

'A Modern Bestiary' (While Darwin Sleeps)

Exhibition dates: 5 May - 1 July 2006

Robert Morgan "We live in Gothic times." Angela Carter

Robert Morgan's visionary short films dramatise the darker sides of human nature – often charting the territory where the human and the bestial overlap, or where the sleep of reason produces monsters. Characteristically, 'The Cat With Hands' conjures a crepuscular, nightmarish scenario in which the naturalistic is intertwined with the supernatural, the domestic yoked to the fantastical. Morgan's cinematic gifts lie, in part, in being able to convincingly give shape to otherworldly or even hallucinatory scenarios which combine horror with delight, and suspense with dream-like rapturous exhilaration. Through his ability to build an atmosphere pregnant with threat, menace and child-like wonder, Morgan creates the veracity needed to mesmerise us, and convince us of the existence and power of diabolical forces. Morgan's narrator, singing, introduces the work with a traditional rhyme: "Last night as I slumbered, I had a strange dream..."

'The Cat With Hands' blends live action and a year's worth of painstaking stop-frame animation. The result is a gothic story indebted to both Grimms' Fairy Tales and Ovid's 'Metamorphoses'. The central character is, as in several classic gothic stories, a monstrous shapeshifting creature which is half-human, half-animal. Compressed into a three-minute short, we follow the story of its unfolding metamorphosis from feline to human being, achieved by a predatory pursuit of flesh, and the vampiric consumption of other life. Morgan's tale turns on the charms of a delectable domestic animal, which (its narrator tells us) "wanted to become a person". By underlining the proximity of the domesticated to the savage in the animal kingdom, and the anodyne and the ferocious or brutal, the artist casts doubt upon our systems of categorisation. The artist's protagonist behaves with feline cunning, bestial savagery, human malevolence, and otherworldly powers of self-transformation.

Morgan's films are structured around dreamlike visual sequences and lullaby-like illusions, which transport viewers to make-believe worlds saturated with texture and atmosphere. Here, the exposition of the story takes place in a nocturnal woodland, where the artist's use of chiaroscuro and timeless costumes evoke a pre- Enlightenment world of superstition and fear. Morgan composes each frame by offsetting lustrous darkness with glimmering highlights, as though his characters each emitted a magical, flickering life-force illuminating their surroundings from within. Morgan's soundtrack parallels his visual idiom, being split between an earth tremor bass which generates tension, and moments of high-pitched terror. Both the visual and

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acoustic properties of Morgan's film evoke the diabolical and the marvellous, so that we feel that the unearthly or malign and the rapturous are close at hand. The film theorist Linda Williams has coined the term "body genres" to analyse the ways in which sensational or ecstatic imagery are structured. As she notes, horrifying imagery most often focuses on "the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion... the ecstatic body, the body beside itself". In 'The Cat With Hands', this can be seen in the most unexpected sense – the protagonist's body lying literally as well as metaphorically 'beside itself'.

'The Cat With Hands' might be said to adapt the aesthetic of gothic painting; it in part resembles several of Heinrich Fuseli's better known canvases, such as 'Titiania and Bottom'. In such largely monochromatic compositions, figures emerge from gloomy, undefined backdrops into dramatically lit foregrounds close to the picture plane; such artificially glaring tonal contrasts establish a nightmarish intensity. As in Fuseli's work, and other high gothic art and literature, it is dreams or fantasies, the supernatural and animistic forces, and horror or extreme violence which are Morgan's core themes. For the artist, these areas continue to allow access to previously subterranean areas of the imagination. But if such motifs and themes have a distinguished pedigree in pictorial art history, they have more distant predecessors in classic literature. As in Ovid's 'Metamorphoses', Morgan's narrative hinges upon cathartic explosions of violence. The punitive savagery with which the Cat commits predatory acts, and its huge-mouthed scream during moments of attack recall the Furies in Aeschylus' 'Oresteia'. Though Morgan's narrative arc can recall such premodern drama, his view of the animal kingdom echoes that of the high Romantic era. This might best be characterised as swinging between idealisation of the 'nobility' of the animal kingdom, and attributing malevolent or demonical qualities to it. On the one hand, Lord Byron attributed "all of the virtues of Man without his vices..." to our fellow species, observing their purportedly 'instinctual' behaviour. But for the majority of Romantic literary and artistic figures, from Bram Stoker to Mary Shelley, animals provided imaginative tools to explore the uncanny, inexplicable and infernal. For Morgan, similarly, the animal kingdom seems characterised by chaos and bestial aggression rather more than beauty or harmony.

In fact, though recalling a host of mythical stories from antiquity to our own time, Morgan's story is based upon a genuine dream: as a child, his older sister experienced recurring nightmares where a cat with human hands chased her around a graveyard. Rather than the improbability of the narrative stretching our credulity, the artist exploits

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the fact that, as the art historian EH Gombrich puts it, “we all believe in image-magic” – that we wish to suspend disbelief in what we already know to be unbelievable.

Below: From 'The Cat With Hands' 2001, video projection from 35mm film: 3 min