Machine Age Noise

Morris Graves **April 18—May 30, 2026**
Organized by Kenta Murakami

Morris Graves (b. 1910 OR-d. 2001, CA) is a difficult artist to place within the scope of 20th-century American art. Despite sustained attention since the 1942 MoMA show that rocketed him to early fame, he has largely become a regional outlier in opposition to the larger arc of Modernist abstraction. In his lifetime he maintained a resistance to being assimilated into the trends of the urban art centers of New York and Los Angeles, instead appearing most compelling as an artist's artist figure for gay oddballs across the century.

The elder Marsden Hartley dedicated a poem to Graves, titling it after the 1941 work, Eagle of the Inner Eye: "I see a singular shuttle of time weaving back and forth between two attenuated retinas / and I am amazed things are as liveable / as they are." [1]In the late 50s, Paul Thek shared with his lover a list of paintings he would have done: "Suzie in search of the Holy Grail. The destruction of the Sphinx. Portrait of Morris Graves." [2] Ray Johnson convened a gathering of Graves fans in 1976 and illustrated a series of interviews he did for Art in America with the text "The Silence of Morris Graves," noting that he had to apologize to the reticent artist for his zeal.[3] Graves understood his work to be a kind of guide for a new way of seeing, and his dedication to symbolism and spirituality, privacy and an almost antisocial commitment to his principles, continue to make him a revelatory model for how to be an artist in the world today.

Mythologized in a 1953 LIFE Magazine profile as one of the "Northwest Mystics," Graves was an artist who strived endlessly for transcendence of the physical, while obsessively cultivating an aesthetic and material universe around himself to facilitate

[1] Kass, Ray, and Theodore F. Wolff, editors. Morris Graves: Vision of the Inner Eye. George Braziller, Inc., 1983, p. 1.
[2] Paul Thek, in a letter to Peter Harvey, late 1950s. Collection of Peter Harvey.
[3] Johnson, Ray. "Abandoned Chickens." Art in America, Vol. 62, No. 6, Nov.—Dec. 1974, p. 108.

the solitude it required.[4] This exhibition is centered around works produced at the first two homes Graves designed and built: The Rock, a remote, shoji-screened outcrop perched on Fidalgo Island 50 miles north of Seattle, where he lived from 1940–1946; and Careläden, an opulent but monastic complex he occupied from 1947–1957. While these years coincide with only the first third of his career, they mark a cohesive and formative period within Graves' practice- one that would define the terms of his work even as it continued to evolve in later decades.

While it would be easy to cast Graves' works from the early 40s as insular to his realm of birds, insects and trees, it would belie the deep sensitivity that necessitated this level of remove. "Thinking back, you felt the mood of the world for war," he later wrote. From the edge of Washington's deep wilderness, "you were not too close to society [to] be identified with it. You were concerned with the state of the world; you found that living on the sidelines [...] helped accomplish an attitude or state of mind." [5]

In Snake in Ecstasy (c. 1938–40), a serpent uncoils into the night sky surrounded by a web of moonlight. Around this time Graves began to use "white writing," a technique innovated by his friend Mark Tobey towards abstract ends, as a means of suggesting an unseen, but no less vital plane of reality. Graves worked mostly at night at The Rock, and he writes: "It was all stony hills, scrubby forests, and mountains that deflected every sound. You could hear the cattle, or a dog barking, from a great distance." [6]Alone with the animals and shadows cast by kerosene lamplight, Graves used these non-human actors as stand-ins for his own mysterious moods: "The serpent is to expiate the ecstasy of the full moon—not only lunacy but ecstasy," he wrote. "The yearning to integrate with the common orb."[7]

Artists in Washington at this time had more access to art from the East than from Europe, with the Seattle Art Museum only opening in 1933 as a collection of predominantly Asian art. Having traveled to Japan as a teenage steamship hand, Graves felt profoundly the effects of the attack on Pearl Habor, the resulting US entry into the war, and the internment of Japanese Americans along the West Coast. Having failed to achieve conscientious objector status, he was additionally under suspicion for his pacifist affiliations and close friendship with the designer George Nakashima. As a result, while his work was being rapidly acquired by many of the country's most prominent art collections, he spent two years imprisoned in the stockade at Camp

[4] Sargent, Winthrop. "Mystic Painters of the Northwest." Life, 28 Sept. 1953.
[5] Wight, Frederick S., John I. H. Baur, and Duncan Phillips. Morris Graves. University of California Press, 1956, p. 21.
[6] Kass, Ray, editor. Morris Graves: Vision of the Inner Eye. George Braziller, 1988, p. 42.
7. Wight, Baur, and Phillips. Morris Graves, p. 43.

Roberts. His letters from this time mark his deep disenchantment: “I should not condemn these men (that I am packed in with) for falling back totally on the flesh [...] I should use beauty as an opiate—and if I can pull out of nature and hint at it in paint––then I should—and hand it as an opiate to any who will have it. I am more tired than my body.” [8] It is in opposition to this phenomenal world that his work turned. In works such as Under the Grinding Rivers of Earth (1945) Graves captured the weight of these years, winter leaves tumbling in the wind until they turn to dust.

In 1947, using the funds being sent from the Willard Gallery in New York, Graves purchased land in the undeveloped suburb of Woodway, Washington and began the long development of a Modernist estate he called Careläden. Before construction began he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which he hoped would allow for him to travel again to Japan. In his application he wrote about his desire to find a language removed from the “exhibitionism called self-expression” then gaining traction, pursuing instead “metaphysical perceptions which produce creative painting as a record.”[9] Given the ongoing reconstruction of post-war Japan, he only made it as far as Honolulu before his entry was blocked by the U.S. military occupation authorities. Instead he spent a year studying the Shang dynasty bronzes at the Honolulu Academy of Arts..

In Ritual Vessel - Mirror (1947) a wine pitcher takes the form of a bird, which cranes its neck to look backwards towards history. Within the depths of its basin is a min-now returning its gaze––a manifestation of the force which “has already started to warp the vessel’s outer form.” [10]The following year Graves disembarked for France. While he spent the winter painting at Chartres Cathedral daily, he supposedly destroyed everything upon his return. A surviving painting of a gargoyle symbolized to him, “patterns of exfoliation, i.e., evolution [...] an eternal potential, latent in consciousness, which can be individually and collectively set in motion to achieve that ultimate experience, [...] that reidentification with origin, that realization that the universe is in us rather than we in it."[11]

Careläden grew over its six year construction to be an elegantly formal residence starkly at odds with the ascetic primitivism he had cultivated at The Rock. The home had a capacious studio and guest corridors, ample gardens and a manmade pond, all enclosed by a fifteen-foot wall. Even this Eden––filled with beautiful objects and roamed by peafowl, chicken and guinea hen––could not harbor Graves, and his seclusion was soon interrupted by the encroachment of suburban develop-ment and the sounds of military flight patterns overhead. In his Machine Age Noise series (1957–8) Graves captures the discordant sonic environment that began to mar his carefully constructed sanctuary. The resulting sumi-e ink abstractions are some

[8] Morris Graves, in a letter to Marian Willard, Camp Roberts, California, October 22, 1942. Halper, Vicki, and Lawrence Fong. Morris Graves: Selected Letters, p. 54.

[9] Wight, Baur, and Phillips. Morris Graves, p. 50.

[10] Ibid, p. 53.

[11] Morris Graves, in a letter to Mark Tobey, Chartres, France, October 26, 1948. Halper, Vicki, and Lawrence Fong. Morris Graves: Selected Letters, p. 277.

of the artist's closest works to the expressionism that defined the art of this period, yet are notably an illustration of his inability to focus or conjure the symbols he sought within the realm of his inner eye.

These explosive works bookend this phase of Graves' life, followed by an itinerant period in which he strove once again to find his roost. While his later work continued his effots to develop a spiritual form of art, it shifts towards a meditative realism reliant on a close observation of nature, departing from the symbolism of his early work. I will note that it is inaccurate to think of Graves merely as a painter of pictures, as his homes and his gardens, as well as his way of living, were equally part of his practice. I think of a letter from the war years in which he wonders: "Do the 'arts' as we have known them past—and the spontaneity and vitality and inner exuberance of the life-of-the-spirit bring us a new medium? — A living medium. Is it not time that the emphasis be put on living the creation correctly? [...] Is there any clue to be found in the old urge of self-expression? I don't know."

[12] Morris Graves, in a letter to Marian Willard, July 2, 1943. Kass, Ray, editor. Morris Graves: Vision of the Inner Eye. George Braziller, 1988, p. 38.