

Frieze

Reviews /



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Ree Morton and the Possibilities of Craft

An exhibition at ICA Philadelphia presents the late-artist's development in line with the discourses of her too brief time



As a nurse and housewife, Ree Morton (1936–77) began taking art classes in the mid-1950s in Virginia, USA before separating from her husband a decade later, eventually leaving her three children with him to pursue an art career in New York. She exhibited throughout the US and died tragically in a car accident a day before the opening of a show of hers at Walter Kelly Gallery in Chicago. At the ICA, where a major exhibition of the artist's work, 'The Plant That Heals May Also Poison', is now on view, curator Kate Kraczon has chosen not to highlight that narrative in hopes of avoiding the biography-centred reading to which the practices of so many women artists are consigned. Instead, the show focuses on Morton's development as an artist in the context of changing discourses in contemporary art at the time, from postminimalism to feminism, bringing together drawings, sculptures, installations and archival materials to provide a thorough accounting of her brief practice.

Alexander and Bonin



Ree Morton, *Don't worry, I'll only read you the good parts*, 1975, oil on celastic, 137 x 66 cm. Courtesy: Alexander and Bonin, New York and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania. Photograph: Joerg Lohse. © Estate of Ree Morton

Structured chronologically, the exhibition moves from Morton's early works – 16 small 'wood drawings' marked with paint, pen and hardware and hung on the wall (the gridded surfaces of some recall tiny Hanne Darboven works) – to the exuberant Celastic pieces for which she is best known. A number of these works, sculpted from the plasticky fabric material and sometimes accentuated with small light bulbs, dot the walls of a large gallery, where their twee forms (bows, ribbons) and scattered installation give the sense of a young girl's bedroom. *Let Us Celebrate While Youth Lingers and Ideas Flow* and *Don't Worry, I'll only read you the good parts* (both 1975) encapsulate Morton's cheerful, almost childlike style: both feature their titles' messages in handwritten letters, whether on pink ribbons against a bright blue sky or on a gathered cloth decorated with a big yellow flower, respectively. On the opposite side of the gallery, *Signs of Love* (1976) extends across two walls in a scrapbook-like display of Celastic roses, sweet portraits in floral painted frames, brightly coloured ladders and individual words – 'MOMENTS', 'SYMBOLS', 'GESTURES', 'PLEASURES' – that evoke both the mechanics and the joys of art-making.

Alexander and Bonin

Ree Morton, *Manipulations of the Organic*, 1977, series of 14 panels; acrylic on canvas; text on gray wall, installation view, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2015. Courtesy: Alexander and Bonin, New York and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania. © Estate of Ree Morton



Other works hint at less unequivocally positive sentiments. *Terminal Clusters* (1974), written on a banner stretching across a large, lit-up horseshoe installed to look like a headstone, brings to mind cancerous cells. Even *Maternal Instincts* (1974), with its title written on a large Celastic banner and smaller ones beneath it, each with a lightbulb and the first initials of Morton's three children, betrays a sense of wistfulness. In the final gallery, works from a later series, *Manipulations of the Organic* (1977), are displayed as Morton set out in studies for her final exhibition. Fourteen acrylic paintings hang within a white band well above eye level; the rest of the walls are painted grey. The paintings also feature a grey background behind biomorphic forms in white as well as rich shades of red, yellow, pink, green, blue or orange. It's a brilliant installation, more precise and meditative than Morton's earlier works, and reveals the continued development of her use of color, form and space – beyond, though never far from, the decorative. Rather than revisiting this overlooked artist simply as a precursor to the renewed interest in sincerity, the handmade, and what has been termed a 'feminine aesthetics' in contemporary art, 'The Plant that Heals' evinces the complexity of Morton's practice and her expansive engagement with the formal and affective possibilities of craft.

Ree Morton, 'The Plant That Heals May Also Poison' runs at ICA Philadelphia until 23 December 2018.