

CLARENCE MORGAN

BY JEFF FLEMING

Clarence Morgan searches instinctively for meaning in orderings of graphic devices. In the black-and-white paintings here, these devices comprise groupings of circles, ovals, and meandering lines, and a merger of voluminous and linear forms. They depict, alternately, a flat, two-dimensional space as well as the illusion of depth. Holes through seemingly solid forms provide vistas into layered, swirling shapes. Forms radiate around one another as if flying in and out of cloud formations, or through the debris of explosions in the expanding reaches of space and, conversely, in microscopic worlds beyond our vision. While marking a maturity and turning point in Morgan's work, these paintings continue his ongoing investigations into the nature of abstract art, abstraction's place in the history of painting or mark-making, and its contribution to visual culture in the 21st century.

Since the 1970s, Morgan has used pattern, rhythm, gesture, color, idealized shapes, decoration, and hybrid forms as the tools of his investigations, each informed his ongoing search for relevance in abstract painting. In these mature works, Morgan has synthesized many of these elements into a concise, stylized presentation by paring down and condensing his vast vocabulary of shapes and forms and reducing his use of color to its most reductive state. The virtual elimination of color, as well as a singular focus on amorphous, circular, or semicircular shapes, serves him well. Relative to Morgan's own progressive history of producing abstract images, these paintings function as a zenith of sorts. They are his simplest yet most complex pictures to date.

Morgan derives his imagery from what we can and cannot see. Among many possibilities, the viewer can detect views of the world afforded by contemporary technology. Other artists have been quick to respond to similar vantage points. Morgan's works share an affinity with and have a relationship to the images of American artist Tara Donovan's recent bubble paintings and prints, which are created in part by the chance actions of acidic bubbles, and the sculptures and drawings of American artists Heidi Fasnacht and Terry Winters, who depict abstractions derived from nature or natural phenomena. Like the works of these artists, Morgan's paintings show us how the images of our time are embedded in our collective visual vocabularies. Pared down as they are, these concise images become stylized versions of what we know, or what we think we know.

Relative to what we can detect in Morgan's imagery, what we cannot see in his work is much more nebulous. Mental concepts, such as instinct, intuition, and sudden impulses, dictate his actions. Morgan consistently attempts to block logical thinking processes and concrete ideas to dwell within the enigmatic. He finds meaning in the transformative experiences inherent in the malleability of thought and in the changing nature of experience. For Morgan, out of the seemingly meaningless occurrences of random choices and chance pairings come knowledge and reward. This working method was highly favored by early Surrealists, such as Jean Arp, and Morgan finds renewed relevance in this process today.

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Morgan positions the meaning he finds in this transformative activity parallel to his personal opinions and beliefs. For him, his amorphous, hybrid forms respond to and represent archetypes. The viewer is familiar with them as forms and shapes, and can apply various meanings to them, but likewise, the viewer is hard-pressed to settle on one specific meaning. Morgan's most pressing question now may be how to find meaning individually, through the physical and mental act of creating a work of art, and how to communicate that meaning to the viewer.

The enigmatic site Morgan activates holds precarious consequences in 21st-century thought and visual culture. The viewing consumer has been acclimated to avoid this path of thinking; we have tossed around words and ideas like personal meaning and archetype until they have lost their meanings. The viewer is forced then to bring his or her own meaning to these graphic devices and revel, at times vicariously, in this search for meaning. The residue of Morgan's explorations, the painting, becomes a chalkboardlike record of a set of actions, of a transformation, not only for him as the creator, but for the viewer as well.

— Jeff Fleming, Deputy Director/Senior Curator, Des Moines Art Center