

NOTES ON THE CULTURE

## What Does It Mean to Be an Artist and a Mother?

A new retrospective reveals the extent of Ree Morton's brief career, and the agonizing decision women of her era had to make between their children and their work.



Ree Morton's sculpture "The Plant That Heals May Also Poison" (1974), made with light bulbs, enamel and glitter on wood and Celastic.FWA — Lieve Van Gorp Foundation for Women Artists. © Estate of Ree Morton, courtesy of Alexander and Bonin

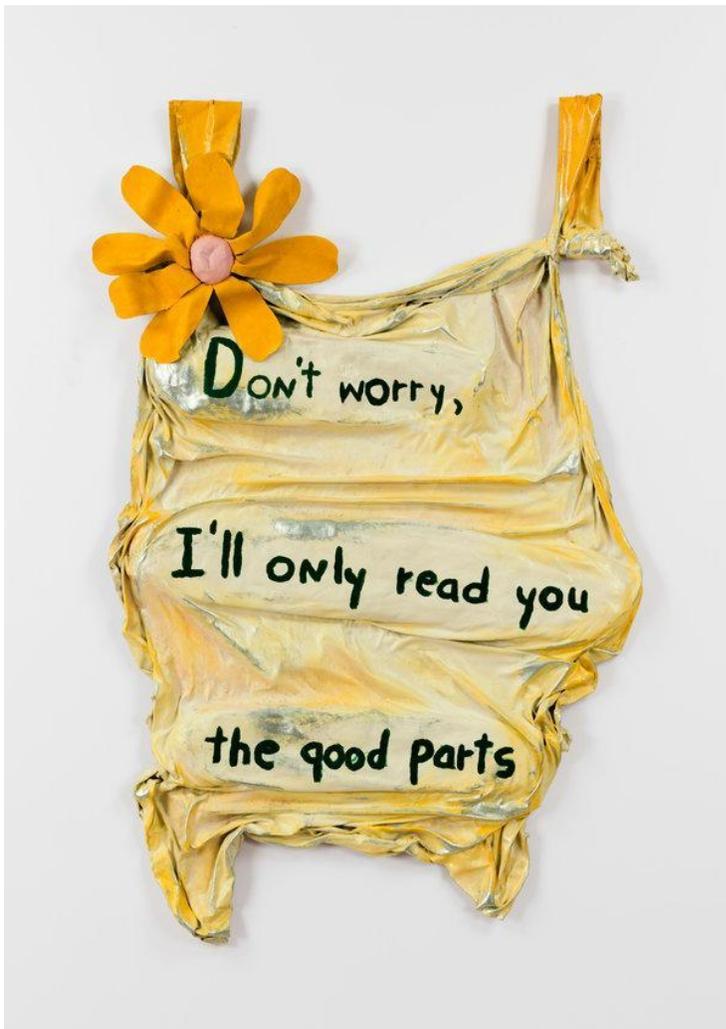
**By Alice Gregory, Aug. 29, 2018**

IN THE FALL of 1976, the artist Ree Morton, then 40 years old, drafted an application for a Guggenheim Fellowship. She opened the submission with a condensed autobiography. "My career probably began at the age of 3, when I took up watching ant hills and protecting lady bugs," she wrote. "This caused a long interruption in my artistic progress, because my family read it as an interest in science and directed me to nursing." Here there is a paragraph break, and on one copy of the document, a faint wrinkle. Morton continued, "As soon as I realized the mistake, I started studying art, but it was already 1965, and I had a naval officer husband, three children and a house in a middle-class neighborhood in Norfolk, Virginia." She summarized her life story, with a winking ironic detachment, as a "feminist classic" and then went on to list some of her accomplishments: "I got a B.F.A. and an M.F.A. I learned to use power tools and to know the difference between needing help and just thinking I did. I got a teaching job in Philadelphia. I moved to a loft in N.Y.C. I learned to take myself seriously. I learned not to take myself THAT seriously. I did some good work, got some shows and some reviews. Not bad, for a girl."

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Attached to Morton's application materials was a checklist of past works. One described an installation, each wall of the gallery painted a different pastel color or wallpapered, covered with flashing lights and hung with arc-shaped sculptures made from Celastic, a plasticized fabric with which she often worked. Another piece, called "Let Us Celebrate While Youth Lingers and Ideas Flow," consists of a blue canvas painted with clouds; three strange, dark flowerlike forms appear to pin up pink banners, which, when read together, make up the work's title. Her iconography was composed of the very clichés — bright, almost childlike colors; the presence of playground objects like seesaws — that critics might have used to condemn her, as they were those associated with a wife and mother, already into her 30s, who had domestic duties and a parochial life. Present in the selection of pieces are many of Morton's sentimental, décor-oriented, performatively feminine motifs — bows; ruffles; wallpaper; flowers; fairy-tale-looking flags; loopy, girlish cursive lettering — which collectively one critic would later refer to as "Emily Dickinson in love with Raymond Roussel." When she

prepared the application, Morton had been making artwork for less than a decade, and a few months later, she would be dead.



"Don't worry, I'll only read you the good parts," 1975.  
© Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York

In the 41 years since, Morton — who once described her own artistic ambitions as "light and ironic on serious subjects without frivolity" — has become something of an obsession within the art world. There are neither monographs devoted to her nor a catalogue raisonné; the few public photographs of Morton show her smiling, and the work — colorful, whimsical — has a similar warmth to it, a savvy but noncynical charm. The sculptor Rachel Harrison is an admirer, and many pieces by Robert Gober are reminiscent of Morton's multimedia works; young artists including Alex Da Corte have cited her as an influence. It is difficult to look at Morton's installations and paintings and sculptures, to see them mounted in exhibitions (she has works in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney, among many other places), to notice her name mentioned alongside famous feminist artists like Judy Chicago and Martha Rosler and not wonder what would have come had she been permitted to keep living. "She is now a member of that tragic

sisterhood of artists in the 1970s who proved themselves but were never allowed the joy of building on their accomplishments," the critic Lucy Lippard wrote in 2009, comparing her to other artists of the same era — like Eva Hesse, Suzanne Harris and Ana Mendieta — whose lives were cut short by illness, bad health or worse.

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In the span of her nine-year career, Morton, whose first major American retrospective in nearly 40 years opens this month at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, had work shown at the Whitney, the Corcoran and the Aldrich. She received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts; taught or lectured at many colleges across the country; forged friendships with Marcia Tucker, the founder of the New Museum (the venue for Morton's last American retrospective, in 1980) and the artist Laurie Anderson; and exhibited alongside the likes of Sol LeWitt, Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Bourgeois, Bruce Nauman, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Lynda Benglis and Joseph Cornell. "It was a career of extreme productivity," Ted Bonin, a partner at Alexander and Bonin gallery in New York, which has represented the artist's estate since 1993, told me. "The amount of work she made in 1974 alone would be like a decade for another artist. You get the sense that she was trying to play catch-up. Whenever we mount a show of Ree's work, people come in, and if they aren't already aware of her, they assume she's a young artist. She didn't live long enough to get jaded or for the work to 'mature.'" The work, he said, "all looks like it's in a forever state of formation."

Considered an early practitioner of installation art and a bridge between the austerity of Minimalism in the 1970s and the more robust and eccentric art of the 1980s, Morton has often been read as similar to a great poet who died before being able to write her masterpiece. She was barely 20 when she married a naval officer, whose work kept her displaced, and she had three children by the age of 25. Living near a base in Jacksonville, Fla., she saw a television commercial for free art classes at the Jacksonville Museum of Contemporary Art, which set her on a path toward becoming an artist. But like so many women, especially in 1960s America, she had to choose between her family and her career. The conflict appears archetypal to us now, and while it might be tempting to view lives like Morton's as somehow representative of a bygone era, the private struggles it entailed are omnipresent still. The relationship between being a mother and an artist — and the question of whether one can be simultaneously good at both — has become a kind of national preoccupation, spawning a whole new literary canon. In just the past few months, autobiographical books on the subject by Sheila Heti and Meaghan O'Connell were published, along with a book-length essay by Jacqueline Rose. Other contemporary practitioners of the genre include Elisa Albert, Maggie Nelson, Rachel Cusk, Sarah Ruhl, Diablo Cody, Jenny Offill and Elena Ferrante. If Morton has long been considered an obscure, lost talent, she now seems more like a quintessential artist of her era, a symbol of all the ways women have been willfully relegated to the periphery, forced into domestic situations and restless to be recognized for something greater than themselves.



Morton, in the red top, next to her installation "The Maid of the Mist" (1976), in Lewiston, N.Y. © Estate of Ree Morton

## Alexander and Bonin

LIKE THE PAPIER-MÂCHÉ school projects of children — toiled on for weeks, forgotten and then rediscovered in the family attic 30 years later — Morton's works are ritualistic, delightful and literal in their influences. Unlike, say, Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton — who were torn between family and work, and whose art was inspired by this tension — Morton did not suffer from debilitating mental illness and did not seem to have a tortured life at home: It was the sheer banality of domesticity that seemed to drive her from it. Regardless of medium, her art appears obviously handmade, and it's impossible to look at it and not imagine, if only for a moment, Morton herself forging it — perhaps while wondering what time she should pick up her kids, or whether they were out of milk. Her strange, friendly-looking pieces are evidence of a life lived not just in the mind or in the studio but among other people.

Having come to the conclusion that she was “totally unsuited” to nursing, Morton dropped out of school and married in 1956. Around 1966, she began taking evening classes at the University of Rhode Island; two years later, at the age of 32, she and her husband separated — they would later divorce — and Morton moved with her children to Pennsylvania, where she got an M.F.A. She worked for years without a dedicated studio, constructing sculptures in suburban basements and behind washer-dryer units. “I still wasn't able to call myself an artist,” she recalled in a 1974 interview. “I was a mother, I had children, I had a family to take care of.” She went on to talk about how her teachers in art school would talk often about “being committed to your work.” That word — “commitment” — had, as Morton said, “a lot of implications that I couldn't accept.”



“For Kate,” 1976.

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Some of Morton's personal writings — including two notebooks labeled “do not read” — were destroyed by her friends and family after her death, but a series of sketchbooks, maintained between 1968 and 1977 and in the past shown as artworks themselves, are now archived at the Museum of Modern Art. They contain sketches for sculptures, lines copied down from books she was reading (Wittgenstein, Victorian field guides), notes to herself and private treatises. One widely reproduces entry lists, in two vertical columns, Morton's enthusiasms and antipathies. Her “likes” include Byzantine mosaics, Roman villa murals, Sumerian idols and good liars; among her “hates” are Abstract Expressionism, Greek Hellenistic sculpture, Stephen Greene and good taste. But the notebooks also contain, intermittently but often, the scribbles of a harried, logistically minded mother: reminders about bills and birthdays. On the right-hand page of a spread from 1976, Morton wrote of her desire to “do work which has as its impetus the influences and working processes of the major 20th-century art movements. To do this work with the intention not of simulating the finished products of those historical movements but to confront the art ideas and problems of those times as directly as possible.” On the left-hand page, in identical script, she writes: “milk, juice, bread, cottage cheese, can fruit, tuna, veg soup — onion soup, noodles, hamburger, cookies, soda.” What is left of her notebooks reveals a woman cleaved. The documents suggest that perhaps “emotional labor,” that newly fashionable sociological term used to designate all the ways in which women are forced to internalize other people's feelings at home and at work, might be a bit of a misnomer. “Cognitive labor” is more accurate.

“She seemed like what she was at that time, a harassed housewife,” the art critic Peter Schjeldahl recalled of his first meeting with Morton, in Philadelphia in the early 1970s. “I got the impression of a woman who had spent a lot of years maintaining a lot of lists in her mind.” Nonetheless, he was impressed. “She pulled these notched wooden pieces of work out of her pocket,” he recalled. “The whole thing seemed quite magical.” Schjeldahl admitted to developing a crush on Morton like a lot of people did. “She had great manners; she smiled a lot. I want to say she was shy, but that isn't quite right. She was reticent, self-possessed and cautious. She was grown up when none of the rest of us were. That's why we were in the art world in a sense. But she was the adult in the room.”

When Morton moved to New York, in 1972, her children went to Virginia to live with their father. Sally, Morton's middle child, now 57, was 11 at the time, and she told me that she remembers an incident in which someone expressed shock that a woman would give up care of her children. “I think that for her art, it was the perfect thing for her to do, but that as a mother she found it difficult,” she said. “I know she felt guilty and torn,” Linda, Morton's oldest daughter, who is now 61, told me. She never gave up on the desire to have her children back with her. “Over the years, when she would talk about moving closer, we would discourage it because we saw how happy she was.” (Morton's youngest child, Scott, is 56.)

Cynthia Carlson, an artist who was one of Morton's best friends, also recalled a snide sense of disapproval surrounding Morton's decision to trade suburban family life for a child-free loft on Waverly Place. She got a lot of trouble “from a lot of people, from in and out of the art world,” Carlson told an art historian in 2013. “I of course thought it was great,” she said. “But Ree was definitely always divided in her emotions and attention. She wondered in her journals if it was really such a good thing to be an artist.” Sally said that growing up she “didn't have a sense that my mom was doing anything life-changing.” When you're a child, she explained, “you only care about what's happening in your own life.” But now, when she thinks about her mother's choices, she's overcome with pride and awe. “It's almost mind-blowing,” she said. “I've always felt that what she did was unusual and marvelous. It's wonderful and sad at the same time. There's just this huge sense of loss that's part of all of this. For me anyway, it's always present and became more so after I had children of my own.”

## Alexander and Bonin

THE NINE YEARS Morton spent as an artist are represented at the ICA retrospective, called “Ree Morton: The Plant That Heals May Also Poison,” which includes more than 40 works. Missing, however, is any reference to the fraught relationship between Morton’s private life and her work. This was deliberate, according to Kate Kraczon, the exhibition’s curator, who told me that Morton’s children are mentioned in the wall text, but her divorce and custody are not. “When you bring the biography to bear on the legacy of

women artists,” she said, “so often it becomes pejorative.” It’s true that in the context of a stifled life, a woman’s work can look smaller than it otherwise might, but not always. It can also look braver, more improbable, more political — just by the fact of its existence.



Morton in 1974. Photograph: Frank Owen

Kraczon explained how viewers have a “morbid fascination” with artists and motherhood, and what it means when mothers choose their work over their children. “We want to punish women who make these choices,” she said. “I do feel like retroactively Ree has been punished, in a certain sense.” She paused, unsure if that was quite what she meant. “I find myself tripping over my words, because we don’t really have the language to address motherhood when we’re talking about women who make art,” she said. “It’s so obvious, it’s hardly worth saying, but were we talking about a male artist we wouldn’t be worrying about mentioning children or divorce — we might not even mention his family at all. Is it a disservice to bring in biographical information into an introductory reading of Morton’s work? I don’t know. It’s something I’ve struggled with.”

Whether it imperils her legacy or not, Morton’s own life story has, like the work itself, a kind of undeniable charisma. Who hasn’t contemplated

altering, radically and beyond recognition, the very conditions of their existence? Leaving everything, moving away, trading — suddenly and forever — one’s old self-description for something new. For those among us who in too many moments find ourselves unbecomingly obsessed with time and life’s lack of it, Morton’s biography reads like a case study in the benefits of deciding to disregard the sunk costs that accrue through merely living.

In April 1977, Morton was living in Chicago. She had moved there to become a visiting artist at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. “Manipulations of the Organic,” a series of 14 acrylic paintings accompanied by a text by Louis Sullivan — what was to be her final body of work — was to go on view at a local gallery. The day before the opening, she was seriously injured in a car accident, fell into a coma and died later in the month, while the show was still up. Her death received a brief notice in *The Times*, which mentions her three children as her survivors. Otherwise, the incident went largely unremarked upon by the press.

Just a few months earlier, she had called Carlson on the phone, newly energized and excited about her work. “Now it’s time to really get serious,” she said.