

Smith, Roberta. "Ree Morton"
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ART IN REVIEW

REE MORTON: 'Selected Works, 1968-1973'

By Roberta Smith
February 25, 2011

Alexander and Bonin
132 10th Avenue, near 18th Street
Chelsea, Through March 5

This is the first New York gallery exhibition in 10 years devoted to the work of Ree Morton (1936-77), one of several artists — many of them women — who started skewing Minimal and Post-Minimal strategies in explicitly personal, mildly comical directions in the late 1960s and early '70s. In several drawings in this show, Morton shades and softens the parallel lines, grids and repeating marks common to the moment. She imbues them with a cartoonish, topographical charm and then disperses them in crude maplike arrangements that she soon translated into sculptural installations.

One large drawing here is presented on a tilted wood platform covered in printed fabric; it seems wittily matted as if awaiting a giant frame, conjuring some kind of summer-camp project. A series of small, enticing, virtually unknown gray paintings with marks wiped into the surface restate the grid as coarse weaving, as if Morton wanted an effect similar to Richard Artschwager's grisaille paintings or some of Roy Lichtenstein's drawings, but less cool, with more touch.

Upstairs, a group of works from 1974 to '76 show Morton taking on bright color and pushing painting toward a kind of sculptural vaudeville. Subjects include ribboned bows, jumping fish and written words ("Pleasures"). This more ostentatiously satiric (and girlish) approach reaches an apotheosis of sorts in Morton's "Signs of Love," an extended installation involving various paintings, flowers, swags and ladders. This work has coincidentally recently been extracted from deep storage by the Whitney Museum of American Art for its mind-clearing one-work-per-gallery "Singular Visions" exhibition.

It would have been wonderful to see what came next in Morton's art, but she died in a car accident in Chicago before she could further explore, and possibly reconcile, these two different yet sympathetic sides of her sensibility.