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Barbara Morgan, Martha Graham - Letter to the World (Kick), 1940

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Barbara Morgan
American (1900-1992)
Martha Graham—Letter to the World (Kick), 1940
Photograph
10 x 13 in.
Gift of Lloyd and Janet Morgan, 91.3.42

A large, stylized initial letter 'B' in blue and yellow, positioned at the start of the first paragraph.

Barbara Morgan's silver print of Martha Graham entitled *Letter to the World (Kick)* unfolds like a series of envelopes: it's an epistle in a poem in a dance in a photograph. Graham's muscular pose evokes Emily Dickinson's words: "This is my letter to the World/That never wrote to Me—/The simple News that Nature told—/With tender Majesty." But Dickinson's "letters" are never simple, and neither is Morgan's photograph. In it, Graham's fluid dress is frozen, so that its surface appears both organic and artificial, like Dickinson's spontaneous and yet highly mannered verses. And where are Graham's feet? Dickinson's famous floor-length white dress is often read as a sign of spinsterish repression, but in Morgan's photograph, the dress's shadows and folds allow the dancer's body to appear simultaneously earthbound and airborne. Dickinson's metrical "feet" work the same way: they draw on standard hymnal meters (taken from the *Bay Psalm Book*), but ultimately subvert established forms. It's never clear where Dickinson's "feet" will land. So often in the visual arts (as in poems) images of women are eroticized to serve the "male gaze." But in Morgan's piece, three women (Dickinson, Graham, and Morgan) use three different forms of media (poetry, dance, and photography) to produce an image that is powerfully cerebral—and cerebrally autoerotic. The dancer's hand calls attention to her head, while below the waist, her passions are hidden in plain sight under her skirt. Dickinson dreamed of dancing while questioning the rigidity of classical footwork; as she wrote to her mentor, T. W. Higginson, "I cannot upon my Toes—/No Man instructed me—/But oftentimes, among my mind,/A Glee possesseth me,/That had I Ballet knowledge—/Would put itself abroad/In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe—/Or lay a Prima, mad . . ." In Morgan's photograph, Dickinson's word is made flesh, but the flesh remains veiled, mysterious, and gleefully self-possessed.

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