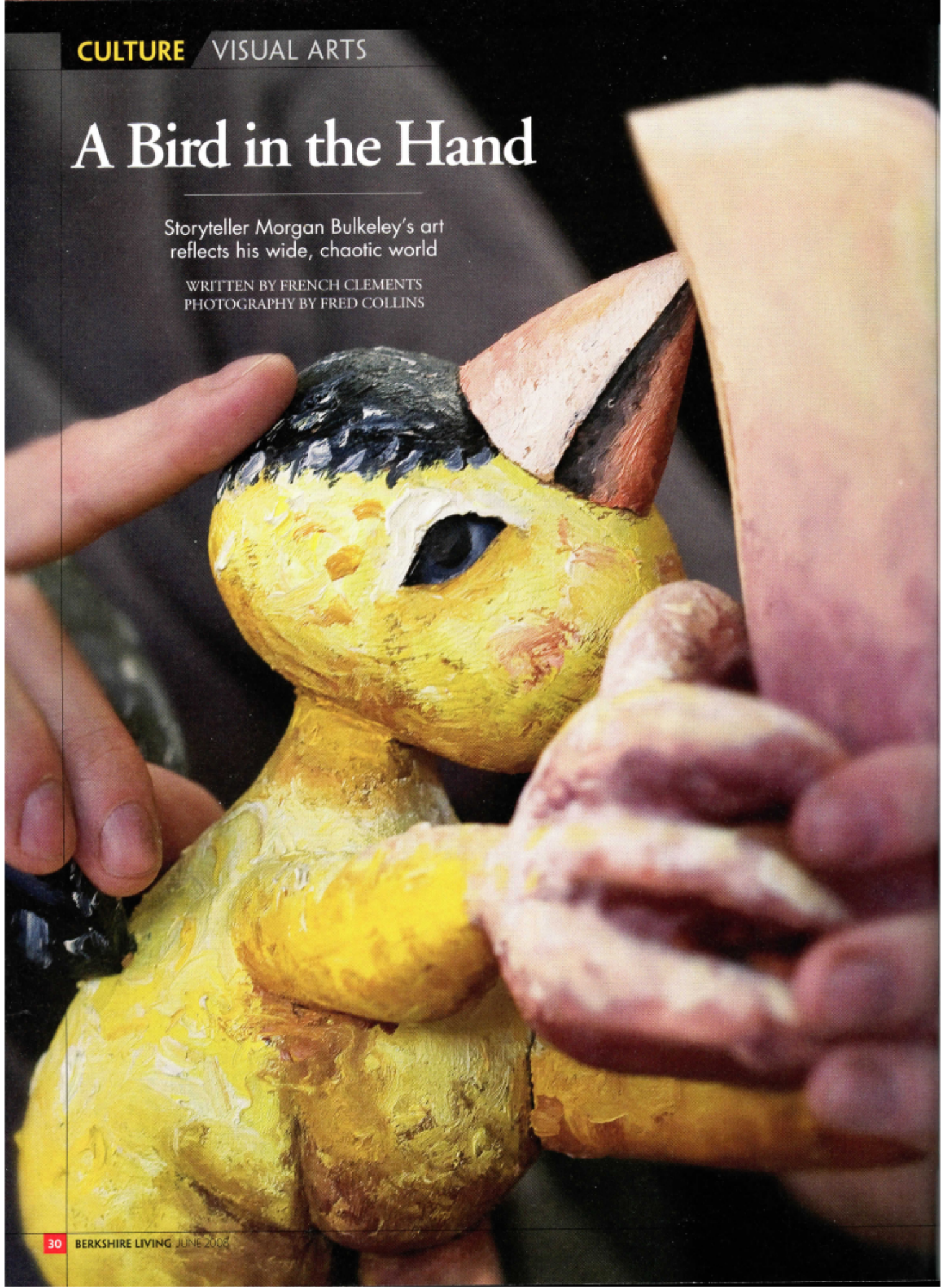


A Bird in the Hand

Storyteller Morgan Bulkeley's art reflects his wide, chaotic world

WRITTEN BY FRENCH CLEMENTS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRED COLLINS



*Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.*

—from "Birches" by Robert Frost

LOOKING DOWN ON THE ROCKY island of Mount Washington, Massachusetts, it could be any year at all, but go back to 1985, in the earliest autumn, just after they found the *Titanic*. It's a gorgeous afternoon, and Morgan Bulkeley is hiking with Eleanor Tillinghast, a neighbor since her childhood and lately his girlfriend of a few months. They've gotten a mile or so through the valley west of Pennyroyal, his old family home, where the trees turn dense and a near hill will soon carve out the sun. Before they head back, he wants to show her a neat trick with birches he once learned from his father (a Morgan, too), who was friendly with Robert Frost, who wrote a poem about it.

You climb high up a gray birch—never a white one—until the trunk turns more than thin enough to bend. You launch your bottom half earthward, clinging to the tree's listing spire until you're both nearly at the ground. Letting go, you leap off and the tree snaps straight.

Morgan demonstrates, landing easily.

Eleanor clutches a low branch, swings on up and goes far.

Except the tree bent the wrong way, or slipped her grasp, and she fell; Morgan thought she had died.

She hadn't, and for her three days of bed rest, they stayed close together.

For several years after, Morgan was consumed by visions of birches and people who fell or flew, and he painted them. Then he started to paint the people being healed, covered in Band-Aids. This was progress, but they still did dumb things, like trying to plug an electric fan into a rattlesnake's tail. Tiny woodland battles later grew frequent.

Bulkeley's stories, in words or in paint, are like this: nature is rarely at peace, and history is never quite the past.

*So was I once myself a swinger of birches;
And so I dream of going back to be.*

For eleven years, Bulkeley lived in a commune in Cambridge, with several M.I.T.



It's Not Easy Being Green: (Above) *Removing the Shroud* (1986), oil on canvas, with signature elements like Band-Aids and a birch tree. (Opposite) Morgan Bulkeley holds *Goldfinch* (1988), oil paint on applewood.

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mathematicians, an architect, some writers, and a psychiatrist. They shared everything, and each dinner meant five or six new friends at the table. His art documented the neighborhood, and if nature was present, it was invisible. Life in Cambridge might have kept them unmarried forever, so in 1986, Tillinghast moved from Washington, D.C., and Bulkeley from Cambridge, to share their mountain again.

Today, while the couple's home is still in Mount Washington, several hundred yards from Pennyroyal, they recently moved to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where they care for the elder Morgan Bulkeley—although any Yalie naturalist in his tenth decade who once spent a year in a cabin, does seven hundred

strokes a day on a rowing machine, and has just gotten through all of Faulkner, even in blindness, would seem to demand more awe than care.

For twenty years, Bulkeley has worked in a weird warren of office space in downtown Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He's one of the six artists whose imagery is on BerkShares, the regional currency. His wife's organization, the nonprofit land conservancy Green Berkshires, is one flight down, and the gallery run by Geoffrey Young, his main regional dealer, is just up the street. Twenty years into their friendship, Young occasionally calls Bulkeley "M.B.," and Bulkeley and Tillinghast often, in all sincerity, call each other by "thee" and "thy."

He paints more than birches now, and his studio is filled with all kinds of wood: 1970s paneling, carved masks and low-reliefs, and his latest project, a series of staffs like those which West African chiefs use to formalize their dignity. They're meticulously painted and colored, like anything from his tough hands, but the work isn't only his. In Pittsfield, after Bulkeley strips a branch of mountain laurel and carves it to a good rough shape, he passes the piece to Bulkeley, Sr., who uses sandpaper to smooth it down. He stops when his hands tell him. They both love doing this.

Bulkeley hastens to mention the major influence of the late painter Philip Guston. The two never met, but their work shares a zany rage at a nation of dullards and hypocrites. Symptoms of this exasperation in-
If I Had a Hammer: (Left) Old tools from Pennyroyal and paintbrushes have been reincarnated as decorative objects, carved from single pieces of sugar maple. (Top) These sculptures at the artist's home, made of cherry wood, have been outdoors since 1980.



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clude their iconic characters feet, painted flat and droll. Bulkeley charts his paintings' characteristic mix of loose jabs and feather-light precision to a 1981 Guston show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, where a simple, grand painting called *Pull* caught and held him for ten minutes. He calls it the history of a dancing hand, and remembers thinking, happily, "This is what it feels like to die."

Later, Bulkeley gives a reasoned, ten-minute discourse on the tumble nature is taking—from Colony Collapse Disorder and the fungus found on bats to chronically wasting deer. Though he's scared and discouraged, he says that things can only get so bad before we have to laugh, and you can imagine Guston chuckling his assent.

Bulkeley will give you whatever he can, and he'll show you even more. Tall and fit, he goes to a corner of his studio and slides out a huge canvas called *Beak Morphology*. It's filled with birds: Audubon birds, dropped in from the sky they're so real; Donald Duck and Tweety, gaping at their realer selves and drawn from figurines hoarded by Jarvis Rockwell, who used to work next door; and people peering like spies from behind waves



Graphic Content: Artist Morgan Bulkeley at work on *Who's the Daddy?*, oil on canvas.

of terrain who pretend they're birds by strapping fake beaks on their faces. One uses a corn cob, another a boot.

He molds their limbs like clay into the naked, Guston-style figure that he uses to thwart notions of race, gender, or age. They're more fuzzily rendered than any of the birds, because birds, he says, are more

present than any person. (Bulkeley's teasing us here, because as people, we're a little out of it sometimes, and absurd, too.) Up close, paintings like this are bizarre and monumental.

His low-reliefs, cut in the toughest local sugar maple, overwhelm with a world's glorious definition. Making them is painfully

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intense on his wrists, and lately he's been tempted to stop.

*One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them*

Two years ago, gallery owner Leslie Ferrin invited Stuart Chase, executive director of the Berkshire Museum, on a visit to Bulkeley's studio. Until that trip, neither had known Bulkeley's art in depth, so Ferrin acts out entering his little room by dropping her jaw and

As a child, Bulkeley identified strongly with Native Americans, and, with his parents' encouragement, he'd be gone for the day, carving wood in caves and a teepee. He admires any culture that embraces a system not built on reality, call it primitive, outsider, African, or folk. He's happy, like these artists, to make work that counters the thrust of the marketplace, and, like them, he finds comfort in the repetition of forms, in acting out, or sometimes subverting, his personal traditions.

And he knows traditions. His ancestor



Birds of a Feather: *Beak Morphology* (2000), oil on canvas, was recently purchased by the Berkshire Museum.

whispering, "This is the real thing." Chase agreed, and later, bought *Beak Morphology* for the Berkshire Museum's permanent collection. (Bulkeley and Chase arranged for the purchase to be made through Ferrin's gallery, so that she'd earn the commission customary for dealers, even though she says her role in the sale was tangential. Whether or not this was necessary, Bulkeley smiles and quietly says that it was. This is the kind of goodwill that Pittsfield enjoys right now.)

In July, Ferrin Gallery presents Boston Ten, curated by Bulkeley. The show unites art by his thirty-year circle of friends and includes a series of drawn collaborations, passed around mostly by mail.

Peter Bulkeley, who left England in 1635 to found Concord, Massachusetts, wrote one of the colonies' first published books—*Gospel Covenant*, which Bulkeley calls unreadable. Bulkeley is proud of his relation to a startling array of New Englanders, but it has little impact on his actions. Still, it's tempting to connect Bulkeley to the transcendentalists, and not only because Ralph Waldo Emerson was a Bulkeley. It's clear that Morgan Bulkeley, Sr.—with his year in a cabin, his seven hundred and fifty columns on nature in the *Berkshire Eagle*, and his lifetime of learning, teaching, and telling—instilled in his son a sense of awe for what surrounds them. The awe sometimes feels straight from Thoreau,

who wrote, "in Wildness is the preservation of the World." But more often, it feels drawn from Frost, who knew the futility of resisting civilization.

A year out of Yale, Bulkeley ended up in Newark, New Jersey, where he saw the 1967 riots firsthand. It was a heavy blow, and one can see the city in his work's dismal suffering and in its mordant pleas—through forgiveness, shopping, or dressing like happy animals—for unity.

If folk art is made by people who don't much care to sign their work, that's what covers the high walls of Pennyroyal—that and the ancient wallpaper Bulkeley annually pastes back up. The property now belongs to Bulkeley's two aunts, and he does whatever upkeep he can. The name, which he pronounces in four distinct parts, PEN-



Old Home Week: Margaret Bulkeley visits with his aunt, Lucile "Cile" Van Deosen, at their family home, Pennyroyal, in Mount Washington, Mass.

ny ROY-al, comes from the mildly toxic herb that surrounds it, and the core of the rambling house dates to 1820, just before Bulkeley's Dutch maternal relatives moved in. They'd been in the Berkshires since 1692,

when they climbed up Mount Washington from the Hudson Valley to avoid heavy tithing by leaders there. With mild indignation, Bulkeley tells of a later Dutch offensive that ended in three torched houses and a murder.

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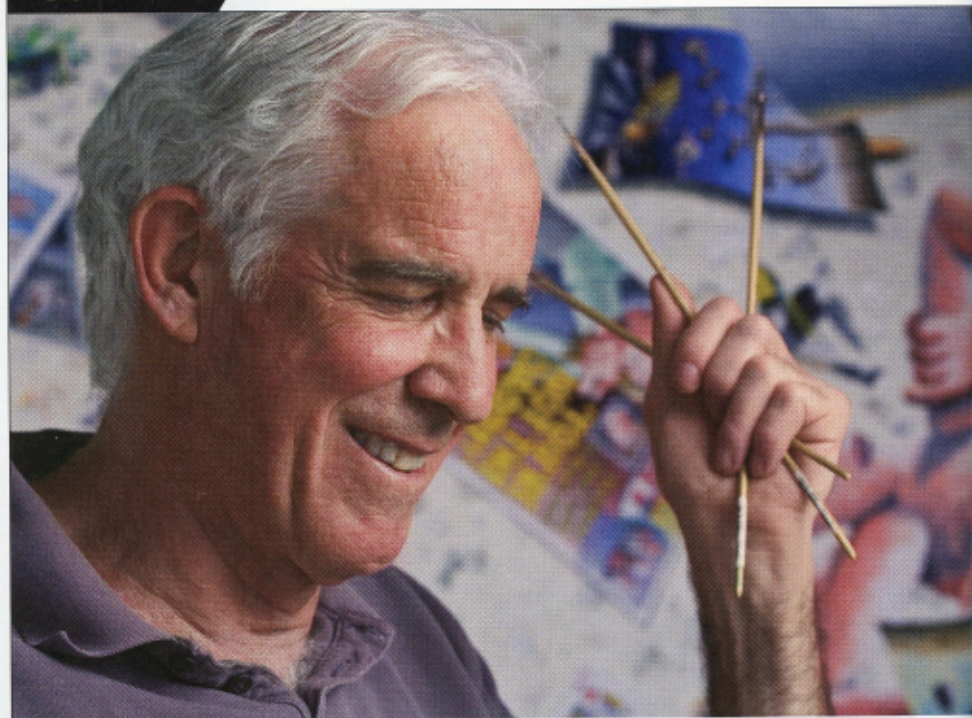
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From around 1880 until 1973, the place was a boarding house; from the 1950s on, it was run by Bulkeley's great-aunt Elizabeth Spurr, a warmhearted woman they called Tizzy. Today, with local business clamoring for nationwide notice, it's bracing to see a place that thrived on nothing but word-of-mouth, however silent now.

Raymond Ditmars, the head of the Bronx Zoo's reptile department, was a regular. He caught rattlesnakes and kept them, live, in his bureau drawers. When indoor plumbing turned all the rage, and Tizzy needed a bathtub, Ditmars brought back a spare trough for elephant-feed. Uncle Bob Sherwood, the last of Barnum & Bailey's original clowns, came often. Babe Ruth stayed close on the mountain during hunting trips, and in the guest register of another house nearby, the family found the signature of one H. Melville.

During his teens, Bulkeley had a job waiting on the long cherry table at Pennyroyal,

with its unending variety of lodgers. Stories of lodgers before his time deepened his senses, and these stories, hardened by years into allegory, now seem the invisible girders of his work. In winter, Tizzy sequestered herself in her quarters with little more than a loom and a bed, lights out by seven. Across from a bobcat skin on her door, Bulkeley shows the razors his great-grandfather, a veterinarian he called "Grampy," used in bleeding cows. He asks if I saw the giant mirror—his parents were married in front of it. He points out the planks, more than a foot wide, on the north wing's cramped second floor.

This wing is where lodgers slept, and it's where his visiting friends still sleep, out from Boston or wherever for a summer's week, no more than five at a time with most bedrooms not up to code. They gather in the library, just as before, playing cards and finishing each other's pictures and sentences. Bulkeley calls this his social world and wishes it could



stay that way forever. He and his wife, with no son or daughter, aren't sure who will take care of the place when they're gone.

*I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.*

The back porch of Pennyroyal opens onto the valley where Eleanor fell, and the long gaze of her husband's work recalls how the land rolls out here, with birches that line the horizon his old grandparents climbed over. Behind those birds, painted so close and clear, the couple is flying too, fuzzy and falling once, but flying, away from earth awhile. **BI**

French Clements's mother is an artist, which means that he grew up saving old tuna cans and spaghetti sauce jars in which she'd mix paints. Today, even with recycling, he still feels a tug at each loss of a good container.

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