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## Barbara Morgan: Exhibition of Photography

Curtis Carter

*Marquette University*, [curtis.carter@marquette.edu](mailto:curtis.carter@marquette.edu)

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BARBARA MORGAN

EXHIBITION OF PHOTOGRAPHY

By Curtis L. Carter

Of the many photographers who attempt to capture the essence of the dance, Barbara Morgan provides the standard of excellence. Her exhibition of 113 photographs in the "President's Art Exhibition, 1977" held at Marquette University in Milwaukee October 2 to 30, included 41 dance works; other selections represented the themes of photomontage, light drawings, people, nature and junk.

According to Mrs. Morgan, the Marquette exhibition represented the most comprehensive presentation of her works to date. Only the Amon Carter Museum exhibit in 1972 in Fort Worth, Texas, rivaled this show in scope.

Nineteen of the dance photographs are of Martha Graham dances: "Primitive Mysteries", "Frontier", "El penitente", "Ekstasis", "American Provincials", "Celebration", "American Document", "Every Soul is a Circus", "Letter to the World", "Deaths and Entrances", "War Theme", and "Lamentation." These Graham works represent a significant cross section of Graham's works of the mid-thirties. Doris Humphrey's "Shakers", Weidman's "Lynchtown", Limon's "Mexican Suite", Cunningham's "Root of the Unfocus", are other notable inclusions among the remaining dance selections.

Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Jose Limon, Merce Cunningham, Charles Weidman, Pearl Primus, Helen Tamiris, and Valerie Bettis are the dancers who appear in the exhibition of photographs.

The hanging of the exhibit was personally supervised by Mrs. Morgan. A sprained ankle did not deter her direct involvement in every decision concerning the placement of each work in just the right relation to its immediate neighbors and to the entire exhibit. The remarkable energy and artistic brilliance evident in her choices generated admiration in younger colleagues who assisted with the hanging. Few who attended the public lectures and exhibition realized that the artist is 77 years of age.

These words of Barbara Morgan convey an adequate over-view of the exhibit:

"This exhibit of 113 photographs represents a cross section of 42 years of my photography, 1935 to 1977. The photographs exemplify all the main themes of my work: photomontage, dance, light drawings, people, nature, and, of course, junk. Basic to all themes is my deep interest in expressing life forces of rhythmic vitality."

"My interest in photomontage comes basically from a philosophical interest

in making metaphoric comparisons: a fossil or a shell against the forms of the city. Since I was originally a painter and primarily interested in abstraction, the use of visual metaphors in photomontage is one of my primary expressive urges. Photomontage allows me to express the complexity of today's world: its multiplicity and diversity."

"The dance photographs were inspired

*Martha Graham - EKSTASIS.*

*Photograph by Barbara Morgan*



originally by having experienced Southwest Indian rituals during three summers of exploration: their use of dance to unify the people with the life forces, and not merely as entertainment, was a major influence. I saw in Martha Graham's dances a similar interest in the Southwest Indian experiences. This mutual interest between Martha Graham and myself inspired me to do a book of photographs on her dances."

"In doing people, I think of them in terms of their relation to today's world, and not merely as individuals. My photographs of people express a concern with human values in our mechanical world. I sometimes find ironic comparisons."

"The photographs of children are primarily from a period in my own life when my own children were growing up. Experience of this period inspired my book of photographs, *Summer's Children*."

"I see the photographs of nature as metaphors of cosmic dances: the corn leaf, for example, exhibits in rhythmic metre nature's life force."

"I see junk as the inevitable metabolism."

"All of my photographs represent a search for the invisible energies of life. I try to express these inner life forces through the exterior visual forms."

Much has been written on Barbara Morgan and her close working relationship with Martha Graham. Their shared affinity with the spiritual heritage of the southwest Indians is well known. Less known is the fact that both Graham and Morgan are rebels from a common Puritan heritage. Their common interest in the philosophical and sensuous aspects of movement has produced a remarkable affinity between the photographs and the dance. According



*"The Kick" - Martha Graham in LETTER TO THE WORLD. Photograph by Barbara Morgan*

to commonly held notions, the apparent opposition between the static medium of the photograph and the essential movement of the dance should have precluded success. But Barbara Morgan's lifelong fascination with motion led her to a profound understanding of the dynamics of expressive movement. Her highly sensitive perception, together with an acute sense of timing, has enabled her to transpose the visual kinetics of expression in dance into dynamic pictorial expression.

It is difficult to choose one representative photograph to discuss, because each of Morgan's works represents an unrepeatable insight into a particular movement or set of movements in conjunction with a universal theme. "The Kick", from Graham's "Letter to the World", nevertheless imposes itself on my attention after four weeks of almost daily visits to the exhibition.

"The Kick" shows Graham wearing a

full, floor-length white dress with three-quarter length sleeves. Her torso is parallel to the floor, and the left arm is stretched along the same horizontal. The right arm forms a triangle with the head; the wrist is set on the top of the forehead, forming a right angle with the hand. The legs are hidden beneath the skirt. The right leg supports the body and appears to be at approximately a 30 degree angle with respect to the vertical axis; the left leg appears to be approximately the same above the horizontal. The spread of the dress forms a half circle extending behind the dancer and above the horizontal axis of the picture. Energy is concentrated in the torso area, and is reinforced by the tension in the horizontally extended left arm. Muscles in the extended neck and shoulder area exhibit substantial tension. The energy centered in the body appears to spread out through the extended skirt, dissipating in intensity as it is further removed from the center. Folds in the cloth mark the energy patterns throughout the positive image.

The black areas of the picture are very important to the total effect. A very dark horizontal bar runs parallel to the horizontal torso of the dancer, accenting the line. The small shadow toward the lower left of the picture accents the design created by the larger figure.

Beyond these formal considerations, "The Kick" refers to a dance and to a poem, Graham's dance and Emily Dickinson's "Letter to the World." The poem and the dance both express the universal experience of sadness and resignation over disappointment in love. The particular movement shape depicted in "The Kick" is one in a series of movements intended to interpret the high point of the poet's resignation over being a poet instead of a lover.

"The Kick" is a truly remarkable photograph. It is a culmination of the creative imaginations of three great artists: Dickinson, Graham, and Morgan. Each one complements the others' response to a common theme. The poet interprets an episode in her own life, but with a universal gesture. The universal insight into human sadness and creative resignation, and the accompanying expressive dynamics, are reinterpreted in the media of dance and photography.

Morgan's photograph inspires the spectator to deeper understanding of the psychological travail that first unfolded in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Even the spectator who lacks a knowledge of the poetry cannot fail to experience the expressive dynamics of the photograph.