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MARGARET MORRISON

Paradigm Shift

By Meg Daly

Margaret Morrison has been drawn to Baroque painting since she was a young girl. As an adult, she developed a mastery of the contrast of light and dark that characterizes Baroque style. What she didn't know is how that style would help her navigate a faith crisis that shook her to her core. ~

An exhibition of her work, *Paradigm Shift: Paintings by Margaret Morrison*, is currently on view at the Lyndon House Arts Center in Athens, Georgia. The suite of 10 large oil paintings depict theatrical characters in dramatic poses and charts the artist's allegorical grappling with her faith.

An art professor at the University of Georgia, Morrison teamed up with theater professor Anthony Marotta on a project titled *Contemporary Examination of Caravaggio's Dramatic Staging and Lighting - A Collaboration between Painting and Theatre*. The project included a stage performance as well as photographic documentation. Morrison then worked from photographs to make her lushly-colored evocative paintings.

Morrison has long been a fan of 16th-century master painter Caravaggio, famous for his dramatic use of chiaroscuro—the contrast of light and dark. She employed a Caravaggio-esque approach to evoke the paradigm shift she had in mind—a personal reckoning with the Mormon Church.

She explains in her artist statement that this series of paintings were inspired by the loss she felt when, in the early 2000s, she learned that the Mormon Church had ugly skeletons in its closet—what she describes as “unsavory and salacious moments in its history.”



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Her paintings trace the arc of her journey from disillusionment about the church she grew up in to a reclamation of inner peace. "I have left behind the black-and-white thinking required to be a true believer," she says. "But I am reluctant to close doors and never look back." Her solution to her faith crisis is to have "one foot in and one foot out."

"For me, the Mormon Church is no longer the arbiter or authority between me and heaven. Instead, it is a vehicle that helps me toward my destination," she says.

Morrison imbued her paintings of the Caravaggio scenes, which features performers from the university theater department, with her own emotions. In *East of Eden*, a young woman faces the viewer with what Morrison intends to be "the gesture of the figure in doubt." The denouement of the series, *East of Eden*, represents the woman's path to enlightenment. "She finds that she can no longer go back to the Garden," Morrison says. "Instead, she travels eastward toward God."

She notes that the journey portrayed in the paintings is not specific to Mormonism. "They are about a universal crisis that happens when you have a faith tradition that has strong sense of institutional hierarchy."

This summer, Morrison is teaching in Italy, as she frequently does. "It's wonderful to take students around and show them Caravaggios in situ," she says. By weaving together art, contemporary life and history, Morrison shows how an Old World style can bring fresh perspective to today's challenges.

Paradigm Shift: Paintings by Margaret Morrison is on view through September 1 and includes a gallery event on Thursday, August 24, at 6 p.m. Morrison is represented by Woodward Gallery in New York City. For a digital catalog of Morrison's exhibition visit www.woodwardgallery.net.

1
Free Fall, oil on
canvas, 72 x 60"

2
Followers, oil on
canvas, 60 x 72"

3
Limbo, oil on
canvas, 48 x 60"

4
East of Eden, oil on
canvas, 48 x 60"

Lyndon House Arts Center 211 Hoyt Street • Athens, GA
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