



Morgan R. Hobbs

**BELL THE CAT**



The lower half of the image features a green, textured face with two large, blue, almond-shaped eyes. The background is a mix of orange and yellow brushstrokes, creating a warm, abstract setting.



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**Morgan R. Hobbs**  
***BELL THE CAT***

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## **Extending Equivalence**

ap/proximate states in Morgan Hobbs's recent work

– Tess Wei

How do we assess the closeness, accuracy or association of objects in space, words in a description, people in a community, likeness in an image? In other words, how do we assess what is ap/proximate? Anything proximate has a curious state of being because it inherently skirts exactitude. To be proximate is to be near but not quite there, slightly apart from the center, the source, the place. Approximate, a close relative, similarly is always within a range, always in relation to something, some goal, but never in equivalence. As such, these ap/proximate states are often stepping stones understood as unstable, not accurate enough, or solely preliminary to some other, more precise end. However, it is this condition of the not-quite-specific that is the basis of Morgan Hobbs's most recent paintings and sculptures. In this body of work, she is not so much interested in the mimetic representation of things, but instead, in the ability of an image to suggest the non-visible: a feeling, a subjecthood, a state of mind.

Before turning focus to this recent work, it might be helpful to address Hobbs's earlier practice, which leaned more toward traditions of representation in order to convey narrative focus. This specific interest was cultivated between 2013–2019, during which time she left Kansas City, Missouri to pursue a Master of Fine Arts at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA). Time at PAFA offered Hobbs access to important works that can be described via three general takeaways. First, representation filtered in through her exposure to the academy's extensive Early American Art collection – a trove of landscape, history and portrait paintings. Second, these works served as hallmarks for the socio-political powers, inequities, and deceptions always embedded, directly or indirectly, in representation.



Even the most serene landscape painting eventually betrays its colonial vision – a trompe l'œil in service of the empire. Third, and perhaps most important to Hobbs's sustained path, were the works in Linda Lee Alter's Collection of Art by Women, a collection of 500 works spanning from the 1910s to early 2000s.

This latter collection offered new and important visibility to artists whose subjecthood and subject matter resonated deeply with Hobbs – women artists who were typically absent from art museums and under-appreciated in art historical canons. For example, the faux-naïf style and measured absence of female figures in Hollis Sigler's (b. 1948, d. 2001) work pushed against male-dominated traditions of representation and the male gaze's subsequent exploitation of the female form. Ranging from scenes of celebration to catastrophe, Sigler's work prioritized emotional content, distorted perspectives, and vibrant colors all of which became integral to Hobbs' own compositions particularly with consideration to absent yet implied figures.

As this new constellation of artistic references grew, another key figure was Gertrude Abercrombie (b. 1909, d. 1977). Abercrombie's surreal, often somber landscapes and interiors were at once crafted with an economy of imagery yet wrought with mystery and psychological complexity. Such a confluence of psychology and form – the conveyance of autobiographical experiences, dreams, and devastations – became an important preoccupation for Hobbs. Here, Hobbs cultivated and specified her interest in women artists: a subversive twist always resides in these works or in the artists' practices. Perhaps not always 'painted in' per se, but impossible to deny that the subjecthood of someone left out of canons and historical narratives inflects on the work in a way that gives space for subversion. Of course, sustained research led Hobbs not only to other, highly influential feminist artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as Florine Stettheimer (b. 1871, d. 1944),

but also to the strong lineage of contemporary Philadelphia-based artists including Sarah McEneaney, Aubrey Leventhal, Ashley Wick, Anne Buckwalter, and Kati Gegenheimer.

Taking cues from and finding kinship with the aforementioned artists, Hobbs sought ways to approximate qualities of lived experience and psychological space via concise, pictorial referents. As such, she spent most of her time in graduate school finding narrative paths through objects and interior scenes. Hobbs was particularly interested in making visible fairly broad and relatable conditions such as “what it feels like to be in a body,” a hypnic jerk, or “the experience of claustrophobia.”



A hypnic jerk, for instance, a muscle contraction that occurs between falling asleep and jolting awake, became the interest for *Hypnic Jerk* (2015). Such a side effect of this slippage of consciousness, resulting in severe feelings of disembodiment and the sense of falling into the void, is signaled first and foremost by the contorted bed. The white mass tilting, seemingly stuffed into the room and confined too closely to the picture plane.



The companion bedside table similarly in flux with drawers strewn open, holding a lamp and glasses that threaten to slip off. Nothing seems to fit. Not even the comic-es-que sleeping ZZZ's floating quietly in the upper right. And so, this domestic scene has turned eerie and purposefully so. The architecture surfeit with precarious objects, the signs of sleep without a body. Pictorial evocations of a hypnic jerk, yes. But perhaps, also a subtle yet poignant commentary on an insidious circumstance of disembodiment, violence, and violation in the confines of a bedroom.

And so, with varying degrees of severity, people and experiences were approximated through personal and prudently chosen objects and spaces. Such subjects were rendered with skewed perspectives, ill proportions, and a range of local, perceptual, and imagined colors, such as in *It's Not the End of the World* (2016, opposite) recounting the spinning frenzy when millions came to see the Pope in Philadelphia in 2015, and *The Worn Out Shirt I Hate* (2016) a more literal chronicling of a conflict with a red-haired friend. In addition to her interest in conveying specific sentiments and psychological happenings, Hobbs's paintings increasingly flirted with abstraction and began to altogether ditch the promise of pictorial specificity oft expected in representation.



This frequent teetering toward abstraction and shirking of precise resemblance became evermore pertinent following the 2016 presidential election. For Hobbs, as for many, the election of the 45th U.S. President inflicted existential dread and a seeming fallout from hope. However, it clarified or, at least, fully publicized in the highest seat of American office, many things we have always known about the country's fortified relationship to white supremacy and decades-long degradation of liberal democracy. Hobbs's subsequent self-reflexive turn – interrogating her identity as a white woman living and working in Philadelphia – moved her to broaden the considerations in her practice beyond day-to-day, intrinsically personal topics and, instead, incorporate her positionality and socio-political purview.





Presently, Hobbs approaches these conditions and subsequent ontological examinations by way of highly textured oil paintings and freestanding, papier-mâché sculptures that use systems of motifs including mirrors, flowers, house cats, skulls, food associated with an Americana culinary repertoire, and symbols such as arrows and crosses. The preceding list includes common, recognizable items, and strategically so. In *Scaredy Cat - Orange Pillow* (2019, opposite) for example, a cat lounges alone, strangely foregrounded amidst a patterned, perspectively-flattened ground. The cat's uneven eyes meets our gaze with a benign, almost pacifying presence. But, as with any subject that stares back, this recursive watchfulness cues something: concern? authority? deceit? And so, suddenly this seemingly comfortable world or, at least, banal scene, is off. In *Alluring Aroma / Warming Weather* (2021, page 18) and *Just a Small Slice* (2021, page 17), a similar unhomeliness creeps in. In the latter, we are met with a seductive slice of berry pie: crust crimped and flakey thanks to Crisco; filling replete with berries, thick from cornstarch. This pie scene, initially harkening to classic Americana comfort and patriotism – a nod to “as American as apple pie” – quickly curdles. Similar to Hobbs’s cat paintings, from *Scaredy Cat – Red & Yellow Eyes* (2021, page 16) to *W(h)erecat* (2021, page 20), the pie begins to stare back. As the berries turn to beady eyes, nestled into a pastry of acidic colors, the confection transforms into an anthropomorphic threat. All at once, this saccharine scene turns putrid, repulsive, sickening.

There is meaning to mine from these pieces but they are purposefully cryptic. In focusing on the ordinariness of something like a lounging house cat, slice of pie, or geometric pattern, Hobbs obliquely considers the insidious nature of “everydayness.” And the “everyday” in question, Hobbs hints, relates to socio-political systems whose pretenses of “normal,” sometimes “democratic” even, reinforce and extend inequalities.



This metaphorical content is perhaps most clear, but still far from didactic, in *Side of Beef* (2020, pages 10–11). A disembodied, masculine-presenting torso is the primary focus of this sculpture painted in colors reminiscent of Florine Stettheimer and geometries harkening to Elizabeth Murray. No appendages. No head. A figure entirely dispossessed of an identity. There is, of course, inherent violence cued in this sculpture: masculine disfigurement perhaps serving as a more literal depiction of patriarchal dismantlement. Yet, there is a sense of tenderness, a subtle fondness made present by way of paint. The back (page 11), for example, is no less serene, abstracted terrain than playful video game imagery than variegated, demoted flesh.







*Bouquet for Bad Day* (2021, opposite) also offers furtive treatment of the human form, whose direct representation is otherwise largely absent in this series. A skull is centered, looming on a table scattered with assorted dining ware, fruit, and a newspaper. Despite the prismatic glow of greenery backlighting the interior table and refracting in its contents, this scene offers no hospitality, no actual sign of life. Instead, the skull – lifeless, gaze-less – implicates a post-human condition. Committed to a still life, overtaken by flowers in its eyes, the skull is mocked. This painting suggests Hobbs’s own ruminations on the ruins of the Anthropocene, perhaps where the life of commodities outlives humanity – “it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism.”<sup>12</sup>

Such a proclivity toward nested motifs and obscure combinations of industrial and natural forms, is apparent throughout this series from *Stacks* (2020, page 26) to *Waterfall* (2020, page 19), *Fist* (2020, page 29) to *Mirror Obscura* (2020, page 21). In these pieces – of which the latter three offer clear glimpses into Hobbs’s interests in Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, and Milton Avery – every form has a namable referent. However, these near-recognizable forms, their proximity to something familiar, serve as clever traps that only lead to more questions: are these objects of desire? rage? disturbance? reflection?

In keeping with the pendulum of making that sways to and fro persistent concerns, Hobbs’s most recent and largest paintings mark a return to one of her enduring subjects: domestic interiors. However, these are unlike the paintings from her time in graduate school such as the aforementioned *Hypnic Jerk* (2015), which offered representations of real spaces and specific experiences personal to Hobbs. Instead, the newest paintings recast the interiors as purely imagined – uncompromising in their flattened space, saturated with patterns. This reacquainting with domestic space offers a new system wherein coded subjects and

symbols gesture toward ambiguous situations suspended on the brink of frenzy. A hand ready to upset a room at night with the light of a lamp in *Night Charade* (2021, page 14) – a threat to the house cats’ nocturne? A preface to a mid-night gathering? The menacing circumstances named in *Prodrome Aura* (2021, page 15) camouflaged by naïve patterns and the respite of a window – a way out, counterfeit or possible? And so, the lexicon of Hobbs’ paintings always offers just enough to anticipate, to retrieve, to make meaning, but never to confirm it.

Morgan Hobbs gestures toward broader commentaries through open-ended inquiries, avoiding easily legible or parochial narratives. This pursuit however is not to be abstruse but, instead, to resist the bland demystification that occurs in didacticism, in being explained and fully understood. Instead, in extending equivalence beyond visible relationships, Hobbs offers a space to wonder, “what exactly is this?” while feeling, perhaps fleetingly, exactly what that might be.





14 *Night Charade*, 2021, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches



*Prodrome Aura*, 2021, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches









18 *Alluring Aroma / Warming Weather*, 2021, oil on canvas, 46 x 34.5 inches



*Waterfall*, 2020, oil on canvas, 24 x 17 inches





20 *W(h)erecat*, 2021, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches



*Mirror Obscura*, 2020, oil and paper pulp on canvas, 30.5 x 28.5 inches



22 *Ham 1*, 2021, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches



*Ham 2*, 2021, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches





24 *Bouquet - Bullseyes*, 2021, oil on canvas, 26 x 21.5 inches



*Ghost Plant 1*, 2021, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches





26 *Stacks*, 2020, oil and acrylic on papier-mâché, dimensions variable



*Harvest Harrow*, 2021, oil on canvas, 63 x 69.25 inches





28 *Blue Bedroom*, 2021, oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



*Fist*, 2020, oil on canvas, 26 x 22 inches 29



**Morgan Hobbs** (b. 1998) is an artist, curator and educator based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She is a graduate of the Masters of Fine Arts program at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) and the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at the University of Central Missouri, where she studied painting and anthropology.

In 2015, Hobbs co-founded AUTOMAT Gallery, an artist-run collective and gallery space based in Philadelphia. AUTOMAT was a 2015 recipient of the Fine Arts Venture Fund and has since run multiple successful fundraising campaigns through AUTOMAT's fiscal sponsor, Fractured Atlas.

Hobbs has shown her own artwork both regionally and nationally, including at Satellite Projects in Miami, 33 Orchard in New York, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts museum, and Fleisher/Ollman gallery in Philadelphia. She has presented her work and writing at the National Conference for Undergraduate Research in Ogden, Utah; the University of Central Missouri; Pennsylvania College of Art and Design; University of Massachusetts, Amherst; and more. In 2012 and 2020, she attended Vermont Studio Center as an Artist in Residence and in 2020, she was awarded a Hemera Contemplative Fellowship. Hobbs is currently the Assistant Director at Gross McCleaf Gallery in Philadelphia, and is represented by VSOP Projects in New York .

essay and catalog design : Tess Wei

**Tess Wei** is Philadelphia-based artist. They are currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Art and the Assistant to the Director of the List Gallery at Swarthmore College.

images : **Adrian Cubillas**





