

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond

P E R S P E C T I V E S

on the Permanent Collection

**ROBERT
MORRIS**



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ROBERT MORRIS

April 23 – June 2, 1991

Known primarily as one of America's foremost minimalist sculptors, Robert Morris has explored a wide variety of expressive forms and materials throughout his distinguished career. His work of the last thirty years has included painting, sculpture, conceptual art, film, performance art, environmental art, process art, site-specific installations, and an extensive body of drawings. Three major earthworks (1971–78), a series of mirror installations (1973–78), and a body of wall sculpture made of industrial felt (1967–83) are just a few examples of this artist's prolific and varied *oeuvre*. This exhibition features three important works by Morris from the Virginia Museum's collection, and several works on loan from the collections of Sydney and Frances Lewis, Richmond; Best Products Co., Inc., Richmond; and the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. Representing each of the last three decades, these works are telling examples of Morris's complex creative endeavors.

Morris's passion for experimentation and his restless quest for new methods and materials have resulted in a career full of changes. Since abandoning painting to explore experimental film, dance, and theater in 1959, Morris has been in the forefront of numerous artistic movements, only to diverge abruptly into new areas of investigation. The seemingly mercurial evolution of his career has been further complicated by his simultaneous pursuit of multiple interests and directions. Large earth projects such as *Observatory* (1971), the works with mazes or mirrors, and the felt sculpture were all undertaken during the same period. Nonetheless, a prolonged investigation of perception and process in art has been consistent throughout Morris's multifaceted career. "His diverse explorations share an interest in how artists make and viewers perceive art and consequently in the theoretical and critical implications of these processes."¹ The level of intellectual challenge in Morris's art and his innovative approach to ordinary materials — for example the use of plain plywood, mirrors, felt, mounds of soil, or steam — result in enigmatic works that often confuse, contradict, and undermine conventional notions of what art is.

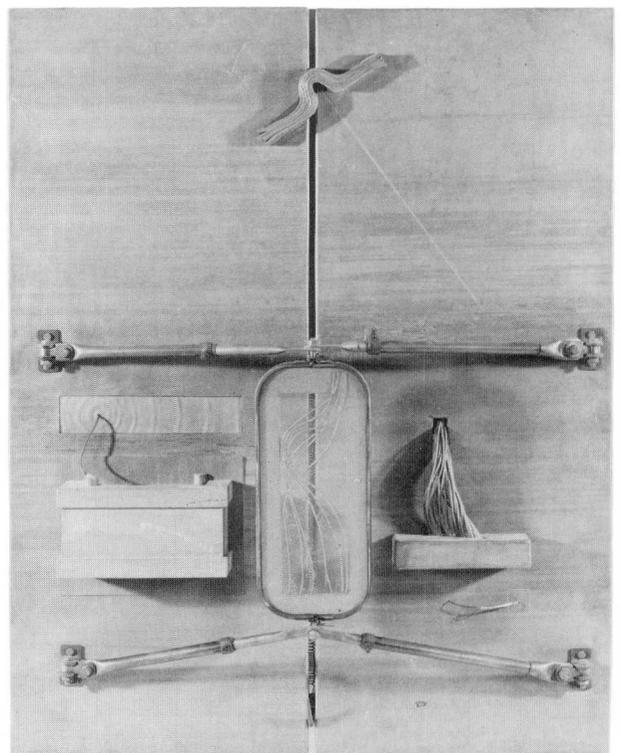
Cover: Table and Chair for Sydney Lewis, 1973
(Checklist no. 6. Photo by Ron Jennings)

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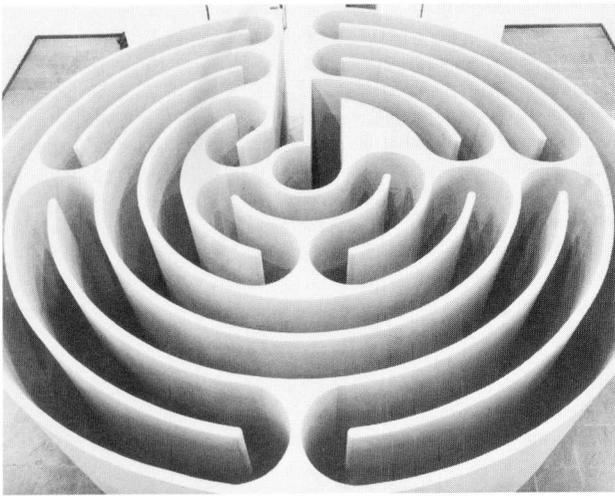
Accredited by the American Association of Museums.

Morris's fascination with issues of perception and process is evident in his first sculptures of the early 1960s. Influenced by Marcel Duchamp and Jasper Johns, these early neo-dada objects explored concepts of paradox, scale, the process of art-making, and the relationship between verbal and pictorial information. Created soon afterward, a group of lead wall-reliefs includes *Untitled* (1964, checklist no.1) — a conceptual work that prompts the viewer to respond to visually contradictory material. Objects resembling electrical conduits, springs, and wires are frozen in a non-functional situation, a contradiction to the volatile, invisible forces that the work ostensibly portrays.² Remote and cerebral, this work is typically perplexing — an example of the precedence of ideas over aesthetics to be found in Morris's work at that time.

In the mid 1960s Morris created his first earthwork and produced his first minimal sculpture. An early proponent of minimalism, Morris was instrumental in establishing the movement through a series of influential articles published in *Artforum* during 1966. Morris's minimalist works were spare, abstract forms — cubes, L-beams, or columns fabricated with commonplace industrial materials such as plywood, plexiglass, or wire mesh. Although the minimal works are radically different from Morris's previous works and appear disarmingly simple and commonplace, their underlying



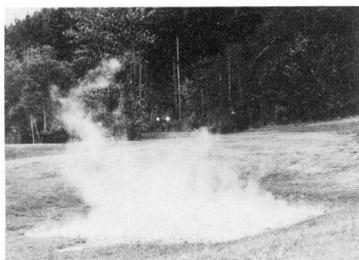
Untitled, 1964 (Checklist no. 1)



Labyrinth, 1974 (Plywood, masonite, oil, 30 ft. diameter x 8 ft. high. Collection of Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, Varese, Italy. Photo courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery)

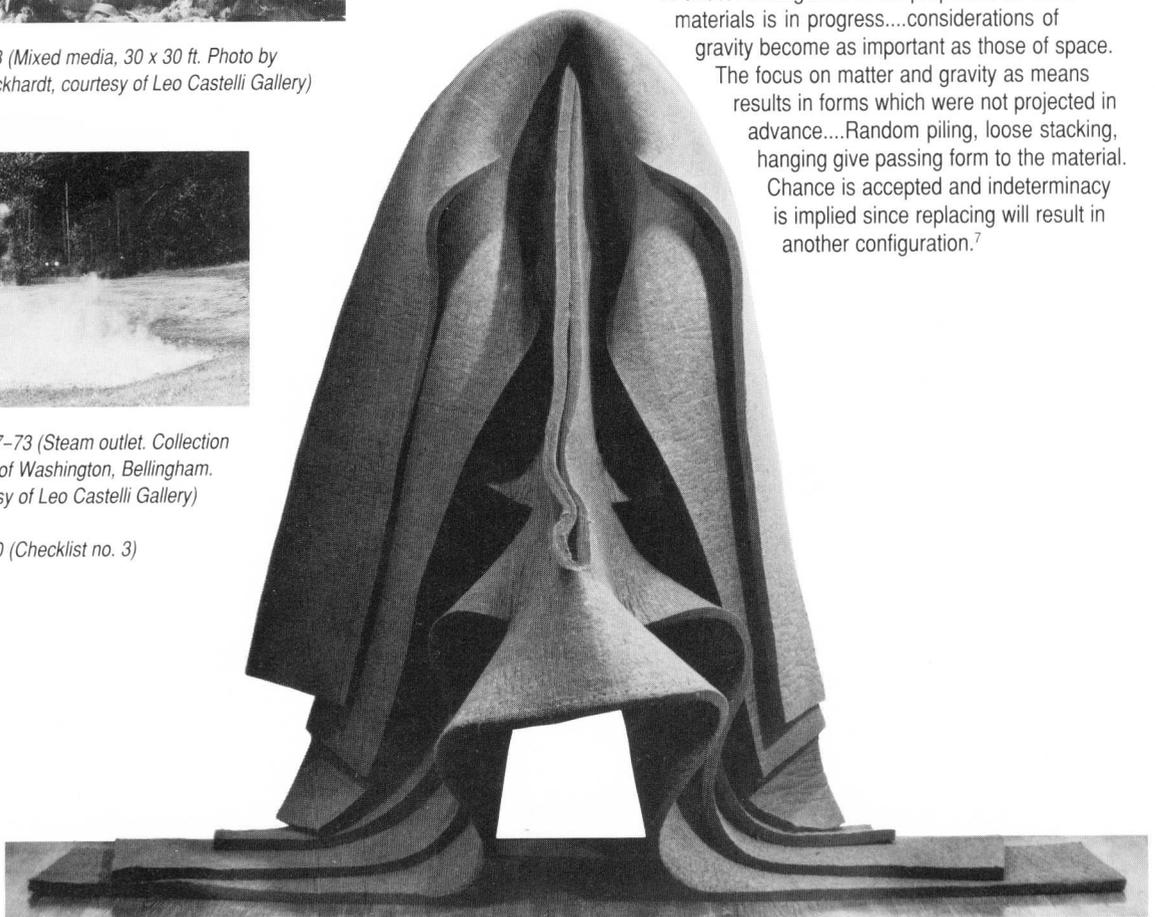


Untitled, 1968 (Mixed media, 30 x 30 ft. Photo by Rudolph Burckhardt, courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery)



Untitled, 1967-73 (Steam outlet. Collection of University of Washington, Bellingham. Photo courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery)

Untitled, 1970 (Checklist no. 3)



acting out various tasks around a *tableau vivant* in a parody of Manet's *Olympia*; and *A Project Altered Daily* (1969), an installation of soil and various materials, incorporated Morris's daily performance of altering some aspect of the work throughout the duration of the exhibition. The performance piece *Pace and Progress* (1969) encapsulated in many ways Morris's belief that the idea of a work—its origin in the artist's mind—is of foremost importance, and the form is a reflection of the process by which it is made.⁶ In *Pace and Progress*, which consisted of Morris riding horses back and forth over the same path until he was exhausted, the idea of the performance was paramount, with the form of the piece taking shape during the process of the performance.

Morris's subsequent works with mazes and mirrors in the 1970s emphasized the active physical participation of the viewer. In these works, the viewer experiences a sense of displacement in order to achieve perceptual and cognitive awareness. While the mirror works distort the viewer's sense of space with multiple reflections, works such as *Labyrinth* (1974), the large circular maze, disorient the viewer's sense of time, scale, and direction. These works address one of Morris's principal preoccupations: how we perceive reality and what its nature is, if what we know of it is based on variable perceptions.

While continuing to create minimal and performance pieces during the late 1960s, Morris embarked on a radical new direction in his work: felt sculpture. In contrast to the pure geometry of his minimalist works, Morris's felt sculpture was sensual and organic. Made of cut pieces of industrial felt, these works were either laid out in heaps on the floor, or arranged and draped off the wall. Such ordinary material produced an impressive range of sculptural forms; some were elegant in their simplicity, such as *Untitled* of 1979 (checklist no. 7); others were ponderous, even menacing, such as *Untitled* of 1970 (checklist no. 3). All were striking results of an unusual approach to form and materials.

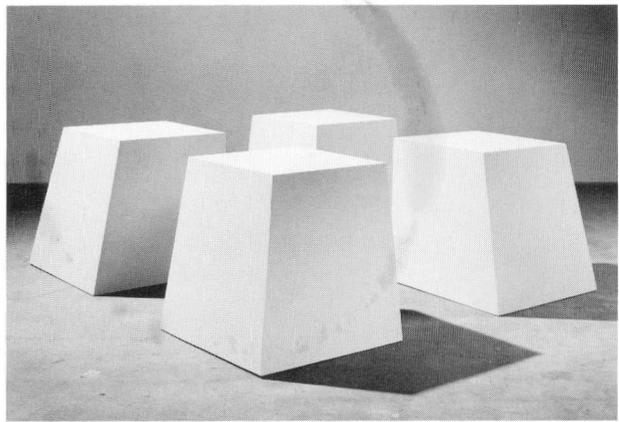
The form of Morris's felt sculpture depends largely on the nature of the material and, more importantly, its process of arrangement. In commenting on the felt works Morris wrote:

A direct investigation of the properties of these materials is in progress....considerations of gravity become as important as those of space. The focus on matter and gravity as means results in forms which were not projected in advance....Random piling, loose stacking, hanging give passing form to the material. Chance is accepted and indeterminacy is implied since replacing will result in another configuration.⁷

concepts are highly theoretical and relate to ideas about perception found in Gestalt psychology.³ Emphasizing form over content, the minimalist works such as *Battered Cubes* (1965–88, checklist no. 2) are self-referential, intended to be perceived “as is,” without extraneous meaning or content. “A shape is neither reduced nor added, but offered as itself. Volume, mass, and weight are seen because they are taken out of context. Simple forms are immediately apprehended.”⁴ Two processes were of critical importance in the minimal works: the process of arranging the objects, and the process of the viewer’s involvement in perceiving the pieces—arriving at a gestalt, or an immediate impression.

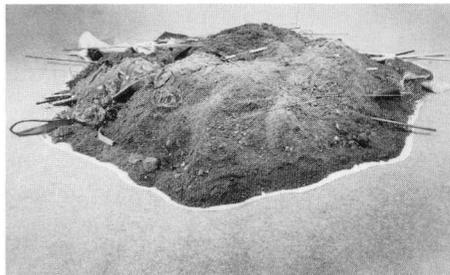
Table and Chair (1973, checklist no. 6), specially designed and made for Sydney Lewis and now in the Virginia Museum collection, relates to both Morris’s minimal and performance works. Like the minimal art, the table and chair are stark and simple, but active physical participation is implied to complete the work. The accompanying drawing instructs Mr. Lewis to sit at the table, write in a notebook, and have the table polished only in the area on which his arms rest. This performance becomes a part of the creation of the work, and the resulting process—the polishing and oxidation of the table—is part of the ongoing evolution of the piece.

Performance—and its correlation to Morris’s plastic arts—is an important, though lesser known, aspect of his work. As *Table and Chair* demonstrates, Morris’s preoccupation with process in art-making was closely intertwined with performance. This connection initially stemmed from Jackson Pollock’s emphasis on gesture and process in his “action paintings.” Following Pollock’s technique, Morris’s early abstract expressionist paintings were created on the floor; he used hands and arms to swirl on paint in works that were as much choreographic as painterly.⁵ This interrelationship between performance, process, and the visual arts continued in many of Morris’s works during the following decades. One of his first minimal sculptures, *Column* (1961), was initially created for a performance; *Site* (1965), a performance piece with Carolee Schneemann, involved

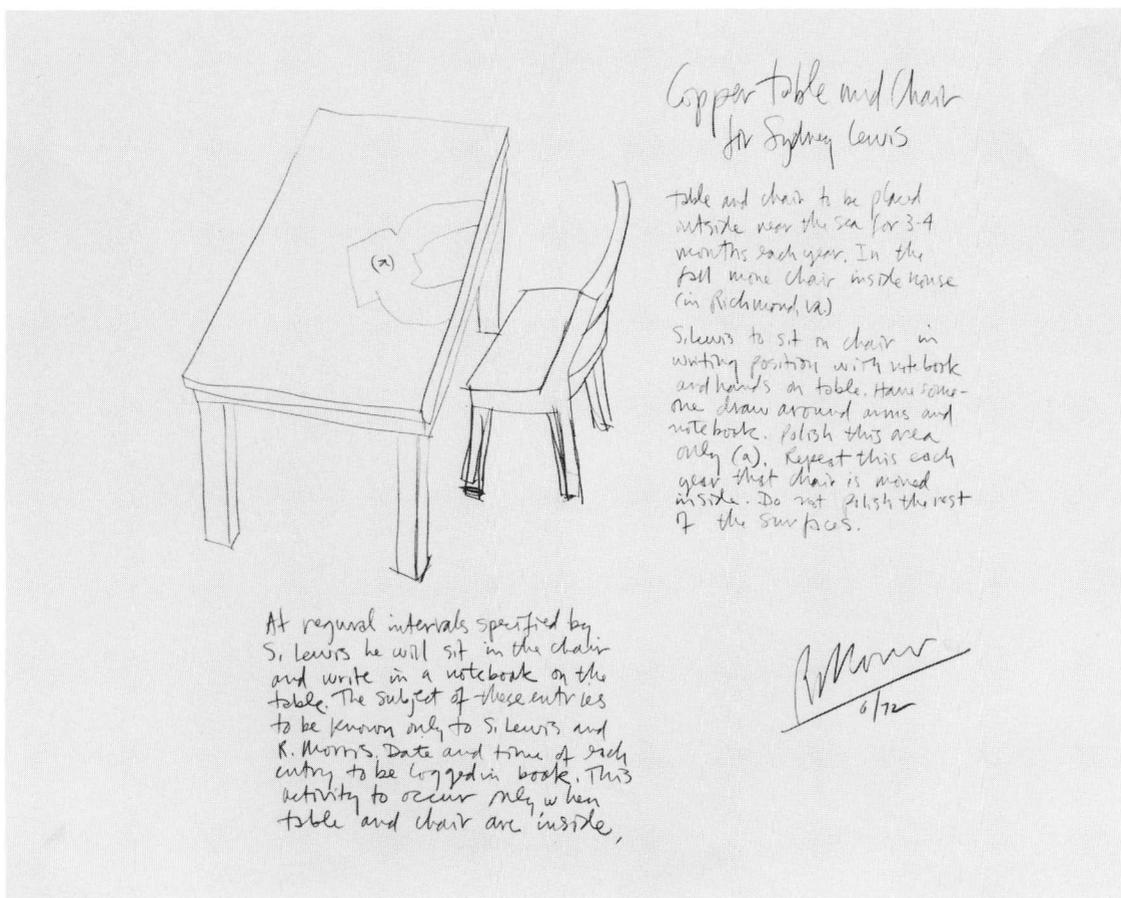


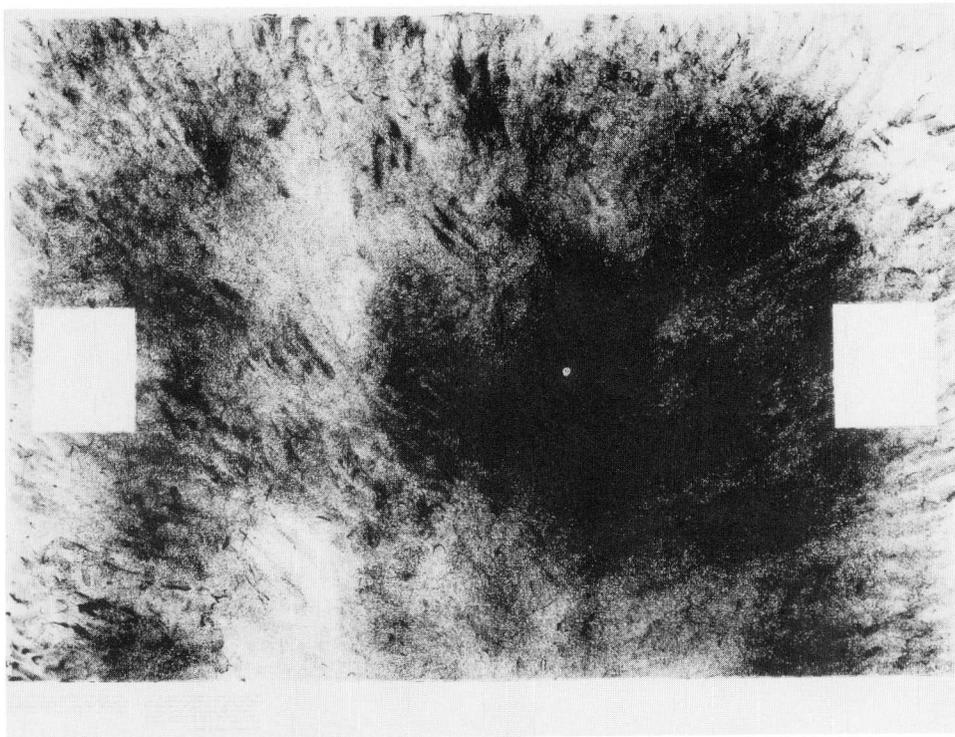
Battered Cubes, 1965–88 (Checklist no. 2. Photo by Douglas M. Parker, courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery)

Earthwork, 1968 (Mixed media. Photo by Walter Russell, courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery)



Copper Table and Chair for Sydney Lewis, 1972 (Checklist no. 4)





Blind Time III A, 1985 (Checklist no. 11. Photo by Ron Jennings)

Similar emphasis on process and the use of "formless" materials (for example, rope, rubber, felt) by other artists, such as Richard Serra, Alan Saret, and Eva Hesse, coalesced into a new movement that Morris coined and championed as "Anti-Form." In addition to the large body of felt works (forty-seven were made between 1970–80), Morris's anti-form works included numerous scatter pieces (floor pieces strewn with thread and miscellaneous debris, such as *Untitled*, 1968), and ephemeral works made with soil or steam, such as *Untitled* (1967–73).

The *Blind Time* drawings (1985) are another extension of Morris's interest in process. He created them blindfolded. Two similar series preceded the drawings, one in 1973 and another in 1976, for which he engaged a blind woman. All these drawings explore the process of creating art under conditions of sensory deprivation. In referring to the drawings of the 1970s Morris stated:

I was interested in making drawings in a different way because my drawings until that time had been primarily diagrams for sculptures. I developed a method of almost working with my eyes closed in which I set myself certain tasks about pressure, distance, location, about geometric figure. I used both hands in graphite. I didn't use a tool, and I also tried to estimate the time. This information was entered on the drawings — the task, the time, and the estimated error.⁸

Morris continued this process in the *Blind Time III* drawings of 1985, including paragraphs of text that involved discussions of the philosophy of physics, and how current theories of physics relate to and affect perception and our notions of time and reality. The text in *Blind Time III A* (checklist no. 11) comments on the ultimate incomprehensibility of the universe, while *Blind Time III B* (checklist no. 12) makes cryptic reference to impending cataclysm. Both drawings relate to themes Morris developed in the 1980s which signaled another major change in the direction of his work.

By the beginning of the 1980s, Morris's investigation of perception and process gave way to an overriding concern with moral and political issues, in particular a brooding preoccupation with the threat of nuclear destruction. This dramatic shift to content and figuration first surfaced in a 1980 installation of cenotaphs titled *Preludes for A.B.*, followed in 1981 by a major installation, *Jornado del Muerto (The Natural History of Los Alamos)*. While his works of the 1980s may have returned to more conventional explorations of theme and content, Morris's innovative approach to form continued with new combinations of materials. In 1981–82 Morris created a series of cast Hydrocal reliefs titled *Hypnerotomachia*, in which he used this commercial brand of white plaster to convey the horror of human devastation (checklist no. 8). These harrowing reliefs were followed by the monumental, multi-panel *Firestorm* and *Psychomachia* drawings of 1982 (checklist no. 9), whose themes are based on the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima. The *Burning Planet Series* of the mid 1980s marked the culmination of this direction in Morris's work. Massive in scale, these works combine architecture, painting, and sculpture into awesome evocations of impending apocalypse.

The Astronomer (Burning Planet Series) of 1984 (checklist no. 10), an extraordinary monumental painting made of steel, oil on canvas, and cast Hydrocal, speaks eloquently to the concerns of our time — the threat of nuclear devastation or ecological ruin — and the timeless issue of human evil and destruction. Elaborate frames of cast plaster depict a gruesome explosion of human body parts; skulls, fetuses, organs, and clenched fists swirl out from the vortex of a disintegrating universe. Dynamic and forceful in impact, the painting confronts us with the imminent possibility of total annihilation and delivers a searing indictment of the abuse of power and technology.

Morris's creative endeavors over the last thirty years attest to an extremely versatile and inquiring mind. While the lack of cohesion in the style or the direction of his work has drawn considerable criticism, Morris's thought-provoking explorations of process, material, and theme have resulted in significant contributions to the art of our time.

Margo A. Crutchfield
ASSISTANT CURATOR
DEPARTMENT OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY ART

NOTES

1. Marti Mayo, *Robert Morris: Selected Works 1970-1980* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1981), 6.

2. Marcia Tucker, *Robert Morris* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1979), 17.

3. Marti Mayo, 6. Gestalt psychology posited that qualities of shape are the primary data of perception. According to Gestalt principles, we are aware of a whole form before becoming aware of its parts. Minimal sculptures were simple indivisible shapes that could be perceived immediately in their entirety.

4. Marcia Tucker, 10.

5. Terrie Sultan, *Robert Morris* (Washington, D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990), 12.

6. Marti Mayo, 6.

7. Robert Morris, "Anti-Form," *Artforum* (April 1968): 33.

8. Jonathan Fineberg, "Looking Back: An Interview," *Arts Magazine* 55 (Sept. 1980): 114.

FOR FURTHER READING

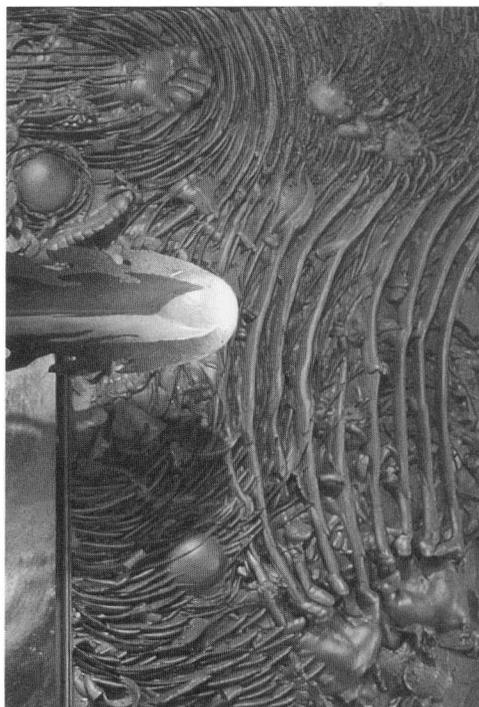
Robert Morris's work has been shown nationally and internationally in more than seventy-five one-person exhibitions and two hundred group exhibitions since 1957. A major retrospective of Morris's art is being organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, for 1992. A selection of exhibition catalogues and articles about his work, and a select bibliography and chronology of exhibitions are available in the Reading Room of the Library in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts during the exhibition dates. The Library is open to the public Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM.

LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

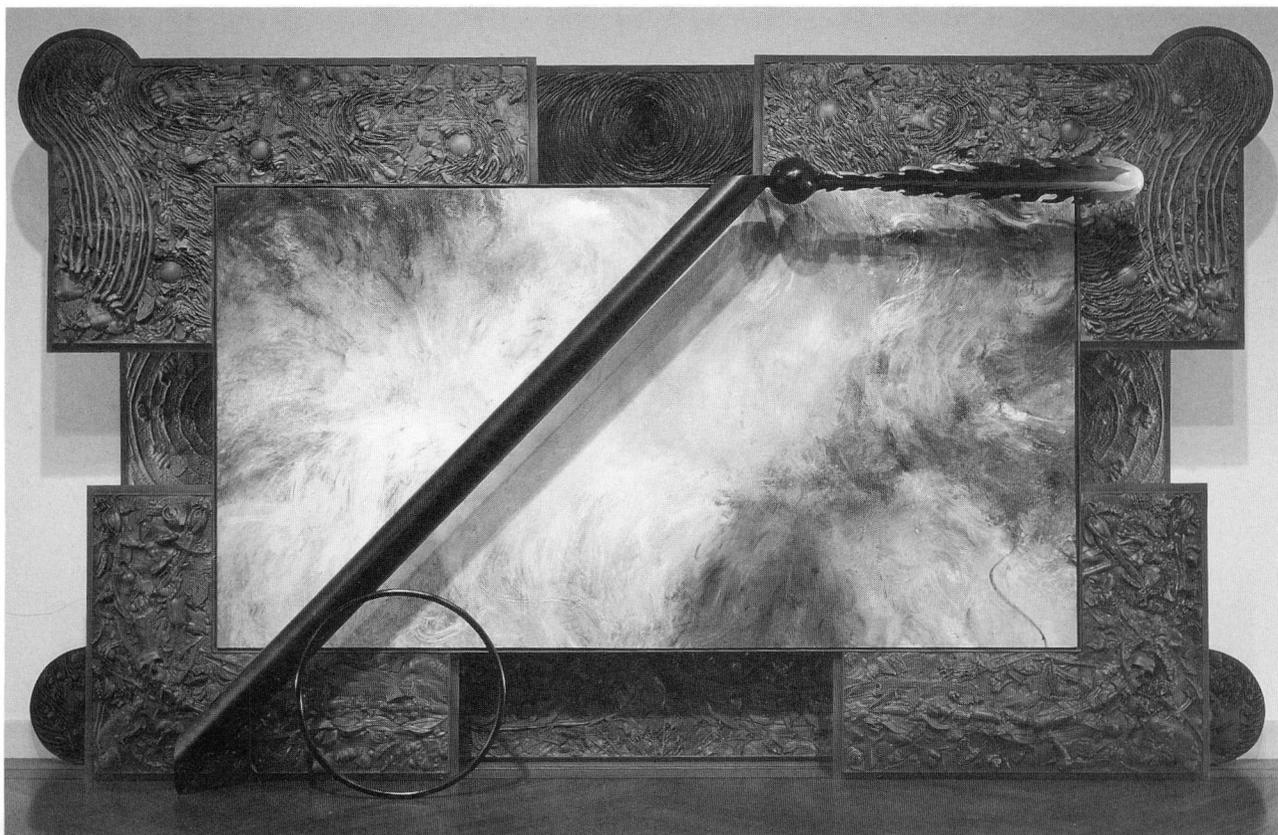
Best Products Co., Inc., Richmond

Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Sydney and Frances Lewis, Richmond



The Astronomer (Burning Planet Series), 1984 (Checklist no. 10, detail.)



The Astronomer (Burning Planet Series), 1984 (Checklist no. 10. Photo by Ron Jennings)

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Measurements are given in centimeters, then inches; height precedes width and depth.

- 1. UNTITLED, 1964**
Lead, glass, wire, mirror, wood
115.5 x 92.7 (45 1/2 x 36 1/2)
Collection of Sydney and Frances Lewis
- 2. BATTERED CUBES, 1965-88**
Painted steel
Four parts: 91 x 91 x 91 (36 x 36 x 36), each
Courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery
- 3. UNTITLED, 1970**
Felt
182.8 x 365.7 (72 x 144)
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Purchase, Sydney and Frances Lewis
Contemporary Art Fund, 72.47
- 4. COPPER TABLE and CHAIR for SYDNEY LEWIS, 1972**
Ink on paper
55.8 x 76.2 (22 x 30)
Collection of Sydney and Frances Lewis
- 5. COPPER TABLE and CHAIR for SYDNEY LEWIS, 1972**
Graphite on paper
55.8 x 66 (22 x 26)
Collection of Sydney and Frances Lewis
- 6. TABLE and CHAIR for SYDNEY LEWIS, 1973**
Copper
Table: 91.4 x 121.9 x 83.82 (36 x 48 x 33)
Chair: 91.4 x 47.6 x 40.6 (36 x 18 3/4 x 16)
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Sydney and Frances Lewis,
85.425.1/2
- 7. UNTITLED, 1979**
Felt
243.8 x 396.2 (96 x 156)
Collection of Best Products Co., Inc.
- 8. UNTITLED (HYPNEROTOMACHIA SERIES), 1982**
Plaster with metal frame
Three panels: 149.8 x 282 (59 x 111), overall
Courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery
- 9. UNTITLED, 1982**
Charcoal, graphite, black pigment on paper
Six panels: 254 x 289.5 (100 x 114), overall
Courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery
- 10. THE ASTRONOMER (BURNING PLANET SERIES), 1984**
Painted cast Hydrocal, oil on canvas, steel
290.8 x 482.6 x 78.74 (114 1/2 x 190 x 31)
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Purchase, The Adolph D. and Wilkins C.
Williams Fund, 86.14a/q
- 11. BLIND TIME III A, 1985**
Charcoal on paper
91.4 x 119.3 (36 x 47)
Collection of Best Products Co., Inc.
- 12. BLIND TIME III B, 1985**
Charcoal on paper
91.4 x 119.3 (36 x 47)
Collection of Best Products Co., Inc.

BIOGRAPHY

Born 1931, Kansas City, Missouri

Studied art, philosophy, and engineering at the University of Kansas and Kansas City Art Institute, 1948-50; California School of Fine Arts, San Francisco, 1951; Reed College, Portland, Oregon, 1953-55; M.A., Art History, Hunter College, New York, 1961-62

Lives in New York City

MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Akron Art Institute
Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio
Art Institute of Chicago
Australian National Gallery, Canberra
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Dallas Museum of Fine Arts
Detroit Institute of Arts
Foundation Juan March, Madrid
Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia
Larry Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut
Milwaukee Art Center
Moderna Museet, Stockholm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
The New Museum, New York
Pasadena Art Museum, California
Rijksmuseum, Kroller-Muller, Otherlo, Netherlands
The Tate Gallery, London
Teheran Museum of Contemporary Art
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut
Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



Untitled (Hypnerotomachia Series), 1982 (Checklist no. 8. Photo by Jon Abbott, courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The efforts of many individuals made this exhibition possible, but I would like to thank in particular Sydney and Frances Lewis; Jay Barrows and Steve Holcomb of Best Products; and Susan Brundage and Mary Joe Marks of Leo Castelli Gallery for their generosity in lending to the exhibition; and Olivia D'Albis for providing photographs. As always, I am especially grateful to the many members of the Virginia Museum staff for their invaluable dedication and expertise. —M.C.