



# SOUTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

SAROFIM SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS

## ***Tom Morin: 25*** **Exhibition Commentary Collection**

“Artist. Teacher. Mentor. Pioneer.”

Mary Visser

Artist. Student. Mentor. Pioneer.

25 years of Tom Morin’s life

This artist’s mid-career retrospective spans 25 years of creating images from 1992-2017. The title of this exhibit is important to the artist and to the work. It is a significant amount of time spent expanding his vision in the life of this creative mind. Just when did this student become the mentor and pioneer? It’s that passion thing he has. I see it nibbling at the edges around his eyes as he talks about his images. That’s the artist I saw then and now. You can see it again when you watch him talking to the students about their work and dreams. Definitely passion! It’s throughout his work and in his approach to life.

The fish photograph (Untitled, Gelatin Silver Print) was taken 20 years ago and its impact is still strong, elegant and mesmerizing. I read his words: pre-visualization, person, object, lighting, backdrop, and composition. These are the words I present to my students all year long, the words don’t just sit there on the page. Tom uses them like breathing to create a connection. Words again - high contrast, elegant formalism combined with a touch of surrealism. It’s a beautiful visual language. This body of work spins surreal metaphors and this image is timeless as it moves from the elegant arrangement of a glittering fish to a cool, calm, and collected kiss. The stillness has such impact, at once quiet, and then loud, as your eyes examine its shapes. This is a playful and intelligent man. This is an artist with an expanding creative mind. One can read it in the titles he chooses (Metaphor, Remnants, and Service) and the images he creates. The prosthetic eyeball sitting upright on the white dinner plate with a pair of suspended eggshells hanging in the air above; so

surreal and real at the same time. A small glimmer of clear raw egg white rests on the curve of the plate, just the right touch of realism to quell one's fears. My mind sings along with the image - fear, beauty, fear, beautiful white, glowing brown, real, not real, real?

His next series comes, "Remnants" he paints Nu-Skin on the bottom of bullet rounds and using a photomicroscope he reveals references to new landscapes and worlds. He simply says it was a foray into abstraction. He sets new choices and breaks rules. In his recent series, "Service", he casually mentions that he was adding rough grain to digital prints; something he says was not the norm is certainly an understatement. Who does this artist follow? Where does he get his inspiration? I search for names in his text Ruth Bernhard, of course, the mother of pre-visualization. Irving Penn the iconic Irving Penn (always tagged as a fashion photographer) but he is the master of Fine Art photography. Magritte and Duchamp the surrealists, masters of illusions. Names I never leave out of the images I show. It is clear he observes new voices. He calls and we talk then it comes out he has a choice to make, no longer student to teacher, we discuss. This man pre-visualizes his life and his work. Tom is definitely a teacher now, as his text speaks about how he uses his creative mind for such complex journeys into making art. And nothing could be more ideal than to come back to where one started to present a look back and a look forward into the making of one's art and mind. His choice of images to present, the detailed description of his reasons for choosing to make these images, and his desire to share his mind with you, these are reasons enough for this exhibition and this catalog. Take a walk through the mind of an artist and a teacher an intelligent man with more to do.

Tom Morin, You have my highest regards,

Mary Visser, Professor of Art and Vice President of Ars Mathematica  
Department of Art and Art History  
The Sarofim School of Fine Arts  
Southwestern University

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"The More I See"  
Therese Mulligan, PhD

The occasion of a mid-career retrospective provides a rare moment to pause and look back at an evolving creative trajectory as well as to contemplate what's next. This is surely the case with the exhibition 25, a mid-career review of photographic work by Tom Morin. A multitude of efforts are on display in this exhibition, tracing the years from 1992 to 2017, from those shaped during formative years of education to the hard knocks school of experiential learning in the

commercial and fine art photographic fields. While chronology underlies the arc of the display on gallery walls, a pendant of welcoming images to the exhibition predicts many of the thematic and stylistic concerns which occupied Morin through the first half of his photographic career. Rendered as an undergraduate student at Southwestern University, the *woman with fish and eyeball on a plate with cracked egg* images, the latter an exercise assigned by commercial photographer Les Jorgensen, with whom Morin interned in New York City, signals the young artist's preoccupation with metaphor as a venue for self-discovery. For Morin, metaphor was a means to "breaking out of a comfortable, isolated environment and embarking on a new visual journey." The importance of this trope of pictorial representation in which the thing seen is symbolic or evocative of something else, including psychological states of mind or feeling, provides the backdrop to his early work as a student, in particular the *Metaphor* series, and then to a larger sequence of images entitled *Remnants*.

In many of the images grouped in the *Metaphor* series, Morin employed ideas and techniques aligned with the notion of previsualization in photography. Elucidated in the first half of the twentieth century by such noted modernist photographers as Ansel Adams, Edward Weston and Minor White, previsualization is the ability to predict the appearance of a final image before the release of the camera's shutter and the making of an exposure. As a tool for the student and then as a working commercial and fine art photographer, previsualization amounted to both a pictorial and psychological concept for Morin. Utilizing a darkened studio background, theatrical lighting and a probing camera lens, he engaged well known and well used environments, combined with disparate objects—dolls, human organs, blood, fish—and human forms in tight compositional framing, to foment psychological states of mind without any single interpretation or message. Instead, as Morin looked to achieve, audiences bring their own experiences and beliefs to viewing this series of photographs, teasing out personalized meaning based on subjective terms of emotion, instinct, etc. While previsualization underscored the formalized aims of the *Metaphor* series, in the subsequent *Remnants* series, it is set aside for a far more abstract and intuitive approach to picture-making.

In the three groupings that comprise the *Remnants* series—*Airplanes*, *Chalkboards* and *Rounds*—Morin comes into his own as a photographic artist of original subject and intent. The synthesis of intellect and emotion in this Series conveys a profound interiority through a minimalizing style that is revealing, subtly lyrical, metaphorically complex and without pretense. In the *Airplanes* grouping, gone are the vestiges of the studio set-up for the simplicity of the handheld medium format camera pointing upward to the night sky as airplanes landed at Bush Intercontinental Airport. The resultant solarized images draw on the intimate and intuitive experience of the nature of photographing itself. The encompassing eye of the photographer and camera fixed on light trails and the primacy of the experiential act associated with direct observation strikes an imaginative metaphorical note of acute awareness of self as *the* creative agent. This same metaphorical note rings through the *Chalkboards* grouping of images as well, but expanded to include considerations of communication and learning. In these images, the part or whole obliteration of a teacher's written hand by erasure suggests both the presence and absence of the transfer of knowledge to a classroom of students. It is the captured sketch of a passing state from one thing to another, full with the mysterious air of arrested expectancy without the certainty of resolution. In the final installment of images in the *Remnants* Series,

the grouping entitled *Rounds*, subject matter is thrown off, with the exception of the title that hints at the pictures' origins, for a headlong excursion into abstraction. Here the "rounds" are the back sections of expended bullet shells, known as the primer which when struck by a weapon's firing pin leaves an indelible impression. Using a substance called Nu Skin to coat and capture the impression left on a spent bullet's primer, Morin sandwiched the impression between two glass slides and photographed via the magnifying gaze of a microscope. The final pictures are enlarged abstractions that again, while suggesting little about their explosive origins, create mysterious views of a kind of frightful beauty, conjuring up visual semblances of a tumultuous natural landscape seen from afar or a close-up of crystalline rock.

From the formalities of previsualization to the imaginative and personalizing use of abstraction, Morin sought to imbue his differing pictorial subjects with an authenticity of vision and aim. In recent years, as he has taken on new life responsibilities, Morin found new content and means to develop his photography. Beginning in 2012, as a public affairs photographer for the Texas State Guard, he took up a documentary approach to photographing the subject of military life. From a series entitled *Service*, Morin selected images for exhibition that show a pictorial unfolding from abstracted portrayals of guardsmen as well as law enforcement officers from multiple agencies, with only telling figural gestures, to a straightforward narrative illustration of soldiers and police officers in action. The warm tones of sepia and the articulated look of film-like grain, applied in digital post-production, connects the photographic images one to the other and heightens the gritty performance of military and law enforcement figures as they carry out their public duties.

There is a unique gravity that underscores a mid-career retrospective such as Morin's exhibition 25. A gravity of moment when what work that came before are so many building blocks leading to an uncharted future of creative possibilities. According to Morin, next steps may involve the landscape, especially the urban and rural environment in and around his hometown of Houston, TX. Metaphoric language about the particulars of place are sure to abound, as too the primacy of the photographic act to "see" anew with invention. As this exhibition demonstrates well, Morin approaches his work with a challenge in mind in order to advance his abilities and knowledge as a photographic artist. In this way, he deepens the scope and depth of his evolving aesthetic interpretation.

Therese Mulligan, PhD  
Director, School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
Rochester Institute of Technology

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"A Minimalist Eye"

Jean Caslin

What do *Airplanes*, *Chalkboards*, and *Rounds* have in common? They are all products of Tom Morin's creative imagination in a three-part abstract series he titles "Remnants." Making art is communication, creative problem-solving, and discipline. I admire him for his dedication to his twin passions: photography and newspaper publishing; devotion to family; and service to his country.

I've appreciated Tom's unique talents since the first time we met more than 20 years ago. It was 1998 and I was the executive director and curator of Houston Center for Photography. Tom had graduated with a studio art degree from Southwestern University, had assisted commercial photographers in New York City, and had returned to Houston to work in photography. He showed me his portfolio, including some photographs influenced by concepts of surrealism. Seeing his "eyeball on a plate with cracked egg," I wasted no time in asking him to donate a copy of this extraordinary image to the 1999 HCP Auction.

It was after his experience working with commercial photographers and their perfectly controlled studio environments that he began to find his authentic voice. He began to relinquish control to an object instead of previsualizing to create the final image. Wanting to create minimal images, devoid of an immediate time reference, he began *Airplanes*, a night series photographing the streaks created by an airplane's navigation lights. He photographed in a field 200 feet from an airport fence at Houston's Bush Intercontinental Airport. These square images were shot with a 1968 Yashica-D twin lens reflex camera that his father had given him a few years before.

"This experience was a combination of lying in a Zen garden and sitting in the front row of a rock concert. I'd lay in the grass -- alone in the dark -- in the same spot for two hours a night over three months. ... Despite the constant air traffic flying overhead, there would be about five minutes of silence before the next airplane would fly overhead ... And just when I'd reach a brief Zen moment, the drone of the massive airplane engines would grow louder and louder until the airplane would roar over me with a decibel level that would make Metallica proud ... The greatest joy of this series was the element of surprise. I'd return to my darkroom the next day having no idea the final outcome of the image. I was allowing the navigation lights of an airplane to determine the visual display of my art. It was a liberating feeling."

It wasn't long before he was accepted to graduate school and was off on another adventure at Rochester Institute of Technology. He continued to grow as a visual artist, following his strong interest in abstraction. His *Chalkboards* series was created during that period of artistic development and became his thesis exhibition. He embraced

chance elements, keeping an “open mind to any delightful surprises” that might arise. The chalkboards were “found art” that he never touched or altered when photographing them. He took thousands of images with a SLR film camera, using a basic overhead flash with a diffuser in order to guarantee the consistency of texture and markings on the chalkboard registered on the film.

*Rounds* developed from his experience in the Texas State Guard. “While serving in the guard, I spent time on multiple firing ranges for small arms weapons training. Afterwards, we would pick up thousands of spent cartridges ... Following the same idea of the Airplanes and Chalkboards, I decided to photograph the back section of a spent bullet cartridge, called a primer. When firing a small arms weapon, the firing pin strikes the primer when pressing the trigger, leaving an indenture on the back of the bullet. I liked the idea that the vast majority of the spent cartridges were fired by other people, continuing my interest in universality. Anyone could have fired these bullets. The importance was not the specific person, but the human presence.” The resulting photographs are microscopic views of the markings on the primers’ surface.

It wasn’t surprising when Tom took over the Daily Court Review (founded 1889) as a fourth generation publisher and president in 2004. Balancing the demands of publishing a daily legal journal with his need for a creative outlet in photography, these two passions have informed and impacted each other. It’s long been established that business people are linear thinkers and artists are non-linear thinkers. Tom’s background in the visual arts has benefited his career as a business owner, especially in solving problems. He acknowledges that he became more articulate after his graduate school experiences of defending his photography referencing both art historical and contemporary practices. Non-linear thinkers make connections among unrelated concepts of ideas and draw conclusions from examples coming from different fields or backgrounds. His expertise with both linear and non-linear thinking has given him a unique perspective among his business colleagues.

Jean Caslin  
Curator, writer, educator