

## Ann K. Morrison / JOEY MORGAN: PIECES OF MIND

*Joey Morgan's work is all in the mind.*

—An anonymous viewer.

Revealed in this viewer's response is one aspect of the fascinating and unsettling enigma that permeates the artistic production of Joey Morgan, an American-born artist who has lived and worked in Canada since 1974. In her complex installations she places objects that carry the dust and encrustations of another time and place. As perceptual focal points, they become symbolic representatives of the missing whole, transformed into artifact by separation and displacement. The enigma floats in the intricacies of implication, ungraspable because of the unpredictability of personal memory. Thus Morgan's works become orchestrations of systems and rituals of process which are intensely autobiographical, but call up our own past experiences in a peeling away of layers as we uncloak meaning. They provide the opportunity to discover selected cross-cuts of Morgan's past merged with our own, and to find commonality of experience.

The term "viewer" is too limiting for Joey Morgan's work. Full participation is required. Time must be spent to reflect and to link the fragments together. The "participant" cannot remain a passive observer, able to click the switch on and off, then walk out unaffected. A journey must be taken so that perceptual change can take place. This is not the mythic search for sanctuary and refreshment of spirit, but an internal involvement with one's own past as released and revealed through Morgan's collaborative processes. The trip can be traumatic and disorienting, for a Pandora's box of ghosts and demons can surface as memories flood the consciousness. This happens with most works of art to some degree, but Morgan's obsession with choreographing the ritual of reaching back into time touches on all the senses. It is as if the past melts away too quickly for her. References must be preserved and her objects take on this role.

These objects can range from the tangible to the intangible,

depending on the systems she has employed. Morgan's installations are caught up in the process of reordering memories: the memorabilia, records, documents and sensory materials associated with the performances and activities of the ritual are of great importance to the hidden narrative. The complexity in her work is thoroughly entangled in the layering of memory and forgetfulness, and its subsequent release through associations with the objects.

Morgan's fascination with the relationships between the objects she installs and the space itself indicates an increasing awareness of the gallery as a separate, closed-off area for contemplation, with its own referential time. In the process of separation, however, an artificiality enters as part of the refining and formalizing of the work. The whole space is perceived as a contained, single sculptural piece divided into parts linked by their placement. Ambiguities and raw edges tend to be minimized and the meaning changes as the formal qualities of the materials, their surfaces and the construction, take precedence over the ambivalent status of each element.

In an interview with Diana Nemiroff in 1985, Morgan describes this subtle change as an attempt to capture "the specialness of the moment." She suggests that in her past work she has dealt with the idea of making "artifacts," but now her concerns are more to do with the context and the interrelationships of the different elements within the work.<sup>1</sup> The piece she was describing was *Souvenir: A Recollection in Several Forms*, an installation first presented on the 31st floor of Park Place, an office building in downtown Vancouver. (It was later seen at the National Gallery of Canada in a 1986 group exhibition called *Songs of Experience*.)

Yet Morgan's formalist concerns persist. She is profoundly affected by the materials she uses. Everything from muslin, wires, latex, wax, photographs, tape recordings, broken glass and countless other bits and fragments from everyday existence are brought together. Imprinted with experience, each has its own history. There is no neutrality possible for either Morgan or the participant/viewer. Within each installation, the wide range of materials includes the visible and the invisible, the real and the abstract, sound, words and music, and silence. The materials with all their layers of experience are there to trigger associations through confrontation, reflection and remembering, and much as Morgan

<sup>1</sup> *Joey Morgan, Songs of Experience*, artist's statement in exhibition catalog, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2 May-1 September, 1986, 118.

orders and formalizes the process, the unique personal experiences evoked change the meanings for each individual. Morgan's incorporation of objects that touch on senses other than the visual and the tactile increase the associative impact, for among our earliest memories are those of smell and sound, and perfume and music are perhaps the most haunting.

The separation from original sources through distance and time parallels the processes of mind with which Morgan is ultimately concerned. With each memory, another layer is added, obscuring the clarity of the whole in the stratification of experience. With each spiralling back, the accumulation of blurred edges shifts memory to a selection of vivid events, feelings, happenings; the context is gone. Each of those memories is sharpened with the meaning of the lost whole, recorded in the senses as Morgan has taped her events, her narratives and her music. Clinging to what will disappear through memorabilia, preserving the past, the mind fights for self-definition. We are our past and with the destruction of each moment of present-become-past, reaffirmation is essential. Joey Morgan's work is not all in the mind, but the processes of consciousness, remembering, forgetting and understanding are her most important but elusive materials.