REE MORTON: THE PLANT THAT HEALS MAY ALSO POISON
September 14–December 23, 2018

ELEANOR BIDDLE LLOYD GALLERY
Ree Morton produced a prescient body of work rich in emotion and philosophically complex. Long celebrated by peers and younger generations, Morton’s influence on contemporary art remains considerable yet muted, her legacy widely under-recognized. Gathered in this exhibition are works produced during her short but prolific career, which span and expand mediums and materials; reimagine tropes of love, friendship, and motherhood; and radically assert sentiment as a legitimate subject of artmaking.

Though the eclectic arc of Morton’s practice was rooted in Postminimalism, a poetic approach to language and symbolism progressively distanced her work from easy categorization. The inclusion of personal narrative — through literary, philosophical, and autobiographical references — and use of bold color and theatrical imagery infused her objects with sly humor and a concern with the decorative, generating a feminist legacy increasingly appreciated in retrospect. Morton’s conceptually rigorous work can seem esoteric at times, yet her intention ultimately one of generosity towards the viewer, and it is this spirit of generosity, playfulness, and joy that this exhibition hopes to expand.

Morton’s practice was profoundly shaped by her time in Philadelphia, where she attended graduate school at the Tyler School of Art and taught for several years at Philadelphia College of Art (now University of the Arts). A major sculptural work, *Sister Perpetua’s Lie*, was created for a 1973 exhibition at ICA and is currently on view in this retrospective, along with rarely seen installations. Often site-specific, these pieces were ephemeral in nature, many known only through documentation. The exhibition features several of these works, along with a selection of drawings, sculptures, paintings, and archival materials which span a single decade of artistic production before Morton’s untimely death in 1977.

— Kate Kraczon, Laporte Associate Curator

### EARLY WORK

*Wood Drawings* (1971) are the earliest works in the exhibition and mark a transition from the loosely grided, Postminimalist forms she produced at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, where she received her MFA in 1970. These intricate little sculptures, covered in markings, signal Morton’s nascent fascination with wood as a material, both the natural structure of found branches and logs and also commercially cut wood.

*Paintings and Objects* (1973), installed adjacent to *Wood Drawings*, features four wooden armatures that prop and push at a canvas pinned to the wall, one of the few remaining sculptural works from this period of Morton’s practice. Documented in her studio, nearly all of these early pieces were repeatedly regenerated into various sculptural formations that lean against the walls and corners, rejecting traditional systems of medium specificity as they hover between painting, drawing, and sculpture.

Many of Morton’s surviving pieces from the early 1970s gesture towards a form of mapping that is increasingly present in the major installations of 1973. With borders and fences, dashes that enclose, and silhouettes or tracings of objects both present and absent, works such as *Game Map Drawing I-VI* (c. 1972–73) and “Newfoundland Drawings” (1973) reveal concerns with landscape, limitations, and organic shapes that are maintained through her final bodies of work. The “Newfoundland Drawings” were created after a summer Morton spent with her three children in Nova Scotia, their cartographical references rooted in the knobby texture of logs and branches sketched in the notebook she kept during that vacation.

### 1973 INSTALLATIONS

The word “installation” was not as commonly used to describe the immersive artwork that Morton made for ICA and Artists Space, New York, in 1973. At that time, the term “environments,” popularized during the late 1960s and ‘70s, was gradually being replaced by, “installation.”

*Souvenir Piece* (1973) was similarly inspired by that summer in Nova Scotia — which, as Morton told her friend, curator Marcia Tucker, was the happiest summer of her life. Created as an immersive environment for her fall 1973 solo exhibition at Artists Space, the two remaining sections of that project have invited biographical readings. Like many of Morton’s works, the numbers three and four can be counted among the objects — four split logs on the low green platform, for example — and she certainly references her three children by name, as well as her friends and family, in many other works. The wood and stones collected on the table (or island) structure may also allude to an accumulation of mementos and memories from that period of her life.

Works that are underlined are included in the ICA exhibition.
Morton’s work remains intentionally ambiguous in this regard, and one-to-one biographical references are repeatedly thwarted by the richness of her other influences. She was an avid reader, and her notebooks frequently cite texts from philosophy and literature, as well as art criticism and theory. *Sister Perpetua’s Lie* (1974), a multi-part installation, features a low, caged space with three shapes sketched onto the floor surrounding a cut tree trunk, signifying the numbers three and four once again. The piece was commissioned by ICA for the spring 1973 inaugural phase of the exhibition series, “Made in Philadelphia.” Though Morton had recently moved to New York, she was still teaching in Philadelphia and had created this installation for the galleries of the Meyerson Building at the University of Pennsylvania, where ICA was housed in the 1970s and ’80s.

2 In the exhibition catalogue, art historian Abi Shapiro will focus on Ree Morton as part of a feminist history of women producing installation art in the 1970s.


ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

Morton kept an extensive archive of materials, including a collection of notebooks now housed at MoMA and accessible online through the Franklin Furnace Archive. Presented here are select drawings, studies, and drafts of grant applications, alongside images, and ephemera related to the four exhibitions that featured Morton’s work at ICA.

CELASTICS

In the spring of 1974, Morton was asked to be in the *Women’s Faculty Show* at Philadelphia College of Art — about which a male colleague snidely commented that women should stick to bake sales. In response, Morton worked with the material celastic for the first time to create bows and a curtain, which decorated the wall behind a platform where she and her students displayed cookies and cakes as the work *Bake Sale* (1974).

She further experimented with celastic later that spring as a visiting artist at the University of Montana in Bozeman, applying the pliable, plastic-infused fabric to clay letters before it hardened into a static material that could be painted. *Bozeman, Montana* (1974) was created during that time, a playful, celebratory wall piece that name-checks students and activities — playing pool, fishing, drinking beer — during a period that seemed unproductive to Morton initially but signaled an important turn in her work. Not only did she apply celastic to text for the first time, but *Bozeman, Montana*, also incorporated electric lightbulbs, a combination that Morton would experiment with over the next several years.

Morton discovered two horticultural texts in the summer of 1974 — *Weeds of the Northeast: Aids to Their Identification by Basal-Leaf Characteristics* (1970) and *Wildflowers Worth Knowing* (1917). While the prior became the namesake and source of imagery for a series of drawings with glitter and woodgrain frames installed on woodgrain wallpaper in 1974 (*Weeds of the Northeast* #2, #5, and #6, on view in this exhibition), the comical Victorian moralism of the latter became a primary source of text for many of her drawings and celastic pieces. The pithy phrasing of *Terminal Clusters* (1974) and *The Plant That Heals May Also Poison* mix with more personal references such as *Weeping Willow* (1974), a nickname given to Morton by her sister, and *Maternal Instincts* (1974), which includes the initials of her three children.

The symbolic shapes used by Morton in her celastic work veer from the celebratory to the funerary, glittery banners and ribbons vying with the melancholic symbolism of gravestones. The housewife motif of *Many Have Run Away To Be Sure* (1974) continues the feminine clichés and the bow/beau as a subject that began with *Bake Sale*, and it was included in ICA’s thirty-fifth anniversary exhibition in 1988. *Of Previous Dissipations* (1974) and *Don’t Worry, I’ll Only Tell You The Good Parts* (1975) similarly radiate the dark humor that infuses much of this body of work.

In June of 1975, Morton installed the ambitious outdoor project *Something in the Wind* (1975), a collection of over 100 nylon flags strung across the rigging of a nineteenth-century sailboat, docked in the East River, New York. A public project with the South Street Seaport Museum, each flag was dedicated to a friend or family member, including many artists from her New York community, such as Laurie Anderson, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Cynthia Carlson.

Morton spent the 1975–1976 academic year as a visiting artist at the University of California, San Diego, where she made the first iteration of *Devil Chaser* (1975/1976) and continued experimenting with its brightly painted coiled celastic forms, in addition to her work on the series “One of the Beaux Paintings” (1975), *Let Us Celebrate While Youth Lingers and Ideas Flow* (1975) was produced during her time in California, as were the similarly curtailed double canvases of the “Regional Pieces” (1976), which feature sunsets and tropical fish paired with matching celastic draping.

ICA’s Ramp Space includes documentary footage of two performances that Morton produced as an artist-in-residence at Artpark, outside Buffalo, New York, in the summer of 1976. *Regarding Landscape* (1976) and *Maid of the Mist* (1976) brought celastic into conversation with the dynamic setting of the Niagara River. *Regarding Landscape* augmented the waterfalls and scenery of the riverside trails with arches of celastic installed in front of theater seats for extended viewing, with simple paintings of the vistas framed by celastic curtains on rocks along the edge of the water. For the live performance *Maid of the Mist*, Morton created celastic ladders covered in ribbons and a life preserver decorated with celastic flowers to “rescue” the young woman of a contested Haudenosaunee mythology who throws herself over the falls (incorrectly described by European settlers as a human sacrifice). Though this remains Morton’s singular foray into live performance, she participated in a theater workshop in New York that fall and designed props for a Mabou Mines performance.6

4 The Haudenosaunee is an alliance between six Native American nations: the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Tuscarora, and Seneca.

5 Mabou Mines is an experimental theater collective, based in New York since 1970.
A theatrical influence is apparent in the set-like structure of *Signs of Love* (1976), produced that fall. A culmination of recent forms, the L-shaped installation features ladders from *Maid of the Mist*, the draping celastic from *Weeping Willow* and the “Regional Pieces,” and the medallions and ribbons from *Let Us Celebrate While Youth Lingers and Ideas Flow*. In this large-scale celastic piece, the earnest yet humorous sentimentality that infused much of her work since *Souvenir Piece* converged as a musing on desire—a celebration of romantic love, longing, and loneliness. As Morton had made clear in her earliest use of celastic, her interest in feminine tropes was always rooted in their toxicity as cliché and her unrelenting attraction to the pure sentiment behind the symbolism.

**MANIPULATIONS OF THE ORGANIC**

Morton’s final project, *Manipulations of the Organic* (1977), focused on Chicago-based architect Louis Sullivan (1856–1924) and was developed as a frieze installation of fourteen paintings. Morton was a guest artist at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago that spring, where she was surrounded by Sullivan’s architectural influence on the city and fascinated by his portfolio of drawings, *A System of Architectural Ornament*, which was commissioned by the school’s library in 1924. ICA has recreated this installation to approximate the drawings and studies she made leading up to her death in April 1977.

*Ree Morton: The Plant That Heals May Also Poison* is organized by Kate Kraczon, LaPorte Associate Curator, and will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue co-published with Dancing Foxes Press, with essays by the curator, artist Nayland Blake, and scholars Roksana Filipowska and Abi Shapiro.

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 19**

6 PM  🕒 Curator-led tour of *Ree Morton: The Plant that Heals May Also Poison*

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 27**

2 PM  🕒 Panel: Roussel, Duchamp, Morton

Moderated by Kate Kraczon, panelists include artist and author Brian Catling; art historian and curator Helen Molesworth; and Alexander Kauffman, Anne d’Harnoncourt–Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow, Philadelphia Museum of Art.


Don’t worry, I’ll only read you the good parts.
Support for *Ree Morton: The Plant That Heals May Also Poison* has been provided by the Inchworm Fund. The Inchworm Fund is an endowment created to respond to ICA’s spirit of exploration, supporting artists and curators in their quest to uncover the unknown through multiyear research, exhibition, publication, and conversation. In naming the fund, visionary Philadelphia patron Daniel W. Dietrich, II wished to attract fellow contributors, encouraging ICA to reach and expand toward new possibilities.

ICA was recognized as part of the inaugural Sotheby’s Prize (2017) with a commendation that applauds the breadth and depth of ambitious exhibition research for *Ree Morton: The Plant That Heals May Also Poison*. Additional support for *Ree Morton: The Plant That Heals May Also Poison* has been provided by the Edna W. Andrade Fund of the Philadelphia Foundation, Nancy & Leonard Amoroso, Amanda & Andrew Megibow, and Norma & Lawrence Reichlin.

**ICA IS ALWAYS FREE. FOR ALL.**

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**FRONT:** *The Plant That Heals May Also Poison*, 1974. Five light bulbs, enamel, and glitter on wood and celastic, 46 × 64 inches. FWA-Lieve Van Gorp Foundation for Women Artists.

**POSTER:** *Don’t worry, I’ll only read you the good parts*, 1975. Oil on celastic, 54 × 26 inches. Photo: Joerg Lohse. All images: © Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York.