Ree Morton
MATRIX/BERKELEY 2

University Art Museum
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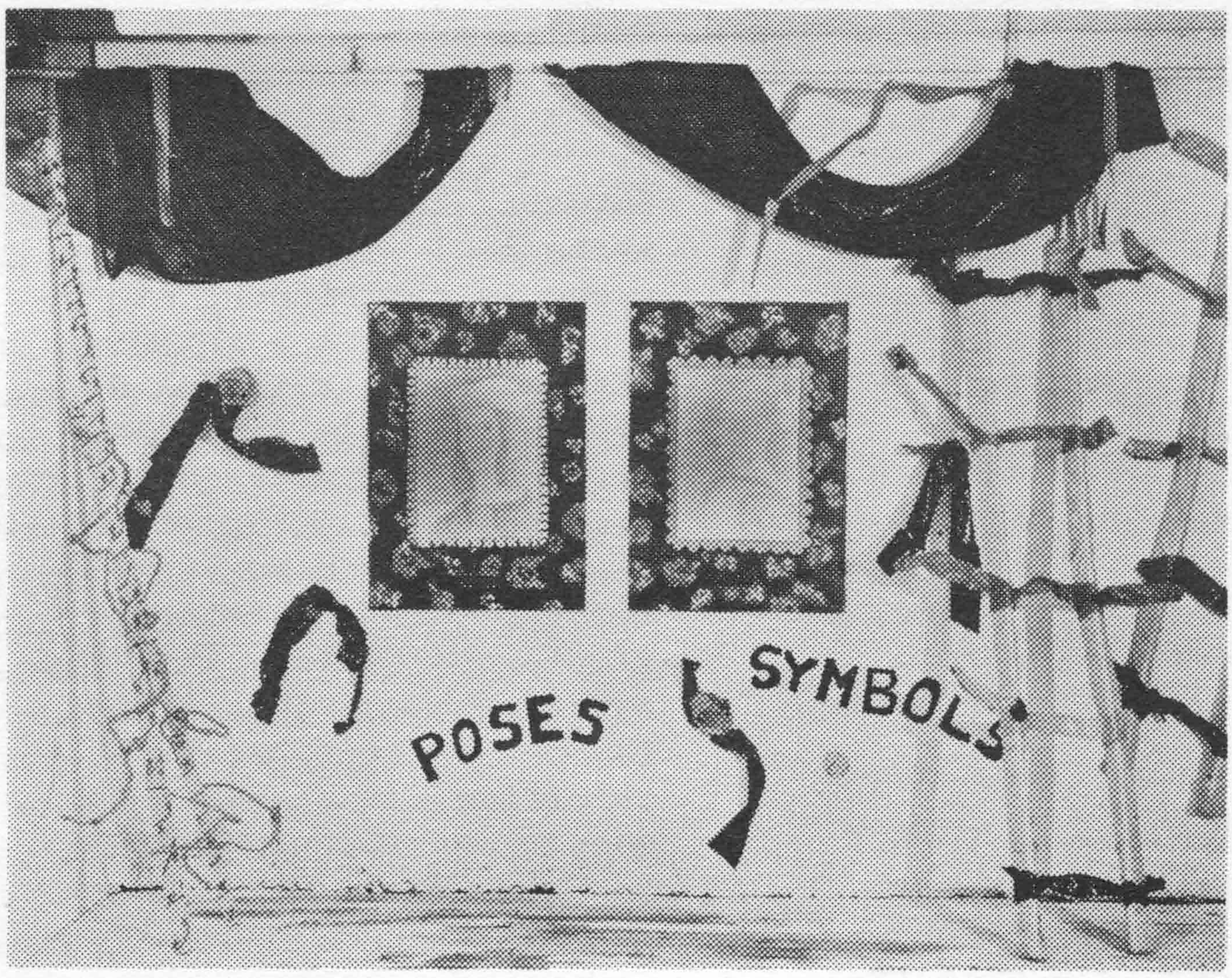
Signs of Love, 1976



By most standards, Ree Morton's career was short. She died at the age of forty-one. Yet she left a very original body of work behind, much of which has not been seen on the West Coast. Morton's works consist of an arrangement of objects on the walls and floor of a space. At times they appear as abstract visual notations, at other times as commemorative tableaux of special places visited and people and things remembered. They appear as a form of autobiography and are often composed of artifacts, souvenirs and objects of anecdotal character. Morton's specialty was finding materials that could precisely convey an emotion, concept or situation. We find throughout her works such objects as logs, light bulbs, flower wreaths, bricks and tree branches to rawhide, canvas paintings, words, plastic ornaments and more.

Experiences related to her travels were often a part of the source material for Morton's art. In a statement written shortly before her death, she wrote: "..you see lots of good stuff when you keep moving around, although it doesn't always register right away. delayed reactions allow for the Fermentation Theory. i have this theory that the hot stuff goes into a storage bin labeled Good Visual Information, cooks around awhile, and jumps on out whenever it is damn good and ready. some of the best visual information i have gotten (excluding very distant memory, which i think happens in a somewhat different way) has been from camp sites, construction sites, roadside stands, traffic jams, horticulture schools, tidal pools, victorian cemeteries, scenic overlooks, race tracks, and regattas." (Morton, LAICA Journal, March-April, '76).

Morton's early works had a mysterious ceremonial appearance. See-Saw (1971) consists of a ten foot long horizontal plank balanced on a tree stump. The plank and stump are placed in the center of a circle marked off by small lengths of painted wood placed on the floor of the space. The plank was constructed to swivel within the circular format. In its formal and mechanical simplicity, the piece is reminiscent of the manner in which a child might arrange a set of diverse objects so that the arrangement has unique structure but no obvious objective function. Such early work involved the combining of simple and basic units into an arrangement open to many layers of interpretation, primitive ritual being the most accessible association. In later works the arrangement of simple, often "found" forms, is combined with a more aggressive manipulation of the forms themselves. Celastic, a thin plastic substance which in certain states can be hand-manipulated, was a favorite material of Morton's in later works and she often arranged it with or wrapped it around a wide range of other materials. Bozeman, Montana (1974) consists of celastic and colored Christmas lights. The names of friends and things experienced on a trip to Montana are impressed in the celastic.

Signs of Love (1976), currently exhibited in MATRIX, was Morton's last work. The piece is composed of garland-wrapped sticks and ladders, draped celastic swags, flowery wall paper, framed portraits and roses. Large bows and knots are lyrically repeated throughout the composition. The seemingly casual yet enthusiastic arrangement of these forms combined with Morton's expressive sense of color establish a clarity of mood that is both straightforward and psychologically affecting. The work is like a poetic valentine brought to stage-set proportion. Feelings of childhood innocence, fantasy and love have been consistently evoked by those who have experienced it.

In terms of format, the work essentially inhabits an ambiguous area between painting and sculpture. It is both flat pictorial plane and three-dimensional environment, with neither aspect dominant over the other. From a pictorial standpoint, Morton's expressive manipulation of celastic clearly reflects a painterly attitude, her swags, knots and bows resembling large impasto brush strokes. The pictorial is also brought into play in many of Morton's works through the use of the drawn line. She approaches drawing in a variety of ways; integrating drawing with sculpture by incorporating drawn lines on objects, using objects in such a way that they also may function as drawn line and incorporating drawings on paper into larger works.

As composit sculpture or environment, Signs of Love unites the planes and angles of the space into the aesthetic experience rather than using them simply as background or container for the work. Ladders and sticks bridge strict angles between connecting walls and floor The work wraps around the space naturally and playfully, utilizing the architecture without emphasizing it.

Born in Ossinging, New York in 1936, Ree Morton attended the University of Rhode Island, Kingston (BFA 1968) and the Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia (MFA 1970). She taught at the Philadelphia College of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago and was a visiting lecturer at a number of universities and colleges around the country. She died on April 30, 1977 as a result of injuries from a car accident.

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Works in MATRIX:

Signs of Love, 1976, mixed media, dimensions variable. Lent by Droll/Kolbert Gallery, New York.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
McLennan College, Waco, TX '69; Artists Space, NYC '73; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC '74; John Doyle Gallery, Chicago '74; University of Rhode Island, Kingston '76; Walter Kelly Gallery, Chicago '77; Droll/Kolbert Gallery, NYC '77; New York University, NYC '77.

Selected group exhibitions:

Philadelphia Museum of Art '70; Whitney Museum of American Art, Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Sculpture, NYC '70; Corcoran Museum, Depth and Presence, Washington, DC '71; 112 Greene Street, NYC '71; Philadelphia College of Art '72; Kansas City Art Institute, Book, '72; Sarah Lawrence College, In Spaces, Bronxville, NY '73; Whitney Museum of American Art, Contemporary American Drawings, 1963-1973, NYC '73; Oberlin College, Four Young Americans, Ohio '73; Institute of Contemporary Art, Made in Philadelphia, PA '73; Whitney Museum of American Art, Biennial Exhibition, NYC '73; Institute of Contemporary Art, Personal Concern, Material Support, Boston '74; Museum of Modern Art, NYC '74; John Doyle Gallery, Chicago '74; Clocktower, Artists Make Toys, NYC '74; Vassar College, Primitive Presence in the Seventies, Poughkeepsie, NY '75; Cleveland Museum of Art '75; Illinois State University, Art in Landscape, Normal '75; University of California, San Diego '76; Women's Building, LA '76; Artpark, Louiston, NY '76; North Texas University, Denton, TX '76; Philadelphia College of Art, Private Notations, Artist's Sketchbooks, '76; Institute of Contemporary Art, Improbable Furniture, Philadelphia '77; Mount St. Mary's College, Attitudes towards Space: Environmental Art, LA '77; Whitney Museum of American Art, Biennial Exhibition, NYC '77; University of California, Santa Barbara, Contemporary Tableaux/Constructions, '77.

Selected bibliography by Morton:

"Places," Journal, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, No. 10 (March-April '76) pp. 20-21.

Selected bibliography about Morton:

Whitney Annual (New York, Whitney Museum of American Art '70).

Contemporary American Drawings (New York, Whitney Museum of American Art '73).

Four Young Americans (Ohio, Oberlin College '73).

Made in Philadelphia (Pennsylvania, Institute of Contemporary Art '73).

Biennial Exhibition (New York, Whitney Museum of American Art '73).

Lippard, Lucy. "Ree Morton, At the Still Point of the Turning World," Artforum, vol. 12 (Dec. '73) pp. 48-50.

Smith, Roberta. "Reviews," Artforum, vol. 12 (Jan. '74) pp. 75-76.

Tucker, Marcia. Ree Morton (New York, Whitney Museum of American Art '74).

Ratcliff, Carter. "On Contemporary Primitivism," Artforum, vol. 14 (Nov. '75) pp. 57-65.

Sondheim, Alan. Individuals: Post-Movement Art in America (New York, E.P. Dutton & Co. '77).

Burton, Scott. "Ree Morton, 1936-1977," Art in America (July-Aug. '77) p. 14.

Plous, Phyllis. Contemporary Tableaux/Constructions (Santa Barbara, University of California '77).

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