

Come Together: Surviving Sandy

Cy Morgan

An Interview

by Noah Dillon

Cy Morgan: The work in *Surviving Sandy* feels as though it's on a couple of different tracks all at once—some things are going in one direction; others are going in another. The work is generally concerned with gravity and the way objects project and resist forces. They also follow different valences that can oppose one another, like beauty and ugliness, or grace and awkwardness. Some things share something from several directions. One big distinction is between found objects or repurposed objects. For instance, *Standing Group on Cart A* (all 2013) and *Standing Wall Object A* both look found and grody, but are mostly comprised of store-bought materials. The found and purchased elements can have a kind of natural meeting place, with juxtapositions that are distinct; and their interaction can alter the nature and the reading of the objects.

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Cy Morgan, “Projecting Wall Object A,” “Projecting Wall Object B,” “Propping Wall Object A,” “Propping Wall Object B,” “Standing Wall Object A,” “Standing Wall Object B,” “Projecting Floor Object A,” “Standing Group on Cart A,” all 2013. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Rachel Styer.

Noah Dillon: I see that especially in *Propping Wall Object A*, in its angularity and the absoluteness; or even the monochromatic austerity of the cement and wood elements in *Propping Floor Object A*, as they are brought into opposition with the contingency and grace of the blue sand at its base. Or, to take a really imagistic piece, *Projecting Wall Object B* where you can mentally reconstruct the way that the arms in the typewriter were originally intended to fit together as an orderly and utilitarian line. As it is now, the object can't serve its purpose in any way. And the subversion of the objects' utility is really pointed—you're not just disassembling the

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objects, you've retained their apparent functionality and the emotional considerations that come with it.

Morgan: Those hammers were a challenge. A typewriter jam is just too many arms trying to go into the same space at the same time. So it was simply a matter of playing with it to find out which ones would hold together in a really stable way.

Dillon: That's especially beautiful, I think, because a typewriter now seems like a delicate, fetishized object that you're abusing and binding. That world is completely gone and the only people that maintain it are those who adore such machines and treat them with a great deal of gentility and care.

It appears your use of hardware and mounting is concerned with the material properties of these elements. Are you interested in the *operation* of how things and references fit together, as here with the Baroque qualities of the interlocking arms set against the blankness of the rounded, matte-gray rectangle?

Morgan: I think about solidifying a gesture or a moment in time.

Dillon: And the gestures seem sort of corollary to the movement such elements make, or that one makes with them:

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typewriter hammers jam, wires snake and twist, wood handles are propped.

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Morgan: Yeah, I'm interested in using these materials, both art materials and more utilitarian substances as expressive tools. I think it's not all that different from painting or drawing. A big concern is finding a way to manipulate substances so that they lend a particular materiality to the composition and its cohesion.

Dillon: That cohesion, and its antithesis, are also interesting to me, the way these sort of skate between painting and sculpture, with their linear elements, the addition of the paint and color, the use of stuff like wood and wire as a drawing or a painting medium. In some of the reliefs the flat

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planes read in a way that's really draftsman-like. How long have you been developing this way of working?

Morgan: I got a B.A. in creative writing from Columbia College in Chicago. I was doing fiction, but then when I got out I could not, for the life of me, write a stitch that I didn't think was just forced. Nothing I wrote ever rang true, so I had to stop. After college I was working as a framer and carpenter and started making sculptures. My work in the studio developed a lot in the year before Sandy. When the storm hit I had a few things done that I was pleased with—the very first things. And some were okay. Some actually survived the flood, in the studio. I was really excited about that. Like, the little foot, *Standing Wall Object A*, that survived, which was amazing. Oddly enough some wire drawings also survived. I couldn't believe it. But much of the work was destroyed.

The choice to make sculptures felt natural, because I grew up drawing and going to museums, but feeling so utterly inadequate in the ability to represent whatever I wanted to represent in a particular way. That lack of confidence in the ability of my hand discouraged me from being an artist. But I couldn't sleep a lot as a kid and I had a lot of nightmares. So I would wake up and just make these things in the middle of the

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night. In particular I liked Babel-esque towers of baseball cards.

Dillon: Using the cards as building blocks?

Morgan: Exactly. They were sort of like bricks and had a cumulative nature. The cards were all printed differently, but had a basic particle of information—the rectangle—that was uniformly the same. One of my clearest memories is making a ziggurat-like structure as tall as I am and being very satisfied with that, without ever delving into why. So when it came time to decide what to make I settled on the object, and very deliberately the object as opposed to the picture plane.

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Dillon: That makes sense, since it seems like even your paintings—because they're iterative and the choice of the

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materials is so specific in each one, and their display with those deep shadow boxes, and so on in the accretion of choices—become much more object-like than something like a canvas or an elegantly framed drawing or something like that. Your decision to switch from text to objects and images reminds me a bit of Marcel Broodthaers.

Morgan: Yeah, like a very literal destruction of his past in a very aestheticized way. It's really interesting to have this history and this investment and then turn, break with that, like Broodthaers, and move in a completely different direction, but one that keeps a physical trace—which is the complete opposite of poetry.

Dillon: Can you find a physical trace of your thinking about fiction in the work that you're doing now?

Morgan: It's a little harder in parts, but I'm invested in mythology and archetypal forms. Like, I have a triptych of three ropes dipped in plaster. Jarrett Earnest visited and remarked, "Oh, these are like The Graces." And I look at them and realize, oh yeah. They're very similar to one another, with different personas, and they move through space as iterations of themselves. So as far as myths and references go, it's like that.

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It's been great for thinking about narrative and breaking away from thinking about and tweaking narrative—its arc and structure—and having to deal with that, with everything immediately present, although not available in every case. The materials go only so far. They're there, they're absolutely there, but you just can't see all of them always.

Dillon: Can you talk more about the scale you're working at? Because of these eight pieces, their size varies widely but their scale feels much more regular: they're human-sized objects, even those much smaller than a body are nonetheless corporeal.

Morgan: Absolutely. I think some of that comes from the objects' elements coming in contact with one another. The sensation (whether visual or tactile) of things touching each other has an inherent implication to it; since my concern is so material, I think it would just be lazy of me not to take all of those things into consideration.

Dillon: Right, and the choices of the distances, the points of intersection, and so on. It's funny: I feel like I'm coming to the materials with all these assumptions about what was chosen, why, and how, and what was found. Some of my assumptions are right, many are wrong.

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Morgan: Well I think it's ambiguous, and that's not something that I try to diminish or persuade people of. I actually don't need it to be super clear what's a choice and what's happenstance. Instead, I think it's more important to take the end as a decision made about whether the thing should just stay in a particular state or not.

Dillon: How did you choose the heights at which those on the wall would be hung?

Morgan: I like them like this and some of them were actually higher in the studio. I like them visible from the top, where they're kind of like Juddian objects that you can get all the way around.

Dillon: Yeah, I'd heard that Judd was really particular in how he made his work so that viewers would have to feel their way around the objects.

Morgan: I'm very particular about how things are placed and where they're hung. David Smith has positions that he tries to lock you into until you go through a transition and see it from yet another iteration of his selected outline or elements that come together that give you a particular experience that he was shooting for. And the name has to do with that staging as well. By naming a sculpture *Propping Wall*

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Object B, the name declares: it has to live on a wall and has to be propped.



Cy Morgan, “Projecting Wall Object B,” 2013. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Dillon: That’s really interesting to me—that it is based so much on the way the object exists, what it’s made of, or how it was made—that those are at heart how you’re framing them with language, with the titles, and affect the way they’re received visually, despite the superficial one-to-one relationship between the descriptive titles and the objects.

Morgan: Yeah. I think choosing titles does a few things: it directs attention in a way, it’s very descriptive and specific without being personal. The title says very little about the material in the piece so I used the title to suggest it. As far as the lettering goes, I was starting to think about working in

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particular veins and enumerating or keeping track in a scientific or methodical kind of way. The lettering system goes A through Z and then it goes AB, AC, through AZ, then BA, etc. So I've got limitless letters to work with.

Heide Hatry, who's been taking photos of flowers she's made from meat gives her works Latin names, which are often beautiful-sounding descriptors of what something really, literally is. In a similar way, the titles I use are descriptive but say nothing about the character of the object.

Dillon: Right, so it's more than "Untitled" and less than something poetic.

Morgan: Absolutely, I wanted to avoid elongated poetic titles. I have nothing against them, they're just not for me. I love Duchamp's *To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour* (1918). I can go through the actions: opposite side, one eye, almost an hour. And I think for him it works and adds to the piece and gives it the literary depth he wanted. I'm trying not to go the other way, just a different way and have an instantaneous narrative, and have all the references inherent in the material, and keep everything superficially impersonal.

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Dillon: Using that word impersonal is curious because it seems like there are a lot of personal attachments to the things you choose. Any time you pick up an old, weathered piece of material and put it in a sculpture, it brings questions about like, “Is this personally significant?”

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interest me, too: strange screws,
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Morgan: Oh certainly—I pick it up because I identify with it, it speaks to me in a way that’s almost tender, like a

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wounded animal off the street that has this inherent history and it's possibly gone through one iteration of itself and now it's a useless thing. And once it becomes useless, that's when it begins to interest me. Idiosyncratic, unusual materials interest me, too: strange screws, odd cables, weird substances and hardware. Those have a character to them.

Dillon: I've been pondering those sorts of objects, lately, especially with the advent of all these things that can be fabricated out of plastic or whatever. There are a million little different screws or fasteners or just incidental tiny pieces, each with a very specific purpose. I don't even know what I find engaging about it other than just the particularity of all the things in the world.

Morgan: I guess what I see in it is the fulfillment of a need, but such a precise need that it requires a tiny, super-specified, one-in-a-million part, subtly differentiated from everything that is similar to it. And that piece is the lynchpin, because without it nothing works.

Topics

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Flood, Hurricane Sandy, Interview,
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