

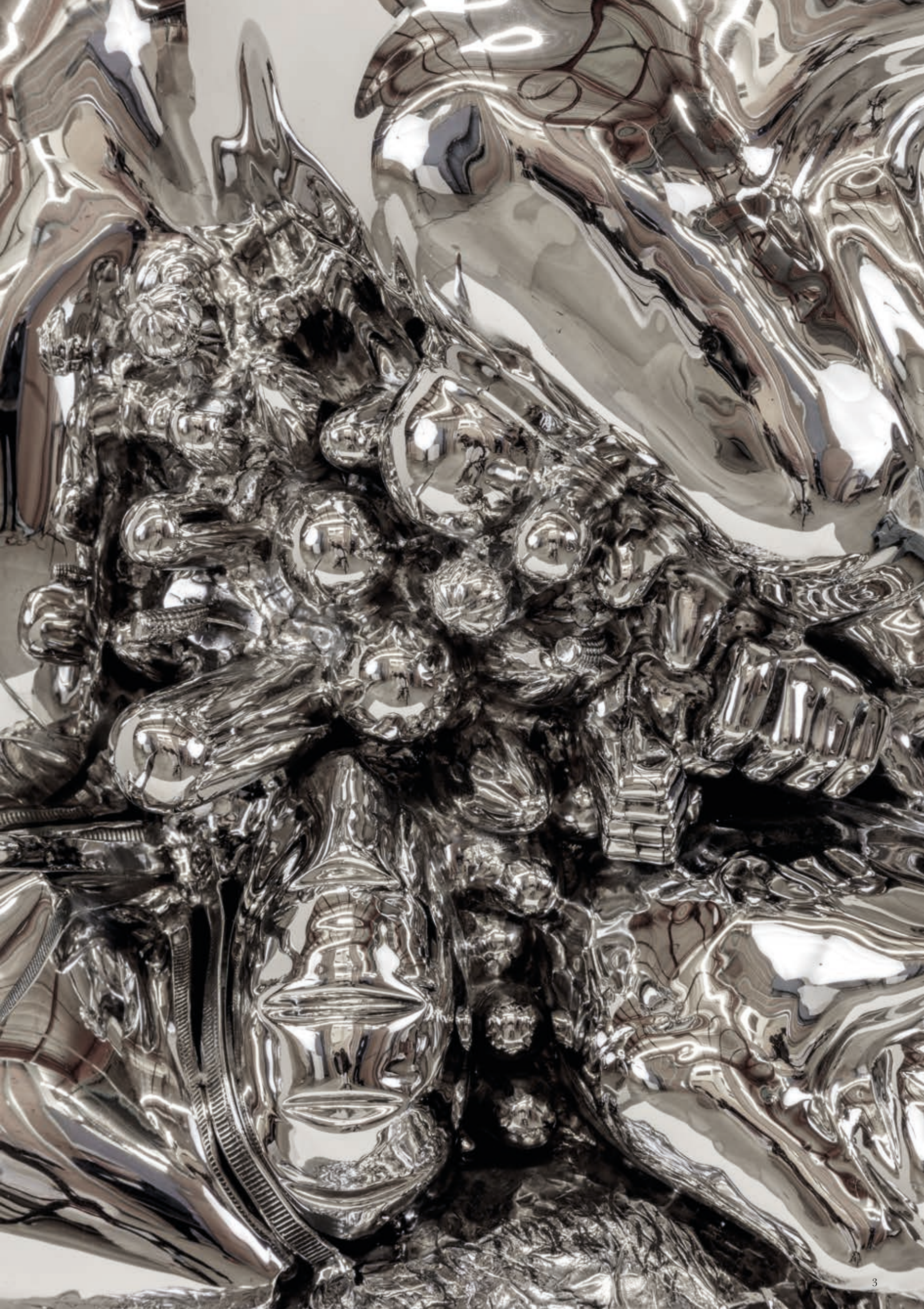
JOEL MORRISON



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MADE IN LA

Essay by Gay Gassmann



MADE IN LA:

The Art and Times of Joel Morrison

Joel Morrison at Reflex Gallery is not uniquely a sculpture exhibition. The body of works speak to the texture of everyday life, the meaning of industrial luxury and consumerism today with a snap shot of raw reality. Morrison works with a finely crafted visual vocabulary of found objects built up with layers of art historical and cultural references. The work is figurative and non-figurative, highly finished and handmade, high and low. All infused with his own brand of humor and irony.

Morrison is an artist's artist, an art historian's artist, a musician and something of a modern day alchemist. What does this all mean? He is an artist who looks back before looking forward. He works with Western art historical canons, like the classical bust, but infuses them with his own brand of iconography. His art is the "art of the slow burn," thoughtful and timely, moving in a different direction from zombie formalism, which is a type of generic abstraction, mostly works on canvas. His work requires the luxury of time. Morrison is a master of his own making, a master of technique. Music has always been an inspiration to his creative process. Growing up, music was the only creative outlet Morrison had. On limited funds, he strove to play and produce the best music he could. He always aimed for the highest quality and surrounded himself with talented people, coming up with solutions on the spot and learning exponentially. This process has all carried over and informed his practice as a fine artist, especially with the cast and polished stainless steel work. Speaking about how music had contributed to his work as an artist, Morrison has said that music fed "my natural gravitation towards creating subversively."

Pop or mainstream art was always seen as the enemy, the other...or at least the competition. The substance in the music I listened to, admired, and made was always undercutting the pop version...I think this has carried over to my fine art making. The subject matter and concepts are complex and sometimes subversive, but the quality and superficial elements are close to perfect..."

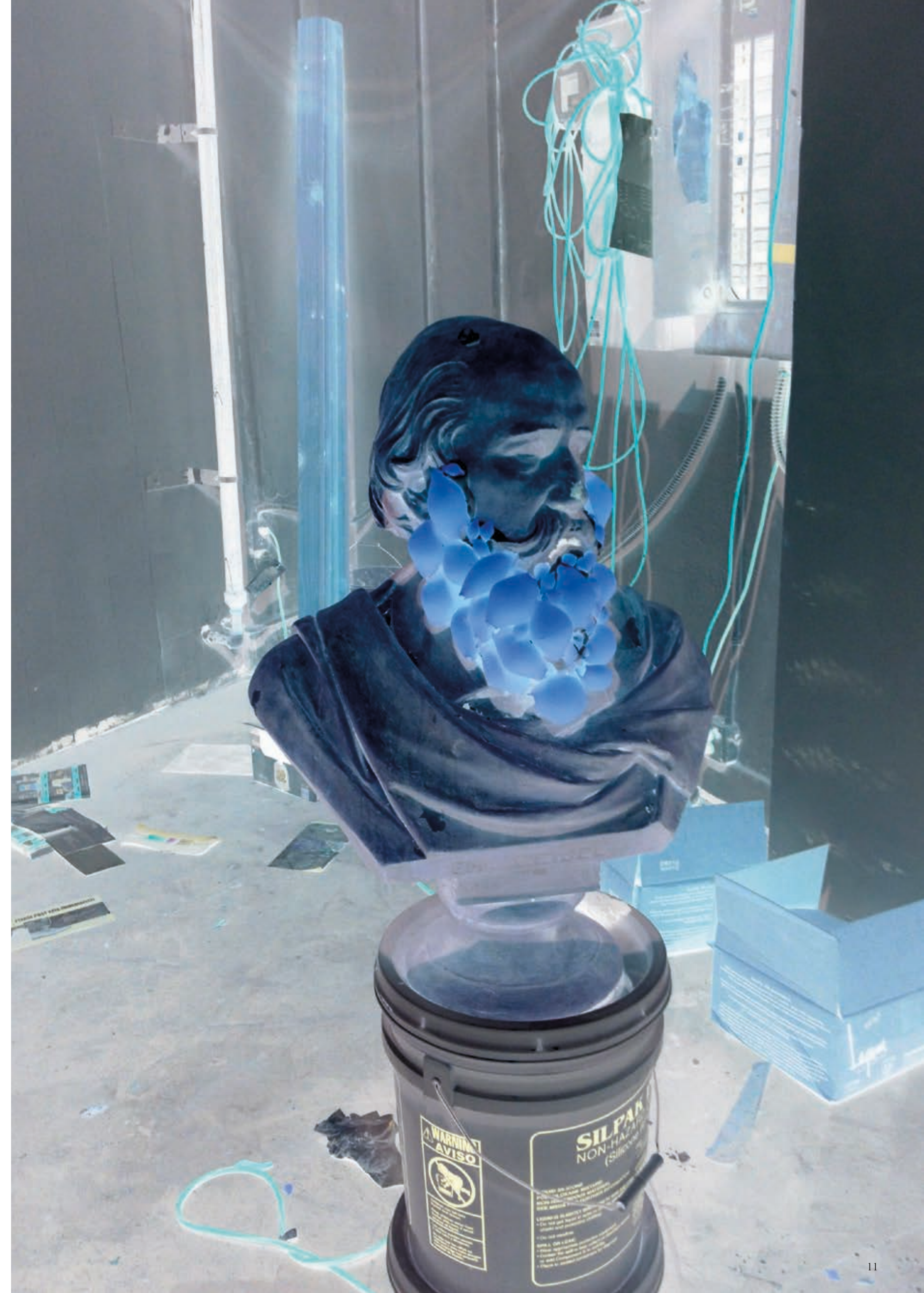
And the contemporary alchemist? Morrison combines various elements and throws them all together. A bear trap on a disco ball, an overturned shopping cart. The artist has described being in the studio like a performance piece.

"I thought that all artists needed to look like Hermann Nitsch after a mutilation performance when they left the studio at the end of the day."

Again, what does this all mean? "I was extremely romantic about the making process when I started...The physical interaction, the sprint to capture an idea before it fades away, or to maintain focus during a critical moment is still as active and ritualistic (or OCD) as it always was. My hands are still extremely active and present in the art I make...for better or worse."

American born Joel Morrison lives and works in Los Angeles. He received his Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and continued to receive a Masters in Fine Arts in Sculpture. His first solo exhibition was in Los Angeles in 2001 and the works currently on view range from 2008 to three new works created in 2017 and shown here for the first time. Morrison has always been interested in color and reflection. "In hindsight, these first works were trying to replicate reflection in the way I was using color...When I started to use reflection, the purpose was to push the boundaries of color and composition on surface. The stainless steel surface was a much more sophisticated colorist than I could ever be."

Morrison is well known for his highly finished sculptures with gleaming mirror like surfaces. The artist works closely with industrial craftsmen at a Los Angeles foundry. The slick, highly polished stainless steel surfaces are created with the same techniques used for car rims and other elements.

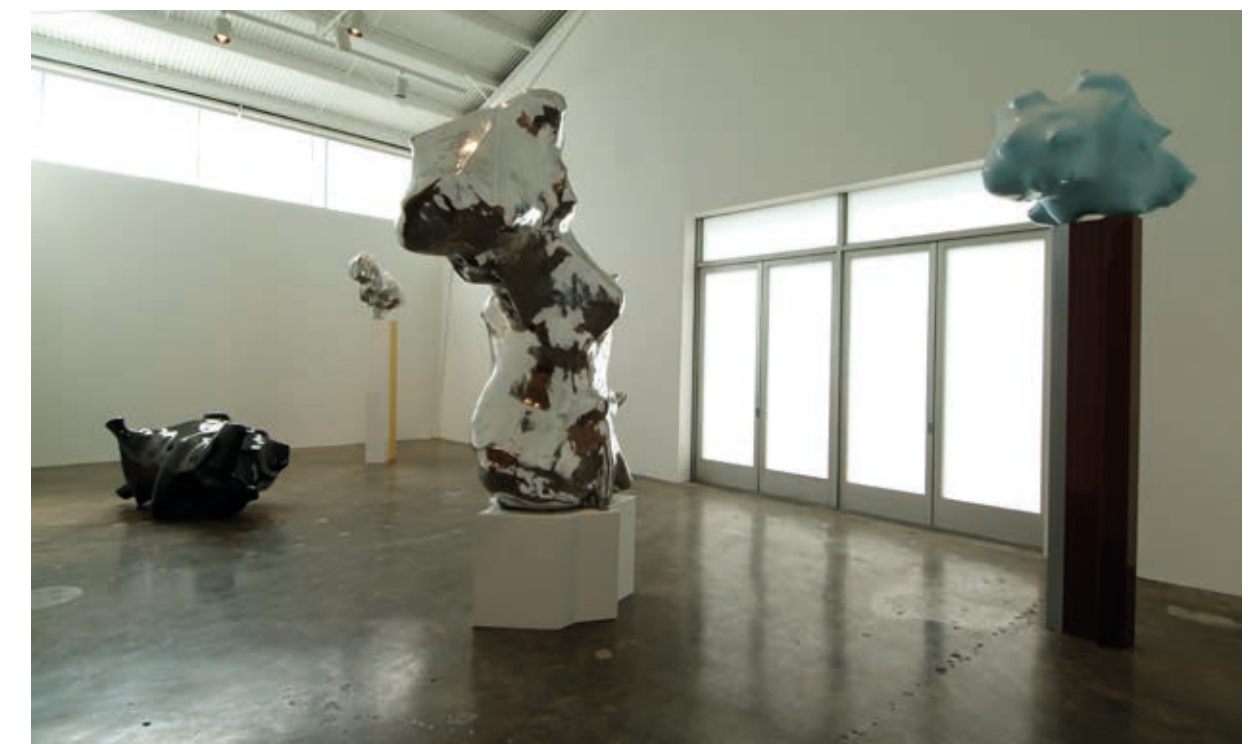




Morrison relies heavily on these specialized workers for their technical input and works side by side with them throughout the entire process. He gets his hands dirty. When speaking of his work in the studio, “It has evolved in many ways, but I still leave the studio exhausted and dirty after a good day.”

The artist’s rethinking of the industrial techniques used with cars and machinery has led to the creation of specific new tools to realize what he calls “street style high art.” The artist sought out working relationships with non-art world fabricators and went straight to the source, industrial technicians and street level polishers.

The three new works created for this exhibition are the result of this new way of working, in which he is both the creator and the producer of the work. He looks at everyday objects, a shopping cart, a pool cover, a meat grinder, in a precious way and his found pieces become encased and imprisoned. The sculptures strive and burst out of their confines, becoming objects in transition, transforming before our eyes.



As a point of departure, there is the object, combined with art historical references to movements like L.A.Finish Fetish, referencing the beautiful and pristine surfaces of artists working in the 1960's in LA like John McCracken and DeWain Valentine.

Other strong references are to Pop Art and the Light and Space movement, referring to West Coast minimalist art of the 1960's and 1970's. "Although I have done some experiments with minimal compositions, my mind connects with composing light and reflection... The light and space movement in general has an iconic aesthetic: controlling light and the infinite."

All of these inspirations are combined with specific Californian references like the tortilla maker and Ronald Reagan. "There is a California vibe to the objects that are far from conceptual or minimal. Collages of street objects.... references to quite specific Los Angeles subcultures. I think the iconography in these new works is Cali vibe for sure.... high art and street smart collages."

As with all of his works, the beauty and importance is in the details.

When looking at his 2017 creations, zoom in on the meticulous technique, leaps and bounds beyond his earlier works of the past 10 years. The new work "Monte Carlo" is made from a simple, traditional process called lost wax casting which dates from several thousands of years BC.

It is a method of metal casting which involves a mold making process and has been used by sculptors for centuries. Morrison's secret weapon is to have perfected this most ancient of techniques and pushed it to new heights of craftsmanship.

"Yogurtland Gasshuffer (Reagan)" is another look at a work from 2012, "Yogurtland" the name of a popular frozen yogurt by the pound chain in Los Angeles. This earlier work is a bust of Ronald Reagan combined with one of Margaret Thatcher. And of course, with Morrison additions of yogurt spoons, skulls and spikes.





A second version of this bust was made in 2016, followed by this latest one in 2017. One composition led to another to almost total abstraction. Morrison's newly developed technical perfection unleashed artistic confidence which opened the door to pure artistic control by the artist, unbound by technical constraints. The composition is built up from gas cans, skulls and cut crystal ashtrays. A free flowing composition. With "Weatherballoon trapped in Duchamp" there are all the pieces of the Morrison vocabulary. What is it?

A weather balloon trapped inside a bicycle rim referencing the revolutionary artist Marcel Duchamp and his readymades of the early 1900's. Duchamp's first readymade (found object) was a bicycle wheel which he installed in his studio in 1913. Morrison as art historian. Although a nod to Duchamp, the artist feels this work is more about appropriation and abstraction. And there is always the particular brand of Morrison humour, but with a critical eye.

"I want to make these new pieces in Amsterdam, not only technically the strongest work, but I want to force the work to show off its ability to compose light, space and color...an extremely important element to the sculpture is how the compositions in stainless steel use reflection: transcending narcissism and using reflection as abstract painting. A contemporary collage which would activate the space without overpowering it.... and giving the stainless steel works cool patterns reflected and distorted in the sculptures." Artist as creator.

Gay Gassmann is an academically trained art historian and her art world career spans over 30 years as an art consultant, writer, and editor. She graduated with a B.A. in art history from the American University of Paris and received a master's degree in the history of the decorative arts from the Cooper Hewitt/Parsons School of Design in New York City and spent two years in the Department of Decorative Arts at the J. Paul Getty Museum. Gassmann is a passionate advocate for contemporary art. As the contributing art editor to T: The New York Times Style Magazine she contributes to the monthly page, A Picture and A Poem, and to art driven features.

Plates





Weather Balloon Trapped in Duchamp, 2017











Monte Carlo, 2017













Yogurtland Gasshuffer (Reagan), 2017











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