

# Bockley Gallery



## *George Morrison: TRAVERSAL*

Exhibition: November 12 through December 24, 2022

Bockley Gallery is honored to present *Traversal*, our eighth solo exhibition with George Morrison (1919–2000). The title refers to acts and processes of passing across, over, and through, and is borrowed from the exhibition's 1958 painting to signal the artist's movements through time and space, and across media, artistic languages, cultural references, and more.

The title also guides the exhibition itself: sixteen works in the gallery and an additional eight works in the viewing area bring together varying scales of painting, drawing, prints and sculpture that span Morrison's six-decade career, from his first years in New York with the Art Student League and celebrated emergent Abstract Expressionists to his Minnesota homecoming and horizons of Lake Superior and beyond. Rather than adhering to linear narrative time, the exhibition's anachronistic presentation highlights singular works to honor Morrison's presence therein, and to allow multiple connections within and between works to arise. In the artist Kay WalkingStick's words, "Like psychic fingerprints, the record of Morrison's hand on the surface is best understood as a series of unrehearsed, autobiographical gestures that say, in effect, this is what it felt like to be me at that moment."

Morrison's oil-on-canvas *Traversal* (1958, above) highlights a period of dynamic, gestural brush work. Layered, roughly textured, boldly contrasting color blocks show the artist's love of moving pigment around, both for the experience of material immediacy and for the lasting composition that offered many, if not limitless, references. Similarly scaled and methodologically approached is his gouache on paper painting, *Untitled* (1957), in which the pigment's layers offer a relative

softness that speaks more of transparency and opacity. Both paintings' fluid groundlessness can be considered relationally to their creation during the artist's most itinerant period (1954–1963), which followed his studies in France, when he began moving between numerous university teaching posts in the Midwest and East Coast regions.

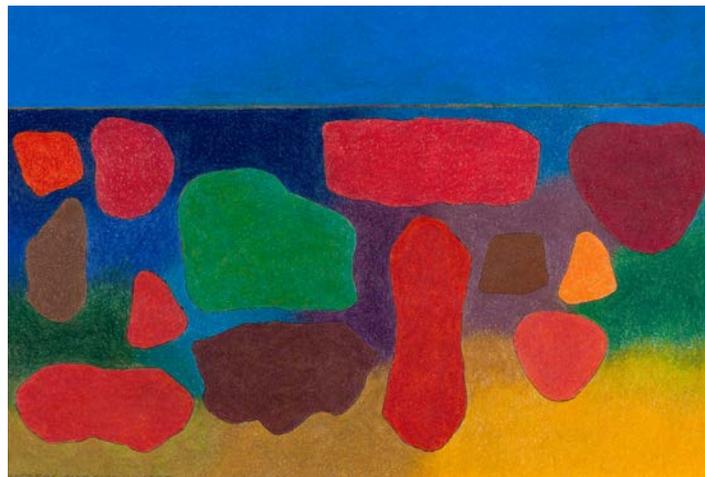
For much of his career, Morrison responded to natural phenomena of skies, waters, and lands—in relation to each other, to wind, to light, to memory, and more, as they passed through his being. *Landscape* (1950) is the artist's first print—a five-color wood block on Japanese rice paper. Along with many of the early surrealist-cubist drawings in the exhibition, *Landscape* is a sign of the artist's wondrous variations of compositional blocking to come: infinite skies and biomorphic fragments that seem to refer simultaneously to spirit and matter of cosmological, subterranean and subaqueous space. Another early landscape, *Structural Landscape with Moons* (1953), was painted in Duluth the year after studying in France. An encaustic-like, pastel-colored painting whose upper register, or sky, charts six moons that may refer to the visible moons of Jupiter as indicated by several later drawings noting constellation visibility on Lake Superior.

Included in the exhibition are a selection of Morrison's *Horizon* paintings, notably from his life at Red Rock, his home and studio on Grand Portage's North Shore of Lake Superior, where he lived and worked from 1983 until his passing in 2000. These variations on the line that both connect and divide land and water and sky became in many senses a way of life—a lifeline of diurnal making as part of healing through a number of health challenges. *Red Rock Variation. Automatic. Memory of Tanguy. Grand Portage* (1984) cites the densely clustered bone-like fragments known to the oeuvre of his early Surrealist colleague Yves Tanguy. The intimate acrylic painting *Approaching Night. Quiet Passage. Red Rock Variation: Lake Superior Landscape* (1993) is a powerfully subtle, moody blue view; while the vibrant, rainbow-colored pencil-on-paper drawing, *Untitled* (1995, below), pronounces a day-blue sky above crisp, organic forms that seem to float in softly out-of-focus waters.

As a studio-based artist who embraced principles of surrealist abstraction, Morrison's appreciation of ambiguity took multiple expressions. Working from one place of significance at any given time, most of his works are a composite of multiple encounters with that place, or embodied multiple places. While Lake Superior may be cited, he often referred to feelings and memories associated with the horizon of home via horizons of his experiences with the Atlantic Ocean or the Mediterranean Sea, for example. Similarly, as Morrison's relationship to his Native identity evolved, his references traversed a sense of kinship across Indigenous cultures, expressed at times through his interest in totemic forms. The padauk wood *Chiringa Form* (1991) cites an Aboriginal sacred object, while the minimalist, undulating lines of the lithograph *Red Cube* (1983) cites his own large wooden collages, specifically his large-scale sculptures that reference various Native American totemic practices.

George Morrison (1919–2020) (Ojibwe) was a member of the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and a founding figure of Native American Modernism. Born on the North Shore of Lake Superior in Minnesota's Chippewa City, Morrison studied at the Minneapolis School of Art (now Minneapolis College of Art and Design) (1938–1943), graduating with a scholarship to study at the Art Student League, New York City (1943–1946), which led to a Ful-

bright scholarship to study in France, both in Paris and Aix-en-Provence (1952). He held teaching positions in Provincetown (1947–1952), various East Coast and Midwest universities (1954–1963), Rhode Island College of Art and Design (1963–1970), and the University of Minnesota (1970–1983). His first solo exhibition was in 1948 at Central Moderns Gallery, NYC, which was followed by a group exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where his work entered the permanent collection. Morrison’s recent solo exhibitions include *Modern Spirit: The Art of George Morrison*, a traveling exhibition by Minnesota Museum of American Art (2013–2015), and *Native Modernism: the Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser* at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (2004–2005). Group exhibitions include *Stretching the Canvas: Eight Decades of Native Painting* at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York (2019–2022); *Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950s to Now*, at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas (2018–2019); and the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe (2019). He was honored in a White House ceremony when his *Red Totem* (1980) was a part of the 1997 exhibition, *Twentieth Century American Sculpture at The White House: Honoring Native America*. In 2022, the United States Postal Service honored Morrison with a series of commemorative Forever stamps featuring five works, including *Untitled* (1995, below)—the only represented work currently not belonging to a public collection.



Bockley Gallery is a contemporary art venue and curatorial practice based in Minneapolis since 1984. The gallery offers an intimate experience with art through a calendar of on-site programming, while its outreach to local, national and international museums and biennales expands the dialogue around what it believes to be the most relevant ideas in art today. Bockley Gallery has curated and organized multiple group exhibitions with George Morrison, as well as eight solo exhibitions at the gallery including *Small Sculptures and Drawings* (1992), *New York School* (2011), and *George Morrison*—a centennial celebration of his birth (2019).