
RED HOOK JOURNAL

Press Releases

Mum & Dad Show

Tom Morton

Dear Tirdad,

Some time ago (perhaps over a beer in London) we discussed the possibility of a project in which art writers would return to a piece of their published writing and correct the things about it that they now found unsatisfactory. This unrealized project has now emerged in somewhat different form in the new online journal you are editing, which, as I understand it, will include curators revisiting a prior exhibition. We've talked, I think, about my reluctance regarding the latter. Exhibitions to me are always, and perhaps inevitably, vaguely unsatisfactory on some level or another, but this is at least sometimes for reasons outside of my control: the vicissitudes of space, budget, shipping, the marketing strategy of a host institution, and all the other familiar factors. What interests me is the prospect of participants taking a look at something they are absolutely accountable for, and finding in it something they regret.

My response then, is this: to send you the textual material that accompanied a 2007 exhibition I curated at Cubitt Gallery, London, of work by my mother and father (they are, I should stress for readers new to this show, not at all well known). Of all the writing I've produced to accompany my shows, this is in some senses the most regrettable, both professionally and personally. I have had second thoughts about this material, and third and fourth thoughts, too, but then I was never quite sure of it in the first place, although I very much wanted to be so.

With my best wishes as always,

Tom

*

PRESS RELEASE

Mum & Dad Show

Rose Scott & Jack Morton

Friday 23 February to Wednesday 18 April 2007

Private View: Friday 23 February 2007, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Curated by Tom Morton

Cubitt Gallery is proud to present Mum & Dad Show, an exhibition of works by Rose Scott (b. East Bergholt, Suffolk, 1947) and Jack Morton (b. Boston, Lincolnshire, 1946). The artists studied together at Norwich School of Art and Goldsmiths' College, London, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, where they were taught by figures including Richard Hamilton, Edward Middleditch, Claes Oldenburg and Colin Self. Scott and Morton married in 1970, and divorced in 1985. They have exhibited widely in the Cambridge area, and have taught art and art history at a variety of secondary schools and sixth form colleges since concluding their studies. Featuring work from the early 1970s to the present in a variety of media, this is the artists' first joint exhibition since 1982. Mum & Dad Show is curated by Tom Morton, the artists' son.

The exhibition is accompanied by an interview with Tom Morton by The Wrong Gallery (Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni, Ali Subotnick).

Mum & Dad Show is supported by Arts Council England.

Mum & Dad Show: Interview with Tom Morton

WRONG GALLERY: What was your biggest fear as a child, and now?

TOM MORTON: For a while it was that my parents would split up, and then—in a ragged, staggered, confusing kind of way—they did. What happens when your biggest fear is fulfilled? It might be that it sets you free, but it might be that it upgrades your other, more coach-class fears, so that they make an unexpected left turn on your mental aeroplane. I've been trying to remember if I was scared of the Bomb (I am a child of the '80s), but I suspect I was actually quite fascinated by the idea that the world might suddenly blink out of existence. Nowadays, my biggest fear is of a terrible harm coming to somebody I love. The things that keep me awake at night should probably have a nobler, more global aspect, but it's only seers and madmen who seem able not to sweat the small stuff.

tmorton 4/12/11 3:21 PM

Comment [1]: On balance, I still like this title, which at least has the virtue of honest description. The logic ran as follows: this is what people would call the show anyway, so why attempt anything fancier?

tmorton 4/12/11 3:30 PM

Comment [2]: 'Elements within Cubitt Gallery are proud' may have been more accurate. In the manner of most press releases, this one does not mention institution indifference, or disgust, at a curator's programme.

tmorton 4/12/11 3:32 PM

Comment [3]: English 'kitchen sink' painter and Royal Academician (1923-1987), whose anyway modest and determinedly local fame has now mostly faded. My parents are not fans, although there's something in his work that I feel could be (perhaps cynically?) recovered / rehabilitated.

tmorton 4/12/11 3:21 PM

Comment [4]: Perhaps unsurprisingly, it still is.

WG: How old were you when you parents split up?

TM: They separated in 1982, so I would have been around 5 years old. I can't really remember being told that Dad was leaving, or a Kramer Vs. Kramer-type scene in which he said a holding-back-the-tears, "look after your little sister, son," good-bye, but I guess something like that must have taken place, if only because people tend to give those moments a filmic or literary shape. Maybe it's worth mentioning that Mum and Dad managed to be fairly friendly and cooperative throughout my childhood and teenage years, and even sometimes displayed genuine warmth toward one other. That stopped abruptly in 2002, when a property issue that had gone unresolved since the divorce reared its head, and they both reached for their lawyers. They *have* now spoken to each other, at least on the phone, to briefly discuss my younger sister's forthcoming wedding. I seem to recall that they also sent each other rather sweet notes of congratulation about halfway through the run of 'Mum and Dad Show,' although that may be my memory playing me comfortingly false.

WG: Why did they break up?

TM: The most honest answer, even after 27 years, is that **I still don't really know**. There are some details I could mention — something close to an affair (my Dad), the death of my paternal grandmother, a move to a new town, some simmering class resentments, some professional frustrations, too much drink, too many unfulfilled dreams, too little trust, some very vicious fighting—but there are relationships that survive all of those things, and a lot worse. Maybe there just wasn't enough love there—at least of the sort that allows you face down your fears, and those of others. I think Mum and Dad have both found that love now, whether with friends, family or new partners.

tmorton 4/12/11 3:34 PM

Comment [5]: I still don't really know.

WG: Do you remember the first time you heard or saw them fighting?

TM: I remember *their* having a huge row in the kitchen of our family house, with lots of shouting from Dad and lots of tears from Mum. After debating what to do about this, my sister Katie and I ran in and started to wallop Dad with our pillows, and were very quickly told *by both parents* to return to our bedrooms. I'm still not sure what to make of our attack. It had a kind of inbuilt reluctance and impotency that, I suppose, we must have calculated would shame both parties into stopping their row (they didn't). At any rate, it's the least fun pillow fight I've ever had.

WG: Were things better after they divorced? Did you get more presents?

TM: In that they stopped fighting, yes, but the whole thing took a toll on my self-confidence for a while—most kids from broken homes, I suspect, go through a period of blaming themselves for their parents' divorce. The split also transformed my moderately comfortable nuclear family into a moderately poor single-parent family. My school lunches were suddenly free, my clothes were suddenly my cousins' hand-me-downs, and without quite knowing why, I seemed to have slipped a rung or two down the class ladder. I did get more presents, though, if only because I now had two separate birthday celebrations, and two separate Christmases. Then, of course, there were the presents bought for me by my parents' new partners, which I received with either greedy delight, or a grudging "this still doesn't mean you're my new Dad."

WG: Will you get married?

TM: I hope so.

WG: Were you influenced by the artwork of your parents as a child, and now as a curator?

TM: My parents' work was the first art I ever encountered, and it very much shaped the art I made as a child. From a young age, I sat in on some of my Mum's life drawing sessions with a piece of charcoal and a Daler pad, and I also made a series of pen-and-ink drawings that employed the peculiar iconography in my Dad's '80s work (I think I was represented therein by a golden cat, or an owl). Similarly, their art books were pretty formative. Perhaps predictably, as a teenager I became interested in the only art they didn't seem to be that bothered about: an odd mixture of Chola bronzes, 18th-century history painting, Marvel comics and '90s Brit-Art. John Singleton Copley as rebellion! Now I'm almost 30, and their influence seems to have made a slight return. **The joke-y, reference-heavy part of my curatorial approach** might well have its roots in Dad's work, while the **chasing-the-numinous** part is probably connected to Mum's. Also, it might seem reductive or cod-psychoanalytical to say so, but it's hard to shake the feeling that my abiding fascination with time and change stems at least in part from their split. The first time I encountered the notion of an Einstein-Rosen bridge, I couldn't help but imagine accessing a parallel universe in which Mum and Dad had stayed together.

WG: In preparing Mum & Dad Show, how did you negotiate your relationships with them as parents, and as a curator?

TM: I tried hard to treat them as I would any other artist I work with, and they've tried hard to respond as artists rather than as parents, or as each other's ex-spouse. Inevitably there's been a bit of heavy emotional weather, but I've been surprised at how infrequent

tmorton 4/12/11 3:42 PM

Comment [6]: This now seems to be retreating from sight, or at least I hope the references now seem less blatantly in search of reward, and the jokes seem, if not more stupid, then at least less clever.

tmorton 4/12/11 3:47 PM

Comment [7]: I wouldn't put it in quite these words now, but this component of my approach seems destined to hang rather listlessly around.

it's been. Both of them understand the exhibition and its attempt to **rethink aspects of what curating might do**, and be. If they didn't, I couldn't have gone through with it, however much they might have agreed to it out of, say, parental loyalty, or a desire to exhibit in a (to their minds at least) trendy London gallery for the first time. Of course, these last two might still be motivating factors for them. Part of me hopes so—there are worse reasons for appearing in a show.

WG: Is this show a form of family therapy or group counseling?

TM: **It's probably too early to tell**. Of course, you could read the show as a slightly pathetic attempt to get my parents back together, symbolically at least, and to a degree you'd be right. What I'm really interested in is how that sticky, very personal stuff combines with the notion of the public gallery, and with the idea of curatorial responsibility, professional friendships, favours and cronyism, and the idea of where a curator comes from. Then there's the notion of transposing objects and images from the "wrong" art world to the "right" one, and of making a show that contradicts **everything that an ambitious young curator is expected to do**. Having said this, I absolutely stand by my parents' art as art, while admitting that I have only a millimetre or so's distance from it. That millimetre might not be enough, but then again, what is?

Tom Morton was interviewed by The Wrong Gallery: Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni, Ali Subotnick.

tmorton 4/12/11 3:45 PM

Comment [8]: I feel very ambivalent about this. The show sort of *was* trying to do this, in its own strange way, but it feels inelegant to say so.

tmorton 4/12/11 3:45 PM

Comment [9]: It is still too early to tell.

tmorton 4/12/11 4:01 PM

Comment [10]: This element of the show is the one I was most interested in, although it was (at least for me) disappointingly neglected in the reviews, a number of which accused me of some version or other of the 'curator as artist' schtick. This absolutely wasn't my interest. If anything, the show proved my inability to inherit the family business.

Tom Morton is a writer, contributing editor of *frieze* and curator at the Hayward Gallery, London.

He is also co-curator (with Lisa Lefeuve) of “British Art Show 7: In the Days of the Comet.”

Posted August 30, 2011. © Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

<http://www.bard.edu/ccs/redhook/mum-dad-show/>

CCS BARD