

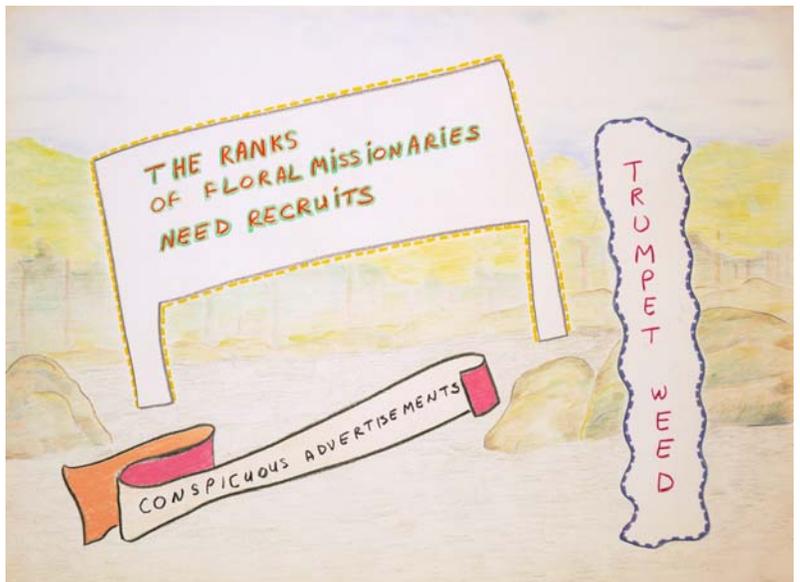
## REE MORTON

12/3/09

THE DRAWING CENTER

by carol diehl

NEW YORK Now that so much art looks like Ree Morton's, it's hard to imagine just how radical her work appeared in the '70s. In her brief career (she got her BFA in 1968 at 32, and died in a car accident at 41) and without even seeming to try, Morton turned everything upside down. Although she was surely reacting to the male-dominated, pared-down, intellectually based art prevalent at the time and therefore can certainly be considered a feminist, Morton did not take a political stance as much as simply use art to make sense of her life as a woman. In doing so, she introduced feminine values (she once designed a series of nautical signal flags representing her friends, many of them women, and flew them from a schooner in New York Harbor), oblique personal narrative and droll aphorisms that could be seen as precursors to those of Jenny Holzer and the Guerrilla Girls.



Thumbing her nose at then current taboos, Morton blithely decorated her pieces with ruffles, swags and curtains, making everything—paintings, drawings, sculpture—in a natural, unstudied way that Lucy Lippard termed "confrontational innocence." In a notebook, Morton said she aimed to be "light and ironic on serious subjects without frivolity." Her work helped to legitimize decoration as well as personal notation and brought humor to an over-earnest art world.

This exhibition, "At the Still Point of the Turning World" (titled after a T.S. Eliot poem Morton kept above her studio desk), featured some of Morton's smaller, more intimate pieces, which had previously been overlooked in favor of the flamboyant sculpture made of a plastic-and-fabric material resembling papier-mâché that became her signature medium. Along with examples of drawing-based sculptural works, there was a wall installation of what Morton called "Wood Drawings" (1971), which consist of small found fragments of wood, rough and punctured with nails or staples. More familiar were drawings from a series in which she riffs on Victorian botanical descriptions ("Jack-in-the-Pulpit: murderer of innocent benefactors, a gay deceiver, a wolf in sheep's clothing, brother to dragons—comes from a rascally family, anyhow"), turning them into statements of a homey, sardonic philosophy.

Most poignant was the selection of notebook sketches and a series of small pencil drawings that Morton made when still a graduate student at the Tyler School of Art, in which she seems to take on Minimalism with the intention of infusing it with emotional content. She makes use of repetitive marks in these drawings in a way that stresses their slight differences one from another, so that her geometry assumes a subtle biological tinge; some marks resemble cuts or wounds, and others seem to quiver like paramecia under a microscope. Unpretentious as they are, the drawings contain all of the strength and vulnerability, intimacy and humor that would surface in the later work which made her so influential.

Photo: Ree Morton: *Trumpet Weed*, 1974, crayon and colored pencil on paper, 22 by 30 inches; at the Drawing Center.