

Exhibition 20 May – 28 September 2015
Sabatini Building, 3rd Floor

Ree Morton

Be a Place, Place an Image, Imagine a Poem



Moments, Atmospheres, 1976

Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York and Annemarie Verna Galerie, Zürich

The work of Ree Morton (Ossining, NY, 1936 – Chicago, 1977) can be situated within a specific art scene in the USA around 1970, characterized by a strong reaction to Post-war Abstract Expressionism via Minimal Art on the one hand, and Conceptual Art and Pop Art on the other. Morton's work can, however, be viewed as being closer to artistic strategies around the Pattern and Decoration or Fiber Art movements, as well as to what Lucy R. Lippard identified as "Eccentric Abstraction", a practice using "bizarre and impermanent" materials, alluding to bodily or abject sensations. On the other hand her oeuvre also has affinities to what has been dubbed Process art (R. Krauss), which deployed found material or new materiality in installations leaning toward ritual, animism or the phenomenological investigation of space.

This was the setting within which Ree Morton began her career, initiated at a fairly late stage in her life and ended prematurely in 1977 by her death in a car accident when she was only 40. However, in just eight years she created an extraordinary oeuvre with the recurrent motif of writing and language as forms and vehicles of meaning. Along with the diversity of materials characteristic of her work, she continually dissects a space located between writing and drawing, sound and sign, word and object.

Her initial artistic steps were characterized by an appropriational mode vis-à-vis Minimalism and Post-minimalism (a retrospective on one of whose key figures, Carl Andre, is also being shown by the Museum at the Palacio de Velázquez) that combined serious and critical notes. The minimalist dogmas of asepsis, non-composition, seriality and utilization of industrial materials were counteracted by the way in which she adopted a tenor that was “light and ironic on serious subjects without frivolity”. This was the means by which she set herself apart from what she conceived as petrified conceptions of art, and this consequently led her to engage in phenomenological and cartographic explorations of space in her work up until around 1974. This period was characterized by installations created primarily with found and painted wood, along with delicate drawings with evocative cartographic mind maps, sign systems and linguistic elements.

Later in her career she would evolve a particular allegorical repertoire by adopting a specific use of materials, especially the visceral *Celastix*, for highly theatrical and emblematic settings, which drew on a panoply of rhetorical twists and turns, as well as tapping into art history and the codification of the “feminine”—plants, bows, garlands or concepts such as Love, Friendship or the Gift. In this allegorical theatre, language became pictorial and sculpture was on the verge of performing. In *Manipulations of the Organic* (1977), she returned to her predilection for architectural structures and combined her admiration for Louis Sullivan’s grammar of ornamentation with the medium of painting, which she had embraced earlier in the *Regional Pieces* (1975-76), and in her affinity with the way that plants unfurl. Her interest in semiotics and expressivity, in questions of *mise-en-scène* and the “false”, should also be understood within the context of contemporary debates on the “illusionism” of painting and the “theatricality” of minimalism. In a monumental installation of paintings, Morton left as her last installation a work that pulls together strands from collective memory of the past, linking Antiquity with the urban, modern present.

Ree Morton’s first major retrospective of work was shown in the New Museum in New York in 1980, yet there was not another solo exhibition of her work until 2008-2009, this time at the Generali Foundation, Vienna. The show devoted to the artist in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, spanning her entire career from her earliest work right through to her final pieces, seeks to mark a new milestone in the study of her work by consolidating research conducted to date.

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

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