

ROBERT MORRIS
BOUSTROPHEDONS

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ESSAY BY PEPE KARMEL

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CASTELLI



Robert Morris
Out of the Past, 2016
 (detail, see Plate 1)

ROBERT MORRIS **BOUSTROPHEDONS**

PEPE KARMEL

It feels like a waking nightmare. The tumbling wraiths of *Out of the Past* [Plate 1] hover around you, arms extended to carry you away. The figures in *Criss-Cross* [Plate 3], with their violently splayed arms and legs, have been frozen while still in motion, tossed into a pile, and fastened to the wall so that you can't avoid them. The anonymous bodies of *The Big Sleep* [Plate 2] lie stretched out at your feet, covered by sheets like victims of a mass shooting. Maybe you can just walk away and pretend they are not there. The six men in *Dark Passage* [Plate 4], with cowls over their heads and ropes around their necks, seem intent on their impending doom. They are mercifully indifferent to your presence.

In these new works Robert Morris returns to the technique of his 2015 installation *MOLTINGSEXOSKELETONSSHROUDS*, where he created sculptures by draping linen soaked in resin over manikins. Removing the manikins, he left only the empty, rigid draperies like the dried skins of molting snakes, the chitinous exoskeletons of insects, or the shrouds used to wrap dead bodies. In *Boustrophedons*, Morris replaces the linen with carbon fiber: a tremendously strong, light-weight material used for the bodies of race cars and advanced

aircraft. Soaked in epoxy resin, the textured surface of the carbon fiber becomes glossy and menacing, the fabric of choice for superheroes and supervillains in contemporary movies.

The installation's title, *Boustophedons*, comes from the format of early Greek tablets, where one line is inscribed from left to right and the next from right to left, like an ox (*bous*) plowing a field, turning (*strophos*) at the end of one furrow and going back in the other direction. The process of casting the figures in the exhibition (thirty-eight in all) felt to Morris like a similarly repetitive, endless process. The titles of the individual works come from *film noir* classics of the late 1940s, whose protagonists search for a path between the Scylla of desire and the Charybdis of greed, while random death follows them like Nemesis.

Viewers familiar only with Morris' Minimal sculptures may be surprised—even shocked—by his new work. His “unitary forms” of the 1960s deliberately avoided the compositional complexity of traditional sculpture and painting. Instead of creating “internal” relationships, Morris wrote in 1966, the Minimal object “takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision.” His simple geometric constructions seemed to refuse any connection with traditional sculpture.



Figure 1
ROBERT MORRIS
MOLTINGSEXOSKELETONSSHROUDS
September 12 – November 14, 2015
Castelli Gallery, installation view

Morris' new work, however, refers constantly to art history. His 2015 installation *MOLTINGSEXOSKELETONSSHROUDS* [Figure 1] included two figures wearing tall pointy hats (like “dunce caps”), recalling the pathetic victims in Francisco Goya's pictures of the Spanish Inquisition. The



Figure 2
Francisco Jose de Goya y Lucientes
They Go Down Quarreling
Brush and grey wash on paper
9 ¼ x 5 ½ inches
Private collection

hovering wraiths of *Out of the Past*, in the current exhibition, are inspired by Goya's drawings of *Witches and Old Women*, from an album whose scattered pages were reunited in a 2015 exhibition at The Courtauld Gallery. *They Go Down Quarreling* [Figure 2], the first sheet of the album, shows an aged witch hovering in space, yanking the hair of a younger maidservant while two other witches float behind them. In an unpublished essay about the album, Morris describes the drawings as “cartoons of the vanities, follies, cruelties, superstitions, fantasies, disgusts, and perversions of old age.”

Born in 1931, Morris today is roughly ten years older than Goya was when he began work on the *Witches and Old Women* album. Noting “some of these old bodies even seem to take shame-faced delight in their unseemly eroticism and awkward groping,” Morris considers a biographical interpretation of Goya's imagery, writing that “a loathing for the very condition of old age seems to seethe just below the surface of these works.” On reflection, however, he concludes that the drawings represent Goya's “revenge” on “the



Plate 1
Robert Morris
Out of the Past, 2016
Carbon fiber and epoxy
88 x 138 x 184 inches (overall)

repressive Spain of Ferdinand VII, a space where liberalism had recently died and where the Inquisition still echoed.” The album is:

[a] gallery of demented and perverted behaviors emerging as irrational reactions to a corrupt and repressive autocracy. Long pent-up repressions erupt as whirling gyrations and shrieks of obscene laughter. A last burst of energy animates these devious and unseemly gestures in ancient bodies that will not go quietly.

Personal disquiet and political disgust also pervade the imagery of the three other installations in *Boustophedons*. *Dark Passage* [Plate 4] depicts a group of prisoners advancing toward their execution. Morris’ figures evoke Auguste Rodin’s *The Burghers of Calais* [Figure 3], commissioned in 1884 by the city of Calais to record a dramatic episode of the Hundred Years War. After the troops of the English King Edward III encircled Calais, he offered to lift the siege if six leading citizens would serve as sacrificial victims on their city’s behalf. Six wealthy burghers volunteered, emerging from the city gates with nooses around their necks to acknowledge their impending death. However, the proud and stoic bearing of the men persuaded the English to spare their lives. The citizens of nineteenth-century Calais, expecting Rodin to render the heroism of the burghers, were outraged by his sculpture, which seemed to show the burghers trembling with fear. Morris’ rendering veils the men’s facial expressions, but their stooped postures betray their terror. Morris’ drapery here recalls not so much the narrow, vertical folds of Rodin’s



Figure 3
Auguste Rodin
The Burghers of Calais
Modeled 1884-95; cast 1919-21
Bronze
82 ½ x 94 x 75 inches
Philadelphia Museum of Art
Bequest of Jules E. Mastbaum, 1929

Burghers as the large, heavy folds of the mourners in Claus Sluter’s tomb for Philip the Bold (now in the Dijon Musée des Beaux-Arts). The burghers are already in mourning for their lives.

The individual figures in the *The Big Sleep* [Plate 2] recall traditional images of the entombed Christ, whether seen in profile, as in Hans Holbein’s *Dead Christ* in the Basel Kunstmuseum, or foreshortened, as in Andrea Mantegna’s *Dead Christ* in the Pinacoteca di Brera. (A 1989 painting by Morris recycles Mantegna’s composition as a deathbed portrait of the Prohibition-era gangster Dutch Schultz, whose hallucinatory dying words have often been cited as ready-made examples of avant-garde prose.) However, the multiplication of recumbent figures in *The Big Sleep* does not seem to have an art historical antecedent. Lined up on the floor,

the barely concealed bodies recall front-page photographs depicting the victims of civil wars or extrajudicial killings, too numerous to house in the local mortuary.

Criss-Cross [Plate 3], evoking a stony battlefield littered with the bodies of combatants, has no Old Master model. However, the multi-directional orientation of the figures, and the way they have been transferred from floor to wall, recalls the all-over paintings of Jackson Pollock. Of course, the hyper-realistic bodies in *Criss-Cross* are completely different from the looping,

abstract figures that occasionally emerge from Pollock’s web, and *Criss-Cross* is not an abstract visual field but a shambles. However this visceral scene may not be so foreign from the latent imagery of Abstract Expressionism. Pollock’s 1947 drawing *War* [Figure 4] similarly depicts a field heaped with bodies, with a crucified figure standing sentinel at right.



Figure 4
Jackson Pollock
War, 1947
Pen and ink, and colored pencils on paper
20 ¾ x 26 inches
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Gift of Lee Krasner Pollock,
in memory of Jackson Pollock, 1982



Plate 2
Robert Morris
The Big Sleep, 2016
Carbon fiber and epoxy
Nine units, each approximately 15 x 35 x 80 inches;
disposition variable



Plate 3
Robert Morris
Criss-Cross, 2016
Carbon fiber and epoxy
120 x 229 x 48 inches

Beyond these references to the Old Masters and to classic Modernism, the *Boustrophedons* also provide a commentary on Morris' evolution from the Minimal 1960s to the present.

Far from being a recent innovation, political allusion has been a constant factor in Morris' work. The nondescript, symmetrical geometry of his 1961 *Column* conveys a tacit social-political message. As the painter Peter Halley notes in a 1991 essay on "Abstraction and Culture," geometric abstraction before World War II offered a vision of a rational, utopian future. This utopian geometry survived into postwar abstraction in Latin America, but Abstract Expressionism in the United States and its counterparts in European art expressed a new sense of existential alienation. Minimalism did not revive the utopian form-language of the pre-war era, but replaced it with a new dystopian geometry, expressing the dehumanization of postwar society. Similarly, Anna Chave, in her 1990 essay "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," argues that, despite the left-wing politics of most Minimal artists, the form language of their work corresponded to the oppressive standardization of the postwar economy, dominated by giant corporations.

The circumstances of *Column's* creation reinforce the symbolically charged quality of its seemingly neutral form. Living in California



Figure 5
Robert Morris
Two Columns, 1961
Painted aluminum (fabricated 1973)
Two units, each 96 x 24 x 24 inches

in the 1950s, Morris had been a painter of gestural abstractions, but when he arrived to New York with his wife, the dancer Simone Forti, he focused instead on installation and performance. Morris constructed the first version of *Column*—a grey-painted plywood box 8 feet high and 2 by 2 in diameter—in January 1961. After dancing in several of

Forti's compositions, he adapted it for a performance at the Living Theater.

Morris' choreography was simple in the extreme. The theater lights would come up on the vertical box, with Morris himself standing concealed within it. The box would remain vertical for 3½ minutes. Then he would knock it to its side, where it would remain horizontal for another 3½ minutes before the lights went down. When Morris knocked the box over at the dress rehearsal, he split open his forehead and had to go to the emergency room. So in the actual performance that evening, the box was empty. After the first 3½ minutes, Morris used a string to topple the box to the floor, where it remained for the next 3½ minutes.

Even if *Column* was no longer inhabited by a living figure, its symbolism remained clear. The vertical box represented man in a state of consciousness, holding himself upright against the downward pull of gravity. The horizontal box represented man in a state of unconsciousness or death, letting gravity pull him to the ground.

Morris had revived or rediscovered an opposition familiar to earlier artists and writers. In the years just before World War I, the German sculptor Wilhelm Lehmbruck created a series of elongated vertical figures such as his *Standing Youth* of 1913 [Figure 6],



Figure 6
Wilhelm Lehmbruck
Standing Youth, 1913
Cast stone
92 x 33 ½ x 26 ¾ inches
The Museum of Modern Art
Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller

expressing the *élan vital* of youth. When it became apparent that war meant not a quick, glorious victory but an unending agony of death, suffering and destruction, Lehmbruck responded with a sculpture of a *Fallen Man* [Figure 7], expressing the horror of the era by shifting the figure from vertical to horizontal. Similarly, W.H. Auden, in the epigraph to his *Poems* of 1930, wrote:

Let us honor if we can
The vertical man
Though we value none
But the horizontal one.



This mournful opposition returns in the *Boustrophedons*, where the tragic verticality of the figures in *Dark Passage* [Plate 4] contrasts with the abject horizontality of those in *The Big Sleep* [Plate 2]. The witches of *Out of the Past* evade gravity, the fallen figures of *Criss-Cross* transcend it.

Figure 7
Wilhelm Lehmbruck
Fallen Man, 1915/16
Bronze
28 3/4 x 94 inches
Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen,
Berlin, Germany

The draperies of the *Boustrophedons* look back to the felt works that Morris began making in 1967 [Figure 8]. In these, he began with large pieces of industrial felt, cut them into geometric swatches and patterns, and suspended them from the wall or simply piled them on the floor. The original geometric pattern vanished or was gorgeously distorted by the interaction between the force of the gravity and the weight and stiffness of the felt. From Ancient Greece through the Baroque era, tailors and artists had created an expressive language of drapery. Morris detached this language from the human body.



Figure 8
Robert Morris
Untitled, 1967
Gray felt
Indeterminate dimensions
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Phyllis C. Wattis Fund for Major Accessions

Many of the felt works had no fixed appearance. Although they were installed according to a defined procedure, the pieces of felt would unfold and entangle differently each time. Moving from the fixed order of their original designs to the quasi-randomness



Plate 4
Robert Morris
Dark Passage, 2017
Carbon fiber and epoxy
72 x 230 x 120 inches (overall)



of their installations, the felt works became allegories of entropy, demonstrating the power of chaos and exhaustion to defeat human intention. Despite Morris' active participation in the left-wing politics of the era, his work evinced a profound pessimism about the possibility of change.

This post-Minimal approach continues to resonate in Morris' latest work. The nine casts of *The Big Sleep*, in particular, may be installed in several different configurations, some suggesting bureaucratic regimentation [Figure 9, Figure 10], others suggesting anarchic disarray [Plate 2].

The threat of chaos implicit in Morris' felt works of the late 1960s assumed an apocalyptic character in his drawings and reliefs of the 1980s. It was an era when the saber rattling of the Reagan administration created a widespread feeling that the end of the world might in fact be at hand. An American television film, *The Day After*, depicting the outbreak and consequences of a nuclear war, attracted an audience of over 100 million people. Within the narrower precincts of the

Figure 9 (above) and Figure 10 (right)
Robert Morris
The Big Sleep, 2016
Carbon fiber and epoxy
Nine units, each approximately
15 x 35 x 80 inches; disposition variable

New York art scene, the New Museum organized an exhibition on *The End of the World: Contemporary Visions of the Apocalypse*, including work by Morris and over twenty other artists.

At first glance, the swirling lines of Morris' *Untitled (Firestorm)* [Figure 11], from 1982, recall the watery deluges that Leonardo da Vinci drew obsessively at the end of his life. On closer inspection, the viewer notices ghostly skeletons in the darker areas of the composition, floating upward from beneath the surface. The title *Firestorm* lifts the image out of the realm of fantasy, and resituates it in history. The drawing recalls the intensive bombing of Dresden in February 1945, which generated a massive firestorm, incinerating several thousand people and killing thousands more by sucking the oxygen out of the air. The following month, the United States began an even more intensive campaign of





firebombing Japanese cities, culminating in August with the dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These brought World War II to an end. By the 1980s, however, it was apparent that a new round of nuclear warfare would mean the end of mankind. Morris' vertiginous drawings and reliefs provided a preview of an all-too-possible end of the world.

The vortices of *Firestorm* return in the fluttering draperies of *Out of the Past* [Plate 1] and the tumbling bodies of *Criss-Cross* [Plate 3]. Here, however, the energy of the storm has condensed into the

Figure 11
Robert Morris
Untitled (Firestorm), 1982
Ink, charcoal, graphite, and various powdered black pigments on rag paper with Velcro
Six panels: 38 x 50 inches each
Overall: 114 x 100 inches
Private collection

individual figures. Apocalypse is no longer a fate that descends upon mankind from beyond; it is a destructive force that individual human beings bear within them.

In a career spanning more than five decades, Morris has called into question the fundamental assumptions of modernism and postmodernism. In the 1960s, rejecting the formalist orthodoxy that defined modernism as the pursuit of purely optical experience, Morris and his fellow Minimalists insisted that the task of contemporary art was to evoke the experience of the body interacting with real materials in real spaces. However, Morris soon began to question the purity of this phenomenological experience. Each element of it—the body, the object, and the space—turned out to be rooted in a history, and could not be understood without it. Although it is tempting to use the term “postmodern” to describe the diversity of Morris' later career, his work implicitly rejects the postmodern assertion that we live in an “image world” detached from the real ground of history. The images in his drawings, paintings, and sculptures lead straight back to the blasted heath.

Morris' new work puts history into reverse gear. Instead of extracting the “essence” of earlier figurative styles, it demonstrates how even the most reductive sculpture (such as Morris' *Column*) points back toward Lehmbruck and Rodin. It is the product of our own violent era, just as Lehmbruck and Rodin's sculptures were products of theirs. Instead of reducing drapery to an abstract play of curves (as in his 1967 felt work), Morris discovers the *zeitgeist* of modern art in Goya's Spain, stupefied by the Bourbon restoration. “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake,” says Joyce's Stephen Dedalus. But to awake from history we must first remember it. ■

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