

**THE BROOKLYN RAIL**

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<https://brooklynrail.org/2019/12/artseen/Robert-Morris-Monumentum-20152018>

**BROOKLYN RAIL**

## Robert Morris: Monumentum 2015–2018

By *Charlotte Kent*



Installation view: *Robert Morris: Monumentum 2015–2018*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, 2019–20. © 2019 The Estate of Robert Morris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Castelli Gallery.

On View

## Galleria Nazionale

*Robert Morris. Monumentum 2015–2018*

October 15, 2019 – January 12, 2020

Rome

The figures falling off walls in *Robert Morris. Monumentum 2015–2018*, at Rome's Galleria Nazionale, seem like an extension of the Baroque city's architectural and sculptural tradition. Works from two of Morris' final shows at Leo Castelli gallery, "MOLTINGSEXOSKELETONSSHROUDS" (2015) and "BOUSTROPHEDONS" (2017), blend together in a haunting display. In Rome, references to Italian art history become more evident and draw attention to Morris' longstanding engagement with the canon. In his essay, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated" (1970), Morris drew parallels between his minimalist contemporaries and Donatello's process. He described how Donatello dipped canvas in plaster and draped it over the figure of Judith in order to achieve the texture that he wanted in the casting process of *Judith and Holofernes* (c.1460). The works in this show adapt that process, and their situation in Rome provides a different set of perceptual relations than when the same body of work was displayed in New York.

The gestures of the two figures in *For Otto* (2014–2015) recall a Pietá, mourning on the ground, and a Christ figure, floating on the wall above her. Morris shaped Belgian linen soaked in resin over a mannequin to create hollow forms for the "MOLTINGSEXOSKELETONSSHROUDS" series, to which this work belongs. The use of traditional painting materials ties into the titular reference: Otto Lilienthal (1848-1896). This German "flying man," known internationally in the 19th century for his successful glider attempts, used wax and cloth (as well as wires and rods) for his prototypes. He died after severing his third vertebra in a crash landing. Christ figure, Pietá; dead pilot, mourning wife—she, too, would die later the same year—the potential meanings seem both clearly evident and, perhaps, belabored.



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Morris extended his molding process for the “BOUSTROPHEDONS” series, turning carbon fiber soaked in epoxy resin into glossy, black, human-shaped shells. The seven life-size wraiths—tumbling, flying, flailing—in *Out of the Past* (2016) hang from the ceiling in the center of the gallery, visible from the main entrance of the museum. The sunlight and foliage in the courtyard flickering through the tall French doors behind the work create a stained-glass window backdrop, and transform Morris’s forms into terrifying spirits. The glossy black characters seem like they might belong in a popular kid’s movie, but their antics also recall Goya’s drawings from the album *Witches and Old Women*. In person, the effect is of cruelty: leaping and jeering postures mock a solitary fallen figure.

‘Boustrophedon’ refers to the motif in Greek tablets where a single line shifts from one direction to its opposite: left to right, then right to left, like an ox [*bous*] turning [*strophos*] in a field. In keeping with that sense of inevitable return, Morris titled all the works in this series with references to film noir—a style known for emphasizing the impossibility of escaping one’s history. The jumble of human figures in *Criss-Cross* (2016) is analogous to the tangled narrative of love and betrayal laid out by the 1949 movie of the same name, but seen in Italy, the figures climbing over one another in this wall piece seem like kin to the anguished figures of a gothic medieval rapture or the tortured souls of Dante’s 14<sup>th</sup> century *Inferno*.

*Dark Passage* (2017) is the most disturbing work in the show. The plot of the film from which Morris takes this title concerns a man who hides his face until he can clear himself of murder—apt, given the faceless figures that confront us here. Morris reinterprets Rodin’s *Burghers of Calais* (1884–1895), a sculpture meant to celebrate six town leaders whose stoicism in the face of death inspired the English to spare them during the Hundred Years war. Rodin, always concerned with the way psychological states are expressed by the body, depicted them as full of a richly human fear. In Morris’s installation, the figures face one another. Hunched or standing, the density of the carbon fiber restores the power and resilience of the cloaked figures. They are strong, despite the ropes around their necks.



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Before Morris's death, he was able to work with the curator, Saretto Cincinelli, to design this show. The artist's presence hovers in the air. The shrouds of ghostly figures evoke opaque histories and memories, and it is tempting to suggest that these works represent a summation of the sustained exploration of form that Morris has carried out across the last six decades. This, however, would be a facile interpretation. Anyone who saw Morris's 2018 exhibition, *Banners and Curses* at Castelli, can tell you that there was no necessary end to his experimentation, as the show was uncompromisingly political and contemporary. In Rome, Morris's sculptural works reveal shadow histories and reiterate a crucial point that Morris has been making since the very beginning—that in an artistic experience, the spectator's standpoint, perceptions, and relationship with their environment and culture matter just as much as the art object itself.

## **Contributor**

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