

Julia Morison's new paintings appear to show a divergence in her practice. Abstract and freely flowing; they're a long way from the scale and complexity of earlier projects like *Vademecum*, *Quiddities*, *Gargantua's Petticoat*, and, most recently, *Head[case]*. But, contextualised within a history of her work, we can see precedents for many of the themes and forms present here.

Morison began her career as a painter of geometric abstraction after studying graphic design and fine art, but pure formalism couldn't sustain her interest, 'I just didn't have anything to add and lost interest in the modernist idea of making art devoid of meaning. I wanted to imbue my work with meaning...'<sup>1</sup>. Morison sought new and diverse influences. She had long been interested in the Jewish school of thought, Kabbalah — a contrast of sorts to the Christian imagery present in a lot of New Zealand art at the time. Much of her work since the 1980s has been informed by the Kabbalah Tree of Life, or Sephirothic Tree, a theoretical system used to understand the universe, divided into ten sephirot or emanations. For Morison the sephirot and the number ten became a structure to guide and inform her practise, 'I was trying to understand and devise a visual language that would allow my work to be read without reference to text; to have meaning that I could determine — to some extent.'<sup>2</sup>

And so, in 1986, Julia Morison created her own visual language. Ten graphic symbols formed the foundation of *Vademecum*, a 55-page book that revealed a complex visual system; each symbol represented an element, and each element dictated the materials used to make the work. The original ten logos (indicators of Morison's design background) were combined and manipulated to generate new, increasingly complex imagery when pinned to walls in different arrangements. These logos went on to act as the foundation for other works throughout Morison's career.

*Um/Er*, as a title, is like a stumble over words, or the absence of the right words to say. Words and language have an ongoing presence within Morison's art, particularly since the 1980s when she began to consider the tension between an artwork and the words people use to describe it. A small publication titled *End to Begin* accompanied a series of the same name that adapted Morison's logos into the form of small wax paintings. A rolling poem of words and short phrases tumbled down the pages. A year later, she published *STUTTERinG*, an artist book of word play and sound poems divided into sections by her *Vademecum* logos.

In these new paintings, speech bubbles, like plumes of smoke, spill from open mouths. *Lisp* and *Whisper*, the titles, might allude to the challenge of expressing oneself, and the increasing expectations of artists to offer commentary and explanation for their work; as if artworks struggle to speak for themselves. In the *Spellbound* paintings, Morison presents us with a series of experiments, as misshapen head forms emerge from the pools of oil paint, suffused by water poured over the surface. The order provided by the Sephirothic structure is subsumed, and instead the materials themselves dictate form.

Upstairs, 30 working drawings for Morison's *Head[case]* are shown alongside a solitary ceramic head from this suite of works. *Head[case]* was first introduced through her dealer galleries — Bartley & Co, Jonathan Smart Gallery and Two Rooms — the number of pieces increasing over time. It developed into a larger installation of 100 heads, immersively displayed on interlocking shelves resembling a room-sized sephirot, at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū earlier this year. Now, *Um/Er* coincides with a second iteration of *Head[case]* that opens at Objectspace on November 6.

1 Julia Morison in conversation with Lara Strongman, 2019. <https://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/bulletin/195/accidents-and-variations>

2 Ibid.

In producing *Head[case]* Morison worked with clay for the first time. Each head was formed from the same mould, but distorted features render each one unique. The working drawings show Morison's thinking process, while the final works, as with the *Spellbound* paintings, show the impact of material experimentation. The origins of *Head[case]* were seeded in Paris in 1990, during Morison's Moët et Chandon fellowship. Morison is a long time admirer of Max Ernst — she carried with her to France a copy of his collage-novel *La femme 100 têtes* — and it was in Paris that she was able to engage with his work in the flesh when she attended his retrospective at the Centre Pompidou. *La femmes 100 têtes* can be translated in two ways. Literally 'the woman 100 heads' or when spoken aloud, 'the headless woman' — 'cent têtes' (100 heads) sounding like 'sans têtes' (without heads).

Alongside the working drawings for *Head[case]* is a work comprising of a collection of 100 black and white postcards of women which have had their faces cut out by the artist. *A hundred headless woman* returns to Morison's time in France, when she and friends collected the postcards over a number of years. The title of the work returns to the name in a 1997 collaboration between Morison and fashion designer Martin Grant, in which they designed ten dresses made from the ten elements of the sephiroth. In *Material Evidence: 100 Headless Woman*, delicate and eerie gowns hang from the ceiling — bodiless and headless.

*a loop around a loop*, the title for Morison's 2006 survey exhibition, refers to the way she circles around and returns to particular motifs over and again, though each time refiguring them into something new. Circling back to loop forward. From this process, a rich network of theories, materials and research swells behind each work or project. In knowing this, *Whispers*, *Lisps*, and *Spellbound*, speak for themselves.

—Chloe Cull, December 2019.

## Biography

Julia Morison (b. Pahiatua, Aotearoa New Zealand) is based in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand. Her extensive studio practice encompasses a variety of media, from painting and photography to sculpture and installation. A roving intellectual spirit, throughout her esteemed career Morison has experimented with diverse approaches to the mediums she works in to create visual and sculptural systems that explore numinous worlds. Morison is perhaps best known for her formal abstract paintings in which geometry, symbology and biology are combined to shape graphic worlds finely balanced between the sacred and profane.

Morison has exhibited extensively in public and private galleries throughout Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally. In 1988 Morison was awarded the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship and in 1990 the Moët & Chandon fellowship and art residency in Epernay, France where she continued to live and work until her return to Christchurch in 1999. In 2005 she received an Arts Foundation Laureate award and in 2006, *Julia Morison: a loop around a loop*, an important survey of her work, selected by Justin Paton and Felicity Milburn, was presented in Christchurch Art Gallery and Dunedin Public Art Gallery. In 2010 she was included in the Biennale of Sydney, with a major work installed at the Sydney Opera House. Morison has completed several major public artworks including *Wooorm/Ouroboros*, Dunedin Botanical Gardens, Dunedin (2013) and *Tree Houses for Swamp Dwellers*, Christchurch (2013). Her work is held in all major public collections throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. Recent exhibitions include *Head[case]*, Christchurch Art Gallery, Christchurch (2019), *The River Lie*, Suter Gallery, Nelson (2017) and *Spirit Level*, Yellow House Gallery Sydney (2016).