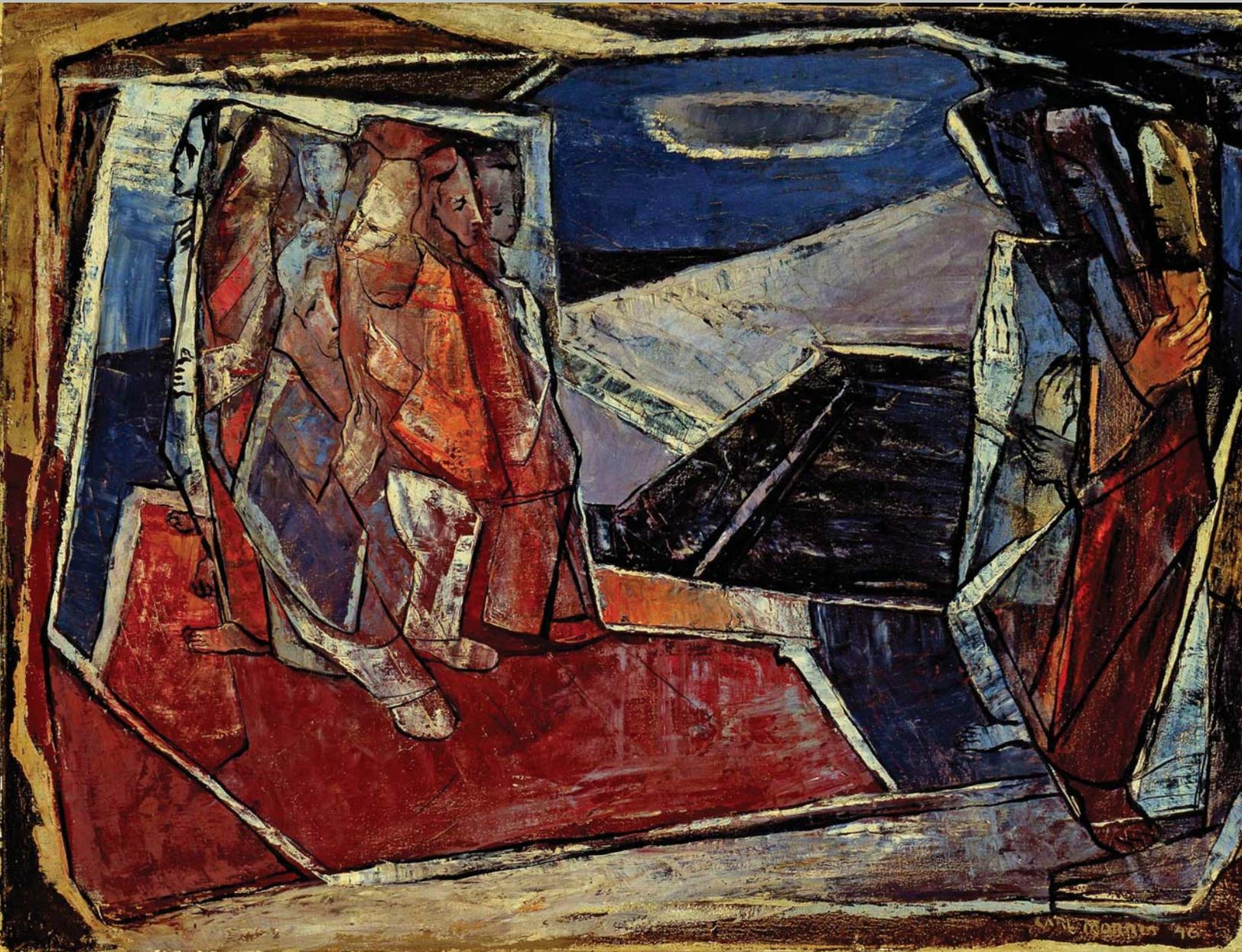


carl morris

figure, word & light

January 13 - February 13, 2008

Prudence Roberts, Guest Curator



by Prudence Roberts

figure, word & light

While many people are familiar with Carl Morris's later works — the large-scale abstract acrylic paintings that he made beginning in the late 1960s — his earlier paintings, which form the focus of this exhibition, are less well known. And while Morris is frequently identified with the school of so-called Northwest Mystics, a group that included Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan and Morris Graves, he is not often linked to his contemporaries on the East Coast. This exhibition and its accompanying essay will look at his works from the late 1930s into the mid-'60s as they relate to the artists and the issues of the New York School. Morris's distance from the art scene of New York gave him a certain intellectual freedom and space he might have otherwise lost. At the same time, his frequent trips to New York and his friendships there ensured his presence in that milieu.

During the 1940s and '50s, Carl Morris, along with other American artists of his generation, grappled, intellectu-

ally and spiritually, with the impact of World War II: the devastation of Europe and the horrors of the Holocaust and the atom bomb. He, like his friends and acquaintances Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, sought to make art that reflected this momentous history and the horrifying new world that lay on the other side of the war. Their quest was to make paintings that could matter in a time of spiritual desolation. In those days, it seemed as though the old metaphors of myth and history were no longer adequate. Newman wrote in 1945:

*The war ... has robbed us of our hidden terror. We now know the terror to expect. Hiroshima showed it to us. We are no longer in the face of a mystery. After all, wasn't it an American who did it? The terror has indeed become as real as life ... No matter how heroic or innocent or moral our individual lives may be, this new fate hangs over us.*¹

For these artists, the quest for an art form that was equal to the moral and emotional weight of this “new fate” led them toward abstraction. Each felt the need to abandon the figure and its inevitable narrative associations. As Morris explained in a 1983 interview, he worried that his early figurative paintings were being misconstrued as specifically political. “There was always something to find in there as a figure and so I did almost a turnabout in approaching it, to take out any references that would be misleading about my intent ...”²

Theirs was a search for what Newman famously described as the New Sublime: an art that could be experienced spiritually as well as optically, an art that removed all elements of the “picture” from a painting. Newman produced *Onement*, his first “zip” painting, in 1948; he would go on to create many other variants of this idea, including his monumental series *Stations of the Cross*, 14 large, essentially black and white paintings, com-

pleted between 1958 and '66 and now installed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

By 1947, Rothko had all but stopped making figurative, myth-based paintings and had begun stacking and layering his luminous oblongs of color in large vertical compositions. As he said at the time, “It was with the utmost reluctance that I found the figure could not serve my purposes ... But a time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it.”³

That sense of mutilation, of the failure of art to measure up to the needs of the times, is summed up in Newman’s recollections:

Twenty years ago we felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles, a world devastated by a great depression and a fierce World War, and it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of painting that we were doing —



Above: *Winter Forms*, 1954
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in., private collection

Left: *The Recorder Player*, 1951-52
Oil on canvas, 46¹/₄ x 26 in., private collection

flowers, reclining nudes and people playing the cello. At the same time, we could not move into the situation of a pure world of unorganized shapes and forms, or color relations, a world of sensations. And I would say that, for some of us, this was our moral crisis in relation to what to paint.⁴

In the 1940s, as Morris faced the same dilemma, he formulated the idea that would be at the heart of nearly all his subsequent compositions: "Man, light and atmosphere intersect. With man's intellect light becomes the word: it becomes the vision of structure."⁵ This symbolic triad of humanity, light and word — the nucleus of creation — is at the heart of nearly all Morris's paintings, whether figurative or abstract.

Like Rothko, Morris had worked in the Federal Art Projects, and his style of the late 1930s shows his awareness of social realism, with solidly rendered figures and landscapes based on direct observation. But *The Family*, 1939-40, also points to the changes his paintings would

undergo during the war years and immediately after. The closely linked figures of a mother, father and child huddle inward against an uncertain environment, suggested by a threatening sky, an indistinct fourth figure and a dark background. It is of course tempting and to some degree valid to see these figures against a backdrop of the war in Europe and the rise of the Nazi Party. But already evident here is that quality of glowing light that critics would frequently remark upon: an inner luminosity that suffuses the figures and lifts them out of a specific time and place, transforming them into a universal and elemental family.

Morris's figures would change dramatically by the end of the war. By 1946 he had established a reputation on the West Coast and had been included in exhibitions in Seattle, San Francisco and Portland. That year was also the first time he was chosen for the Whitney Museum of American Art's annual exhibition (the forerunner of the present biennial)⁶. He traveled regularly to New York and was in frequent contact with Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still



Burned Earth, 1946
Oil on canvas, 30 x 42 in., private collection

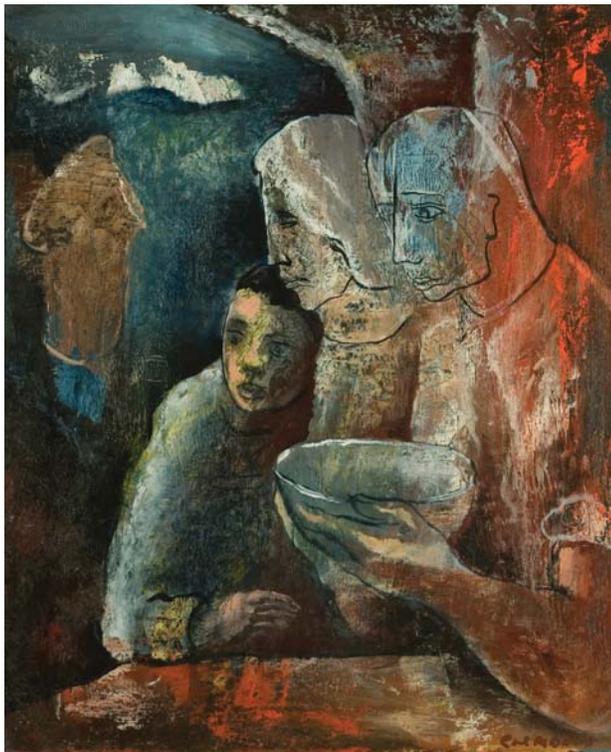
and others. Rothko was moving away from his earlier, myth-based, figurative paintings, and so too was Morris, although his journey would be a different one, rooted in his growing sensitivity to the Northwest landscape, its geologic features and its light and atmosphere.

Two remarkable paintings from 1946, *Burned Earth* and *In the Stillness of Time*, exemplify the beginnings of his new direction. In these works, groups of fleeing, anonymous figures are coterminous with their rocky, austere surroundings. Bits of faces and eloquent hands lend these figures their tragic dignity. Broadly painted areas of brilliant but somber color define a minimal landscape, a place that bears the scars of history.

Although he was still painting such haunting figurative paintings in the early 1950s, Morris had also begun to explore abstraction through line, color and form. *Triptych No. 3*, 1952, was included in a 1953 exhibition of eight Oregon artists at New York's Kraushaar Gallery (which would subsequently represent Morris for the rest of his career). *Art News* critic Henry McBride labeled this work the best in the show and described it in somewhat whimsical prose:

It was curiously satisfying with its sparkling color and playful naturalness and charged with the sense of having arrived at the effect aimed at. So many abstractions aim at nothing and get nothing ... It could be a marine, a shore piece, or it could be a three-winged Japanese screen. It could, as I have said, be many things.⁷

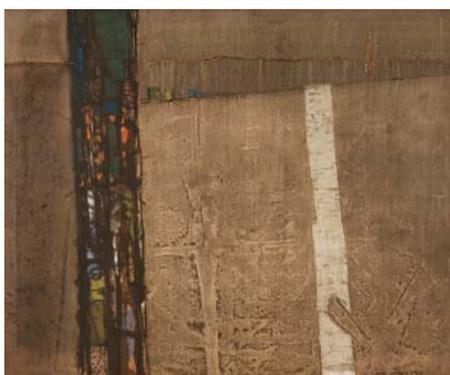
In spite of his hesitant embrace of abstraction, McBride does get at some of the qualities that underlie Morris's painting. First, there is, as with Rothko and Newman, an insistence upon content. But for Morris that content was increasingly based upon his observations of the landscape, while for Newman and Rothko it focused on intellectual, inward-looking expression. Second, there is the "sparkling color" and its suggestion of vibrant light. Third, there is the allusion to Japanese art: Japanese painting, ceramics and calligraphy had always been of interest to Morris, and in the 1950s he translated that sense of dynamic line into his own paintings and sumi ink



The Family, 1939
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in., private collection



Triptych No. 3, 1952
Oil on canvas, 14 x 36 in., private collection



Rising City No. 2, 1955
Oil on canvas, 39 x 48 in., private collection



Untitled, c. 1960.
Oil on canvas, 48½ x 61 in., collection
of Brooks and Dorothy Cofield
Photo: Jim Lommasson



Ascending Forms, 1954
Oil on canvas, 48 x 30 in., private collection

drawings, some of which are included in the exhibition. In his paintings of the 1950s — a work such as *Ascending Forms*, 1954, is an example — he frequently employed calligraphic shapes that suggest figure or text.

As Morris's style shifted toward abstraction, he was also more aware than ever of the inescapable presence of the Pacific Northwest. In its varied landscape he found a source of inspiration that, in contrast to Newman's and Rothko's more cerebral wellsprings, was both physical and spiritual. In a 1983 interview for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, he explained his position:

Abstraction became, or has become to a great extent, totally removed from environment or subject matter or anything of that sort, and is turned more into a sense of non-objective art or art for art's sake and denying everything that one is. I have felt that, to begin with, for me this was an impossibility and in many

instances is a lie on the part of artists who assume that they're not being influenced by who they are and where they are and what they are. I choose to be in an environment that excites me as the Northwest does. The trips that I do into the mountains, the desert or the beach, wherever, are experiences that are not recorded directly as landscapes — I do not sketch them when I am out; I don't work directly from nature at all. Often the experiences are the material of my paintings.⁸

In 1959, Morris received a commission for a series of paintings on the history of religions, to be exhibited at the Oregon Centennial. Produced in a white heat — he had six weeks to complete them — they are nine extraordinary mural-sized compositions.

After the centennial, the paintings, at Morris's stipulation, were kept together and went to the University of Oregon. They were exhibited last summer, for the first time in decades, at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art. For many the works were a revelation, and more than one viewer likened their powerful impact to the experience of visiting the 14 crepuscular panels in the Rothko Chapel or of encountering Newman's *Stations of the Cross*.

In *The History of Religions*, Morris summed up both his spiritual philosophy and his approach to abstraction and also solidified many of his most important motifs, the ideas that he would continue to explore in succeeding years. Some of the titles are telling: *Light Breaking Across Darkness*, *Intersection of Light, People and Structures* and *Books and Tablets*. Unlike Newman's paintings and Rothko's, this "chapel series" is outward-looking, dealing as it does with the idea of fellowship and of a spiritual presence manifested through light and rooted in nature. Morris later explained the commission thusly:

I did it because I think of myself as being basically a religious person and hating religiosity, hating the doggerel ... There are basically some things that I do embrace. In a sense, it's a whole attitude of brotherhood of man, or compassion for one's fellow human being⁹

In works made after *The History of Religions* commission, Morris often elaborated on the symbolic primacy of word and light and would render each a tangible presence. In such paintings as *Deciphered Stone* and *Tablets on a White Field*, 1961, word — or truth — is made as durable and necessary as rock. The latest pieces in the exhibition are from the *Script* series, made between 1966 and '68. In these paintings, Morris groups together animated calligraphic elements, such as those in *Ascending Forms*, so that they resemble congregated figures or scrolled columns of text.

In later years, Morris often returned to the themes and forms he had identified in his early works. But ultimately (in part, of course, because his career was longer) his work grew and evolved more than that of Newman or Rothko. His sources came from the outer world — from his love of music and literature and, especially, of the Pacific Northwest landscape — and his experiences of it. While he worked hard to establish a national reputation during the 1950s and '60s, he insisted on a distance from a marketplace that, he believed, all too frequently rewarded artists for repeating their successes and not for seeking new directions. As this exhibition makes abundantly clear, Carl Morris's paintings reflect his own intuition, his understanding of philosophy, and his quiet, independent spirituality.

¹ Barnett Newman, "The New Sense of Fate," unpublished document quoted in Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman*, Tate Gallery, London, 1987.

² Carl Morris, "Interview with Carl Morris Conducted by Sue Ann Kendall at the Artist's Studio in Portland, Oregon, March 23 and 24, 1983," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/morris83.htm>

³ <http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/myths1.shtm>

⁴ Barnett Newman, 1967, cited in Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*.

⁵ Carl Morris, 1959, quoted in Louise Aaron, "Beauty, Peace Reign Here: Paintings Represent Worship," *Oregon Journal*, May 31, 1959.

⁶ Between 1946 and '63, Morris exhibited in eight Whitney Annuals. During that time, Kenneth Callahan, Tom Hardy, and Mark Tobey were the only other Northwest artists to be included.

⁷ Henry McBride, "Oregonians," *Art News*, February 1953.

⁸ Carl Morris, "Interview with Carl Morris Conducted by Sue Ann Kendall at the Artist's Studio in Portland, Oregon, March 23 and 24, 1983," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁹ *Ibid.*



Above: *Untitled*, 1957
Oil on paperboard over masonite,
11 x 16½ in., collection of
Brooks and Dorothy Cofield
Photo: Jim Lommasson

Right: *The Keepers*, 1947
Oil on canvas, 31 x 40 in., private collection

Cover: *In the Stillness of Time*, 1946
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in., collection of
Michael Parsons and Marte Lamb



acknowledgements

Marylhurst University thanks art historian Prudence Roberts for proposing this exhibition on the work of Carl Morris for The Art Gym. *Carl Morris: Figure, Word and Light* elucidates an important artist's response to the traumatic events of the mid-twentieth century. Marylhurst is honored to present the results of Roberts's research in the exhibition and brochure.

We thank Dan and Kathy Harmon for their generosity as exhibition sponsors. We extend our appreciation in addition to supporters Brooks and Dorothy Cofield, The Harold & Arlene Schnitzer CARE Foundation, Laura Russo Gallery and the Royal Danish Consulate, Portland, Oregon.

We are also grateful to the collectors who have loaned work to the exhibition: Brooks and Dorothy Cofield, Dan and Kathy Harmon, the Carl and Hilda Morris Foundation, Michael Parsons and Marte Lamb, Laura Russo, Arlene and Harold Schnitzer, and others. Also thanks to Lawrence Fong, curator, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon, for his splendid exhibition of Morris's *The History of Religions* murals in 2007.

Several years ago, the friends and family of Arilla Ruth Dawson established a memorial fund in her honor at Marylhurst University. Dawson was an artist who studied at Marylhurst, and her daughter, Dr. Libby Dawson Farr, is on the faculty of the university's Department of Art and Interior Design. We thank the donors to the memorial fund for their generosity and are pleased to be able to use their contributions to help meet the costs of *Carl Morris: Figure, Word and Light*.

Terri M. Hopkins
Director and Curator
The Art Gym



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OREGON ARTS
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Carl Morris: *Figure, Word and Light*

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