

HYPERALLERGIC

An Early Installation Art Maverick Gets Her Due with a Madrid Retrospective

by Abi Shapiro on September 15, 2015



Installation view of 'Ree Morton: Be a Place, Place an Image, Imagine a Poem' at the Reina Sofia Museum

MADRID – The short but plentiful career of US installation artist Ree Morton, surveyed at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid in *Ree Morton: Be a Place, Place an Image, Imagine a Poem*, reminds us there are still many untold histories of 20th century women artists. Morton's impressive body of work, made over only nine years, has hovered on the peripheries of American art histories for decades despite the artist enjoying professional recognition during her life before she tragically died in a car accident in 1977 at age 40. Taking a broader view than ever before, this new retrospective revisits the breadth and innovation of her work as it materialized amid post-minimalist and feminist art practices on the East Coast of the United States.

Morton's trajectory was anything but conventional. She took up studying fine art in 1965, at the age of 29, while she was leading a suburban life as a naval housewife and mother to three young children. Deciding to pursue art professionally after earning an MFA in 1970, she moved to New York City in 1972, a transition she subsequently referred to as "a feminist classic, out of the kitchen and into the studio." From there, she joined the eclectic and socially conscious SoHo art scene. The large body of work Morton produced between 1968 and 1977 traces her rapid maturation from amateur to professional artist, detailing a confidence in drawing influence from a huge range of styles, ideas, and subjects.

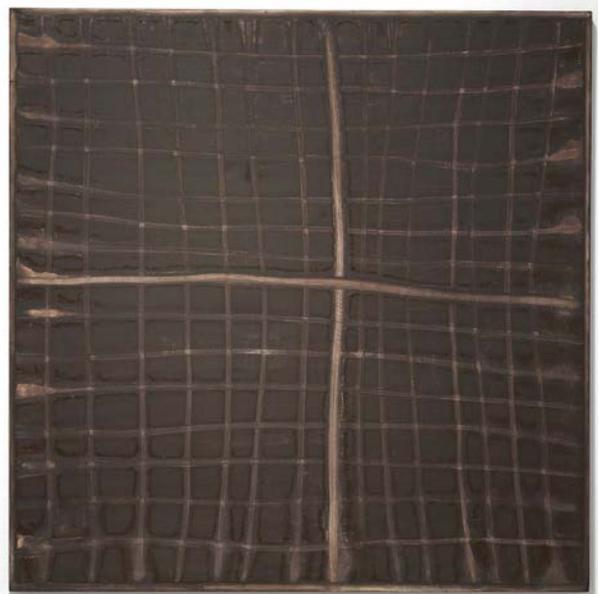
Alexander and Bonin



"Untitled" (1971-73), Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College

and Ilse Lafer). A relevant inclusion, these pieces underscore Morton's sophisticated use of non-figurative and serial forms typical of post-minimalism, as seen for example in "Untitled" (ca. 1970). This large, dark canvas, with its unevenly painted grids, the curators tell us in the wall text, aligns her early work with what critic Lucy Lippard called "eccentric abstraction," a term applied to Morton's contemporaries Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois.

Morton's more ambitiously-scaled spatial works emerged in the early '70s at the same time as installation art as a genre was in formation. Pieces like "Paintings and Objects" (1973), shown at the start of the exhibition, offer a useful segue into later works as Morton used two- and three-dimensional forms together, with painted planks of wood jutting from canvases connecting floor and wall. From here, Morton's installations converged with her growing interest in feminist and decorative art movements, producing a spectacular series of colorful, large-scale installation works in the mid '70s. The companion pieces "Souvenir Piece" (1973) and "Newfoundland Drawings" (1973), which commemorate Morton's summer vacation in Canada with her children, feature rocks on tiny plinths offered up for studious inspection as memento mori on a low-lying table. "See-Saw" (1974) likewise recalls the child-like wonder of play, only with a more sinister twist. The work only resembles the eponymous playground item by its crudely built structure of a long plank balanced horizontally on a perpendicular tree trunk. On closer inspection it is clearly not fit for use, but appears more as a kind of ritualized prop with one of the "seats" curiously hanging backwards.



"Untitled" (ca. 1970), courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York

Alexander and Bonin



Ree Morton, "See-Saw" (1974) (collection of Catherine and Will Rose, Dallas)

The measured theatricality of these works anticipated Morton's most immersive installation, "To Each Concrete Man" (1974), first shown at the Whitney Museum in a solo show of the same name. This piece, more than any other, demonstrates Morton's ability to create dynamic spatial arrangements with affective results. Dark grey painted walls in a huge room enclose two staged scenes on either side of a long rectangular space: four drooping ceiling lamps hover over four stumps of wood teetering on little legs on one side, while on the other a raised stage supports four wooden "characters" of child-like height that Morton called "Woodsmen." The figures' blank faces are directed back toward the stumps and lamps as if frozen in the midst of a performance. As Morton's only fully immersive installation, the work marks her adroit intervention into the genre of the large-scale installation format at the mid-point of her short career.

Other rooms showcase Morton's penchant for thematic investigations as diverse as Victorian botany in "Weeds of the Northeast" (1974), sentimental heraldry and flag making in "Something in the Wind" (1975), kitschy maritime panoramas in "Regional Pieces" (1975-76), and architectural design in "Manipulations of the Organic" (1977). The show culminates with several rooms that champion Morton's repeated use of a sculptural material called celastic. Now obsolete due to its toxicity, the material was widely used in the '70s for making stage props as its fabric texture hardens quickly when wetted with acetate.



Ree Morton, "Bozeman, Montana" (1974) (Beth Rudin DeWoody)

Alexander and Bonin

Morton used celastic to make objects resembling bows (“Beaux,” 1974), cakes (“Bake Sale,” 1974), ribbons and ladders (“Signs of Love,” 1976), and roses (“For Kate,” 1976). Creating a saccharine riot of “feminine” iconography in the years before she died, Morton seems to have waded into the contested feminist debate about “women’s art” – a descriptor she notably rejected for her own work – by deliberately overstating a girlish, kitschy aesthetic in order to lay bare its gendered stereotypes. As she wrote in one of her notebooks – which are now in the care of the Franklin Furnace Archives – “it is impossible not to be dealing with clichés when drawing flowers. How do you do it and let that show?”

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While each of Morton’s works can stand alone, seeing them in a full retrospective setting like this allows for a wider trajectory of early installation art to emerge, underlining the importance post-minimalist and feminist art practices had on the new genre taking shape. The exhibition marks a welcome intervention specifically into histories of early installation art, a relatively recent art historical narrative constructed by scholars and curators since the ‘90s, yet one where very few female artists have been permitted.



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Ree Morton: Be a Place, Place an Image, Imagine a Poem continues at the Reina Sofia Museum (Calle Santa Isabel, 52, Madrid, Spain) until September 28.