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## Presenting The Sexual Essence Of Morris Graves

JULY 31, 2019 BY [PHOEBE HOBAN](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, NYC (through August 2)

Reviewed by Phoebe Hoban

Morris Graves is an eloquently quiet artist. And yet the subtle chords he strikes in his delicate, musical compositions have a remarkably powerful resonance, a feeling of total “rightness” that certain artists can achieve, often with the least apparent drama.

Graves, a mostly self-taught, transcendental painter, created works that stand as painted haikus. An avid gardener, many of his paintings are of birds and flowers. His 2001 obituary recalled the artist, in his youth, “rushing here or there with flowers or canvas in hand.” “There is,” as he once put it, “no statement or message other than the presence of flowers and light.”

Yet it is his finely rendered vessels, rather than single blossoms or bouquets, that firmly tether his paintings, thus engendering the name of this exquisite show, *Calix, Cup, Chalice, Grail, Urn, Goblet: Presenting the Sexual Essence of Morris Graves*. The title is taken from a poetic letter Graves wrote in the 1980s: “Calix cup, Chalice, Grail, Urn, Goblet, superbly presenting the sexual essence, the reproductive-mystery elements, the seed cup. The flower. The Cup (chalice) to quaff the life-flow- the cup that invites and summons the bees and moths to savor, quaff and carry the pollen.”



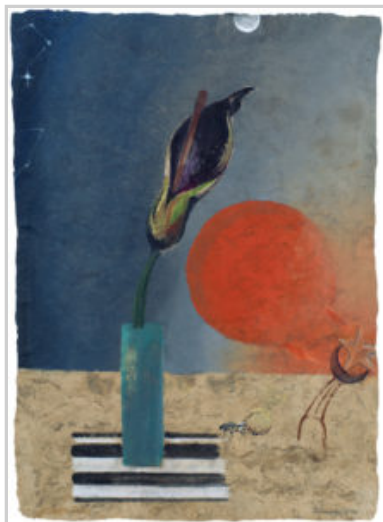
Haunted Bouquet



Star Flower Bouquet

Graves' love affair with nature dates back to his childhood, when a bout with pneumonia confined him to the family garden. He dropped out of high school to become a merchant sailor, which took him to China, Japan and the Philippines, cultures which had a life-long influence on his work. He finished high school, but never attended art school. He eventually settled in Seattle, becoming a member of the Pacific Northwest artist group that included Merce Cunningham, John Cage and Mark Tobey, all close friends. He had his first solo exhibit at the Seattle Art Museum in 1936, when he also became a painter in the WPA's Federal Art Project. Always drawn to the quiet of nature, he lived from 1940 to 1947 in a simple house he built called "The Rock" on a remote island 60 miles outside Seattle, "far from the machine-age noise of America," practicing a reclusive, Zen-like life devoted to meditation and observation.

Graves' Asian influence, including Zen Buddhism and Hinduism (in later life he also travelled to India) can clearly be seen in his spare but evocative line, as innately spiritual as it is aesthetically appealing. His calligraphic technique is combined with a deeply-felt mystical philosophy, creating what one critic rightly called "some of the finest religious art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." He was, like his antecedents Albert Pinkham Ryder and Charles Burchfield, a visionary; the numinous — as much as the visible — his central subject matter.



Black Lily of the Nile and Re



Bhutan's Isolation, Tashich Hodzong

Apart from its meditative quality, Graves' art is also striking for its strong sense of composition and use (or deliberate elimination) of color, and much of his work could stand on its graphic design alone. *Bhutan's Isolation, Tashich Hodzong* (1996), for instance, done on beautifully textured Mexican bark paper, is a stunning work that consists of a simple pot of flowers on a table with a geometric-patterned cloth. *Black Lily of the Nile and Re*, from the same year, also on Mexican bark paper, is more sexual, with a thrusting stamen resembling a Jack in the Pulpit bending towards a red orb. Some of the most beautiful pieces are also the most minimal, such as *Haunted Bouquet* (1949), a luminous nested flower, its tangle of hanging vines resembling a Rapunzel-like hank of dark hair; the quintessentially simple *Flower* (1954), and *Star Flower Bouquet*, a tiny white blossom poking out of a pitcher-shaped vessel (1950.)

As loaded symbols, Graves' vessels seem to have a secret life of their own, particularly those depicted without flowers. *State of the World*, (1947), with its powerfully entwined heron heads, their beaks crossed, is a standout, as is *Ceremonial Bronze Taking the Form of a Bird* (1947). More subtle, but equally compelling, are *Consciousness Achieving the Form of a Libation Cup* (1947), and *Ritual Bronze*, from the same year. Both are so delicate as to almost evaporate, although *Ritual Bronze* features a fierce, dragon-like head.

Graves is a master at visually conjuring a deep sense of silence, a pictorial answer to the Zen koan, "what is the sound of one hand clapping?"



Ritual Bronze



State of the World

Featured Image: Detail of *Ceremonial Bronze Taking the Form of a Bird*

Phoebe Hoban is New York City Art Critic at Riot Material Magazine. Ms. Hoban has written about culture and the arts for a variety of publications, including The New York Times, New York Magazine, The Wall Street Journal, Vogue, Vanity Fair, GQ, Harper's Bazaar, ARTnews, and The New York Observer, among others. She is the author of three artist biographies: *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (1998), *Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty* (2010) and *Lucian Freud: Eyes Wide Open* (2014).