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New York Galleries: What to See Right Now

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‘Calix, Cup, Chalice, Urn, Goblet: Presenting the Sexual Essence of Morris Graves’

Through Aug. 2. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 100 11th Avenue, Manhattan.
212-247-0082; michaelrosenfeldart.com



Morris Graves's "Summer Still Life," 1955-56, oil on canvas.
Morris Graves Foundation, via Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

It is an open question whether this sumptuous show conveys the sexual essence of Morris Graves — as its overlong title implies — or an exquisitely refined, delicately erotic mysticism that may be the real underlying essence of his art. But the 23 works here, dating mostly from the mid-1930s to the mid-50s and mostly on paper, show him expressing his love of vessels by rendering them with flowers, animals or both, while evoking different cultures and manipulating different mediums (gouache, watercolor, tempera, ink and oil) to great and varied effect.

Each work is a superb balancing act. Some are meticulously depicted yet startlingly inspired Chinese bronzes, like “Ceremonial Bronze Taking the Form of a Bird” (1947). Elsewhere the form-taking is earthier: In two instances white blossoms occupy sturdy jardinières sporting the furry legs and cloven hooves of goats. Sometimes the vessels nod to modernism with flat simple outlines, as in “Haunted Bouquet” (1949). Nonetheless, its inexplicably rounded interior harbors a small white flower, while a thorny branch curls around the edges of the sheet, as if guarding the Sleeping Beauty, shadowed by some pale green atmosphere. In the beautifully worked surfaces of the pink and black “Summer Still Life,” one of two works in oil on canvas, a fully dimensional compote holds three pieces of fruit as an offering to a flat platelike aura in the sky. This is a show to savor. *ROBERTA SMITH*



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