

MOMUS

Locascio Nighthawk, Lisa. “Unsettled Vision: Aaron Morse on the Fantasized West at Philip Martin Gallery”
Momus, February 26, 2026



Aaron Morse
Night of the Comet, 2025
Acrylic on canvas
58 x 62 in
147.3 x 157.5 cm

Aaron Morse’s tall heavens evoke Georgia O’Keeffe’s painting *Sky Above Clouds IV* (1965); the big-sky country of the American West; and the empyrean orange, yellow, and black wrought by wildfires and other industrial and climate disasters (in fact, Morse’s *Cloud World #3* [2014] anchored a recent show about portrayals of climate change in art). I was drawn to the artist’s new exhibition at Philip Martin Gallery in northeast Los Angeles, *Lights Out for the Territories*, by his attenuated, hyperreal clouds—white, cumulonimbus-wily, stretched, almost pixelated upward—and skies cerulean (or violet, or pitch black, or blood red) that convey his unsettled vision of an expansive, celestial West.

Driving to the opening, I contemplated the last few years’ obsession with nouveau Westernia, encapsulated at its height by the mainstream breakthrough of masked country singer Orville Peck and ushered to a close by the monoculture drop of Beyoncé’s *Cowboy Carter*. This New New West, which feels like it began in 2019, seemed to end in 2025 as the streets and airwaves began to fill with a different cowboy tenor. Morse’s show opened on January 24, the day Border Patrol agent Jesus Ochoa and Customs and Border Protection officer Raymundo Gutierrez killed Alex Pretti in Minneapolis. Unsure of what to do with myself, I went to the gallery, feeling queasy about cowboys, uncertain I could trust their small, spectral bodies in Morse’s paintings, where they curve on horseback amid rams, goats, cattle, among rocks and shrubs under an endless sky.

In person, the surprisingly large paintings—mostly acrylic and oil, many featuring cutouts collaged on top of colorful, busy landscapes—play in the space between memory and imagination. “My paintings, though broadly representational, are not so realistic as to be confused with reality,” Morse writes in the press release that accompanies the show. “So what then is a Wild West or Sci-Fi image actually doing?” His works quote a wide variety of popular representations of the West at grandiose scale. The line of figures at the bottom of the sky full of meteors in *Night of the Comet* (2025) reminded me of the colorful tableaux of Millard Sheets’s Southern California bank murals. The man standing next to me in front of that painting remarked that he was sure it referenced a bas-relief he had seen at a concert hall somewhere in LA.

Conquest and colonization coexist, whether on rockets or horseback, as the mania for acquisition rides along with the uneasy and constant erasure of history. *Cosmic Ecology* (2025), with its chaotic collision of ringed planets, spacecraft, and intergalactic phenomena rendered brightly against a black background, recalls and troubles the classic sci-fi style of legendary comics artists such as Al Williamson and Joe Orlando. They are part of a canon of midcentury artists that includes counterculture figures like L. Ron Hubbard (a sci-fi artist and writer before he founded Scientology), as well as Edythe Eyde and James L. Kepner, queer Los Angeles pioneers whose science-fiction zines and illustrations created subaltern community spaces that flew safely beneath the radar of mainstream opprobrium. Two long, banner-shaped paintings, *Ancient Ocean* (2023) and *Stampede (Western Death)* (2017), similarly recall—in both color and fervent, organic shapes—the eighties comics style epitomized by Alan Moore’s run of *Swamp Thing* (1983–87), illustrated by Stephen Bissette, Rick Veitch, and John Totleben; Sam Kieth’s *Sandman* (1989) and *The Maxx* (1993–98); as well the profuse, Japanese-influenced, sometimes neon landscapes of popular California woodcut artist Tom Killion. In layering and drawing these styles together, Morse’s paintings stun the reader into a kind of dreamy present. What, indeed, is such imagery actually doing? The answer may lie in the paintings that seem to mark the greatest departure from Morse’s well-

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Aaron Morse
Cosmological Figures, 2026
Acrylic on canvas
65 x 54 in
165.1 x 137.2 cm

trod frontiers. *Cosmological Figures* and *The Spring* (both 2025) are elusive and confronting, with no heads-turned cowboys or writhing beasts, but rather collections of faces and ephemera laid in vague circles atop squarish canvases. The compositions are more horizontal and collagistic, less narrative than Morse's typical approach. In *Cosmological Figures*, a persistent motif of ancient esoterica prevails, with images resembling film negatives of statues, Egyptian and Greek ephemera, and a vaguely European past. A masked knight with a heart pinned to his chest, bearing a sun-faced shield, and a crowned woman in profile are arrayed like flowers around other figures who seem to represent the African diaspora. *The Spring* features another collection of heads, mostly but not exclusively femme, encircled by blooms. Here again lurks the sense that the meaning of these images seems to drift just beyond our grasp. In these two paintings, Morse tends to a palette that recalls thermography, creating the sensation that these assemblages of half-recalled visages wait on the inside of your eyelids. They are memories; they are history; they may be buried, or forgotten, but they have not disappeared.

"For a moment, at the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant. There is not *tabula rasa*," the historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote in his 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," arguing that the nature of "winning a wilderness" determined the character of the United States of America. "What is the frontier?" he asked, in what would become known as the Frontier Thesis. "The most significant thing about it is that it lies at the hither edge of free land."

While I ate tacos in the courtyard outside the gallery, Morse's confronting images looming in my mind, I looked out at the parking lot, wondering about *The Leonids* (2025), one of the few images in which Morse places a woman at the center of the action. She is dismounting her horse, braids akimbo. Beset by spectral riders, she seems to be opting out of fantasized Wests altogether. The shapes in the sky, constellations that also conjure contrails, offer her no more escape than her pursuers. Only by heading out of the frame, toward a newer and more ancient path, does she chance reinvention and change.