

## Last Meeting: Morris Graves and Gordon Onslow Ford

—Fariba Bogzaran

Dialogical engagement and philosophical debates are customary among artists involved with new ways of perceiving, reflecting the nature of reality, consciousness and existential inquiry. I became witness to such a dialogue between Morris Graves and Gordon Onslow Ford. Gordon introduced me to many of his artist friends, and I was particularly interested to meet the artists whose work was reproduced in his book *Creation* (1978). The book explored his philosophical views of the inner worlds and their expressions in various forms of art. Two of Morris Graves' paintings were discussed in this book, *Bird of the Spirit* (1943) and *Birds, Surf and Moon* (1941), which are also part of the current exhibition.

My request prompted Gordon to arrange a meeting with Morris Graves. On March 10, 1993, we set off on our journey to Loleta, California where Morris lived. On our way, we engaged in metaphysical discussions, played surrealist poetic word games, and read fortune cookies at a Chinese restaurant. Gordon was delighted with his fortune, "You are heading in the right direction!"

The mood of the sky changed as we drove through the woods and up the hill to Morris' house. We sat in the car to be "fashionably late," listening to the down-pouring rain, yet also embracing the profound silence of the remote surroundings. Gordon looked at me and said, "This will be a great meeting." I believed him. At least I knew it was important for Gordon. Perhaps for Morris, too, as for years he sent affectionate letters to Gordon and admired his paintings. In one letter Morris wrote, "I couldn't have had a happier time than those days spent with you. Once again I learn from you, your spirit, our moving and profound new beginning in the painting . . ." (Oct. 16, 1962). And in another, "I felt cleansed after being in the galleries of your Oakland exhibition and now from random reading in your *Painting in the Instant*. What disciplined energy it all reflects! What solitude!" (April, 26, 1977). They had not seen each other for a long time but continued to follow each other's careers closely. There was anticipation in the air that perhaps the gap of time might bring unexpected interactions. Even though they were deeply sympathetic with each other's inquiry, their expressions in art differed greatly. At the time Morris was painting the ephemeral presence of delicate flowers in translucent vessels; Gordon had embarked on another series of enigmatic black and white line, circle, and dot paintings.

We were greeted with an umbrella and a kind smile from Robert Yarber, Morris' assistant and friend. Robert, a practitioner of Vedanta, is currently directing the Morris Graves Foundation in Loleta. Walking into Morris' house felt like entering a Japanese temple. The serenity, the refined arrangements of objects and antiques, the mood and lighting had the quality of a monastic environment. The living room faced a large lake, which by design became an integral part of the house. On the lake, well-groomed shrubs were perfectly situated, in the harmonious relationship of an *ikebana* arrangement.

Robert left Gordon and me in the living room to inform Morris of our arrival. We stood in silence in front of windows that framed the lake as if it were an animated painting. What was directly in front of us and the entire scene were mesmerizing. As rain fell in perfect lines, it hit the water creating hundreds of concentric circles. The form, colors and lines had an uncanny resemblance to Gordon's watercolor paintings of the 1950s that he painted in his studio on the ferryboat *Vallejo* in Sausalito. While rocking his body gently back and forth, Gordon looked at me with a smile as we viewed this unexpected yet familiar panorama.

Morris walked into the room; a white-haired, thin and rather frail man, he stood tall and had a very strong voice. He greeted me with gentleness. From his handshake, I could sense the grace behind his paintings. Then he held Gordon's hand for a quite a while and said, "Well, it has been a long time." He seemed to want to hug Gordon, but their backgrounds stopped both of them from fully expressing the obviously intense emotion of seeing each other again. "Has it been ten years or so?" Morris recalled. "I don't remember" was Gordon's reply. Gordon had just turned eighty, and Morris was two years older.





*Minnow*, n.d.  
Sumi ink on paper, 19 x 31 7/8 in.  
Coll: Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art  
University of Oregon, Eugene  
Gift of Brigitta Bertioia

Morris sat and lit a cigarette. He was dramatic and theatrical, with the intelligent eyes of a man who cultivated presence. We sat sipping tea quietly in semi-darkness. Contemplation was part of all of our lives, so this small group was certainly comfortable in silence. Morris finally broke the stillness. He talked at length, using convincing arguments to convey that there is really nothing to talk about. His point of view was that it was desirable to have a minimal number of material things, thoughts and concepts. No subject to paint, but seeing purely the spirit of what is present. He concluded by saying, "If there is nothing to talk about then there should be silence." To reinforce his point of view, he spoke of life as a constant repetition. "Things come and go and it all ends in nothing. Whether we are here or not, it does not matter. Spring comes, spring goes, and it is all the same." His philosophical remark may have contained a slight attitude of resignation very different from a letter he wrote to Gordon: "Although this lake-forest, like your forest, is beautiful at all times of the year spring is so fresh and mild and with the tender new spring foliage either rain washed or sun caressed" (April, 10, 1976). Gordon, with his optimistic attitude, replied to "it is all the same" by saying, "But things do change and they are different." Morris made his hand into a shape of a flower bud, and then opened it and waved it in the air and said, "Poof, it all disappears into nothing."



The dialogue grew into a debate. They held their different positions firmly. Morris advocated the concept of Vedanta and life as Maya or illusion, emanating a solid presence in the moment, with overtones of existential inquiry about life and death. His conviction was "All reality is an illusion whether alive or dead." Gordon held a position of evolution with new beginnings, which reflected his future-centered view, and commented, "But the inner worlds exist and we have to discover them." Morris countered, "I am tired of discovering them!" Gordon was rather perplexed with that answer and said, "But discovering them brings delight."

It was obvious that Morris held a non-attached position. He was comfortable being present without searching for additional meaning. This moment reminded me of the visit Gordon and I had with a Stanford professor of comparative religion, Frederic Spiegelberg, who was responsible for establishing the East-West dialogues and meetings of the early 1950s in San Francisco. Frederic was in ill health, in a wheelchair, yet totally lucid when we visited him. This was couple of years before he died. When we were leaving, Gordon said with great affection, "We should leave you in peace." Frederic replied with great wit, "But I am in peace!" Morris seemed to reside in the same space of contentment as Frederic.

Gordon had brought Morris two prints as gifts. While looking at them, Morris tried to interpret the elements in the works as a symbolic language. Although both artists had similar sensitivities to exploring the inner world, they had fundamentally different ways of expressing it. Morris pointed to a cluster of interlocking circles and stated, "It looks like a spider web." He noticed that his symbolic interpretation received a puzzled look from Gordon. He tried to correct it, but it was too late! He continued on in a more positive way, saying, "They are intellectual and scientific. There is some energy coming out of them." For them to critique each other's work and then agree to disagree was nothing new. They learned from each other. Robert Yarber recalls that in the 1980s at Charles Campbell gallery in San Francisco, while viewing Morris' 1979 triptych *The Great Blue Heron Yogi and the Great Rainbow Trout Yogi in Phenomenal Space, Mental Space and the Space of Consciousness*, Gordon remarked to Morris, "Space of consciousness does not have any color." Morris was puzzled and apparently disagreed but replied, "That is interesting."

The debate finally opened up in general terms about inner realities. Morris remarked that even if we recognize these levels of inner worlds, we would arrive in nothingness. He was not speaking from a nihilist view but reflecting the concept of the non-dual nature of reality. He emphasized his awareness of the illusion of appearances and explained that he was not speaking negatively but describing a state of bliss. Gordon affirmed that in the inner world there is no negativity, and that "negativity is a waste of time." What became clear was that Gordon held the position of keeping the inquiry alive by continuously exploring the inner worlds, while Morris' position was one of staying still within that self-realization, similar to what Gordon once wrote: "Painting is meditation, drawing is meditation, meditation is meditation" (*Insights*, 1991).

At one point their discussion intensified, as if they were struggling to navigate among Buddhism, Vedanta and art! I entered their debate as a referee by commenting, "I think you are talking about the same space but using a different language." I was not sure how my remark would be received in this rather lively, yet tense discourse. Suddenly the atmosphere changed and stillness prevailed. "Yes, we don't have to argue who is right or wrong. We are indeed coming from the same space," Morris commented gently. Obviously they were both relieved, and so were Robert and I! After all, they had not seen each other for a long time and their directions in art and lifestyle were even more divergent approaching their sage years. Morris' life seemed to have taken a contemplative, detached turn as Gordon was emerging from a solitary period and desiring to become more engaged with the world.





*White Flowers in Box*, ca. 1948-1950  
Gouache on paper, 8 1/8 x 12 3/4 in.  
Coll: Graves at Oregon  
Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art  
University of Oregon, Eugene

The rest of the day we spent looking at paintings, sharing a meal and exchanging stories. Morris looked relaxed and casual, happy to have this time with his old friend. What was palpable and inspiring to witness was the depth of their dialogue and commitment to a philosophical inquiry through the practice of their art and way of life. In that relational space, a rich significant communication truly took place. Morris and Gordon cherished every moment of this visit, as I believe they knew very well the meeting was to be their last.

— **Fariba Bogzaran, Ph.D.**, professor, writer and artist, co-founded the Lucid Art Foundation with Gordon Onslow Ford and Robert Anthoine. She collaborated on publications with Onslow Ford including *Once Upon a Time* (1999) and has curated several exhibitions of his work.