

ARTISTS FILE

SETTINGS

POSES

SYMBOLS

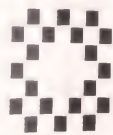
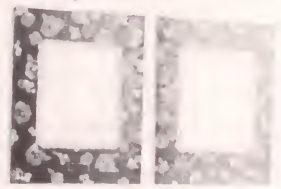
PLEASURES

GESTURES

OBJECTS

MOMENTS

ATMOSPHERES



REE MORTON

A New Acquisition: Signs of Love

"When we cease being children we are already dead"
—Constantin Brancusi

Ree Morton (1936–1977) is an artist who, like many others, came out of the kitchen and into the studio during the sixties. After studying nursing, marrying a naval officer, and having three children, she abandoned conventional life in search of something more. When Morton returned to school in 1966 to study art, her exceptional drive, dedication, and brilliant ability to synthesize were immediately apparent to her teachers, including Robert Rohn, Marcia Tucker, Rafael Ferrer, and Italo Scanga. She tackled such subjects as Pre-Columbian influences in Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture and the myth of Prometheus in post-Renaissance art with intensity and seriousness—qualities that would fuel her own art through the next decade. Though Morton came to art late in life, she went into creative high gear in the seventies, producing some groundbreaking and influential work that reflected many of the aesthetic currents of that decade. Tragically, Morton's career was abruptly cut short by a fatal car accident in 1977, less than ten years after it had begun.

From the start, Morton eschewed traditional art practices, favoring instead a more open, inclusive approach. She refused, for instance, to choose between painting and sculpture, preferring to work in an area between the two. As indicated in an entry from her notebooks from 1968, she was an independent thinker, particularly intolerant of "good taste":

I LIKE	I HATE
Byzantine mosaics	Symbolism
Moslem mosaics	Abstract Expressionism
Kachina dolls	Surrealism
Roman villa murals	Greek Hellenistic sculpture
Aegean art	Liars
Sumerian idols	Painters—phony
Good liars	Paintings—rectangle
Sculptors—real	Color relationships
Printed circuits	Elegance
Ingres	Good taste

Her primary concern was space, her approach, situational. Some of her earliest works were spatial installations using industrial materials such as fiberglass insulation and glass brick. Soon, natural materials—branches, logs, twigs, rocks, and grass—found their way into the work. The elements were dispersed in loosely ordered arrangements that evoked arcane rituals, Native American ceremonies, or Japanese gardens. In 1973 and 1974, Morton produced three ambitious installation works: *Sister Perpetua's Lit*, *Souvenir Place*, and *To Each Concrete Mau* (which was made for and exhibited in this very space). These works had strong mythological and metaphorical associations; they recalled memories of past places while responding to the particularities of the exhibition space.

Morton's anti-formalist approach came directly out of Post-Minimalism and Process Art, as did her belief in indeterminacy and lack of a fixed reality. In her diaries she acknowledged debts to Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois, Claes Oldenburg, and Richard Artschwager, among others. Yet she had an eye to other cultures, to literature, to theater.



She admired, for instance, Florine Stettheimer's private, feminine expression—her rejection of both the academy and the avant-garde—and started to spend considerable time pondering the validity of a "female sensibility." As Morton became more involved with feminist issues, she began turning away from nature toward a more decorative, overtly emotional, and theatrical expression. Along with other artists, such as her friends Elizabeth Murray, Scott Burton, Judy Pfaff, and Laurie Anderson, she bridged the gap between the austere installations of the early seventies and the pattern and decoration movement that would follow.

The turning point in her aesthetic came in 1974, when Morton was asked to submit work for the "Women's Faculty Show" at the Philadelphia College of Art, where she was teaching. Because there were few eligible participants, she concocted an ironic response in the form of *Bike Sale*. Paper doilies, glitter, cheap contact paper, jujubes, and small pastel bows made out of elastic were pressed into service for this pictorial installation that was both humorous and sentimental. This was her first use of elastic, a material that sags like cloth when dampened and can be molded into shapes that harden when dry.

Morton began to push this surprising unleashing of sentimentality even further, experimenting with the emblematic function of words—in particular, aphorisms and homespun American clichés. The phrases—among them "the plant that heals may also poison" and "let us celebrate, while youth lingers, and ideas flow"—were emblazoned on banners, flags, plaques and horseshoe-shaped floor pieces. Innocent and childlike, menacing and uncomfortable, they corresponded to the artist's own inner emotional states.

The culmination of Morton's radical reorientation was *Signs of Love*, made late in 1976. She had spent a joyous year in southern California teaching at the University of California, San Diego, and the work is festive, bold, and self-confident. Its carnival atmosphere was shocking when it was first exhibited in the Whitney Museum's 1977 Biennial Exhibition, and it still retains the power to stop you dead in your tracks. A mélange of ladders, curtains, roses, bows, and swags, *Signs of Love* is a melodramatic ode to the romantic and fleeting aspects of love. The words "symbols," "objects," "moments," "gestures," "atmospheres," "poses," and "pleasures" underscore the mood while suggesting the artistic process itself. In *Signs of Love*, Morton successfully synthesized narrative, image, and object into a symbolic whole. As one of her notebook entries reads, "good decoration is symbolic."

Morton was a true original—her wit, poetry, and exuberance infected her art and everyone she met. Willing to take big risks, she tested the limits of beauty, taste, and acceptability with a rare combination of humor and seriousness, vulnerability and strength.

Lisa Phillips
Curator

Works in the Exhibition

Signs of Love, 1976
Mixed media, dimensions variable
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Gift of the artist's children 90/2
Seven sketchbooks, 1968–77
Franklin Furnace, New York

Chronology and Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

1936 August 3, Helen Marie Reilly (Morton) born in Ossining, New York, to John W and Helen Reilly

1953–56 Attends Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York, studies nursing.

1956 Marries Ted Morton

1960 Spring, lives in Jacksonville, Florida
Attends first art classes at the Jacksonville Museum

1963–65 Lives in Norfolk, Virginia

1965–68 Attends the University of Rhode Island, Kingston; receives B FA

1970 Attends Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia; receives M FA

Included in "Contemporary American Sculpture Annual," Whitney Museum of American Art

1972 Moves to New York City

1973 Installation, *Sister Perpetua's Lie*, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Installation, *Souvenir Piece*, at her first one-artist exhibition at Artists Space, New York

1974 Awarded Creative Artists' Public Service (CAPS) fellowship

Installation, *To Each Concrete Man*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art

First use of celastic, in *Bake Sale*, installation at "Women's Faculty Show," Philadelphia College of Art

Visiting artist, painting and drawing department, School of The Art Institute of Chicago

1975 Awarded National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant

Visiting artist, sculpture department, Yale University, New Haven

1975–76 Visiting artist, University of California at San Diego

1976 Visiting artist, School of Art and Design, California Institute of the Arts, Valencia

Installation, *Regarding Landscape*, and performance, *Solemn Ceremony*, at Artpark, Lewiston, New York

1977 Visiting artist, School of The Art Institute of Chicago

Manipulations of the Organic, one-artist exhibition at Walter Kelley Gallery, Chicago, and Droll/Kolbert Gallery, New York

April 30, dies of injuries sustained in an automobile accident, Chicago

May, sets and costumes designed by Morton for the Mabou Mines theater production *Dressed Like an Egg*, New York

September, *Regional Pieces* at Droll/Kolbert Gallery, New York

"Ree Morton 1936–1977," at Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University

1980 "Ree Morton Retrospective 1971–77," organized by Allan Schwartzman and Kathleen Thomas, at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, with catalogue (traveled nationally)

1988 "The Sketchbooks of Ree Morton" at Franklin Furnace, New York

R E E M O R T O N

A New Acquisition: *Signs of Love*

May 11–July 22, 1990

Whitney Museum of American Art

This exhibition is sponsored by the Lobby Gallery Associates

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New York, New York 10021