

**#55 November 2020 Cameraderie
Barbara Morgan (1900-1992)**



Barbara Morgan (nee Johnson) trained and practiced first as an artist, and later as a photographer. She is noted as a dance photographer—the focus herein—but her artistic work was prominent. Most of all, this unique woman was an extraordinarily whole and sensitive person, both artistically and in her relationships with other people; I have not seen this noted so strongly before about any photographer in this series. Consequently, I have quoted below extensively from the Wikipedia article to tell her story.

See the Wikipedia article on Morgan here, and read it for more detail:
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Morgan_\(photographer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Morgan_(photographer)).

The Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona holds a Barbara Morgan collection. Here is the webpage:

<https://kennerly.ccp.arizona.edu/artists/barbara-morgan>

But you can go directly to view 14 Morgan photos in this collection with this more specific link:

<http://ccp-emuseum.catnet.arizona.edu/view/objects/asimages/People@1600?t:state:flow=4e8a22b1-ed1a-4a20-abbf-1d34a319a67d>

Here are some quotes of interest from the Wikipedia article, indented below, interrupted by my one summary comment, not indented.

Barbara Morgan used a Speed Graphic [see the image of Morgan above] to photograph Martha Graham's choreography.

(Perhaps the most famous Speed Graphic user was New York City press photographer Arthur "Weegee" Fellig, who covered the city in the 1930s and 1940s [see #38, March 2019] [This quote is from the Wikipedia article on the Speed Graphic camera: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speed_Graphic .])

Her art training at UCLA, from 1919 to 1923, was based on Arthur Wesley Dow's principles of art "synthesis." Abstract design was taught parallel to figurative drawing and painting. Art history was taught with significant emphasis on the primitive, Asian, and European artistic traditions. While a student, Johnson [i.e., Morgan] read from the Chinese Six Canons of Painting, about "rhythmic vitality", or essence of life force, described as the artist's goal of expression. This concept related directly to her father's teaching that all things are made of "dancing atoms," and remained a guiding philosophy throughout her life as an artist.

Every summer ... [husband] Willard and Barbara loaded their car, with painting and photography equipment and headed for the desert. Barbara painted as much as possible for winter exhibits and helped Willard photograph for articles. Willard had two Model A Leicas, with which the couple photographed each other in cliff ruins, climbing Rainbow Bridge, in the Hopi mesas and canyons. The resulting photographs were among the first 35mm images to appear in American magazines illustrating Willard's articles.

Morgan's Southwest experiences were deeply influential to her. The stratification of Grand Canyon and Monument Valley attuned her to geologic time; Mesa Verde Cliff Dwellings to ancient human time. The Navajo and Pueblo Indian tribes through ritual dance displayed their "partnership in the cosmic process" and connected her to a universal primal. [This paragraph—and several others in the Wikipedia article—sounds like it was written by a friend, as it draws conclusions without evidence, even if its conclusions are accurate.]

Morgan was a prominent artist, both in practice, and in participation in artist's organizations. She gradually added photography, completing her skill set in the darkroom when she and her family moved to New York City in 1931.

While photographing a Sudan fertility icon and an Ivory Coast totemic mask, Barbara discovered that she could make these ritual sculptures seem either menacing or benign, simply by control of lighting. This experience of dramatization of controllable meanings by light manipulation became the prelude to her "psychological lighting" of dance for camera compositions.

In 1935 Barbara attended a performance of the young Martha Graham Dance Company. She was immediately struck with the historical and social importance of the emerging American Modern Dance movement.

Morgan conceived of her 1941 book project *Martha Graham: Sixteen Dances in Photographs*- the year she met Graham. From 1935 through the 1945 she photographed more than 40 established dancers and choreographers, and she described her process:

“To epitomize...a dance with camera, stage performances are inadequate, because in that situation one can only fortuitously record. For my interpretation it was necessary to redirect, relight, and photographically synthesize what I felt to be the core of the total dance.”

Morgan's life and art were both infused with this profound sense of energy and purposefulness. “I'm not just a ‘photographer’ or a ‘painter,’” she asserted, “but a visually aware human being searching out ways to communicate the intensities of life.” [italics mine] She possessed an innate capacity for close associations and lasting friendships with some of the most creative minds of her time, exchanging letters with Edward Weston [#1, Oct. 2012], Gordon Parks [#21, Aug. 2017], Margaret Mead, Buckminster Fuller, Joseph Campbell, William Carlos Williams, Dorothea Lange [#4, March 2013], Stuart Davis, Richard Neutra, and Charles Sheeler, among many others. She was a deep and trusted friend of Berenice Abbott, Wynn Bullock, Minor White [#20, July 2017], Ansel Adams [#12, March 2014], and Nancy and Beaumont Newhall [future article #56]. In 1952, Morgan founded *Aperture Magazine* with Adams, Lange, White and the Newhalls. Her work was included by Edward Steichen [#9, Sept. 2013] in MoMA's world-touring *The Family of Man* [#22, Sept. 2017], which she reviewed for an issue of *Aperture* devoted to the show. Morgan exhibited widely, including a second solo show at Museum of Modern Art, New York, and lectured nationally for nearly five decades. She was a guest instructor for the Ansel Adams Yosemite Workshops in 1970 and 1971. Her numerous articles in journals, her commentaries on art and photography, and her voluminous, lively correspondence have yet to be studied in depth. Morgan's archive can be found at the Center for Creative Photography located on the University of Arizona campus in Tucson, AZ. *“How wonderful to behold a person who has developed all of these capacities because of her practice of living as a whole being,”* [italics mine] Minor White wrote in the introduction to a 1964 issue of *Aperture* dedicated to her work.

She subsequently resumed work in drawing, watercolor, and painting as well, which continued through the 1970s.

Here are some of her most notable dance photographs.

Martha Graham, "Letter to the World" (Kick), 1940



This is one of the most iconic of all dance photographs. Note the space on the left side; aside from leaving room on that side, I wonder about the symbolism that Graham's heart is in the exact center of the frame. Notice Morgan's lighting—as mentioned in the notes, she did not shoot performances, but set up carefully controlled shots (it is very hard to get good shots from performances).

Martha Graham (Lamentation), 1935



This highly original dance shows the act of rending one's clothing (symbolically). Unlike the previous image, everything is off-center and unstable-in-motion, creating visual stress. Again, note the controlled lighting.

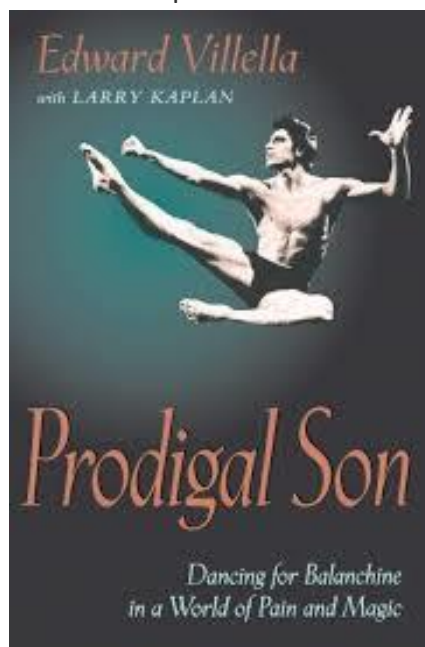
Martha Graham, "El Penitente" (Erick Hawkins), 1940



The low point of view emphasizes the height of the dancer's leap. This reminds me of the more recent magazine image of Edward Villella making his leap in front of a jet airplane and appearing to leap higher than the plane. Morgan set the style for shooting high-leapers that Philippe Halsman used for shooting Villella.

Philippe Halsman: Edward Villella, 1961
(see #40, May 2019)

Source unknown—I just put this in because I have seen Villella perform this dance.



Pure Energy and Neurotic Man, 1940



Morgan was a light painting pioneer. This 1940 image comes only five years after Man Ray originated artistic photographic light painting.