DONALD MORGAN
Drunk Robot, 2004
Collaboration with Scott Reeder
MDF, enamel
45 x 15 x 12 in

Birth Book Chair, 2019
MDF, casters, found books, plexiglass
35 x 34 x 36 in

Euell Gibbons Memorial Library, 2019
MDF, found books
12 x 36 x 19 in

Black Flag, 2013
Acrylic, laminate, wood
47 x 20 x 7 in
Photo: Mike Bray
MAINTAINING

by Jon Raymond

Dying is easy, as they say in show business, but comedy is hard. It’s a sentiment that bears out in the visual arts, too, where many artists traffic in the lyrical, the critical, the operatic, and all manner of irony with an eye on mortality, but only a select few could be considered very funny. Picabia and Magritte were kind of funny artists of their Dada/Surrealist era. Jim Nutt was funny, in that zany 60s way and William Wegman in that elliptical ‘70s conceptualist way. Mark Tansey and Jeff Wall allowed into their 80s postmodernism what Wal has called, after Michael Bahklin, “suppressed laughter”, and Mike Kelly and Paul McCarthy made actual laugh-out-loud pieces in the adjacent 90s.

Donald Morgan is a member of the greater funny school. He’s like the very, brany teenager sitting in the back of the class, murmurizing comments under his breath that are precise and understated and come at you sideways. One example, taken almost at random, is an older piece called “Drunk Robot” made in collaboration with Scott Reeder. It’s from a batch of digital etchings, Albers-like sculptural renderings of a figure poised in different dourness postures. In one, the drunken robot is leaning against a wall, in another, he/she is on his/her knees. There’s also a “botoxed” variation staring at a wall. In the pieces’ minimal reduction of form, and their active engagement with contemporary culture, they partake in classically modernist strategies of making, but Morgan’s inspiration narrative puts the work on a woozy slant. You get the joke quickly enough, but if you linger you also get a lesson in sculptural theory. You start seeing Judith’s bricks, and a trope on Minimalist “readacraft”. You start thinking about two and three dimensional space in the screen era, and the body in physi-cal space. The joke opens the door to a wide and subtle rearrangement of perception, as a good joke should.

Another piece, “Black Flag”, performs a different kind of comedy. The piece is a simple black flag made out of laminated plywood, held upright on a short wooden flagpole by a notched black mask atilt on the floor. The mask has two round eye holes that bring to mind Guston’s klansman hoods, but has two round eye holes that bring to mind Guston’s klansman hoods, but has a creepy, scary chiasmoc, the floating, dimensional layering of the backgrounds, the rim-lighting, the molded, plastiscine surfaces, cartoons mimic the zone of altered consciousness, or vice versa. “Hard Edged Hallucination” makes this connection explicit, featuring a pie of cow shit and polycystin mushrooms cast in stainless steel set on a canary yellow cube in front of a canary yellow and gray backdrops of modular, silkscreened panels that allude to broken windowpanes. One pane features a printed sideviews, and crossing another two panels is a black cat, which together summon the idea of scariness, albeit on a thin, Fred Mayer Halloween section level of intensity. As Morgan is a literary fellow, Ahab’s famous line from Moby Dick might be apropos: “All visible objects, man, are but as改装board masks?” Underneath Morgan’s flimsy Halloween masks—as under reality itself—is something spooky the piece seems to imply, but what that is, we don’t know. It seems like there might be an angry teenage Ahab in Morgan (i.e. “Black Flag”). If that’s so, he long ago came to reside inside a full-grown, melancholy adult, and whatever grins in cutting or dark-hearted jokes stand at the inception of his ideas, they’re quickly passed on to this craftsman who mills them into products of great sturdiness and precision. Something happens in the making of his objects that is the execution of a piece of art. The end result, for Morgan, is often a piece that’s at once gnomic, immaculately-made, and distantly related to the inception of his ideas, they’re quickly passed on to this craftsman who mills them into products of great sturdiness and precision. Something happens in the making of his objects that is the execution of a piece of art. The end result, for Morgan, is often a piece that’s at once gnomic, immaculately-made, and distantly related to the work of Richard Artschwager, one of Morgan’s favorite artists, whose practice of “Purism” was a form of cubism without detail—a refinement of often comical ideas into pure, expertly-made objects that resembled furniture. If that’s so, he long ago came to reside inside a full-grown, melancholy adult, and whatever grins in cutting or dark-hearted jokes stand at the inception of his ideas, they’re quickly passed on to this craftsman who mills them into products of great sturdiness and precision. Something happens in the making of his objects that is the execution of a piece of art. The end result, for Morgan, is often a piece that’s at once gnomic, immaculately-made, and distantly related to the work of Richard Artschwager, one of Morgan’s favorite artists, whose prac-tice of “Purism” was a form of cubism without detail—a refinement of often comical ideas into pure, expertly-made objects that resembled furniture.

The process might be a means of capturing some of the “suppressed laughter” Wal was talking about. “Things can be laughed about” Wal said, “but not openly. The fact that the laughter is not open gives it a sinister, neurotic, bitter, and ironic quality. It’s a kind of manicured laughter that is similar to Jewish humor, Schneideneheads, and gallow humor.” Morgan’s art has some of all of that, but something else, too. The closed-mouth laugh-ter ringing from his works is more like the hearty, knock-kneed kind call “maintaining” i.e. keeping it together at the dinner table while the corkscrews and wind shears of a trip fly around inside the skull. Insanity might be unfurling before one’s eyes, but one’s face doesn’t register it. In this way, Morgan’s art maintains, sending its silent, wry, horrified laughter into the void.

Jon Raymond is the author of novels Rain Dragon, The Half-Life, Freebird, and the forthcoming The Empty Chair, and the short-story collection Livability. A selection of his art writing was published as The Empty Chair, and the forthcoming The Empty Chair, and the short-story collection Livability. A selection of his art writing was published as The Empty Chair.


Donald Morgan

b. 1969. Lives and works in Eugene, Oregon
2020 Hallie Ford Fellow

Donald Morgan’s work is deceivingly complex. Impeccably built and finished sculptures pose a compendium of questions and narratives in conversation with texts. The works touch on broad-brush humor and high-brow postmodernism. Morgan’s work has been shown widely including venues such as High Desert Test Sites in Joshua Tree, California, the Green Gallery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; the Art Gym at Marylhurst University, Portland, Oregon; and Portland2016 Biennial of Contemporary Art at Disjecta Contemporary Art Center, curated by Michelle Grabner. Morgan received his Master of Fine Arts from Art Center College of Design in 2001. He was an early member of Ditch Projects, an artist-run exhibition space in Springfield, Oregon.
Hallie Brown was born in 1905, outside of Tulsa, in Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. She supported herself as she earned a bachelor’s degree at East Central University and taught in Oklahoma before her parents moved their family to rural Oregon. In 1935 Hallie married Kenneth W. Ford and together they established Roseburg Lumber Company in the midst of the Great Depression.

Hallie Ford was drawn to art all her life, specifically the accessibility of artmaking. She took classes with the painter Carl Hall at Willamette University in Salem, and painting became a central part of her life. Her philanthropy established and supported key Oregon visual art museums and universities.

After Hallie’s death in 2007, The Ford Family Foundation’s Board of Directors honored our co-founder by establishing a Visual Arts Program. The first element of this program was the Hallie Ford Fellowships in the Visual Arts, awarded since 2010. Through these unrestricted fellowships, we seek to make significant awards to visual artists who have worked to establish their voice and craft.

Another of our goals is to help support the ecology that builds connections and capacity in the visual arts community of our state. As the Fellows become the focus of exhibitions throughout the world, they bring more attention and support to their Oregon peers. We are certain that Hallie Ford would be pleased to see how both individual artists and the visual arts community in Oregon have flourished since the establishment of this program in her honor.

We could not be more excited each year to bring new Hallie Ford Fellows into this family, and to share their work with you.

Anne C. Kubisch
President, The Ford Family Foundation

The Hallie Ford Fellowships are the flagship element of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program. The Foundation commits to an ongoing relationship with our Fellows through exhibition support, convenings, and professional development opportunities. In addition, the Visual Arts Program offers grants to visual artists for unanticipated career opportunities; supports artists-in-residence programs in Oregon and nationally; brings curators and arts writers from outside the region to Oregon for studio visits and community dialogue; commissions arts writing and publication; supports exhibitions, catalogues and other forms of documentation for Oregon artists; and awards grants to enhance exhibition spaces.

The Foundation is pleased to partner with the Oregon Arts Commission, University of Oregon, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), Portland State University, Reed College, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Creative Capital, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, United States Artists, and the artists and visual arts organizations of our state.

The Ford Family Foundation was established in 1957 by Kenneth W. and Hallie E. Ford. Its mission is “successful citizens and vital rural communities” in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The Foundation is located in Roseburg, Oregon, with a Scholarship office in Eugene. For more information about the Foundation and its Visual Arts Program, visit www.tfff.org.