

REQUIEM

The Remains of the Day

August 4, 2021



**RICHMOND
ART CENTER**

2540 Barrett Avenue
Richmond, CA 94804
RichmondArtCenter.Org
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RUTH MORGAN



REQUIEM

The Remains of the Day
August 4, 2021

RUTH MORGAN

Exhibition

April 5 - June 3, 2023

Opening Reception

Saturday, April 15, 12pm-2pm

Ruth Morgan in conversation with Robbin Légère Henderson

Saturday, May 27, 12pm-1:30pm

Closing Reception

Saturday, June 3, 2pm-4pm

Richmond Art Center

2540 Barrett Avenue, Richmond, CA 94804

Gallery Hours: Wednesday-Saturday, 10am-4pm

Exhibition and events are free and no RSVP is necessary

Cover image: Ruth Morgan, *The Remains of the Day #1*, 2021

Introduction

BY ROBERTO MARTINEZ, EXHIBITIONS DIRECTOR

On August 4, 2021 at approximately 7:30pm the Dixie Fire, that had already ravaged the ancient Sierra Mountain forest landscape, crested the mountain range and roared through the small town of Greenville, CA. In less than 45 minutes it destroyed wooden buildings that had stood for over a century. A gas station, church, hotel, museum and bar were among the structures gutted, along with nearly 100 family homes, schools and commercial businesses. The homes of approximately 1,000 residents were reduced to rubble. Fortunately all townspeople were evacuated.

The Dixie Fire, which began on July 13, 2021, burned nearly 1 million acres before being contained on October 25, making it the largest single-source wildfire in recorded California history.

On October 1, 2021, photographer Ruth Morgan drove to Greenville with the intention of photographing and interviewing residents who had been displaced, but instead found herself in a town devoid of people with only the remains of the day to tell the story. Morgan documented these remains,

her photographs now part of a requiem, capturing the tangled destruction and loss of a tight-knit community. From scorched vehicles to blackened clay pots to the lone standing chimneys: these remains speak to lives interrupted by a sudden fiery force.

Ruth Morgan's *Requiem: Remains of the Day* puts us at the center of Greenville's devastation. Through large-scale photographs, Morgan presents us with the town's charred and desolate landscape making it impossible to escape the magnitude of this historic fire. Her haunting images envelop us in a quietness only felt after a destructive force has come and gone—creating a powerful space for remembrance, reflection and deep reckoning.

Morgan focuses her lens on the tangible destruction of Greenville at the hands of immense wildfire. But more than this, she captures a foreboding sense of the catastrophic impact climate change will continue to have on us and our natural world if we don't step up and save each other.

Can you see what is not there?

ESSAY BY ROBBIN LÉGÈRE HENDERSON



Ruth Morgan, *The Remains of the Day #2*, 2021

At first Ruth Morgan's new series, *Requiem: Remains of the Day* seems a departure from the imagery familiar to those of us who have followed her work over the years. From her astonishing work in San Quentin Prison in the mid 1980s, through her exploration in Widelux format documenting intimate portraits of her aging parents in the 1990s, to her engagement with marginalized communities over the past 20 years, Morgan's lens has focused with deep empathy on people—probing their struggles, their communities and their robust endurance. Some of the power of her earlier work derives from the implicit intimacy between the participants in the encounter—the artist's presence in contact with the souls on the other side of the camera. Morgan is there, a character in the drama. The participants are not "subjects" and as she looks at them, they are looking at her, not at a camera.

Requiem: Remains of the Day, in contrast to previous work, is devoid of people. The images reveal only what remains of the former lives of those not shown. Morgan exposes only what's

left after devastating fire destroyed an entire town of 1,100 souls in less than 45 minutes on the day (August 4, 2021) the Dixie Fire virtually erased the town of Greenville. It is one of many towns established after the gold rush in the Sierra wildland–urban interface that experienced catastrophic fires in what have become nearly annual events from June through November in the Western United States. Here we confront the poignant remains of lives shattered not by an "act of god," but by human generated climate change.

Scale has often figured in Morgan's work. In her early depictions of San Quentin inmates, recently acquired by the San Francisco Public Library, the images measure 4 x 4 feet, essentially the width of an actual San Quentin cell (4 feet x 10 feet). The immense format renders nearly life-size figures framing the confinement of the men as they interact with two beautiful young women on the other side of the camera, Morgan and her colleague, the interviewer Barbara Yaley. About that work Morgan has said, "I had a big camera that many [inmates] were not used to. And a tripod. They took me seriously. I think the men felt that





Ruth Morgan, *The Remains of the Day #4*, 2021

what Barbara and I were doing was important and that helped in getting penetrating portraits.”¹

In *Requiem* at Richmond Art Center the large format suggests expansiveness rather than confinement. Here we are drawn into the environment; to feel the vastness and finality of destruction. An overview of the small town, set in what was once a verdant valley, gives us a sense of the scale of the catastrophe, while accompanying images involve us in the details of the loss—the twisted metal siding and scorched corrugated roofing; intact but empty terra cotta flower pots; the burned shell of a car; a chimney rising from the earth, no roof or walls—everything fallen, twisted and blackened. Entering the work, the eye moves from object to object as details build underscoring the devastation of the whole. This requiem acknowledges the sadness of human folly—the apocalypse of consumption and greed. It suggests new terrors of the era we are entering (or perhaps we’ve been sleeping through for over three centuries) now termed the “anthropocene” by some geologists and environmentalists and the “capitalocene” by others offering a more social-political critique.

Morgan often collaborates with writers on her projects. Her background in sociology and her years of work with ex-

offenders as the director of Community Works West, a program addressing the needs of those in the Bay Area ensnared in the criminal justice system, inform her choice of subject matter. For *Requiem* she originally intended to gather interviews of those displaced by the Dixie fire, but the totality of the devastation scattered possible informants. Unable to locate survivors, the urgency to document the destruction impelled her to begin with the images.

Since 2000, participants in Morgan’s projects have been the marginalized and ignored: Civil Rights activists, Latinx and Black communities in East Harlem, descendants of Japanese/Japanese-American internment, and indigenous Americans—Ohlone in the Bay Area and Piqua Shawnee in Ohio.

Influenced by the writing of Bill McKibben, Naomi Klein and others who have long warned of the enormity of the consequences that now engulf us, Morgan’s knowledge and concern about climate catastrophe preceded the escalating firestorms of the recent past. James Hansen’s warnings date back to the 1980s. As we continue to ignore the ultimate consequence of our profligate exploitation of planetary resources and exponential population growth, we ensure disaster.

1. <https://sfcamerawork.org/pete-brooks-and-ruth-morgan-interview>



Ruth Morgan, *The Remains of the Day #5*, 2021

As Morgan notes above, her early work used traditional film and camera, darkroom processing printed from black and white negative film. As photographic technology evolved, she adjusted and her methods changed. In the 1990s she experimented with the Widelux camera, manufactured in Japan from 1958 to 2000, that used a different aperture system—a slit instead of a shutter— that exposed the 35mm film as the camera pivoted to capture a panoramic image. Today her work is digital, with images that can be printed equally in black and white or color. While she shot these large images in color, she still remains attached to black and white prints. A black and white series made simultaneously with the work shown here is equally powerful. Though not as large as the color images in the current exhibition, they will certainly be

shown elsewhere, as smaller black and white images are experienced differently and can be exhibited in more confined spaces.

An unknown artist has used the remains of structures in Greenville as canvases for art—mural-sized drawings of people: a woman who looks like a film star limned on the ruins of a movie theater, Jesus painted on a chimney—creating a mysterious presence in the aftermath of the desolate wreckage. In Morgan’s new body of work the absence of interlocutors hauntingly suggests their presence and the human adaptability that they represent. Once again in *Requiem*, through her lens we observe survival and resilience—an exhortation and hope.

Robbin Légère Henderson is a Berkeley-based artist, curator and writer.

About the Artist

Ruth Morgan founded Community Works West in 1997, an organization that combined her interest in working directly with people and communities impacted by incarceration and her commitment to social justice. At the same time, she has had a separate career as a photographer.

Morgan has always used her art for social change and to give voice to marginalized

communities. Her work is in private collections and museums that include the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Recently her S.F. Jail archive was purchased by the San Francisco Public Library and her Ohlone Elders and Youth archive was purchased by the Bancroft Library.

www.ruthmorganphotography.com