

CLAIRE MORGAN *Stop Me Feeling*



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Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery

February 10–May 7, 2017

Stop Me Feeling is Claire Morgan's first solo exhibition in the United States and presents six recent works exemplifying her ecologically minded artistic practice. In beguiling installations, cabinet sculptures, paintings, and works on paper, the artist stages dramatic encounters between humans and nature and confronts issues of life and death.

Morgan builds a structure for her three-dimensional works by arranging organic and inorganic materials into grids and geometric shapes, such as circles and squares. Her painstaking process involves collecting large quantities of seeds, insects, leaves, and/or torn bits of plastic and then mounting them on hanging nylon threads. Caught up in the webs created by those forms are deer, foxes, owls, rabbits, and other wild animals that live alongside humans in the rural and urban environment. While these animals learn to adapt to the artificial conditions of our making, and many of them thrive to the point of overpopulation, they often meet violent deaths. Morgan finds them after they have been killed by cars, pest control, or pets, or have died of natural causes. The reverence with which she preserves the dead animals through taxidermy sharply contrasts with the carelessness of other humans toward them while they were alive.¹ Morgan is an exceptionally sensitive and acute observer of the creatures that live in our midst, and her novel constructions open our eyes to both their beauty and our own destructive ways.

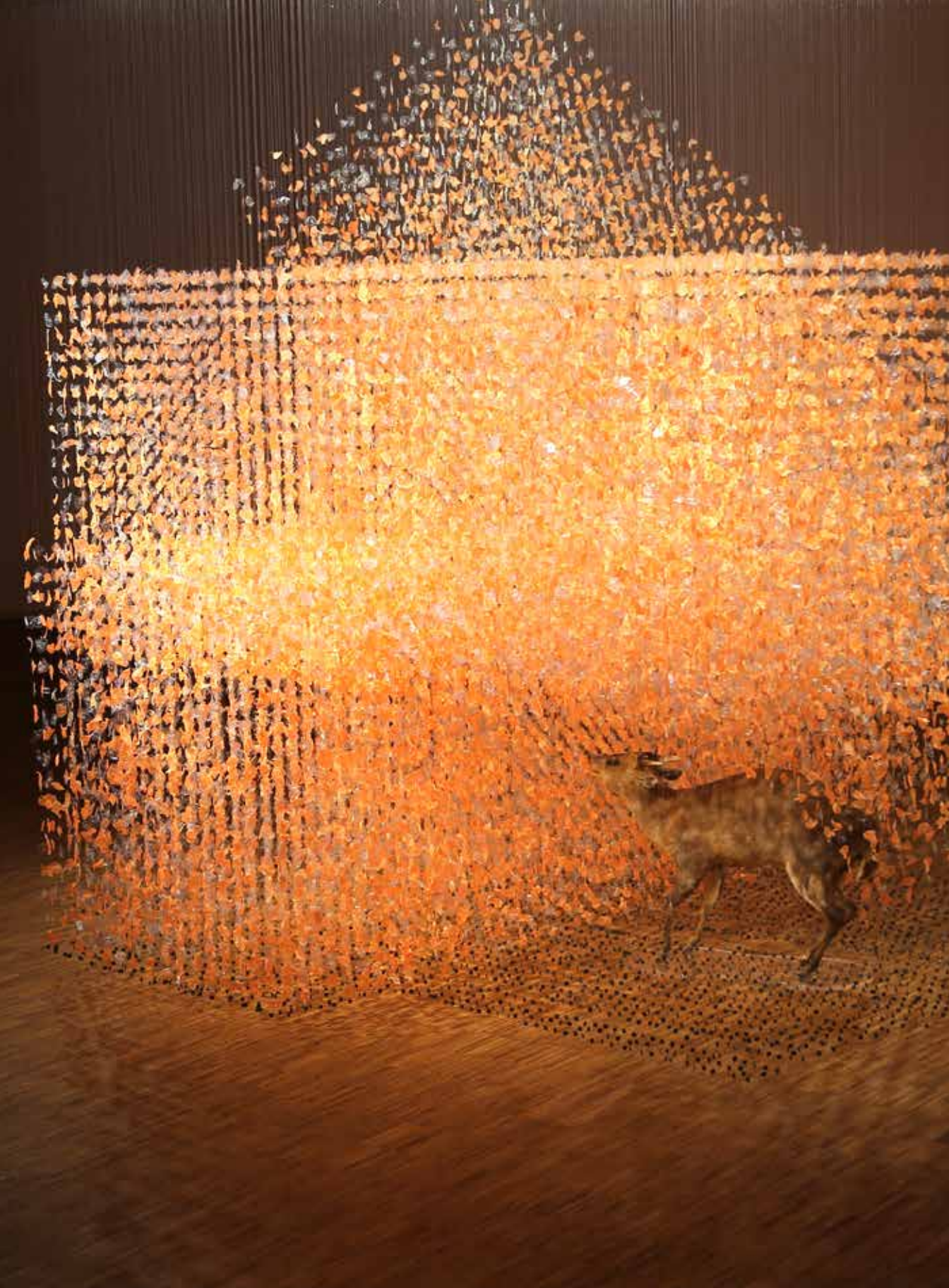
Within You Without You (fig. 1) is one of many sculptures that Morgan has arranged inside a glass cabinet. A vertical stream of colorful forms that possess the delicacy of confetti or flower petals draws us to the work. Upon closer, more sustained examination, we recognize that the forms are in fact fragmentary pieces of polythene, a feather-light plastic currently overwhelming our planet. Used to make trillions of shopping bags that people around the world discard after just one use, polythene disperses itself widely, getting stuck in trees and littering waterways, and is stubbornly resistant to biodegradation. We take almost no measures to stop it. Our plastic shopping bags will be here long after we are gone—one of our most enduring marks on the earth.

The linchpin of *Within You Without You* is a dunnoek, a small songbird, placed just left of center in the vitrine. Morgan displays the taxidermied bird as if it were alive. While it forages, polythene rains down on it and enters its food stream—a common hazard for animals and fish. The bird's characteristic brown plumage, which usually allows it to blend in with trees and dirt and protects it from predators, stands out in such a colorful setting, further endangering it.

Morgan has lived for many years in industrialized urban centers. She was born in 1980 in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and now resides in Newcastle, England. She first realized what a problem polythene is shortly after she became interested in natural processes and decided to



Figure 1



incorporate animals in her work. During an eight-week artist's residency in a rural area, she grew dismayed at the plastic bags strewn along roadsides and began gathering them for her work. The prominence of polythene and dead animals in her sculptures and installations is symptomatic of the world today.

Morgan's tragicomic titles are simple words or phrases lifted from everyday language or are borrowed from books or pop songs. *Within You Without You*, for example, is a play on the title of a Beatles song. Released in 1967 during the Summer of Love, the song's message about consumerism and materialism continues to resonate, and it has been covered by a variety of acts, including Oasis, Patti Smith, and Sonic Youth. It explores the theme of the metaphysical space between us that prevents us from seeing the forces that unite the universe. The song becomes a soundtrack for Morgan's sculpture and part of the viewer's experience.

Morgan uses the slang term "clusterfuck" for the title of another one of her cabinet sculptures in the exhibition (cover). A crow finds itself trapped inside the vitrine. Suspended in midair, the black bird appears to rotate backward within a dark, rectangular cloud composed of flies, flower seeds, leaves, and polythene. The overall effect is akin to a piñata that has exploded, with some of its pieces on the ground. The blood-red polythene dotting the composition, however, is a reminder that the bird is real—not papier-mâché—and has lost its life in a senseless world. On the most obvious level, the title of Morgan's work refers to the bird's hopeless predicament, in which it has been outsmarted and overpowered by an unseen force. Yet, the title also functions as a metaphor for our disastrous approach to the earth and the environment, which of course we inhabit too: "What scares me is our relationship with nature: our unwillingness to see ourselves as part of [it]."²

Morgan's work is an exploration of our relationship with the natural world, with no specific narrative intended. She appears to subscribe to the view of Russian writer Anton Chekhov, which holds that the role of the artist is to ask questions, not answer them. She does not want to tell viewers how to think. Her works can, however, be interpreted as social sculptures that are intended to inspire change, which each of us has the power to effect in our daily lives simply by being less ambivalent in how we treat the earth.

Morgan is at her most awe-inspiring with her spectacular installations hung from the ceiling. One entitled *If you go down to the woods today* (fig. 2) is featured in this exhibition and occupies its own gallery. It depicts a muntjac—a type of small deer that has become particularly numerous in the United Kingdom in recent years. It is one of the artist's largest taxidermy specimens to date. Seen from behind, the muntjac is about to become lost as it

Figure 2



Figure 3

follows fluttering butterflies into a forest of orange polythene weighted with lead. Here again the title is integral to the work. It is borrowed from a lyric in “The Teddy Bears’ Picnic,” a strangely ominous old children’s song that warns “you better not go alone” into the woods and it’s “safer to stay at home.”

Two works on paper in the exhibition provide insight into the artist’s working process. For many of Morgan’s sculptures, there is at least one related drawing on fine paper made before, during, or after their completion. In *Full of Grace* (fig. 3), a watercolor and pencil drawing done in preparation for a cabinet sculpture, the artist cocoons the supple body of a fox within the confines of a circle. The scenario is mysterious but obviously unnatural, and there is no doubt that the upside-down fox is in peril. The title references the Catholic prayer of intercession often said in the most desperate of moments, calling for divine intervention when a positive outcome appears highly unlikely. In *The Air that We Breathe* (fig. 4) the artist traces the elegant arcs of the flight path of a disoriented sparrow stuck inside a square. In this case, the artist’s palette extends beyond pencil and watercolor to include taxidermy residue from preparing the bird for inclusion in the final cabinet sculpture of the same name.

Figure 4

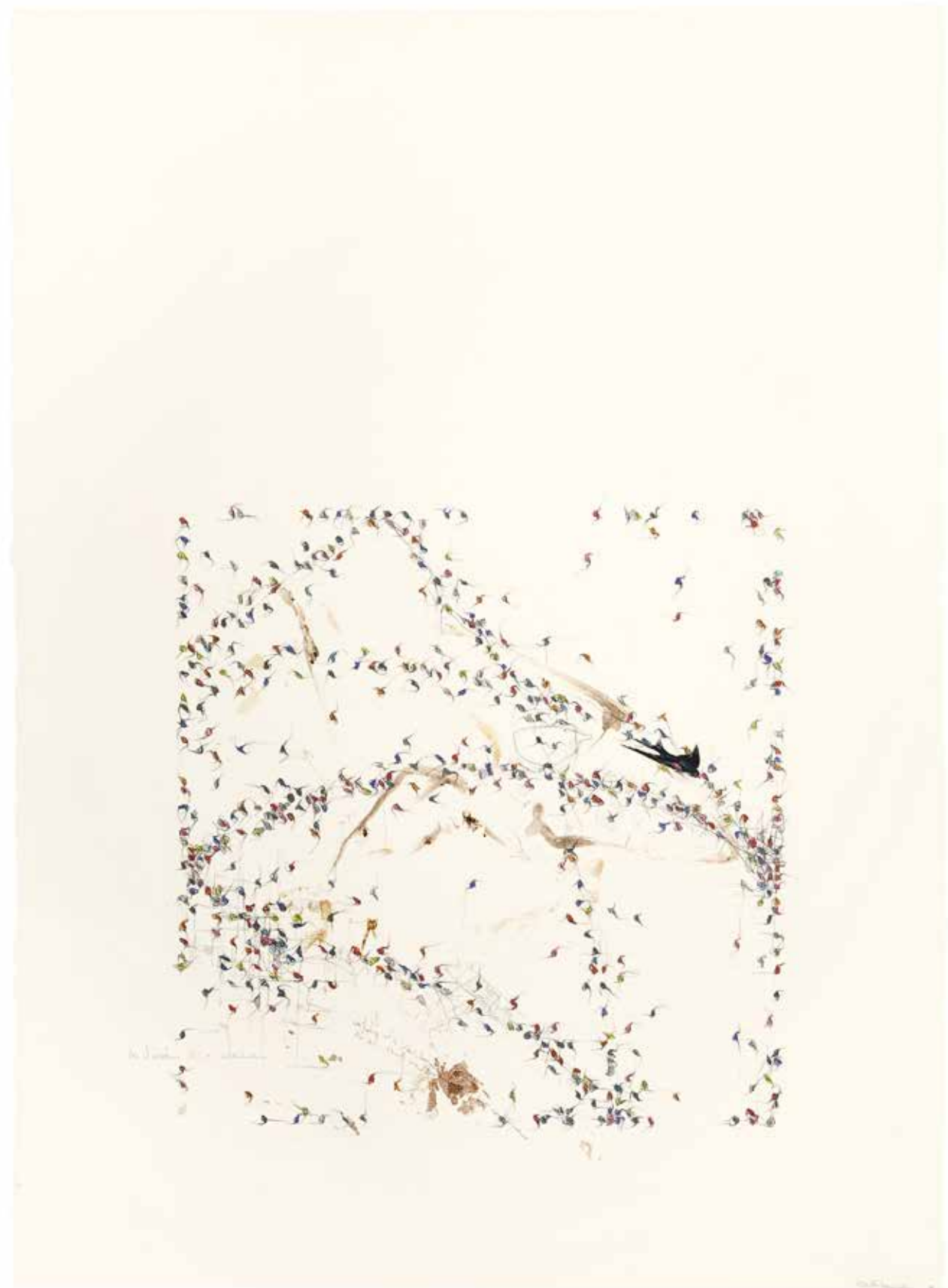




Figure 5

Recently Morgan began making large paintings related to the taxidermy process as well. One of her most ambitious is a triptych entitled *Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds* (fig. 5). The tripartite form carries certain cultural connotations because of its origins in medieval Europe, where it was used for religious works of art depicting Christ's Nativity and Crucifixion. On her triptych, Morgan also deals with life and death, creation and destruction. She utilized the blank canvas almost as an operating table to prepare the bodies of several dead animals. Her title is a line spoken by the Hindu deity Vishnu in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Those words took on new meaning in the twentieth century when Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who directed the Manhattan Project, invoked them after the first atomic bomb test. He rightly noted that the world would never be the same. In both its shapes and colors, Morgan's painting evocates a great explosion, and points to our willingness to push Earth itself to the brink.

It has been said of David Foster Wallace, Morgan's favorite author, that he could be "sad, funny, silly, heartbreaking and absurd with equal ease; he can even do them all at once."³ The same is true of Morgan, who is likewise deeply philosophical and concerned with our shared fate. Her intricate works can also be extraordinarily beautiful, and they amaze us as demonstrations of her mastery of light, color, and materials. Endlessly fascinating and alluring, they intensify our awareness of life and death, and make them seem even more mysterious and unpredictable than we had ever realized before.

Trinita Kennedy, curator

Notes

1. Morgan is one of many contemporary artists who incorporate taxidermy into their work and perform the taxidermy process themselves. For more on this subject, see *Dead Animals, or The Curious Occurrence of Taxidermy in Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue edited by Jo-Ann Conklin (Providence, RI: David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, 2016).
2. Claire Morgan, quoted in "TLM10: Claire Morgan," *The Last Magazine*, May 20, 2013.
3. Michiko Kakutani, "Playful Musings Bearing Ambitions," *New York Times*, January 4, 2006.

Illustrations

COVER: *Clusterfuck*, 2015. Carrion crow (taxidermy), flower seeds, leaves, insects, fragments of polyethylene, nylon, and glass. Collection of Kim Manocherian

Fig. 1: *Within You Without You*, 2015. Dunnock (taxidermy), torn polythene, nylon, and glass. Private collection, USA

Fig. 2: *If you go down to the woods today*, 2014. Muntjac (taxidermy), butterflies, torn polythene, nylon, and lead. Courtesy Galerie Karsten Greve

Fig. 3: *Full of Grace*, 2015. Pencil and watercolor on paper. Collection of Kim Manocherian

Fig. 4: *The Air that We Breathe*, 2014. Pencil, watercolor, and traces of taxidermy on paper. Collection of Ellen and Peter Safir, USA

Fig. 5: *Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds*, 2016. Triptych: taxidermy residues, salt, graphite, and mixed media on paper on canvas. Collection of Kim Manocherian

This exhibition was organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts
in collaboration with Galerie Karsten Greve.

Supported in part by the Friends of Contemporary Art and



Downtown Nashville
919 Broadway
Nashville, TN 37203
fristcenter.org

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