



Photos by Peter Clough / The Invisible Dog Art Center

## A 'DINNER PARTY' FOR A DOG-EAT-DOG WORLD

In Stephen's Morrison's installation, on view until Oct. 10, visitors are treated to a campy canine catharsis

By [Jessica Robinson](#)

Enter the door of the [Invisible Dog Center](#), a sprawling ground-floor space located in Brooklyn's Boerum Hill, and the first thing that you notice is, well, the dogs. You are greeted by the backside of a pantsless, human-sized canine. Look closer. He is on a leash, held by yet another humanoid dog. With his pants on. This is when it dawns on you that the room is, in fact, crowded with dogs. Sixteen of them, in fact.

Sitting around an eighteen-foot-long dining-table, dressed in white shirts, loosened neckties and indigo jeans, the anthropomorphized plaster pups are eating, drinking, and basically debauching.



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If “Dogs Playing Poker” is pure retro kitsch, Stephen Morrison’s new “The Dinner Party” installation at the Invisible Dog Center is right where camp meets art. For nearly a year, Morrison worked in his 150-square-foot studio to create this monumental, site-specific, installation, for his first-ever solo show, on view here through October 10.

Some dogs are downing bottles of Le Chien wine, others gobble food, puff on cigars, pass around joints, and pass out. These hedonistic animals are riotous, as if part of a mass hallucination.

Craftier still is Morrison’s use of plaster, not just as an interim step, but rather as his medium. In “The Dinner Party” tableau, plaster casts an intoxicating spell. Whether swinging from a chandelier or just covered in spaghetti, the dogs give off an air of naïveté, mixed with a dash of menace.

“What I love most about the exhibition is that ‘The Dinner Party’ speaks to before, during and after the pandemic,” says Brooklyn-based choreographer, Raja Feather Kelly, a friend of Morrison’s. “We were animals before: careless, selfish, impulsive, and abusive. We were puppies during: needy, helpless, confused, stupid. We are dogs now: ruthless, sacrificial, lustful, raw.”

He sees anxiety in the work.





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Morrison himself has a different take. “I think we have all been hungry for so long now after Covid—for connection, for touch, and pleasure, that I wanted to represent these characters as going overboard, as really relishing the moment,” he says.

“At any good party,” adds Invisible Dog Art Center Director, Lucien Zayan, “there is always that moment where everyone becomes drunk, maybe a fight starts, people start flirting. This piece is kind of a love letter to that moment.”

Both Morrison and Zayan (who also happens to be Morrison’s husband) were known before the pandemic for hosting extravagant dinner parties. “...dinners that often lasted well into the wee hours of the morning,” says Kelly, who has been a frequent guest.

And in the midst of the pandemic, in semi-confinement, dinner parties were what the couple missed most. “Everyone would look fabulous under the light of the dancing flames of the candles,” explains Zayan. “Everyone, with high-flying spirits, would share guilty and dirty secrets to be buried forever once the sun returns.”

Living vicariously through his own art, Morrison began to build the party of his dreams, choosing dogs, he says, because, “Dogs are not bound by social conventions or crippling bouts of self-awareness. Unable to do otherwise, they express themselves freely.”



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### **‘It brings me joy’**

Born in 1991 in Rockland, Maine, Morrison studied painting at the Laguna College of Art and Design. A long-time dog lover, his first two dog paintings, goofy portraits of his family’s pit bull rescues, were gifts for his sister. Though they were meant to be side projects, by the time he’d painted his third, a Christmas present for his parents, he’d found them more meaningful than anything else he’d made, “Because it brings me joy,” he says. (It should be noted there is no connection between the theme of the installation and the name of the gallery. It should also be noted that dogs are welcome to the exhibition space.)

For “The Dinner Party” he says he “tried to make each dog a kind of caricature of the people that would come to the dinners,” says Morrison. “Each is kind of an exaggerated behavior, so there is the gluttonous one, the one putting on a show, the rejected one. I wanted an immersive experience where you, too, felt like a dog.”

Elegant oriental carpets, inspired by Versailles, add bursts of color beneath the dining table, while hanging from the ceiling are glimmering glass and gold crystal chandeliers, lighting up the riotous evening. On the walls, in ornate frames, are send-ups of masterpieces from the 1800-1900s, the human figures reimagined as dogs.

As Morrison and Zayan are gay, I wanted to know if the dogs are, too. “The characters are all based on a mix of my husband and myself, so in a way they all are!” says Morrison. “That’s why they all appear to be male. My husband wears the same sort of uniform of white button-down shirt and blue jeans every day, so that is how I developed their style. And the body dimensions of the dogs themselves are from my body.”

Artists, of course, have long used dinner party scenarios as a way of making larger social statements, dating back to the earliest portrayals of the Last Supper. Just up the road, at the Brooklyn Museum, Judy Chicago’s women-only dinner party (built between 1974 and ‘79) is a high-minded feminist attack on patriarchy.

Morrison’s work is much more earthy. It’s not often you hear peals of laughter from fellow gallery-goers. But seeing the pure pleasure from the visitors to “The Dinner Party,” can be a recharge during these anxious times. Morrison’s celebration of artifice and exaggeration resonates in a world so loony you don’t know whether to laugh or cry.