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# BLOG

## IC Interview: Steven Morrison

June 26, 2017

In a series of interviews, we reached out to grant winner Steven

**2017 Grant Application  
will  
open this fall**

We offer grants from \$500 to \$2000 to Atlanta-area artists to encourage experimental and investigative art projects across all genres of the arts: visual art, dance, literature,

Morrison. He recently premiered his piece *Air (an opera for breath)* at The Center For Puppetry Arts. Steven talks on bread dough, *Alice in Wonderland* and opera.



**Where were you born?** I was born in Urbana, Illinois while my dad was a PhD student. We moved west when I was still very small, so the state of Illinois always had a distant romantic aura around it in my mind as a kid. The silent “s” was mysterious and conspiratory.

**What are you favorite materials to work with?** It's important to let my ideas dictate my medium, and so materials tend to change a lot from work to work. But one through-line is that I really relish the textures and surfaces of whatever I'm working with. For the last three or four years, I've spent a ridiculous amount of time with bread dough. It's a fascinating material, because the artistic process becomes a true collaboration. The yeast creatures inside the dough are literally alive—a vast civilization of microscopic puppeteers moving the dough around as they breath together.

performance, digital media, music, curatorial projects, critical writing, film, and video.

**Application deadline will be announced this summer.**

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**What is your motivating factor in creating artistic**

**work?** Creating artistic work is what I want to be doing all the time, so motivation isn't really an issue. Of course I want to investigate my materials, push them and play with them and see how far they'll take me. A lot of it comes down to a really basic delight in moving material around—squishing bread dough, smearing plaster, sculpting with paint, or editing film to sculpt with time. It's a visceral experience and one that leads to endless surprises. The drive to create things is primal.

But the things I create should be the beginning. I want people to engage with them, be moved by them, and be driven to create their own meanings. Good art gets new meanings started.

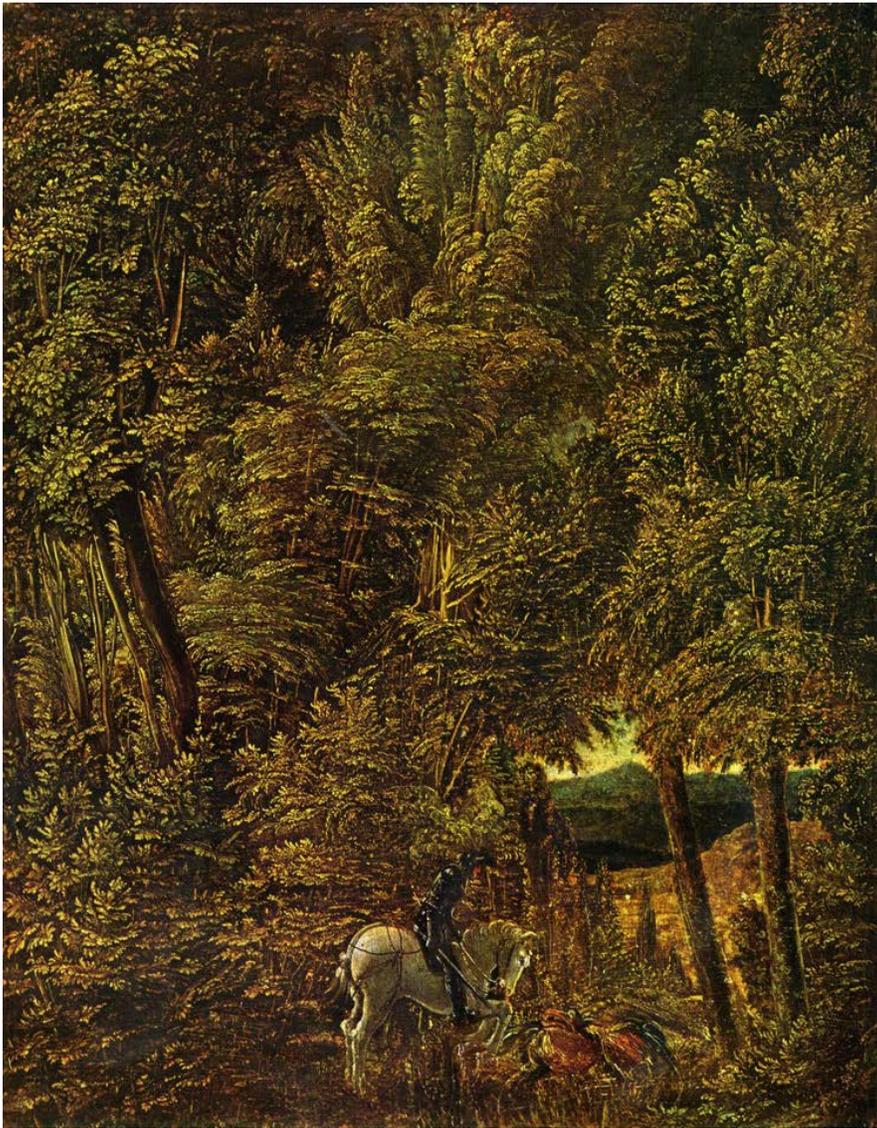
**What do you like most about the art that you make? I'm**

constantly in awe of the strangeness of the world and I'm voracious in my search to find human expression of this strangeness. I like it when that strangeness crops up unexpectedly in my own work.

**Who are your influences?** In terms of animation, my primary influence has been Jan Svankmajer. When I was a teenager, our local university had a free screening of Jan Svankmajer's *Alice*, a mind-blowing Czech stop-motion vision of *Alice in Wonderland* featuring piles of leaves, puppets, chicken skeletons, and toothed socks eating through the floorboards. I remember walking home from that screening and feeling like the dirt, leaves, and shrubs I passed were all secretly possessed with a kind of uncanny life—that they could get up and shuffle away at any moment. I've never been the same since then. That moment really sparked my interest in how animation and objects could create a world-altering aesthetic experience. In my animation, I really lean into textures, real raw objects, and natural forms.



A couple of my favorite paintings are Albrecht Altdorfer's *St. George And The Dragon*, Goya's *The Dog*, Poussin's *Landscape With Man Killed By A Snake...* I love Philip Guston, Tony Oursler, Annette Messager, Nancy Graves, Anselm Kiefer, Urs Fischer, Alex Katz's landscapes, Laura Owens...







**The first art you saw that informed your practice and let you know this was possibility to become an artist?** I had an important moment about four years ago while visiting an art museum that had curated an exhibition of contemporary experimental animators. It gave me the courage to investigate that pathway which I had longed to explore, but which had seemed so very unrealistic to me. Since then, I've made half a dozen experimental animations and been able to start showing them in museums and galleries.

**What do you feel you are trying to communicate with your work?** I want to communicate a sense of wonder and a sense of humor. I want people to be surprised that they can be emotionally moved by a lump of dough. With *Air (an opera for breath)*, I think of the bread as the body, and the breath expands and deflates that body. The bread dough becomes like lungs, among other things. The idea of inspiration/expiration relate to love and death, the central dramatic themes of opera. I'm also interested in the kind of inherent eroticism of opera--a hushed audience sitting in the dark and watching singers' bodies as they take huge breaths and expel them (musically) with soaring vocal athleticism. Watch an opera singer breathe in before belting out a big note--their whole body shudders.

**As an artist, do you think your work is political? What is the connection between protest and art-making?** My most recent show, *Uneasiness In Culture* (at Eyedrum earlier this year), is my most political work to date. The show featured a series of sculptures where bread dough worked its way through concrete enclosures. A

collective body breathing together and pressing their vulnerability against seemingly implacable obstacles can become an image of political resistance.

An important part of the relationship between art and politics is that we fight political fights in order to make space for life-enhancing art. In WWII, Churchill famously argued that art and culture are what we are fighting *for*. So even when the art is not directly taking on political subject matter, I still find it incumbent on me as an artist and citizen to be politically involved in order that art may continue to have a place in our culture.

**What was the seminal experience that got you to the work you are making now?** When my daughter was a toddler, she loved baking with me. We used to make a big pile of dough and then knead and punch and squish it. We'd finger paint with the flour spread out on the table. One day, I set a bowl of bread dough out to rise and completely forgot about it as we moved on to dinner, bath, and bedtime. The next morning, I saw a horribly bloated lump of bread dough surging out of the bowl, tipping it over. Much of the art I've made in the last four years began in that moment.



**What are you working on currently?** In a few weeks, I'll be part of a group show with my fellow Walthall Fellowship members at

MOCA-GA (opening in July). I'm working on a giant painting on window screening for that show.

I've also been working on lots of paintings made with tar lately. And I have tons of extra footage that didn't make it into *Air (an opera for breath)* and will likely be shaped into a series of animated shorts.

JF

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Mary Stanley, Sam Romo /  Comment

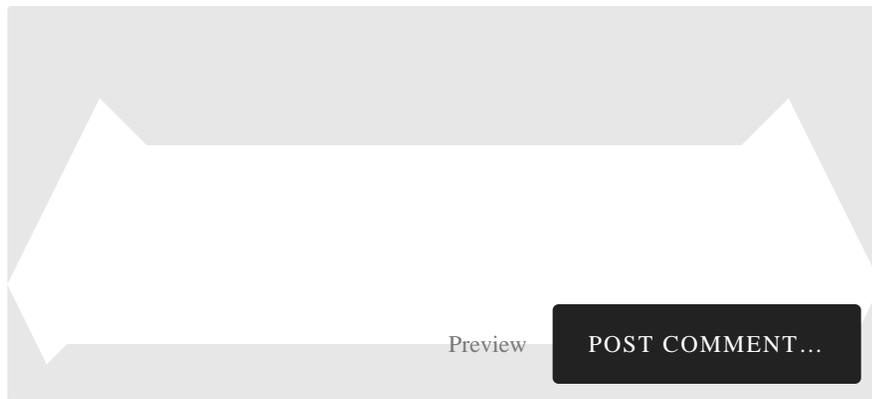
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