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INTERVIEW

That Dog You Just Can't Let Go

What makes Stephen Morrison's paintings of flower arrangements particularly special is that his beloved dog, Tilly, is integrated into the flowers themselves.



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painter Stephen Morrison with one of his trompe l'oeil paintings

Stephen Morrison is a painter who has a hard time letting go. The delicate flowers he renders appear wistful as they refuse to decompose, frozen in time in a seemingly fantastical arrangement; tied to the back of painting stretchers, the petals and stems of the arrangements are suspended in mid-air. But what makes these virtuoso canvases particularly special is that his beloved dog, Tilly, a pit bull mix who was the ring bearer at his wedding and passed away three years ago, is integrated into the flowers themselves.

The effect is both thoroughly contemporary and marvelously Baroque. Death is thwarted in these memorial arrangements, yet whimsy is too. Some may see these works as memento mori of sorts, but I think they signify a moment of more — more memories with a favorite companion, or with a favorite flower arrangement before it wilts. All the while, he thumbs his doggie nose at convention and reminds us that it's all a stage anyway: life, art, everything.

I asked the artist some questions about [this series, which is available at the 2024 Spring/Break art fair](#) and curated by Marina Molarsky-Beck. Look for more of his paintings in his solo exhibition at [Hashimoto Contemporary](#) in January 2025.

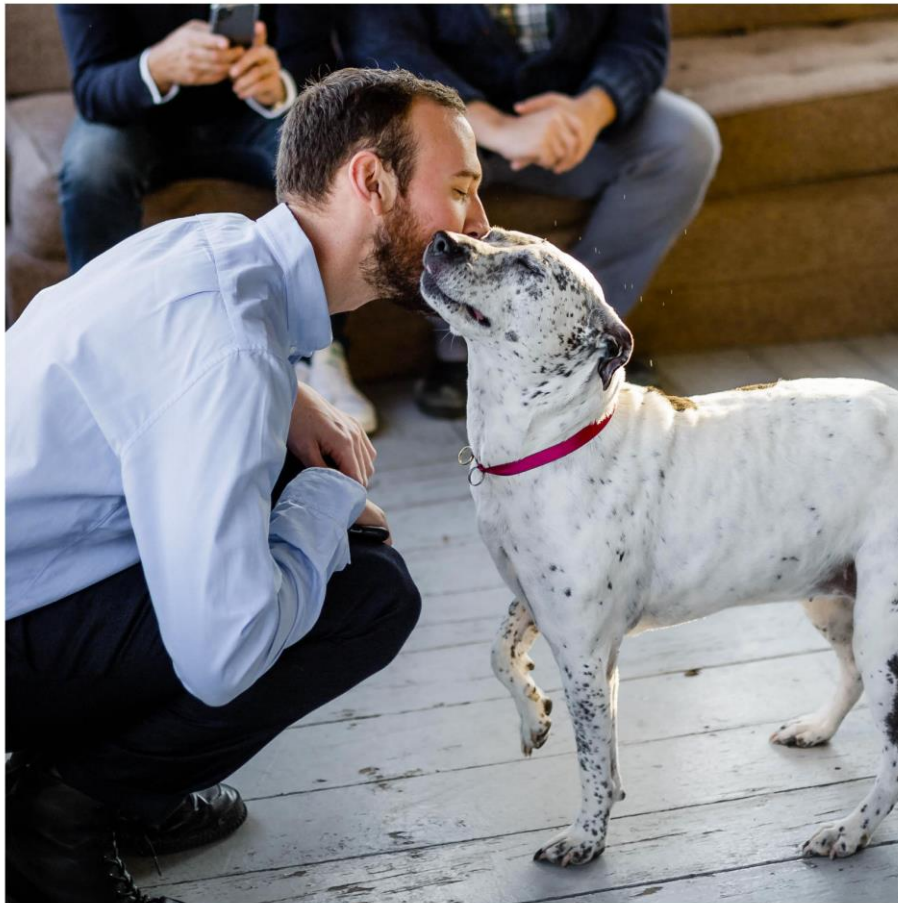


Detail of Stephen Morrison's "We Are Ever New" (2024) featuring his beloved dog Tilly.

Hyperallergic: *Can you tell us about your dog? What do you most remember?*

Stephen Morrison: If you talk with dog owners, usually you'll hear that they have loved all their dogs but there is always one dog that really sticks out as "the best dog." Tilly was that for me. She just felt like such a real companion. What I admire most about dogs is their complete lack of shame and guilt about pleasure and desire. If they want to eat too much, sleep all day, hump your leg, whatever — they just do it. Tilly did all that with grace and sweetness.

When I was a kid my idol was Hugh Hefner — not because of his actual job, which I was unaware of, but because he got to wear his pajamas all day — which is to say that I think I’ve always been a bit of a hedonist and kind of set up to love the life of a dog, of doing whatever you want when you want to do it. That's why making work with dogs feels so natural, because it’s deeply a part of my character.



The artist with Tilly as the ring bearer to his marriage to Lucien Zayan, the founder of The Invisible Dog art space in Brooklyn (courtesy Stephen Morrison and used with permission)

H: *Why is she featured in the work?*

SM: The first painting I made of a dog was her. I made it for my mom as a Christmas present and I remember feeling so much more joy making that than the art I was making at the time. Painting a subject I truly felt love for was radically different. It kickstarted this whole obsession, using dogs as a theme and developing these repeating characters. I use them as self-portraits, in sculptures of food, in recreations of historical masterworks, etc.

H: *What made you think about combining these flowers that appear to grow from the back of the paintings and your dog?*

SM: The idea behind the show is less about the flowers and dogs themselves and more about life and death. Because my husband is quite a bit older than me, we often talk about how finite our time together is. Seeing the cut flowers in our home, lasting only a few days before beginning to wilt and then fully die, inspired me to use them as a metaphor for this. To appreciate every minute with something you love while it's around, even if it will wilt in just a few days. And relationships with dogs are similar. For example, I recently was talking with a friend about how she might get a dog for her family because "they are good for teaching children about mortality." We adopt dogs as pets knowing full well that best-case scenario we will be absolutely heartbroken in 10 to 12 years.



Stephen Morrison, "Passage II" (2024)

So really all of these things work together well. Even a painting has a life span if we zoom out far enough on our timeline. Everything is temporary, and with this show I'm just trying to learn how to not be so terrified of that.

H: *Why are the canvases painted as if they're turned away from the viewer?*

SM: I started this series using the back of the support itself to stage the still lifes. In this way, when I painted it, the support itself would be included in the trompe l'oeil effect, inspired by the way the frame is used in Pere Borrell del Caso's famous work "[Escaping Criticism](#)" (1874). Even as far back as 1670 there is an example of this by [Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts](#) that is simply a painting of the back of a framed painting — so I'm also referencing this long tradition with trompe l'oeil painters.

When a collector bought a piece from the series and asked to have the work framed, I came up with the idea to frame the work in reverse as well. Finally, with this Spring/Break show, even the text cards on the sides of the paintings were flipped to create the illusion of an entire museum or gallery show in reverse.

Inside this illusion, my flower dogs are experiencing this life and death cycle. I see it like mold growing in a basement cabinet or insects living in a tomb — a sort of life within the static lifelessness of a museum. [I'm] playing with the idea of purity and immortality of art, and blurring the line between our own mortality and the idea that a painting lasts forever. It adds a layer to the idea of nature morte and makes the gallery a sort of still life in itself.

H: *They look joyous, precious, and endearing to me but I'd love to hear how you'd describe them.*

SM: Cuteness and joyousness play a pivotal role in my entire practice. I use them to engage people and then sneak in more layers of less agreeable idea underneath, like over consumption or feelings of anxiety and, in this case, aging. It brings people closer in and then they are confronting these unpleasant aspects of life as they are applied to cute, cuddly puppies, which for me is more effective than using a human because we are so desensitized to seeing these [aspects] in people.

With a dog I can portray emotions purely and directly, without the trappings of a human identity that the viewer has to contend with.