

OCULA INSIGHT

## Joel Morrison

Artist, Los Angeles

Diana d'Arenberg 25 July 2016



Image: Joel Morrison. Courtesy the artist.

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I first met Joel Morrison in 2012 when I interviewed the LA-based artist for his solo show at Gagosian Gallery in Hong Kong. In the gallery stood a series of shiny metal sculptures, and on a cursory glance they looked to be the very embodiment of industrial luxury, quite at home in the slick minimalist white cube of a mega gallery. On closer inspection however, the works were revealed to be amorphous and misshapen. The artist's hand was visible with indentations and fingerprints marring the reflective surface, challenging the production-line approach common to luxury products and to a good portion of contemporary art. Shapes of bottles, wrappers, shopping trolleys, balloons and machinery dissolved into zoological forms and busts of classic sculptures—golem rising out of the toxic sludge of consumerism.

Morrison salvages discarded objects, casting them in stainless steel where they appear to be in encased, pushing and straining against their metal skin. This

gives a physicality and mutability to the work, despite their solidity and stasis. These metallic hybrid creatures seem caught as if in the middle of a transformation. Part figurative and part abstract, luxurious and dystopian, they are products of an insatiable consumerism, drawing us in Narcissus-like with their reflective surface, and repelling us with their deformed monstrosity.

The artist is critical of contemporary consumerist culture, while playing with visual tropes of art history. He layers references from classical Greek sculpture, LA Finish Fetish, Arte Povera, and Pop art, and cleverly fuses them with his everyday environment: music, film, the urban landscape. In doing so Morrison creates his own visual language, bringing together high and low cultures, the industrial and handmade, in a tongue in cheek 'collage' which draws on the mischievous spirit of Dada.

Born in 1976 in Seattle, Washington, Joel Morrison now lives and works in Los Angeles. A former bass guitarist, he has been an indispensable guide as I navigate music with my own guitar. On the eve of David Bowie's death, we began an email correspondence about music and art, creativity and re-invention, which continued as an interview during Art Basel in Hong Kong earlier this year.

**You see art in a broader context of movies, music, literature and other creative forms. All of these influences play into your work and you layer them as references that inform the works and help provide a context to them. Bowie was like that, able to take inspiration and references from everywhere and turn it into something very much his own. Seeing as we're both musicians and fans, let's talk about David Bowie, and what made him such a great and influential artist in your opinion.**

A big part of the music/art thing has to do with development ... or re-inventing. I think Bowie passing and us loosely discussing art/music parallels seems to highlight a void of the artist as an inventor/mad scientist/re-inventor. Bowie was a god and a master of reinvention. Some artists have done it (Bruce Nauman, Philip Guston, Sherrie Levine, Paul McCarthy, Roni Horn, and a few others of course) but it was calculated and to a micro audience. But it's amazing how Bowie did it several times convincingly to a pop audience! He could literally switch genres and pick up new generations of convinced and loyal diehards, his finger buried in the pulse.

Visual artists are usually convinced that their intellect is superior to musicians and most visual artists are snobby brand calculators. Ask a sculptor to make a painting, or a video artist to do a text piece and they crumble, or more importantly are fearful their audience will misunderstand their brand—of course there are exceptions. Ask them to do something truly subversive and they crawl into a corner and start thumb sucking.

The second factor is the contemporary pace of information output, absorbing channels (venues) and the contemporary audience's expectations and critical taste. Bandcamp, iTunes, and YouTube (music) perfectly parallel art fairs, Artsy (or Ocula). The access is infinite, so the demand for infinity has to be at least big, right? So both genres crank it out encouraged by record labels or art dealers to get it done now! 'Press a button, any button'. Great artists and great musicians will always be great and most of them will always hover to the surface, but the art of the slow burn, the art of reinvention, and the art of being an artist, mastering your craft, or perfecting your instrument is crushed under this paradigm.

It's the way the world is and the way information is attractive and the way both exclusive and pop commodities are sold and branded. We all need to adjust. Without being nostalgic, there are questions about the outcome.

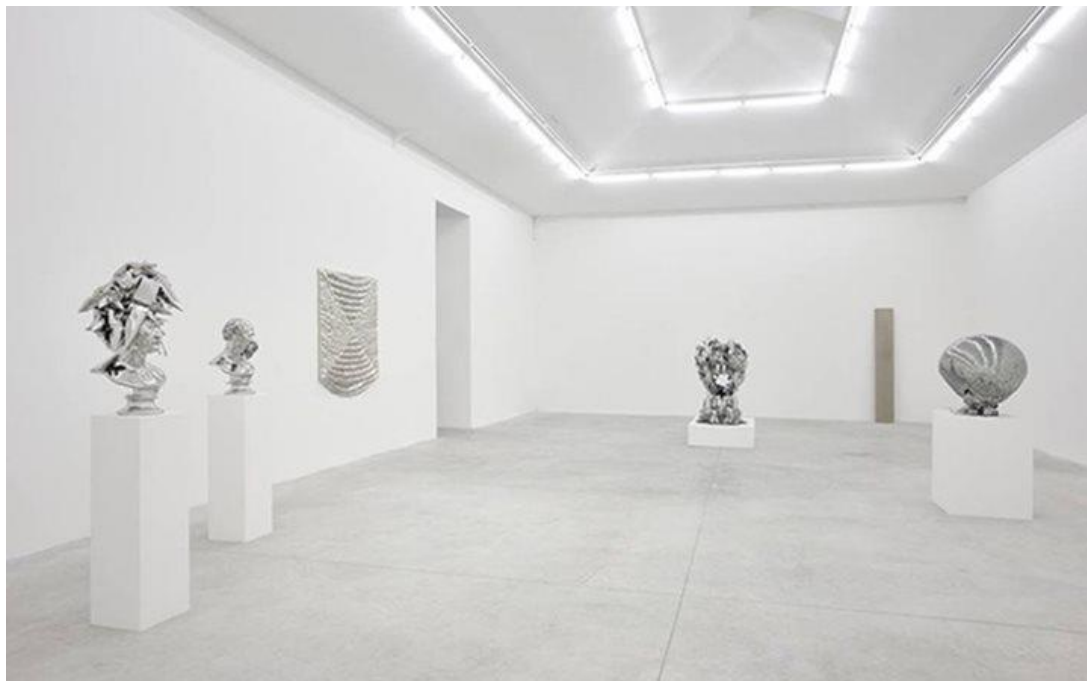


Image: Installation view, Joel Morrison at Almine Rech Gallery, Paris. 09 January - 15 February, 2014. Courtesy Almine Rech Gallery. Photo: Rebecca Fanuele.

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**This media and information-saturated culture we live in now is just a natural evolution of living in a technology driven society. How does it affect the production of art?**

One hundred percent! So, no longer do you have to play it all the way through. Your goal is to get a snippet of information, you edit it make a composition, but as a musician—as a live performer—you have to then learn to play the songs that you’ve recorded. Furthermore, these super-nerds who used to be the producers of the albums, who knew how to play all the instruments and knew how to use all this analogue recording equipment, they became DJ’s and they became the artists getting \$350,000 a second for playing pre-programmed computer music to a Vegas crowd or to a festival. You know they mastered Photoshop, or Pro Tools ... before they mastered 4 track recorders etc.

Along with the change in how you make art comes the fact that you can make it so quickly and distribute it quickly via the internet like on Artsy and other online platforms. So you need to make it quickly. The galleries have also changed from your Leo Castelli-type of gallery where he was like, ‘Listen you’re going to be rad in 60 years. I see where you’re going and I’m going to encourage you to go certain routes. If you make something bad I’m not going to tell you to undo it; we’re going to develop this organically’. But now you can’t do that. The galleries became huge and you have these artists that have great talent that you can see, and they’re instantly encouraged to make a 100,000 square foot exhibition in a hurry. There are a few of them that can do it, but most of them can’t. This is why you also have this trend towards zombie formalism, because in a way it’s the solution of development ... it’s printing itself.

Maybe this is evolution, but zombie formalism isn’t a guitar solo through a great piece of art, but a solution to a tedious process that uses persona and the implication of a larger intellectual backbone to make it quick and in the foreground. Zombie formalism is pretending to be this guitar solo to this really great band, when really, it sounds like a guitar solo, but there’s no great band. And all the collectors and Instagrammers who go to the parties are like ‘Yeah, there must be a great band because we’re looking at it and the artists really play into that, because: A. It’s smart, and B. they don’t have any option. And I say this generally speaking. They’re generalisations, but I think art and music have a lot of parallels.



Image: Joel Morrison, *Carl Andre in Technicolor, 2016 (#1)*. Silk Screen on Shaped Canvas, 108" x 52". Private Collection Sao Paulo, Brazil.

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### **Has time become a luxury in the contemporary art and music market and industry?**

Yeah, giving an artist time to develop has become a negative. It takes too damn long. It is a luxury to have that time. But that time makes art and makes music. With music, a band's first album is always good because they had a lifetime to make it, and then the follow-up album takes a year or two to make. You need to be able to develop those skills and that mode of thinking in order to continue to do it. That's why we have the 'one and done' artists all over the place.

Around twenty years ago, you had music being recorded in the basement on analogue reel-to-reel or 4 track recorders, and I remember playing in bands when you had to play the song all the way through, and if you got it wrong you had to rewind and do it all the way over again. And sometimes that seems like a waste of time, but that's also where the magic happens. When you go through that process of developing the film or developing the music in an analogue sense, that's when those magic moments happen and you can follow that bread trail. That's what makes you rad, going through what seems at the time a very meticulous process and being with those groups of people.

**Do you think part of the problem is that there is such a pressure to market artists as commodifiable brands, encouraging them to pander to the market rather than focusing on artistic development?**

Absolutely! And aside from artists doing the zombie formalism thing, they also understand that it's about persona. Persona is another component to getting on that show. The persona is part of the art. It's the art of the persona. Like zombie formalism, it'll get you that spike, it'll get you that show, it'll make you money. But if you can develop a persona that lasts 40 years, you're a genius. It's the art of convincing these collectors, and these gallerists and these Instagrammers that you're cool. And a huge component of artmaking is being able to hustle the audience to make you think you're an artist. And if you can do that, you can do whatever the fuck you want ... for a short amount of time, anyway. People eventually tire of it. And with all these new collectors come teams of consultants, and they're paid to say who's hot and who's not. 'I want that car, I want that bag, I want that artist!'

And you have critics ... their job was to put everything in place or at least in perspective. But that's also about likes on Instagram and celebrity. Nothing is keeping anything in check anymore. And you have other artists who are not really making art about the way things really are, because all they want to do is sell and go to the dinners and fairs and all these things. Everyone wants to get invited to the party.



Image: Joel Morrison, *Untitled (Anvil jaws)*, 2013. Stainless steel. 132.1 x 137.2 x 81.3 cm. Courtesy Almine Rech Gallery.

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### **Does art have to have meaning anymore?**

Art has to have reference but it doesn't have to have meaning. Persona is key to the art now. It distracts from what the art is.

### **Tell me about your colourful paintings. It's quite a departure from the stainless steel sculptures.**

They are designed to go around stainless sculpture and I preferred them lined up not spread through the space.

The first series—there's 20 paintings and a series of 7—is on Carl Andre with an inflated medical examiners glove on his head, and I made them really pretty. I would get asked 'who's that?' 'Well, that's Carl Andre when he was on trial for the murder of his wife', and of course I was told that they could never

be shown. I wanna make something that looks beautiful and a little street, but keep the context nasty and deep, give it substance. So, why Carl Andre? Well, he's the one guy that got the pass, except that he's way more invested than OJ Simpson was. And even now a gallery won't show them because there are plenty of collectors that probably have a Carl Andre work. So you can make something beautiful, but if you talk about it and reveal the meaning that doesn't sit well. He looks like a hipster with a beard. I should have just said it was that. It's not like I was saying he was a murderer, but there was this time that this hipster couple got together, this dude had a midlife crisis, and his wife made rad art and somehow fell off a 34 storey building. And not only that, but Frank Stella, Paula Cooper ... all of these people put up the money to get him off. To me that sounds a little fucked up.



Image: Joel Morrison, *Carl Andre in Technicolor*, 2016 (#6). Silk Screen on Shaped Canvas, 108" x 52". Private Collection Sao Paulo, Brazil.

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**What are some of your upcoming projects?**

I will be doing a solo exhibition complete with a publication in Amsterdam in the spring of 2017, which I am now trying to finish (the exhibition is untitled as of now). It will be all new works: wall paper, paintings, and sculpture. Officially the exhibition will be at Reflex gallery in Amsterdam coordinated by both Reflex and Gagosian Gallery in New York.

The next exhibition will be 1 September, 2016 in Tel Aviv, Israel. The exhibition will be held at Alon Segev Gallery and will be coordinated by Alon Segev Gallery and Almine Rech Gallery in Brussels. I am interested in how this will turn out. It will mostly be works from 2012-2016—wall works and stainless pieces. The show is titled *The Side Effects Of Thinking With A Minimal Glock*. Everyone there is beyond enthusiastic for this to happen and the vibes are good.

**Finally, you used to be a bass player yourself. Do you still play or have you given up completely for art?**

Yes, I am still playing. We talked about how music and art changes and how (at least a bit) and we should feel obligated to be influenced and partake in evolution. It changes us as musicians. No matter how much time you spend away from playing an instrument, writing songs, or recording, you always get better. Taking in sounds and changes—if you keep an open mind—influences your style with an instrument, the pencil, paper, or GarageBand/Pro Tools, and you surprise yourself. I think it keeps your physical playing/arranging/DJing skills sharp and your mind fresh and interested. Change is a secret weapon. —[O]

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