The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, A Glimpse Back*, an exhibition by the late artist Robert Morrison. The show is at the Western Nevada College's Bristlecone Gallery from September 18 – December 11, 2024. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artist's family, Western Nevada College, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Dr. Brett Van Hoesen, who provided the following essay.*

"The Office of Inquiry: Reflections on the Work of Robert Morrison"

We shake with joy, we shake with grief
What a time they have, these two
housed as they are in the same body
-Mary Oliver[1]

In the late 1960s, Robert Morrison joined the faculty in the Department of Art at the University of Nevada, Reno, where he would pursue a long and highly productive career, nearly fifty years in length. Like many teaching artists, Morrison's work over the years was highly influenced by his pedagogical practice, primed by students' assignments and queries that both extended and distracted from the realm of pure making. Morrison's commitment to the regional arts community was a signature characteristic of his career. As writer and curator Bill Fox noted in 2005, "Morrison has installed his work outside of Nevada only rarely," showing a few times in other states such as California, Texas, Florida, and New York[2]. Morrison's devotion to exhibiting his work in Nevada was partly connected to his interest in privileging feedback from a local audience, valuing personal connections with friends, family, colleagues, and students that played a significantly larger role in his life than pursuing big-city commercial appeal. While I only knew Morrison for roughly ten years of his career at UNR, the last decade to be specific, I came to appreciate his sincerity, humbleness, and persistent quest to create an intellectually stimulating community environment. This sincerity was tied to Morrison's investment in larger philosophical questions, such as how we define and materially represent existence. This essay reflects on what it means to think retrospectively about Morrison's work and practice with a focus on the interplay between the personal and the material, the invocation of sound in his sculptures, and the ever-important role of experimentation.

Baboon Nurse, welded steel, 69"x36"x5", 1998; steel pedestal: 24"x60"x3"

I. The Personal and the Material

Sculpture has long been associated with questions of materiality, form vs. function, and the tension between illusionism and real space. Sculptors associated with Minimalism of the 1960s notably worked with pre-fabricated industrial materials – often metal or wood – in ways that significantly countered the hands-on physical approach of earlier artists such as Alexander Calder, David Smith, or Barbara Hepworth.

The question of "what is sculpture" has resurfaced lately in feature articles like *Art News'* 2022 interview with four prominent contemporary curators – a query also asked by one of the early writers on Morrison's work, the art critic Jeff Kelley. In the introduction to his 1989 essay, Kelley noted, "more and more, the term 'sculpture' is an irrelevant description of the material, phenomenological, and even social unfolding of recent art . . . In fact, I'm not sure it applies to [Morrison's] work in any way . . ."[3] Kelley went on to explain that if there is indeed such a thing as "sculpture," it "seems to be a meta-space in which Morrison's psyche and the work meet."[4] This idea of sculpture being about the material and well beyond its "thingness" connects with German artist Joseph Beuys' concept of "social sculpture" – that "life itself could be seen as a kind of collection sculpture."[5] Beuys was indeed one with whom Morrison was in dialogue, a relationship that at the very least encouraged his interest in working across a wide range of media.

Morrison's work certainly drew from life experience, generating content that was personal and also universal in haunting installations like *Tongues: The Half-Life of Morphine* from 1986. Commissioned from and initially presented at the Center for Research in Contemporary Art at the University of Texas at Arlington, the work consisted of thirty-six steel and fiberglass structures resembling hospital beds organized in rows, each wired to sound-generating sources that emitted music, static, and unexpected alarms. Again, according to Kelley, then Director of the Center for Research in Contemporary Art, the installation was inspired by "being immobile, in pain, on morphine, and yet being under intense pressure to make art" after Morrison suffered an accident while wind-surfing that resulted in a serious leg fracture.[6] Kelley assessed that this work, with its unforgettable visceral signals of mental and physical anguish, was likely Morrison's masterwork. Other sculptures from the same period, such as *Brain Extraction*, a version of which is included in this exhibition, are more explicitly figurative. This work invites the viewer in, entranced by the smooth, graceful profile of the upturned head, resembling the solidity of bronze modernist sculptures by Ernst Barlach or Käthe Kollwitz. The title, however, disturbingly implies bodily harm in ways that emphasize the push and pull of Morrison's conceptual mindset.

Brain Extraction, cast and patinated bronze, 12"x9"x9", 1986/87

Other works in this exhibition convey a much lighter aesthetic – both literally and figuratively. An attractive early work of Morrison's *Floral Form Brutalist Sculpture* from 1966 invokes a resemblance to the work of renowned Japanese American Bay Area artist Ruth Asawa, whose hanging biomorphic wire mesh sculptures now adorn a large gallery at the De Young Museum in San Francisco where her first solo exhibition took place in 1960.[7] One can't help but wonder if Morrison happened to see this particular exhibit or later reproductions of the famous fellow Californian's work during his graduate education at Stanford or post-graduate studies at UC Davis. Asawa, who trained at Black Mountain College in North Carolina with famed Bauhaus artist Josef Albers, developed

L: Robert Morrison R: Ruth Asawa's sculptures

her signature hand-crocheted wire technique thanks to a stay in Toluca, Mexico, where she learned the method from indigenous basket weavers. During the early 1960s, Asawa's work received positive reviews from Bay Area art critics like Alfred Frankenstein writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, who discussed her "webs of wonder" as being "one of the most original and unprecedented styles of any sculptor in America."[8] Morrison's *Floral Form Brutalist Sculpture*, made a few years later, is an intricate lace of thin welded rods, an organic form that extends from a delicate tapered Art Nouveau-esque base. I can imagine a dialogue here with Asawa, a mutual turn toward the refined and made-by-hand in the face of the pre-fabricated solidity of contemporaneous Minimalism.

Morrison's office/studio

One of the pleasant surprises associated with learning more about Morrison's work over the years is that in addition to sculpture, he also completed a significant body of drawings, paintings, and performances. These too incorporated a combination of attention to materiality as well as personal content. Morrison's Danish heritage was very important to him. This manifested in many ways – from the large red tapestry of the Scandinavian Dala horse that hung above a desk in a studio space at his home to his interest in the natural world, including flowers, landscapes, and seascapes. In 2023, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York hosted an exhibition entitled "Beyond the Light: Identity and Place in 19th Century Danish Art." The exhibition of drawings and paintings focused on harbor scenes, landscapes, architectural facades, and the enchanting light of everyday domestic interiors. Danish artist Johan Christian Dahl's oil painting titled *Copenhagen Harbor by Moonlight*, 1846, presents a waterscape with heightened atmospheric effect thanks to the vibrant light of a full moon in contrast with the muddled patterns of evening clouds.[9] It reminds me of a large-scale acrylic painting in this exhibition, untitled and undated but thought to be Morrison's last painted work, according to his partner Lynn McLellan. Morrison's muted yet still rich palette and attention to the undulating line of the horizon seem to fuse the waterfront of a Danish shoreline with the landscape of the northern Nevada desert. The dramatic splash of white, likely clouds, could be read as white-capped waves. In whole, the work emits an ethereal quality harkening back to The Met's coterie of Danish 19th-century paintings that emphasize heightened atmospheric conditions.

L: Christian Dahl's painting R: Robert Morrison's painting

II. Reverberations and the Body

While the works in this exhibition do not involve sound, it was a significant component of Morrison's oeuvre, well before Sound Art became a buzzword in contemporary art. Morrison's connection to sound was inspired by his admiration for the compositions of John Cage and Stephen Reich, American composers who were integral to avant-garde experimental music. Cage and Reich created works that incorporated silence, recorded everyday sounds, and random noise in ways that liberated standards for what constitutes "music."

Sound as an ingredient, if not an impetus, for Morrison's work also tapped into the autobiographical. In 1978, the artist spent six months in Demark without speaking much Danish.[10] This memorable, and likely frustrating, experience triggered an increased understanding that sound is a cultural environment, where the stark contrast between intelligible content and silence can be profound.

Mumbles, steel with non-working electronics, five in a series of 9, 52"x36"x1" each, 1983

At about this time, Morrison started to experiment with adding sound to his sculptures, including the hypnotic quality of repeated spoken words or phrases on video and audio tape loops. In 1981, Morrison staged a notable performance at Piper's Opera House in Virginia City, where he placed on the dusty wooden stage four reel-to-reel tape machines in the shape of a square in order to generate quadraphonic surround sound. According to Bill Fox, who attended the event, "Morrison threaded blank recording tape in a loop through the machines, turned on both the microphones and speakers, and hit the start buttons. Then he walked away."[11] The sonic result was disturbing, what Fox recalled as "a building crescendo of unbearable ambient magnification." In his 2005 article for *Sculpture* magazine that corresponded with Morrison's 2004 retrospective exhibition at the Nevada Museum of Art, Fox referenced the performance in Virginia City. "The piece gave the space a voice without any specific authorship . . . [and] exhibited many of the tensions that would inhabit Morrison's work for the next two decades."[12] In this way, Fox was referring to works like *Mumbles* from 1983, which originally consisted of twelve steel wall elements with sound electromagnetics that engaged subtle auditory actions referencing the body. Nine of the steel panels of *Mumbles* are included in this exhibition and unfortunately no longer emanate sound. As originally designed, Morrison carefully constructed the slabs of steel to purposefully function as imperfect speakers that were incapable of relaying the range of frequencies required to accurately transmit sound. Instead, each steel panel served as a conduit of muffled audio generated by radio broadcasts and white static noise. In this way, *Mumbles* was a self-curated audio performance, where the viewer, depending upon their pattern of physical encounter with the work, would generate their own unique audio-visual experience. As the title suggests, *Mumbles* required an effort by the viewer to discern incomplete acoustic information, not unlike the experience of knowing only a fraction of another language.

Mumbles, steel with non-working electronics, one in a series of 9, 52"x36"x1" each, 1983

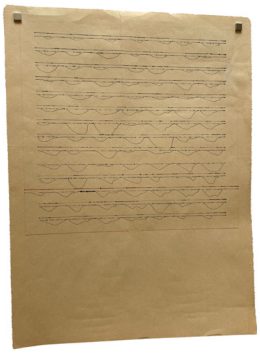
Before writing this essay, my knowledge of the breadth of Morrison's work with sound was extremely limited. My main point of reference was a collaborative work he did in 2015 with my husband, Jean-Paul Perrotte, who as Associate Professor of Music Composition directs the Electroacoustic Composition (EAC) Lab at UNR. Following an experimental seminar on "Sound and Modern Art" that I offered at UNR in Spring 2015, Perrotte and I co-curated an exhibition in the fall of that year for the University Galleries entitled "Sound Art: New Only in Name," the title of an essay we co-wrote a few years prior for the edited volume, *Germany in the Loud Twentieth Century*.[13] The exhibit, hosted at the galleries at the Jot Travis Building, included three distinct sound works by Clint Sleeper, Tohm Judson and Carol Burch-Brown, and Morrison and Perrotte.

Untitled, acrylic on canvas, 26"x25"

The latter's collaborative *Structures in Microtonal Harmony*, 2015, was an installation that consisted of twelve of Morrison's previously cast brass bowls mounted on silicone pads atop tall, steel pedestals. Six of the bowls were sonified due to strikes generated by solenoids programmed by Perrotte using Max/MSP, an electronic music software. Visitors were invited to activate the remaining six bowls with thin fiberglass mallets. Previous to the installation project, Morrison had noticed that each brass bowl, despite being cast in the same way, was slightly out of tune with the other when struck. Perrotte and Morrison, with help from Morrison's son Jens, worked together to create a discordant choir of metallic ringing timbres, again a distinct self-curated sonic experience. The body was invoked in multiple ways in this work, most notably thanks to the physical experience of walking through and between unexpected sounds. Perrotte also fondly remembers Morrison's keen attention to materiality and body references in the work. According to Perrotte, "Morrison was concerned with the uniformity of materials in the installation. All elements of the human-sized pedestals, which supported the brass bowls were consistently elegant. Morrison referred to the clear silicone pads that nestled the bowls as sexy." Even without sound, the language of the body and the implication of the acoustic realm reverberates throughout this exhibition.

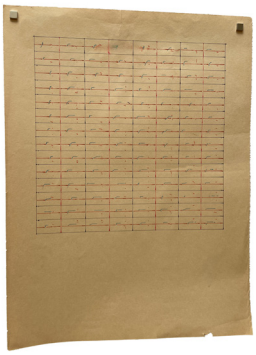
III. The Office of Inquiry: Experimenting Like Robert Morrison

Unbeknownst to me, well before this collaborative project described above, Morrison had been thinking about sound not only in sculptural terms, but as a visual problem for at least three decades. This established practice manifests, in my mind, in untitled drawings included in this exhibition where it looks as if Morrison is "visualizing sound."[14] Thanks to the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of Sound Studies, we now know that "visual music" is a phrase often associated with synesthesia. As far back as Aristotle, theorists have been experimenting with mathematical equivalents between pitch and color, combining the aural with the visual.[15] Was Morrison trying to create such equivalents? If we transferred these coordinates to digital music programs like Garage Band or Logic Pro, what would Morrison's drawings sound like? Or, were these just drawings that unintentionally looked like sonic graphs, part of the artist's love for grids and systems?



Sonic Graph, ink on paper, 1984

What I find most admirable about Morrison as an artist and colleague was his willingness to live with the uncomfortability of the unsolved. It is rare these days to not have answers quickly, to exist in a murky space of experimentation that may or may not lead to desired results. Morrison's last office on campus was at the Jot Travis Building, the former student union, transformed to be the home of the Black Rock Press, a few faculty offices, graduate student studios, drawing and foundations classrooms, exhibition space, a large lecture hall, and the lab for Design Engineering. Morrison's office was a few doors down from mine and that lucky proximity meant that we would have impromptu conversations about a wide array of topics. One random afternoon he showed me a series of "drawings" he was working on that were tacked to a long wall outside of his office. The space was usually reserved for student



Sonic Graph Red, ink on paper, 1984

work, but we were at a slow point of the semester, so Morrison utilized it for his experiments. I looked at the display of large blank pieces of paper and wondered if I was missing something. It wasn't until he provided instruction that I realized his "drawn lines" were actually long pieces of hair, abandoned human relics he had found in the classroom or hallway. The simultaneous intrigue and repulsion of the material reminded me of Lebanese-British artist Mona Hatoum's installation *Recollection*, 1995, where samples of the artist's long curly dark hair were coiled into balls on the floor or glued in extended strands that hung vertically from the ceiling. This meant that as you walked through the exhibition space, you experienced the uncomfortable sensation of cobwebs across your cheek. While Morrison's drawings didn't elicit this same sensation, they intriguingly played with the dynamic of chance linear compositions fashioned from the aura of human remains.

I have come to appreciate that this mode of experimentation was truly integral to Morrison's methods over his long career. Like sound, Morrison also played with materials such as fabric and paper. This type of trial and error was exemplified in the 1998 exhibition "Robert Morrison: Eating Monkey Brains, The Baboon Nurse and Other Tales" hosted at the Museum of Contemporary Art at Palm Beach Community College in Lake Worth, Florida. In the essay for that show, Morrison's friend and writer Kirk Robertson asked, "What are we to make of these fabric pieces?," a reference to ambiguous works such as *Sanitary Apron*, 1988. Robertson characterized these works as "sewn, stitched, turned and bleached muslin . . . soft and sexually charged against the hardness of the bronze and steel."[16] The fascination for the outline of forms and their visual weight, despite being rendered in delicate materials, is echoed in a notebook of drawings by Morrison in the permanent collection of The John & Geraldine Lilley Museum of Art at UNR. Here, page after page, Morrison's forms in this case black ink on white paper, investigate the allure of the silhouette, an index of shapes, including bowls, that he replicated in other media.

The last works of sculpture that Morrison created, perhaps out of necessity due to weakened health, were extremely light weight. Again, many of these were studio experiments that he created in that last university office, a significantly smaller space than he was used to inhabiting. The works involved paper cones, some arranged in grid configurations, others suspended horizontally by a single wire, like a toy seesaw, gently testing the laws of gravity. This choreography of lightness, as exemplified in late works like the house made of small sticks, also on display in this exhibition, invite the viewer to think critically about the poetics of levity, about the potential for the magic of everyday accessible materials.

Conclusion

joy / grief
0 / 1
on / off
positive / negative
soft / hard
start / stop
back / forth

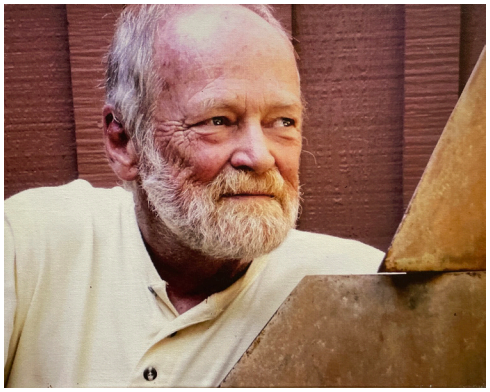
Untitled, wood, 11"x10"x10"

In the poet Mary Oliver's terms, joy and grief are housed in the same body; indeed, these types of polarities were very much present in Morrison's work and practice. The subtle terms of celebration and sadness

inherent to the human condition, the positive and negative charges of a solenoid, the hesitation and confidence inherent to making and completing a work of art – Morrison's polarities were a significant part of his compelling personality. A few weeks ago, I attended an academic conference with a book fair. There I purchased a book with a trendy title, *Teaching with AI: A Practical Guide to a New Era of Human Learning*.[17] One chapter entitled "Designing Assignments and Assessments for Human Effort" reminded me of the kind of academic practice that would completely dull Morrison's spirit. In my experience, as his colleague over roughly ten years, bureaucratic curricular reform as articulated through student learning outcomes (SLOs) and assessment metrics were not Morrison's passion – far from it. Nonetheless, intellectual conundrums like what does it mean to tangibly "measure human effort" would be a topic that we could spend hours discussing.

This exhibition offers an unprecedented opportunity to applaud significant human effort across five decades of Morrison's engagement with the arts. We are fortunate to have uninterrupted time with Morrison's work and the privilege to think about it retrospectively. Nevertheless, as is often the case when someone has passed on, there are a plethora of unanswered questions. Why do so many artworks lack titles, dates, or signatures? Why didn't Morrison leave us instructions on how to reinstall *Mumbles* so that its important audio element would remain intact? What drove him to work in such a wide range of media, from heavy bronze sculptures to ephemeral works on paper? What would Morrison want to be remembered for? Despite the longing for answers, this exhibition admirably honors his vast artistic praxis and solidifies the appeal of Morrison as the ever-present teacher, who keeps our intellect primed and cultivates a desire for more.

Brett Van Hoesen, PhD
Reno, Nevada
October, 2024



Robert Morrison
(1941-2018)

[1] Mary Oliver, "We Shake With Joy," from *Evidence* (2009), reprinted in *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (New York: Random House, 2017), 70.
[2] William L. Fox, "Robert Morrison: Anxious Austerity," *Sculpture* vol. 24, no. 2 (March 2005), 35.
[3] Jeff Kelley, "Robert Morrison," exhibition catalogue for exhibit of Morrison's work in October 1989 at TMCC. The catalogue was produced collaboratively by University of Nevada, Black Rock Press, TMCC, and DICE (Development of Innovative Contemporary Exhibitions) in conjunction with designer Sue Cotter.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Joseph Beuys cited in "What is Sculpture?: Four Curators Try to Define an Elusive Art Form, *Art News* (September 22, 2022), https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/what-is-sculpture-1234638336/ (Accessed October 14, 2024).
[6] Jeff Kelley, "Robert Morrison," 1989.
[7] See a sampling of Ruth Asawa's work at the De Young Museum here: https://ruthasawa.com/exhibition/ruth-asawa-permanent-installation/ (Accessed October 18, 2024)
[8] Alfred Frankenstein writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1960, cited in Marylyn Chase, *Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2020), 97.
[9] For a reproduction of Johan Christian Dahl's painting *Copenhagen Harbor by Moonlight,* 1846 see: https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/beyond-the-light/exhibition-objects (Accessed October 15, 2024).
[10] Jeff Kelley, "Robert Morrison," 1989.
[11] William L. Fox, "Robert Morrison: Anxious Austerity," 35. According to Kelley, in his essay, "Robert Morrison: Low Performance" for the 2004 NMA exhibition catalogue, "Morrison pushed these concerns with sound into performance situations during a year-long series of 'events' furtively staged at the historic Piper's Opera House in Virginia City, Nevada, in 1981. Called Pigeons at Pipers, these evenings (of which I was one of the organizers) were loosely modeled after the more well known Out Our Way series in which the UC Davis cadre of Bay Area artists did outrageous things on stage."
[12] Ibid.
[13] Jean-Paul Perrotte and Brett M. Van Hoesen, "*Sound Art* – New Only in Name: A Selected History of German Sound Works from the Last Century" in *Germany in the Loud Twentieth Century*, edited by Florence Feiereisen and Alexandra Merley Hill. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 141-156.
[14] According to the artist's family, these drawings were included in an exhibition, "Three Years of Sound," 1984.
[15] Cretian van Campen, *The Hidden Sense: Synesthesia in Art and Science* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2008), 45.
[16] Kirk Robertson, "What If: Robert Morrison's Ritual of Panic," exhibition essay for "Robert Morrison: Eating Monkey Brains, The Baboon Nurse and Other Tales" hosted at the Museum of Contemporary Art at Palm Beach Community College in Lake Worth, Florida, 1998.
[17] José Antonio Bowen and C. Edward Watson, *Teaching with AI: A Practical Guide to a New Era of Human Learning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2024).

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