

# MAUD MORGAN'S COLLAGES: A POETRY OF CHANGE

BY NANCY RAINE

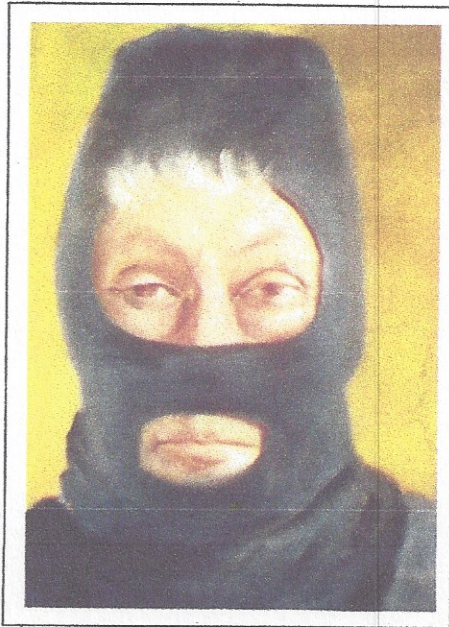
**T**he aim of art, so far as one can speak of an aim at all, has always been the same: the blending of experience gained in life with the natural qualities of the art medium.  
Hans Hofmann

*The final importance in a work of art is not between one color or another, one style or another, one period or another—it is not what a form is, but what it does.*  
Maud Morgan

*Beauty is momentary in the mind—the fitful tracing of a portal;  
But in the flesh it is immortal.*  
Wallace Stevens

In 1957, a decade before the unprecedented absorption in the examination of the self which is, for better or worse, a mark of the times, Maud Morgan assembled a one-woman show of self-portraits at Betty Parsons' New York gallery. Morgan was then fifty-four and living alone for the first time in twenty-six years. She'd been painting for almost three decades. Using different media and styles, Morgan's own physical features became many changing surfaces—at once mirror and ocean. It was all there—transfixed heartbreak, schizoid exhaustion, intimations of secret perversity, the persistent, introspective coolness of the survivor, self-pity protected by irony. These portraits were an astonishing collection of psychic seasons, a headlong plunge into subjectivity and introspection at a time when they were labeled shallow, narcissistic, or worst of all "feminine."

A decade later women artists, especially those working in photography and film, began to turn with passion and conviction to critical introspection and to the personal statement—self examination became valued, even perhaps celebrated. But in 1957 when the trend in painting was the post-painterly renovations of



*Passe Montagne* Oil on Canvas. 20" x 15", 1978.

"THE PAINTER WAS TO BEGIN BY VISUALIZING THE VOLUMES AND VOIDS IN NATURE, AND THEN TO TRANSLATE THEM INTO PLANES OF COLOR IN ACCORD WITH THE NATURE OF THE PICTURE SURFACE—THAT IS BY FLATTENING SOLIDS AND FILLING VOIDS. THE PLANES WERE TO BE ORGANIZED INTO 'COMPLEXES.'"

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abstract expressionism, both the theme of Morgan's exhibition and its stylistic disparity were out of step.

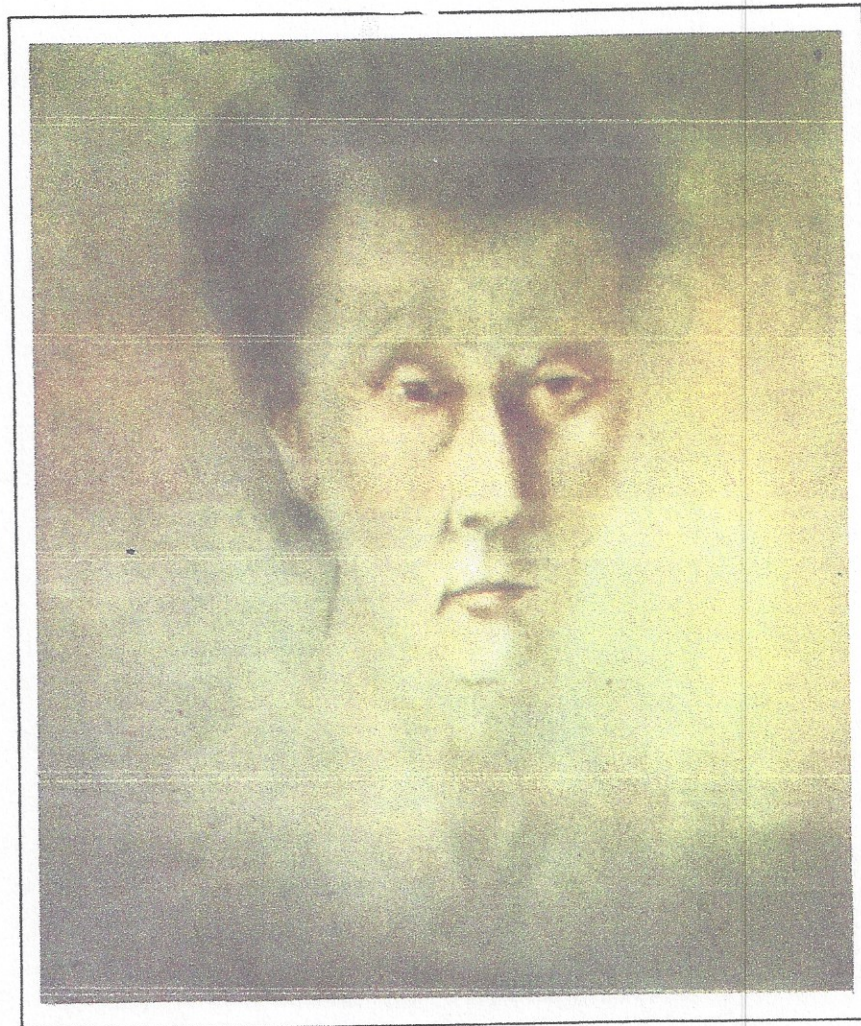
It's 1978 and Morgan is seventy-five and still restless. Three years ago she began to work in a medium new to her—paper collage. Her work has characteristically shown a remarkable range of style and media; in her fifty year career she has had many "periods" of work, never seeming to push toward

a single style as is the case with many other contemporary artists. People look at her collages, scratch their heads and say, "Well, you just never know what she's going to do next." These collages show a highly disciplined understanding of the inherent nature of the Japanese mulberry paper she uses in their construction, and at the same time, paradoxically, they emanate a sense of total "newness." That's intriguing.

In the course of producing a documentary film about Morgan's life, I felt the path of her work under my feet, curving and winding gracefully from "period" to "period"—from its representational beginning in the 1920s and 30s through her growing interest and final commitment to abstraction in the 40s and on to its sensitive exploration in pencil pastel, silkscreen, hard-edge acrylic, romantic oil and finally, collage. Here and there are scattered free-formed ceramics and wire sculpture, and all the while the self-portraits. As I looked at her life, which even in its barest outline reflects the major social and artistic changes of the twentieth century, I came to see, of course, that her art and her life are inseparable and to feel that the apparently sudden shifts in her style and use of medium were not sudden at all. The body of her work became a circular tapestry, not a linear progression, woven from different directions at once, while constantly being enlarged on its boundaries.

Morgan's habit of keeping apart—is a habit of keeping her finger on her own artistic pulse. Perhaps an art critic would trace different connections than those connective tissues I felt stretching gently between one artistic period and another. But I tend to see her artistic habit as one of tilling, rather than harvesting. Her present work in collage is both a culmination of work she has done in oil, silkscreen and hard-edge acrylic, and a further and more complex exploration of her most basic





*Mood.* 31" x 26", 1956.

*Moyenage.* 16½" x 13", 1957.



artistic and personal concerns.

The underpinning of all of Morgan's work, irrespective of the style and medium, is a basic philosophy of art and life which has to do with a highly personal, sensual response to nature and natural forms. In her collages this may find its most dignified and coherent expression, but it was very much on the agenda in her work with silk-screen and a series of oils which came before her collages.

In her early representational work Morgan painted directly from scene and figure. This work never feels stuck in a particular moment of time. There is a feeling of a "beingness" over time. The picture becomes the translation of a long accumulation of sensory impressions taken in from experiences of nature and set into a plastic reality on the two-dimensional surface of a painting. Memory becomes, in Morgan's expert hands, a physical, rather than a narrative tool, *recreating* rather than *describing* these impressions.

All of her abstract work, whether in oil, silk-screen, hard-edge acrylic or collage, strives to express her relationship to the natural world and its forms. In abstraction she is freed from the requirements of realistic depiction to create (with abstract form and color) the space, volume, mood and rhythm of objects in nature. Morgan's work in collage is moored first and foremost in her earliest exploration of the creation of flatness and depth with abstract form and color, an exploration which began with her studies with Hans Hofmann, one of the greatest teachers of art in America and the single most important influence on her work (She studied with Hofmann on and off for five years, between 1934 and 1940).

Hofmann's teachings pivoted on his concept of space as a dynamic—as a living thing, and he originated the now famous term "push and pull" to designate the simultaneous operation of flatness and depth in a picture. The fundamental mechanical problem facing the abstract painter is the creation of means sufficient to relate the elements of an abstract picture, which tend naturally to lock into a visually flat surface. Hofmann taught his students that space and form exist only through each other and that in this relationship space "vibrates and resounds with color, light and form in the rhythm of life."

The painter was to begin by visualizing the volumes and voids in nature, and then to translate them into planes of color in accord with the nature of the picture surface—that is by flattening solids and filling voids. The planes were to be organized into "complexes." The total effect of a picture issued from the interrela-



tionship of the complexes.

Although his classes focused on the mechanics of painting, he also taught his students that these were only means of realizing a spiritual synthesis. The artist's basic problem was how to transform the material with which he or she works into the sphere of the spirit, for in the end, the spiritual quality dominates the material.

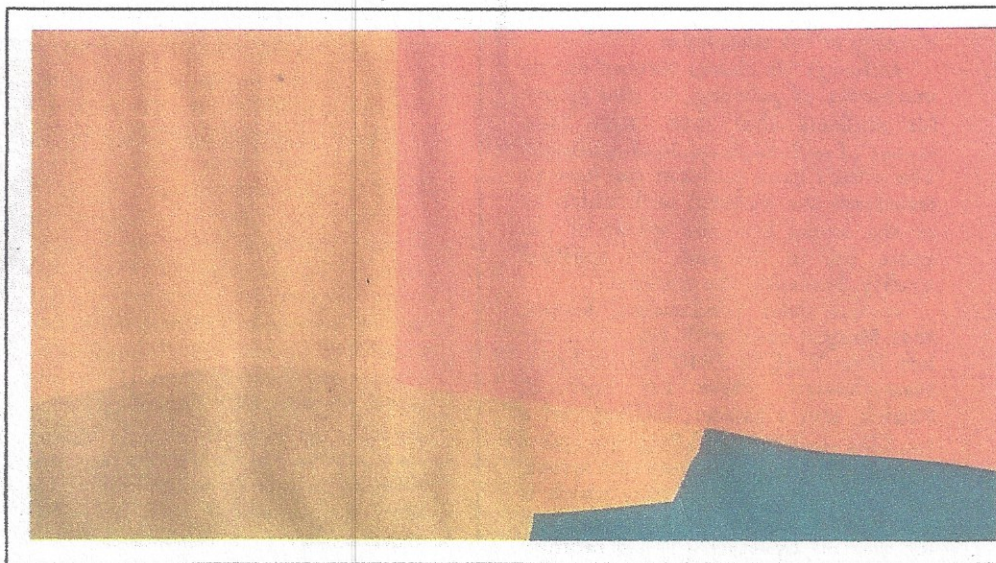
It was these fundamental lessons that Morgan took with her when she left New York in 1940 for Andover, Massachusetts where her husband, Patrick, also a painter, had secured a teaching position at Phillips Academy. Like many women writers and artists, Morgan's mid-career, a time which is often most productive for men, was interrupted by marriage and motherhood; but she continued to paint, primarily in oils, and to move steadily toward increasing degrees of abstraction. Her paintings in the seventeen years she was to remain in Andover take obvious pleasure in the disciplined and intuitive exploration of the abstract infinities of space and the interplay of color and form with volumes of space.

In 1958, a year after her exhibition of self-portraits and at the end of her marriage, Morgan made her first collage, called "Lazy Afternoon" which was inspired by scraps of canvas:

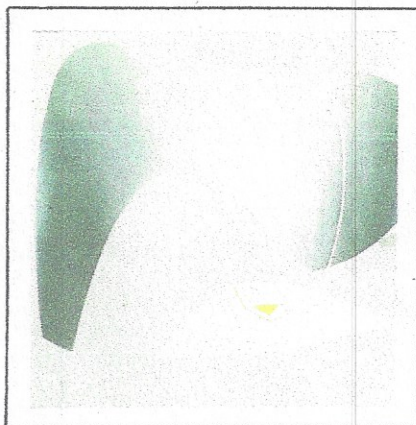
*I had torn up an unsuccessful painting and saw some interesting pieces on the floor—especially a wonderful circular shape with an open center. I felt very happy and thought of them as human beings lying on a grassy hilltop with a gentle breeze blowing the circular piece becoming a cloud. I still love the work. Then I happened on silkscreen and became engulfed. It was the incredible possibilities of color and the beautiful clarity that hooked me on silkscreen.*

Plunging into silkscreen, Morgan wasn't to return to collage until 1975, but she had threaded the needle. In the intervening twelve years while Morgan worked with the hard edges of color in serigraphs and acrylic she was preparing the ground for her collages in several ways—through her method of work and through her exploration of "forming with color."

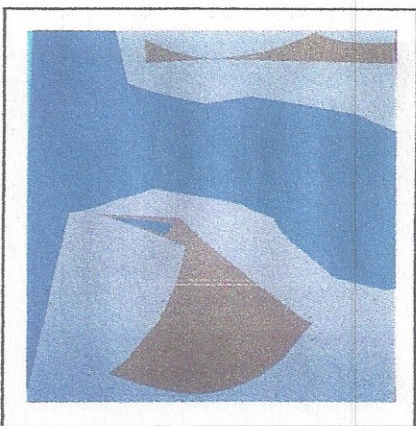
Her work procedure on the silkscreens was to cut out and pin up shapes of color aid paper. She would manipulate the colored forms, changing their shape and their relationship to each other. Once she had achieved the design she wanted, she habitually threw away these models. "Basically," she recalls, "though I never thought of it except as a work procedure, it was collage."



*Serigraph — SVIII. Tropic, 18" x 39", 1969.*



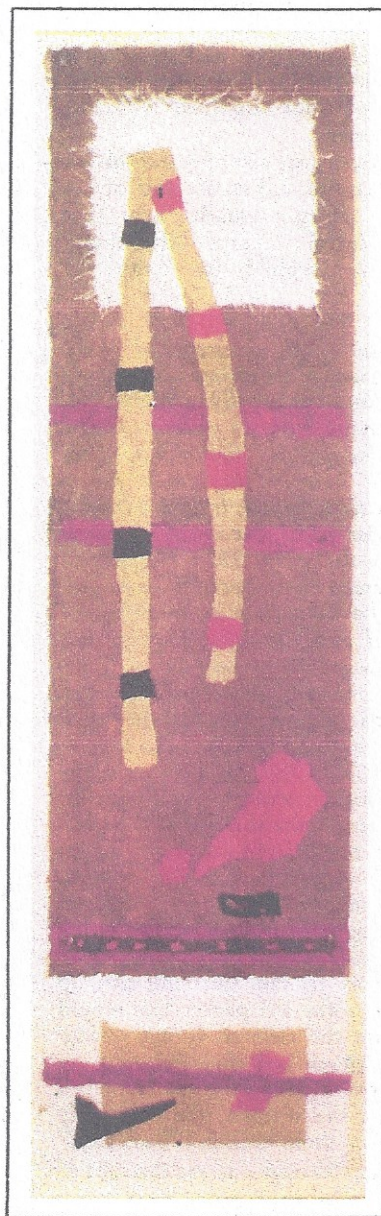
*Estuary. Serigraph SXV, 24" x 25", 1969.*



*Suspended. Serigraph, 25 1/2" x 24", 1970.*

Morgan's silkscreens show her to be a highly intuitive colorist and they are a joyful celebration of nature as both source of inspiration and as model of creation. Morgan "forms with color" to achieve volumes in space which move forward and backward in unresolved tension, activating but never violating the picture's two dimensionality. The color in the silkscreens is full and clear and seems actually

*Tall Collage. 92" x 26", 1976.*





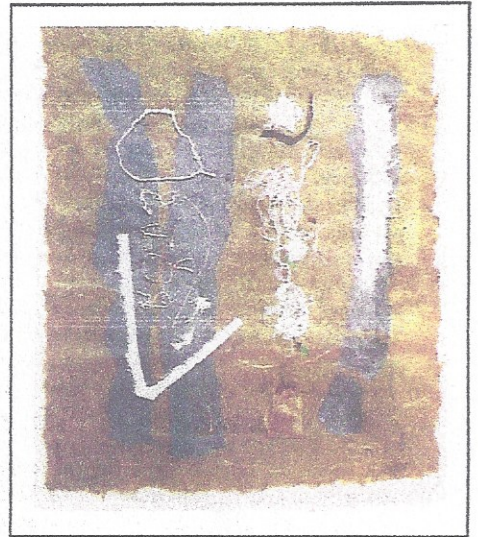
to create the form which then becomes a volume of shore, beach, island, ocean, or sky. The shapes are sometimes geometric patterns, but often they are irregular planes of Miro-like whimsy.

The hard edges of color in the silkscreens lend a thoughtful restraint to the celebration of nature—a sense of being aware of awareness itself. Her collages express the same joyful relationship to nature as the silkscreens and are also expressly formed with color. But there is an ingenuousness and spontaneity about the collages which has to do with the nature of the medium itself—the soft, textured, raggedy-edged Japanese mulberry paper. The rigid edges of one area of color against another in the silkscreens, which seemed to restrain the flow between nature and the celebrant, break apart into the soft edges of torn forms. As the edges soften and dissolve, the colors tend to earth. The collages are as highly disciplined as the hard-edged prints, but the possibilities of layers and textures adds an inti-

oils, entitled “Seasons,” which were included in her one-woman show which opened the Boston Visual Artists Union in 1973. “It was a challenge, in a way I suppose sort of an intellectual challenge, to combine the soft flowing edges with the hard edges.”

There are four paintings in this series (“Spring Love,” “Summer Solstice,” “Winter Narrative” and “Autumn Equinox”). Perhaps nowhere else in her work is Morgan’s romantic sensibility given such freedom of expression; these are clearly the emotional precedent for the collages which she was to begin in earnest immediately afterwards. Carried through each painting in this series are several hard edge motifs which recapitulate the colored shapes of her silkscreens, as if she were “adhering” the crisp colored forms onto the variegated areas of color of the oil paint. The paintings also include softened dancing lines, dots and bands and irregular shapes which suggests wisps of thread or swatches of torn paper.

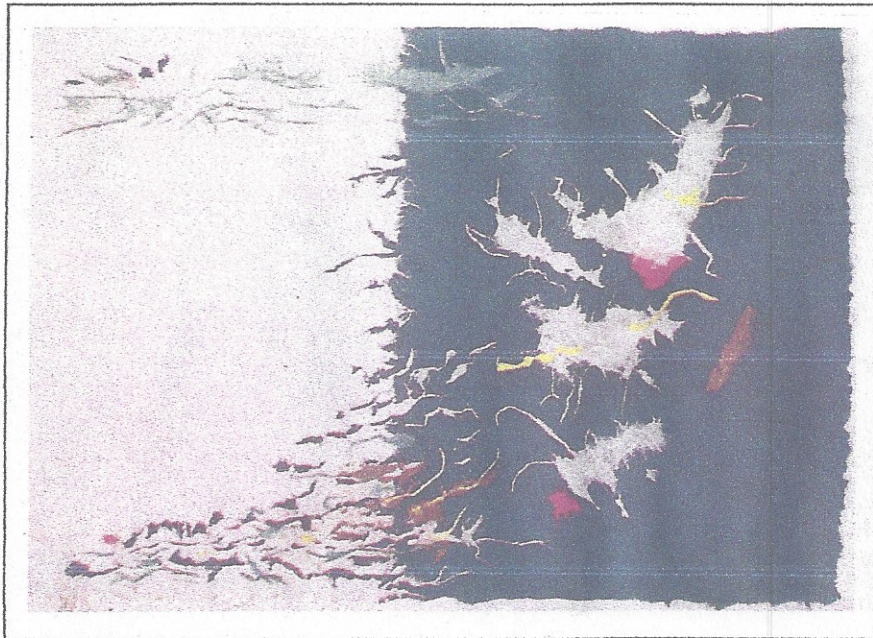
The collages are not as romantic



Collage #32. 24" x 21", 1975.



Collage F. C. #123. 60" x 30", 1978.



Paper Collage. 20" x 29", 1977.

macy—a feeling of at-homeness.

The link between her silkscreens and collages came in 1974 through her impulse to go back to greater texture in her medium. During the period she was most engaged in silkscreen, Morgan was also, typically, working on large hard-edge acrylic paintings. But she became, as she put it, “fed up with acrylic which wasn’t sympathetic to me—it was too dry somehow,” and she got back into oil paints “with joy.” She began working on a series of romantic

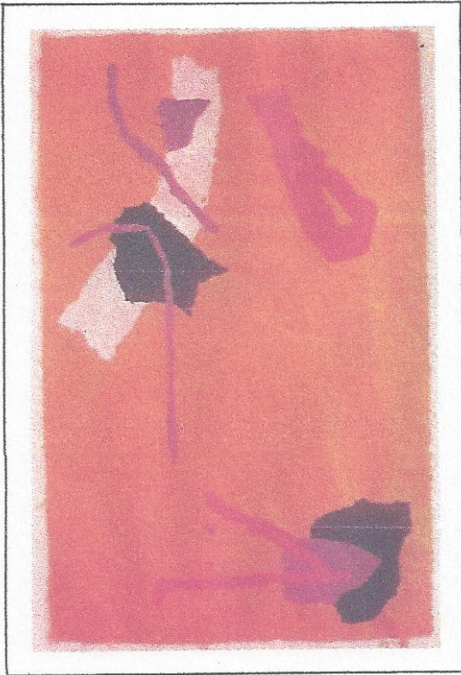
as these paintings in the sense that the natural processes of nature seem to actually *live* in the collages, rather than be celebrated by them. This is made possible by the added element of texture which is part of the medium. The actual moment of birth of the collages was New Year’s Day, 1975:

*I was extremely depressed. My work seemed to be going nowhere and I’d made some very childish little crayon drawings just because I was trying*

*to get out of the hole. It was New Year’s Eve. I woke up the next day and found some blue paper and just started adhering things to it and I thought, “well, this is better than the little drawings I was doing last night—really quite a bit better,” and then I got excited.*

Morgan had watched this blue paper being made and it was the thought of actually “molding” with it that had initially excited her. “I saw this mush of stuff in vats that was to





Collage #131. 38'' x 24½'', 1978.

Collage #117. 39'' x 24½'', 1978.



become paper, and got very turned on and thought maybe I could make shapes out of it and dry it and have it almost like clay."

She did a series of eight small collages using this textured blue paper, adhering gold foil, colored tissue paper, and fibers pulled from a small pad of hand-made Japanese paper she happened to have in her Cambridge studio. In the first three or four of these small collages, the fibers of the Japanese paper are spread out across the surface of the design, but as she

gradually used up the blue paper, this fibrous texture was compacted into the background as well. From here the step to Japanese mulberry paper was immediate.

The fact that much of the paper Morgan uses is already permeated with clear color—brilliant yellow, soft orange, deep blue—is part of the discipline of the collages and ties them directly to her silkscreens, where she manipulated evenly colored shapes. Forming with color Morgan creates flowing forms which are always torn when wet. She creates variegated areas of color by painting white sheets of mulberry paper with acrylic. "I paint it very wet—it's almost like a water-color."

She "paints" with these torn areas of color by layering them and pasting them down. Her hand becomes her brush, giving the collages the feel of a natural object. Threads are often torn out of a sheet of paper and laid on top of areas of color which are either clear or created by layering. The layers themselves are translucent, the color "on top" bleeding from and into the one below. Seen from a distance,



Black Collage F. C. 122. 30'' x 42½'', 1978.

there appear only to be forms of color pushing and pulling in volumes of space, but no matter how far back you stand there is the feeling of color movement inside the forms, because of the texture. Each collage feels "brewed." Some contain bits of string and rope formed into dancing configurations—a Japanese Miro. In several of the collages Morgan incorporates tea bags which are stained with use—made wet, used, then dried—tasted and smelled and brought out of the mundane into the rich fabric of the



work.

Morgan's collages were recently exhibited at the Boston Museum of Science's design gallery. At the gallery entrance Morgan places a plaque with her own description of the way the collages relate to nature:

*A scrap or haphazard group of scraps of paper on the floor suddenly and vividly bring back a beach in Greece, a monk in Spain, a monastery in Japan: falling petals, wind blown tumble-weed, lying in a canoe under low branches on a quiet river.*

*a drive to create and recreate these feelings to communicate them to others; a joy of tearing the beautiful strong paper into diversified active shapes and placing them in space to tell their tale.*

The philosopher Minkowski once described time as "that fluid mass, that shifting, mysterious, imposing and mighty ocean that I see everywhere around me." In all of Morgan's work in different media there is the sense of time as fluidity, as something which flows beneath the face of the clock. Time is compressed into a moment of

were looking at the cross section of an ancient oak or the lines around your eyes. The woody character of the mulberry paper itself suggests this time, but the fact that the sequence of composition and construction is visible to your eye reminds you of clock time—of something happening first and something happening next—so that you become an archeologist with dirt under your nails.

It is this visible sequence of construction which gives the collages the feel of natural objects—gives them their elegance and grace. They are more than just objects of art which must remain just behind some border



Tall Collage #95 XIV. 96" x 30", 1977.



Collage #101, 1977.

Collage #F. C. 121. 42½" x 50", 1978.



feeling. But this moment is the consumption of impressions of natural objects in real space and time. When we aren't running after the hands of the clock, we are sometimes conscious of time as this current, and in seeking "art" we want to brush up against time as an unmeasured body of movement.

In Morgan's collages we gain this feeling about time in a richer way than in any of her other work. We get it, just as we do in life, by experiencing time as a sequential affair, which we measure as it moves us inevitably "forward." In each collage the stages of construction are visible, as if you

for fear they would disintegrate into nothingness if they played with clock time too carelessly. Morgan's collages move you backward and forward in space as well as in time. They step forward into three-dimensions without apology—the teabag and the dancing thread washed over layers of translucent color. They step back when you do into abstract areas of color existing in specific tensions, always unresolved, in relation to each other, as if saying, "There, I'll act like a good painting now."

Deborah Pye, a writer for a small New England newspaper, said that "looking at one of Morgan's collages one realizes briefly, blindingly, that everyday life is perhaps only randomness," and that in Morgan's hands art becomes "something very close to a poetry of change." No one, however, put it as succinctly as the elderly man in a three piece suit I happened to overhear at a recent opening of Morgan's work in Boston. He had been standing alone for several minutes in front of a large horizontal collage, oblivious to the noise and press of the party going on around him. He pushed his face up to the glass, stepped back, then back further still, only to step forward again. When another man approached him, he turned and with a look I can only describe as incredulity said: "This is like going to heaven without having to die." □

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