

In the Alchemist's Cabinet

The latest series of vessels from the incantatory world of William Morris presents the viewer with wondrous containers of magic and myth from the far reaches of the imagination.

Morris has once again created a series of exquisite sculptures that, like those in a storied sorcerer's den or an alchemist's cabinet, seemingly embody the unseen and unknowable forces of another time and place, suggesting forgotten mystic rituals in a talismanic immediacy.

One of the most important glass artists working today, William Morris has found his inspiration within the envelope of cultural bricolage, as a provocative collagist of reference and form. He discovered early on that his love of the outdoor life and of travel gave him a continuing source of

spiritual renewal and fresh imagery on which to draw in his sculptural work with glass. Moving away from the demands and uniformity of contemporary urban life, the artist has sieved through world cultures—ancient to modern, first world to the other—for images and artifacts that inspire his imagination and elicit emotional response or association. Ancient cave paintings and the bony remnants of prehistoric hunts, canopic jars from pharaonic Egypt, Mediterranean amphorae, anthropological and zoological specimens—all have found a place in Morris's work. Mixing disparate elements and sources, both temporal and mythic, over the course of some twenty-five years he has sought to invigorate his chosen medium with a welter of associations that unlock visceral emotions and a sense of wonder in our collective unconsciousness.

The awe and sensual delights available in his work from its earliest days found a deeper range of emotion following the events of 9/11 and the deaths, first, of his mother, and then of

his great mentor, Italo Scanga. Over the intervening years, Morris has created successive series of hand-held vessels that embody a somber range of associations, from the funereal to the medicinal—centenary jars for the lost to medicine jars for a mythic healing. The imagery and formal qualities of these enigmatic receptacles, their physical presence and material beauty forged in the fire, underscore the darker possibilities of their meaning. These jars share a unity of impulse, functioning as prompts out of time to return us back to a relationship with an arcane, yet simpler way of being in the world.

Characterized at one moment by Morris as “objects of common ceremony,” these vessels share a source in the long cultural context of both functional and ritual vessels that are found in agrarian societies across the world, from Latin America and Southeast Asia to Africa. Starting with the simple form of a container and its stopper, Morris embarked on a plastic exploration of sculptural form that has generated a luxuriant, technically brilliant vocabulary of

surface treatments and a new menagerie of insects and animals for his work. Inspired by the shapes and surfaces of gourd containers in Latin American maize cultures, and most recently from sailing among the nomadic Moken people off the coast of Myanmar, with their coconut-based vessels, Morris has invented entirely new *craquelure* surface effects in glass to animate the sculptural inventions of his simple vessel forms. Playing artifice off of context, Morris has stepped very near his source material to shape the forms and sculpt the stoppers. Unlike the sun-bleached colors and worn surfaces of their Moken inspiration, Morris's vessels deploy a panoply of vivid translucent and transparent colors, layered and inscribed with patterns. The powerfully modeled and brilliantly colored stoppers, which he directly sculpts in molten glass, richly evoke a range of beings—from bats and beetles, to frogs and ravens—that suggest primordial symbols, much as do a child's delight in small animals and dead birds, or an adult's fascination with the hidden meaning in a *vanitas*.

Through these transcendent objects, which surprise and delight us with their invention, William Morris illuminates a far more complex and romantic notion of our being in the world. He creates a place outside specific culture through these artfully adorned vessel/artifacts that locates our fascination with humanity's primitive origins and historical past—a place that reconnects us with the mysteries of magic and ancient medicine. In this age of packaged celebrity and instant transparency, Morris's reverence and passion for experiencing the world intuitively, and his need to explore a longing for mystery—for *not* knowing—is a gift beyond measure. From the silent centenary jars to the vigorous sensuality of the recent medicine jars, his work allows the possibilities of seeing to flourish.

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Bruce Guenther, the Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Portland Art Museum, has organized and contributed to numerous international exhibitions of contemporary art. Formerly at the Seattle Art Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the Orange County Museum of Art, he has contributed to over fifty exhibition catalogues and is the author of *Clement Greenberg: A Critics Collection* (2001), *Tony DeLap* (2000), *Guy Anderson* (1986), and *50 Northwest Artists* (1983).