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Portraits of the artist

The multiple images of Maud Morgan

by Kim Hays

The portrait is like me, yet not like me, but like my fleshly image. For if this painter desireth to draw the very me in a portrait, he will need more than colors and things that are seen with the eye.

These are the apocryphal words of St. John the Evangelist when he was presented with a portrait of himself. They are also the words that Cambridge artist Maud Morgan copied out and gave to Nancy Raine just before Raine and her colleague Marisa Silver began to edit Raine's first film, *Light Coming Through: A Portrait of Maud Morgan*. For Raine the quote was both a warning and a reassurance. "I read it over many, many, times," she says. "It expressed to me the fear that all portrait-makers must share of missing the life of their subjects. I think I was very conscious, from the beginning, of how appalling it would be to simply capture the outside of Maud."

With the help of co-director Richard Leacock, editor Marisa Silver, and Maud Morgan herself, Raine struggled to put together a film that would capture "the

very me" of Maud Morgan. "In the end," Raine has told me, "we decided to focus on Maud's work and use it to gain insight into her spirit. But up until the premiere we had no way to know if it was going to work. What would people who didn't know Maud go away with? You see, there is a level of reticence in Maud, and the only way to get beyond that reticence, the only approach of any integrity, is through Maud's work. An artist doesn't just create out of one place in herself and live out of another — it's all tied together."

To attempt to capture in a 23-minute film the essence of Maud Morgan, a 78-year-old artist who has been painting for more than 50 years in an extraordinary variety of styles and media, is no easy task. To meet her is to become aware of what filmmaker Richard Leacock calls "her enormous vitality, the continuous high-voltage energy" that expresses itself in her paintings through "a marvelous sense of light and color." The same exuberance shapes what she does with her life; when I interviewed her she had just returned from six months alone in Africa.

Nancy Raine, who became close to Morgan during the making of *Light Coming Through*, knows that Maud's "freenees (sic) of expression" (in the words of her teacher, abstract expressionist Hans Hoffman) was hard won. "The way Maud lives her life, so vividly in each moment, is something very special," Raine believes, "and probably quite unusual. I think she's gotten there through terrific self-examination and struggles and pain." Richard Leacock agrees. "Maud has had to deal with an enormous amount of conflict between her success as a painter and her personal life. She talks about it in the film. Her ultimate liberation, getting a divorce, is beautifully stated. It's perhaps a sad way to be liberated — but it's better than some."

When, at the age of 54, Morgan left her husband and came to live alone in Cambridge, she had had a one-woman show of self-portraits at Betty Parson's gallery in New York. Says Morgan, "It was a period in my life when I was very much trying to find myself. And I was there; I just had my own face to work with. Of course, I know a lot of the self-portraits don't look like me. But that doesn't really interest me at all, because what I'm trying to do is to communicate something internal. I've always painted from the inside out, even when I was just doing a straight landscape. I hope I'm going to be able to do a lot more self-portraits; my ambition is to

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someday do a huge show of them."

Morgan sees *Light Coming Through* as a kind of self-portrait, since she has been actively involved with it since the idea of the film was presented to her, more than three years ago, by a group of friends. It was Morgan who recommended Richard Leacock as filmmaker; Leacock in turn brought poet and writer Nancy Raine into the project, with Morgan's wholehearted approval.

All three artists — Morgan, Leacock, and Raine — worked to express through the film their beliefs about the creative process as it has been experienced by each of them in painting, filmmaking, and poetry. All three respect the intuitiveness of artistic creation. It is put into words in the film by Morgan as she works on a paper collage. "I am a vehicle through which something passes," she comments, her hands moving deftly among the paper shapes, arranging and rearranging, "a hollow reed." Leacock uses this same intuitive process when he shoots and edits a film; he likens it to being in a maze. "I begin at the beginning and try to go toward an end, but it's scary, because if you make a wrong turn at some point you can get totally lost. So you have to keep nudging your way along, and it's extraordinary when you manage to get there, because the film suddenly crystallizes — snap! — and is transformed."

When she writes poetry, Raine, too, is searching for a metamorphosis. "A lot of my poems are ways to capture a moment in my life and preserve it and, at the same time, to transform something. With film, you're dealing with captured images, but it's what's coming through them that's vital."

This concept of the artist or the

work of art as a vehicle through which something — some light or essence — passes is not uniquely applicable to painters and poets and filmmakers. In fact, Maud Morgan attributes the same quality to athletes: "Painting is like athletics. In one way, you have to push yourself, but at the same time, if you push yourself you can't make it. You can't get all tense and tight; you have to stay loose to perform your best. Think of a high-jumper or a runner. Well, I feel the same way. It is very hard to stay free and loose as a painter and to open up to something beyond your own little nugget. When you're open, all of a sudden it's as though the canvas were painting itself. If you can't maintain the openness, things go wrong — you have to rub out and make changes, and the painting starts to lose its vitality.

"The great challenge is to stay loose and yet to have enough experience behind you, enough knowledge, to know when to become critical. Staying loose means knowing when to step in with your knowledge to correct something, and it also means knowing, if something happens that you didn't quite intend, how to take in something new that may change your whole idea. Two little brush strokes can change an entire painting. It's tremendously exciting. Often you don't know how it's going to come out, and sometimes you don't really like what's emerging. But you have to keep working through it. And then, sometimes, you find out something about yourself."

Maud Morgan has found out something about herself in making the film with Raine and Leacock. "Through Nancy," she says, "I got what you could almost call a historical approach to myself. And I think the film taught me objectivity. I'd like to see the film many times; I think it's wonderful. I don't feel self-conscious about it, and I don't think it compromises me in any way or impedes me from doing whatever I want to do from now

on. Because it doesn't fix me as any one kind of woman. It is an impressionistic film, a sort of collage, an abstract painting in colors."

It is appropriate that *Light Coming Through* should be a kind of collage, since Morgan has been working primarily on collages since 1975. The film communicates both her vitality and her introspectiveness through images of her thrusting through a thicket, driving madly along a dirt road, fishing, tolling a bell in a country chapel, standing in a waterfall, and sunning herself on a rock. Mingled with these pictures of Morgan out of doors are stills of her paintings and scenes of her working in her studio on a collage and a self-portrait. The only voice in the film is Morgan's own, joking, teaching, telling stories, and discussing her work, life, and future plans.

Richard Leacock sees the core of the film in the scenes of Morgan in her studio painting one of the four self-portraits she began in response to the filmmaking process. Leacock shot this footage himself, with what Morgan remembers as great sensitivity, since she was very uneasy about having a watcher in her studio.

"It really intrigued me to film her painting," Leacock explains, "and yet I didn't want the filming to affect her relationship to the painting. So I would come in quietly, shoot for a little while, leave, and come back a few days later. My mother was a painter and I used to watch her work. I've always been fascinated by it, because painters never do things in the order I expect them to, even draw lines."

In the film, Morgan is doing a self-portrait while looking in a large mirror. "I became captivated by the three women," Leacock says, "painted Maud, Maud Maud, and mirror Maud. Playing with these three different images delighted me. And then for the audience there was a fourth image, film Maud, the portrait presented by the film."

Although Nancy Raine would agree that the scenes of Maud working on her self-portrait make up the visual core of the film, its theme, for her, is expressed in something Maud says. During the film Maud tells a French-Canadian story about a fisherman who finds a beautiful mermaid. He wraps her tenderly in his coat, carries her home, and puts her to bed, and all night long he sits by the bed, watching over her, protecting her, loving her. But in the morning, he is grief-stricken to find she is dead. He didn't know she couldn't live out of the water.

"When Maud told the mermaid story," Raine remembers, "we were riveted. I felt it was different from her other stories, that it was resonating in a special way for her as well as me. For me, it is the story of a lot of women artists. Or maybe I'm just preoccupied with the people who don't find a place where they can be themselves or who have their places and then lose them in the name of love."

Morgan didn't see the film until it was finished, and when she did she was surprised at Raine's emphasis on the mermaid story. But she understands "that that was the whole symbol for Nancy — that painting was my natural element, my 'water,' that if I wasn't painting I would die, so to speak."

In her own house, surrounded by friends' artwork and the objects she has brought back from her travels, Maud Morgan does indeed seem to be in her natural element. But her life has not always made it easy for her to paint. She painted her first picture in Paris, when she was about 24, and immediately she knew she had discovered something "that was right for me." A painter named Patrick Morgan encouraged that first picture; in 1931, after several years of painting, traveling, and studying, they were married. Seven years later, the Morgans had a joint exhibition at the Grace Horne Gallery in Boston, and Maud Morgan had a solo exhibition in the Julien Levy Gallery in New York. Within two hours of the Levy opening, the Whitney and Metropolitan museums had acquired Maud Morgan's work for their permanent collections. She was an instant critical success.

This unexpected triumph totally unnerved her, and for several years she couldn't paint. Then Patrick Morgan was appointed instructor in art at Phillips Academy, and the Morgans moved to Andover, Massachusetts. There Maud Morgan continued to paint and to show and sell her work, but she found most of her energy going into raising her two children, being a faculty wife, and teaching art herself, at Abbot Academy. Her first abstract show in New York was not well received by critics; her 1957 show of self-portraits, intentionally done in a wide range of styles, got only one review, from a critic who said, "It is unfortunate that this artist, who seems to have some talent, can't make up her mind what she wants to do."

Morgan's 50-year retrospective at the Addison Gallery in Andover in 1977 revealed her work to be astonishingly various, since it comprises etchings, pencil pastels, oils, acrylics, collages, silk-screens, lithographs, and occasional ceramics and wire sculptures and includes highly naturalistic, semi-abstract, and totally abstract work. But the many artists who look to Morgan for advice and inspiration find this variety anything but unfortunate.

"I like the fact that Maud is very catholic in her approach," says Richard Leacock. "Of course, that can be construed as dilettante. I think it was Marcel Duchamp who said that in order to be successful as an artist you

have to paint the same painting over and over and over again. But as a filmmaker, I identify with Maud, because for me, every film, every sequence even, presents a new problem. It's like starting over each time with 'Film-making IA.' For a painter, too, every painting is a different problem, needing a different approach."

Nancy Raine thinks the variety of Morgan's work is a key element of her personality. "I suppose if you are an art critic, you could see Maud's work as that of at least six different people. But I am not an art critic, and to me the work makes a great deal of sense, because I know the individual who connects it all. It has identifiable trends that grow out of events in her life. When I first looked at her work historically, I said to Maud, 'There is a thread here. You are the thread.'"

Maud Morgan feels her work reflects inner motifs that she comes back to again and again. "I think they exist in everybody's life as they do in music. A theme, a leitmotif, is introduced and treated in a certain way in the first movement; then, in the second movement, it's different. Somehow, in the last movement, it's all brought into a very different dimension and made into an entity."

The thread that shines through Morgan's life and work and transforms the film into a glowing portrait is indeed Maud Morgan herself, "the very me." In a poem he titled with her name, sculptor Carl Andre has the final word on the "light coming through" that is Maud Morgan.

*Light is how we know the
world
& her color is the garb of
light
& color is the grace
& mystery of painting*

*Art is how we see the
invisible
& her paintings catch the
winds of light
& drive the mills of making
visible the invisible*

(For more information about Maud Morgan's work and the Raine-Leacock film, contact the Morgan Film Project at 661-3858.) □