

Margaret Morrison

Patron Saints & Rituals

November 3 - December 30, 2005

By the time painter Margaret Morrison started high school, she had visited almost all of the world's great museums. Based in the Philippines, her family made a point of introducing her to art on their travels throughout Europe and Asia. "I felt as if my head had been opened up," she says, "and all this amazing visual information had been poured in. I loved all of it but was particularly fascinated with pagan and early Christian iconography, reveling in the imagery and symbolism."

In this breakthrough exhibition, Morrison, Professor of Art at the University of Georgia, shows just how greatly those rich, early encounters and her subsequent immersion in art history have affected her. Each one of these profound paintings invites the viewer into a mysterious and complex world where ancient rituals, religious symbolism and contemporary concerns intermingle. "I cast old symbols," she says, "in contemporary language."

She places her models, often family and friends, in historical situations that underline the universality of human experience. Brilliant technically, she as convincingly portrays expressions of confusion and love as she depicts a raging fire, a gun battle or the graceful purity of a lily.

Though called "Saint Lucy," Morrison's riveting portrait of a pretty, green-haired young woman in a sexy black evening dress hardly seems to be saintly. Looking askance, her subject appears quizzical and defiant. "I put her in gothic attire," Morrison says, "to go along with the Mardi Gras theme. She holds a feathered mask with eyes because St. Lucy was martyred by having her eyes gouged out, for staying true to her religion."

Like all her saints, Morrison's Saint Lucy displays a striking individuality, less representative of a virtue than of a psychological state of being. "They are my personal saints," she explains, "my own patron saints." She clearly empathizes with these men and women, who struggle for life in the powerful "Saint George and the Dragon," cherish a small bird in the tender "Veneration of Saint Barbara," and look for direction as the man does in "Gabriel the Archangel".

Taking as inspiration a pagan or Biblical story, Morrison then lets her imagination run rampant, finding connections between our own struggles with those of our mythical and religious ancestors. It is for this reason that almost all the paintings in her show seem to exist in a timeless zone where archetypal characters have gathered to act out their most private emotions.

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ESTABLISHED 1994

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In many works, Morrison's palette consists of soft grays, browns, blues and greens and the overall atmosphere is dark. Though in the exuberant "Saint Cecilia," who is the patron saint of music, the voluptuous heroine, silver bodied and blowing on a giant brass sousaphone (named after the march composer), marches across a desert under a cloud-filled blue sky, as bursting with light as the painting "Mary Magdalene" is full of dark foreboding. She does not see her subject as a fallen woman, as she is often cast by the Roman Catholic church, but as a brave spirit who prepared Christ's body for burial. Proud and sensual in a blue dress, Mary Magdalene stares out from the canvas, asking to be judged on her own terms.

Morrison uses the triptych to reveal different aspects of the same theme, for instance, in "Finger of God", the lightning in the center symbolizes an angry god, while to the left and right, lilies and a vessel, represent purity and the Holy Spirit, respectively. Then sometimes, as in "Saint George and the Dragon," under the large part of the panel where she painted two figures locked in combat, she added a scene of firefighters facing blazing buildings, in their own way, locked in combat.

While knowing Morrison's references adds to an appreciation of her stunning paintings, it is by no means a requirement to being swept up in their dramatic intensity. Dense, deeply felt, intriguing and masterfully painted, they draw in a viewer in part because of the honesty one feels in their creation.

As a young student a professor told her that she had to choose between being a wife and mother and a career as an artist. How wrong he was. "If I had not been able to tap into the emotion of being a mother," Morrison says, "I could not have painted this way. I could not have reached this level of the sublime. I continually draw from the well of my love for my family. Without them I would have gone dry."

-Valerie Gladstone, Contributing Writer for The New York Times and ArtNews magazine

Please join us for the opening reception on Thursday, November 3rd, 2005 from 6-8pm. Artist Margaret Morrison will be in attendance.

NEW STILL LIFE PAINTINGS BY MARGARET MORRISON
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AT GOURMET GARAGE/ART BY THE POUND
Street level windows 453 Broome Street at Mercer, on view 24 hours a day

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