

TIMES UNION

UNWIND

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ARTS

Shining a light on an art pioneer

Breadth of Ree Morton's creativity on display at Tang Museum exhibit

Ree Morton, "Terminal Clusters," 1974. Oil on wood, enamel on celastic, lightbulbs.



If you go

"Ree Morton: The Plant That Heals May Also Poison"

■ **Where:** The Tang Museum, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs



Photos by William Jaeger
Ree Morton, "Regional Piece," 1976. Oil on wood, enamel on celastic.

By William Jaeger

The 1970s artwork of female trailblazer Ree Morton is so connivingly subtle and deft it ends up dazzling. And yet it also does remain rather quiet, as if whispering, as if so self-assured it only needs to give the broad, friendly outlines of ideas. These are then puffed up with some words or dotted lines as if they are very interior thoughts that have escaped, untrammelled.

"The Plant that Heals May Also Poison," a savvy retrospective of Morton's work at the Tang (originating at the ICA in Philadelphia), gives a full sense of Morton's mature work, which she made in her thirties before dying in a car crash. There are reconstructed small installations that are simultaneously perplexing and cheerful, simple-seeming drawings that look faint and obscure and yet remain bold and brave when you enter them, and sculptural objects that play with words the way a mischievous cake decorator might but without winking.

Yes, this is good stuff: bold, unique, and without affectation.

The early 1970s, you have to remember, marked a rough patch for the visual arts, then suffering an identity crisis after the bursting bubbles of pop, minimalism, and conceptual art. Work from

Please see
MORTON 5 ▶



Ree Morton, "Bozeman, Montana," 1974. Enamel, flocking, and glitter on wood and celastic, light bulbs.

Photos by William Jaeger

FROM THE COVER

Artworks made with subtlety, deftness

MORTON

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that period made by women—whether it was “feminist” or not, and much of it was—broke out of the mostly male molds that came before. It took on an outsized importance, one that grows to this day (think Ana Mendieta, Lynda Benglis, and Judy Chicago just for starters).

Here at the Tang, Morton’s defiance of formal norms is what many will notice first. There are many inventive, plasticized canvas bas-relief shapes. And there are post-minimalist experiments like “Paintings and Objects,” where a canvas is pressed flat against

the wall by wooden supports. Some yellow repeating marks cloud whether this is the front or the back of the painting. Around this is another canvas, and on it is a diagram of some kind, with straight dotted lines at the edge and along the wood itself.

Any one piece like this might seem to be outwardly striving, the rough edges too apparent and the ideas too plain. But as you follow her work through its different permutations, it’s clear how sober and thoughtful this is. The restraint required to go just this far, and no further, while still having something to say, is a feat of precision.

This holding back and pushing forth with perfect poise creates a light but never actually funny sensibility, and this goes farthest, for me, with her use

of language. Or I might say, her use of words, for there is often just a single word or a short phrase at work. The semiotic implications hint at a prefiguring of a still-latent post-modernist embrace of language and language structure, but if she knew this, she as usual kept her cards well hidden.

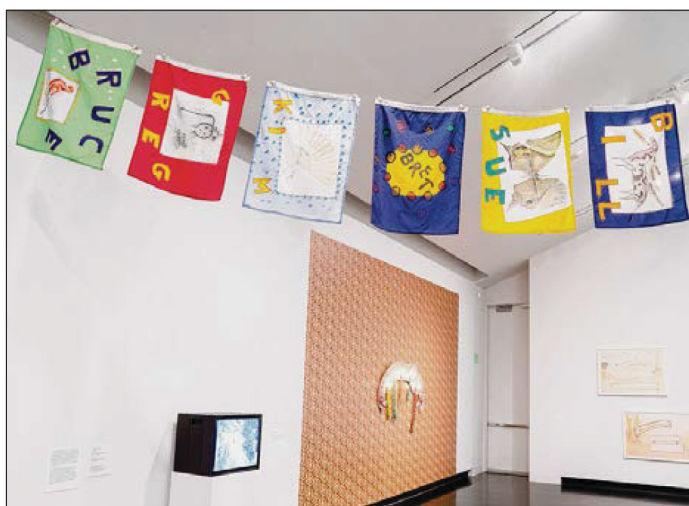
And so we have a work like “Bozeman, Montana” from 1974, which is a collection of dimensional, single words made in this obscure material called Celastic that looks like hardened, wet, shaped canvas (which is essentially what it is). The words Mike, Pool, Beer and so on reveal what she was actually doing in Montana, and the muddy palette of mustards and off-pinks, with an intermittently glittery surface, reveal what she was doing in her art, pushing it

into something all her own, something you would probably not call pretty.

Drawings as finished pieces are also core to Morton’s work and psyche. Some almost seem like pages from a naturalist’s notebook made large, with sketches of flowers and their names. Others are more obscure. The series called “Game Map Drawings” look like plots of land with trails and arrows and a jaunty boundary of casual hexagons. All this may signify something, but to me they are also simple acts of playing, of imagining.

Morton dares to codify and transcribe, visually, her most plainspoken experiences.

► William Jaeger is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.



Ree Morton, "Six flags from Something in the Wind," 1975. Acrylic and felt-tip pen on nylon.



Ree Morton, "For Kate," 1976. Oil on wood and wire, enamel on celastic.