

# HAUNCH OF VENISON LONDON

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## POLLY MORGAN PSYCHOPOMPS

21 July – 25 September 2010





'Psychopomps', Polly Morgan's first solo exhibition with Haunch of Venison, consists of four suspended taxidermy sculptures, each poised between metamorphosis and flight. Named Psychopomps after the mythical creatures that conduct souls into the after-life, their historical representation includes Hermes and Charon from Greek mythology, the Valkyries from Norse myth, Anubis the jackal-headed Egyptian God, and in various cultures, horses, bees, dogs and shamans.

In Morgan's vision they are represented as a fabulous troupe made up of a flying machine, two winged cornucopias and a cardinal held within a ribcage carried by balloons. The flying machine, called *Systemic Inflammation*, offers a fantastical inversion of the life of a caged bird. Rather than imprisoned, these flame-coloured finches fly above their cage, carrying it off as if to another world.

*Black Fever* and *Blue Fever* are abstracted composites, one made from the wings of a crow and the other from those of a pigeon. Planted one on top of the other, the wings unfurl to display, as if this were a flick-book or an Edward Muybridge photo series, the full range of the bird's motion in flight. Known for presenting animals outside their natural habitats – rats in champagne glasses, chicks harnessed by balloons or bursting from the seams of coffins or the earpieces of a telephone receiver – Morgan has here taken this subversion a stage further: no longer are the animals' bodies recognisable from life; these reassembled creatures distort the natural world, as if dredged from a dream. Indeed, the abundance of wings adds a surreal psychological dimension to these elevated spectres, which fan their plume but remain disembodied and faceless.

The final work is *Atrial Flutter* in which Morgan has introduced a human body part

for the first time. Placed within this ribcage is a bright red cardinal where the heart might have been. Both ribcage and bird are suspended by a cluster of balloons, like so many brightly coloured lungs.

These Psychopomps are also linked by their titles, each of which references a disease, yet this taxonomy of illness is contradicted by the splendid brilliance of the birds' appearance. Inert but seemingly poised to journey somewhere far away Morgan's Psychopomps are hybrids that evoke on the one hand, the metaphoric nature of these soul conductors, and on the other, the traditions of taxidermy and its attempt to revive the bodies of dead animals.

Polly Morgan was born in England in 1980 and lives and works in London. She had an unconventional upbringing, raised in the country alongside goats, llamas, hens, hamsters and every other popular domesticated animal, but only discovered taxidermy some years after coming to live in London at 18. In 2005 she studied the art under George Jamieson and has subsequently forged a personal practice founded on its technical conventions. Solo exhibitions include 'The Exquisite Corpse: A Reconstruction Project', at 1 Marylebone Road, London, 2007 and 'Still Life After Death' at Kristy Stubbs Gallery, Dallas, 2007. Work features in the Thomas Olbricht Collection, the Anita Zabudowicz Collection and the David Roberts Art Foundation. Group exhibitions include 'Wonderland', Assab One, Milan, 2010, 'The Age of the Marvellous', All Visual Arts, London, 2009, 'Mythologies', Haunch of Venison, London, and 'You Dig the Tunnel, I'll Hide the Soil', White Cube, London, 2008.

## INTRODUCTION: DEATH AS PSYCHOPOMPS

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Tom Hunt

The title of this exhibition comes from Polly Morgan's latest series of works, a group of four hanging mobile sculptures, each of which focuses on the taxidermied bodies of dead birds set within various playful and macabre constructions.

Psychopomps is a Greek word that refers to the guides who lead souls from death to the after-life. In mythology, they include the wing-footed messenger God Hermes and Charon who guards the gates of the Underworld. In Morgan's works, they are played by canaries, finches, crows, pigeons and cardinals, themselves already dead, but suspended as if mid-flight.

The move towards airborne sculpture and Greek mythology, away from glass domed Victoriana, represents a significant shift in attitude as well as aesthetic. The ornamental forms and gothic iconography of Morgan's earlier plinth-based work were founded on upturning prevailing attitudes towards a fusty and even morally dubious medium. The uncanny, doll's house charm of rats in champagne glasses and robins lying on miniature books has been replaced by something more physically and conceptually expansive, by monumental structures and a human scale.

Aside from their role as psychopomps, these works are linked by their titles, each of which reference and puns on diseases common to humans and birds: *Atrial Flutter*, *Systemic Inflammation*, *Blue Fever* and *Black Fever*. This morbid taxonomy introduces an interesting, unremarked aspect of Morgan's work: the near total absence of the human form. We look on limbs, eyes, mouths, limp, dead bodies, sometimes we perceive cruelty or tenderness, vulnerability and exposure, but in each case the part and the effect belongs to a creature unlike us. For an artist so evidently fascinated by death – which is a humanistic idea as well as a technical term

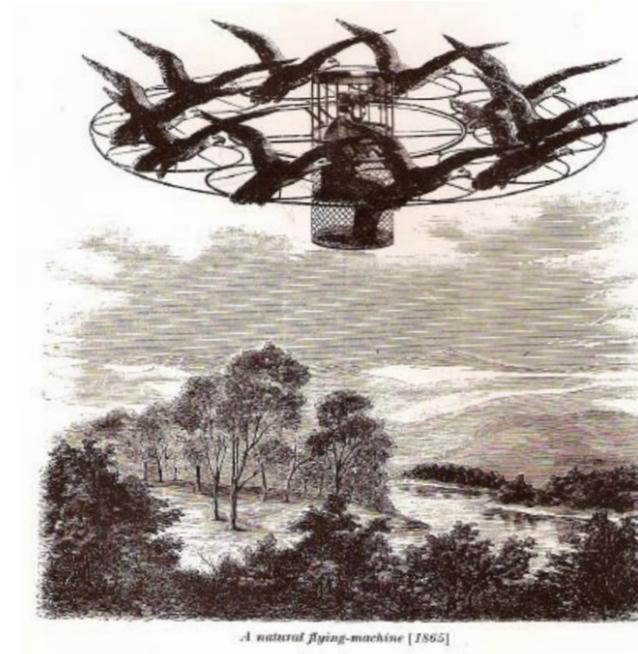
– our exclusion is strange, almost phobic, suggesting perhaps a desire to locate oneself outside one's own body.

In *Atrial Flutter* Morgan introduces a human body part for the first time. It is a ribcage, mere carrion, and has been cast rather than stitched together from death. Inside this holey white chamber and placed where the heart might have been, is a small red cardinal, affecting to be a palpitating heart.

*Systemic Inflammation* shows a burnt flying machine borne in the air by a troupe of finches and canaries. It was inspired by an anonymous illustration published in *The Scientific American* in 1865 for a fantasy invention, showing a man locked inside a cage being carried aloft by birds. In Morgan's version, the cage remains but there is no man. Why has she chosen to exclude this central figure? Aside from the potentially precarious ethics of taxidermy humans, the man is removed because to include it would compromise the tension between these works as metaphorical and factual representations of death.

Though death is a pre-requisite for Morgan's taxidermy work, it is offered both literally through the corpse which really is there and dead, and symbolically, via the apparatus that elevates, even ennobles, the dead body. In *Systemic Inflammation*, flight as an analogy for passage and metamorphosis, is crystallised by the hovering birds which carry off the cage. That these birds are dumb to their new found mythical status does not reduce the effect of the work, but rather signifies the way a sense of the infinite – the sky, flight, immortality – can be inspirational.

The abundance of flapping wings adds a surreal, nightmarish dimension to *Black Fever* and *Blue Fever*. Covered in the wings of a crow or pigeon, planted one on top of the other, each successive wing unfurls to display – as if this were a flick book or an Eadweard



Muybridge photo series – the full range of the bird's motion in flight.

While the dynamism of the winged sculptures and the flying machine recall Muybridge, and the fabulous grotesquerie places Morgan's work alongside fellow taxidermist Thomas Grünfeld, there is a mysterious theatre, an affinity with Greek myth and an oblique intimacy which is redolent of the illustrations of Jean Cocteau. She shares with him an ability to render life and death aphoristically, in a condensed form of visual poetry.

Using feathers, skin, leather, resin, wire and steel, Morgan has created a body of work which positions the cadaver above our heads, spectrally and physically, so engaging the history of the hanging mobile via a sustained meditation on death. Like a blue-black night these works are dark and very beautiful.



## Systemic Inflammation

2010

Taxidermy finches, taxidermy canaries, steel, leather  
130 x 113 x 113 cm  
51.1 x 44.5 x 44.5 in

HV34019



*Systemic Inflammation* is a flying machine made in the spirit and tradition of the eccentric inventor. Inspired by a book called 'Flying's Strangest Moments', Morgan visualises a charred birdcage hauled up, as if from the ashes, by a charm of flame-coloured finches and canaries. Equally pretty and sinister, the play between a putative hell below and heaven above is crystallised by the empty seat on which someone (we?) might take our place.





## Atrial Flutter

2010

Taxidermy cardinal, resin, plastic, wire  
85 × 27 × 22 cm  
33.5 × 10.5 × 8.5 in

HV34020



Like a nursery rhyme or fable, *Atrial Flutter* contains a powerful allegorical logic within a simple construction: a cardinal sits within a cast of a human ribcage; the ribcage is held by nine brightly coloured balloons, each of which appears to float in the air. Their sense of mutual dependence is buoyed by the semi-transparent surface of the balloons which is reminiscent of the gossamer membrane of lungs. The work makes a play on the relationship between the heart and lungs as life-sustaining and the body as cage and home.



## Black Fever

2010

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Taxidermy crow wings, wood, wire  
116 × 83 × 83 cm  
45.5 × 32.5 × 32.5 in

HV34017



The bulbous sculptures *Black Fever* and *Blue Fever* are made from little more than the taxidermied wings of crows and wood pigeons. Suspended in the air, they burst as if captured mid-explosion. Their full-bodied, primordial appearance contrasts their uncanny, mutated form whose shape and pulse-like energy recalls Muybridge's time-lapse photographic experiments and the bullet-time effect used in recent cinema. However, while these techniques were and are employed to enhance our grasp of reality by 'proving' the way things move in time, Morgan's works place us outside this framework by offering full repertoires of movement in still and ever-complete images.

## Blue Fever

2010

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Taxidermy pigeon wings, wood, wire  
200 × 55 × 40 cm  
120 × 80 × 80 cm  
47.25 × 31.5 × 31.5 in

HV34018





## POLLY MORGAN BIOGRAPHY

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Born in 1980 in England  
Lives and works in London

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2010 *Psychopomps*, Haunch of Venison, London
- 2007 *The Exquisite Corpse: A Reconstruction Project*,  
1 Marylebone Road, London
- 2007 *Still Life After Death*, Kristy Stubbs Gallery, Dallas

### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2010 *Wonderland*, Assab One, Milan
- 2009 *The Age of the Marvellous*, All Visual Arts, London  
*Mythologies*, Haunch of Venison, London
- 2008 *You Dig the Tunnel, I'll Hide the Soil*, White Cube,  
London

### Collections

Thomas Olbricht Collection  
Anita Zabłudowicz Collection  
David Roberts Art Foundation

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