

TRANSCRIPT, REE MORTON 1974

KRISTINA KITE

MORTON: [Laughs] *Oh, that I was going to be a nurse.*

These are the first words from Ree Morton in a video interview conducted by Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal in 1974. The question preceding her answer is inaudible above the jostling of the camera and a steady buzz but, as the only interview of its kind, the fuzzy, gray footage is a treasure, a revelation.

Ree is either thirty-seven or thirty-eight years old at the time, and the camera frame is tight around her head. Her straight, brown hair is shoulder-length and parted on the right side. Her eyebrows are raised, wrinkling her forehead. Ree's wide eyes settle on Kate Horsfield—who sits off-screen asking the questions—while her left hand buries itself in her hair or otherwise props up the back of her head.

She starts her story the same way it has often been told: At sixteen years old, Helen Marie Reilly set out for a career in nursing. She spent the summer of 1952 on the Jersey Shore, working as a waitress alongside

aspiring doctors and nurses. "Cool hands on a warm head" was a romantic notion to Ree, and she initially resisted the idea "that I could do something with these hands." Back home in Ossining, New York, her father, a doctor, and her mother, a nurse, encouraged her to pursue medicine. As a student who excelled in science, Ree began the prenursing program at Skidmore College the following fall and spent the next summer working in the wards at a nearby hospital.

MORTON: *I never worked as a nurse. I did all the ward things that student nurses do for a year, but I didn't finish or ever do anything with that. I was totally unsuited to nursing. I had every symptom of every disease that we would study. I would go around with hepatitis while we were studying hepatitis, with all the symptoms and every kind of cancer there was. I would get very emotionally involved with the patients. I would be sorry when they would leave and upset about their illnesses....I couldn't figure out what was wrong...so I got married [smiles].*

In 1956, Ree quit her nursing studies and married a naval officer named Ted Morton. Ted and Ree lived on the naval base in Jacksonville, Florida. One year later, their first child, Linda, was born, followed by two more children, Sally and Scott.

While Ree was taking care of the home and the children, she caught a television commercial for a free art class at the Jacksonville Museum. That evening, she went down and enrolled, later referring to the weekly class as "just something to do." But even as the Morton family moved frequently—living in Georgia, Virginia, Florida (again), Europe, and briefly in Los Angeles—the art classes continued. When Ted was stationed in Quonset Point in Rhode Island, Ree transferred her Skidmore credits to the University of Rhode Island, where she began taking studio art classes, eventually obtaining her BFA in 1968.

HORSFIELD: *When you were in Rhode Island, that's when you became serious about being an artist, right?*

MORTON: *No, no. I still wasn't able to call myself an artist. I mean, I was a housewife, right? I was a mother, I had children, I had a family to take care of. And [being an artist] was something I did in my extra time. It was taking up a lot of time by then, but it still, I was never...The teachers would talk a lot about commitment, being committed to your work, and somehow that word had a lot of implications that I couldn't accept, the kind of lifestyle that I didn't think I wanted; that somehow if you are an artist you have to behave a certain way, you had a certain way of looking at the world that I didn't think had anything to do with me, so I would just never be committed, I would never say that I was an artist. I would say that I did paintings, that I was a housewife, and that this was where my interest was. And I was going to school. I would call myself a student, but it was a long time before I would say I was an artist.*

Ree could never consider herself an artist because she never had the time to commit to it, and because she saw the life of a housewife and that of an artist to be mutually exclusive. Or it may have been that she had never really been part of a community of artists. Before art school, the only artists that Ree knew were her teachers who, she confesses in almost a whisper, were not very good. Despite their continual emphasis on *commitment*, she remembers most of them as less than inspiring.

MORTON: *They were very casual about their attitudes toward their work...There were no women faculty members there. Oh, there was one, but she was actually very much a stereotype of what a woman artist might be, and she taught only freshman foundation. They all did bean collages and texture studies, and she was not doing what I thought was interesting work herself. So, the models that I had were two art historians that were there—Marcia Tucker being one of them, and Eunice Lipton being another—who were very serious, intelligent women. They were very involved with what they were doing, and that was sort of a revelation to me.*

Despite pressure from her teachers to focus on either painting or sculpture, Ree continued to mix elements of both into her work. The slides that exist of her paintings show oddly shaped canvases consisting of two colors painted more or less in thick, single stripes. Ree explains that she approached painting in a very systematic, intellectual way (“you know, using intellectual color”) and that she was very interested in Frank Stella. Just as Stella titled his *Protractor Series* after ancient cities and archeological sites, Ree also titled her canvases after cities. They were her “silly Stellas,” and the titles, maybe names of some of

the places that she had visited, still conjure some mystery. *Monterey Park* (1968) is a hard-edged O of cleanly interlocking brown and purple layers; the wall is visible through an elongated diamond shaped center. *Sussex* (1968) is a skewed square-ish canvas with a sharp plank of bubble-gum pink running down the center, bisecting a pink field framed by thick brown angles. And *Chicken Itza #2* (1969), a pair of hot orange and white wedge-shaped “floor paintings,” begins Ree’s shift toward sculpture.

MORTON: *I was putting them on the floor, and people were kicking them, and I knew that I was asking for it if I put them on the floor. So...I went through a transitional period of using soft materials...felt, insulating material, fiberglass, plastic sheeting, graphite, oil, anything that seemed to be direct. I never have been interested in secondary sculptural processes—I mean, casting or, well, even two-dimensional processes like printmaking. All those indirect secondary processes really slow me down, and I just don't like to do them. So it was any material that I could just deal with and also fast—it had to be fast—because I was working through a whole lot of ideas and didn't have time to be doing, like, six coats of paint and long tedious things.*

At this point in her career, Ree was thirty-four years old. She had her MFA, was separated from her husband, and was quickly and steadily working through different ideas in every new piece. Her emphasis on time and speed cannot be underestimated, nor her insistence on the work being direct.

Even so, she had not yet mastered her own wish for directness. After the soft experiments, she worked with glass bricks, clamp lights, weather stripping, tape, wire and wooden slats, all of which would be either neatly arranged, scattered, repeated, hung from the wall, dropped from the wall, or draped between walls. She restlessly reevaluated and rearranged her own ideas, which resulted in pieces that resembled other contemporary work at the time.

After finding diagrams for food-drying racks in the back of an old cookbook, Ree decided to recreate them using lumber, screen, and twigs, the first documented example of her use of these materials. What she discovered was the potential strangeness that setting out to make a certain thing could produce. Soon, her new starting point became based on using only a few materials and heading intentionally toward the unexpected.

Ree then established a vocabulary of materials that she would use and reuse in most of her early installations: wood (in the form of logs, tree trunks, branches, twigs, lumber, blocks, slats, slices, small pallets, and crates), rocks or chunks of concrete, dirt or flour, and sometimes

hardware such as metal hooks and hinges. The materials were simple and direct, sculptural and diagrammatic, processed and natural; together they could be familiar and foreign, formal and abstract, all qualities that allowed Ree to move beyond material concerns and into more challenging investigations.

In composing these arrangements, Ree embarked on an exploration of space not only as a sculptural concern but also as a location of human existence. Drawing on both literal and metaphorical connotations, the pieces alluded to paths, zones, playing fields, and maps. They sometimes resembled the marking at construction sites or garden walkways. One is clearly a sidewalk with a tree planted in the middle, but the pieces quickly became less recognizable, more complex, and even more allusive.

She began to incorporate paintings and drawings—usually a canvas or large sheet of paper attached to the wall—that consisted of simple marks, circles, lines, and scribbles. At times the drawings appear to be diagrams of the installation. Other times they resemble certain three-dimensional elements used within the installation: quickly drawn circles that repeat the circular slices of logs or painted brown stripes that echo a plank of lumber leaning nearby. She also painted and drew on the walls, the floor, and on the wooden elements themselves: dotted yellow and red lines, black circles, silver branches. A few times she included a hand basket or what looks like a suitcase, casual signs of human presence that activated the abstract scenes with narrative potential.

MORTON: *You can see how I collect junk over there. I have things around, and then as I work, it's almost a kind of drawing process. It involves picking something up, placing it over there, looking at it, putting something else with it, seeing how they relate to one another, bringing a third thing in, taking it out. It's a really physical manipulation of those things as lines and areas and zones or whatever they do, and then working from there....Really it's a very slow process of getting those things to come together.*

As Ree speaks, the camera pulls back, revealing more of the room. She sits in a high-back wicker chair with a pillow behind her. Her left foot rests on her right knee. Kate Blumfield holds a microphone in her hand, while half of her bob can be seen nodding up and down on the left edge of the frame. At the top of the frame, above Ree, the edge of a lampshade is visible. It spotlights some oddly shaped objects and a small poster or drawing that hang on the wall behind her. In the background are a ladder (or maybe a bookcase), a bicycle, and some canvases. The camera moves in again, a little tighter than before.

HORSFIELD: *Can you say anything about the meaning of the pieces and how people are supposed to respond to them?*

MORTON: *Well, no. I mean what I can specifically say is that there is not a way that they are supposed to respond and that's a very emphatic thing. I mean, that probably is the only thing that I insist on is that you can't see it wrong.... I think I really am also dealing with ideas. I am also involved in a very immediate, tactile, sensual, emotional response to what's there. It should trigger associations that you have because of who you are and where you came from that I would have no idea about and, you know, that's cool, that's exactly what I want to allow. You know, I don't want it closed, but I want it open.*

Not in this interview but at another time, Ree described her installations as events or markers of a specific moment defined by where one is and what one thinks. For Ree, the event was determined by the architecture of the space—a certain wall, a corner—and its mapping, its mood, her intentions for it, and her feelings about it. Like most installations, they existed at a single place for a set duration. As a result, what remained were only elements of them, “artifacts,” as Ree called them.

BLUMFIELD: *How would it work out, or how does it work out, when private individuals buy your pieces?*

MORTON: *It doesn't happen [laughs]. I haven't had to work that out.*

Although Ree produced more than twenty sculptural installations between 1970 and 1972, most, if not all, were destroyed. The documentation that exists looks like it was taken in her studio or during a works exhibition, of which there was usually only one. But the destruction was part of her process as she salvaged the materials from one piece to create another. Several of these artifacts are easily recognizable from piece to piece: the leglike tree stumps, the long gnarly, green branch, the chunk of concrete, and the small wooden dolly. The way she reused elements not only played with notions of seriality and repetition but also gave her work a history, a narrative. With these reappearances, certain elements became almost like characters or actors, and they began to allude to bodies, not only in form but also in function.

The year of this interview, 1974, roughly marks the midpoint of Ree's short career. She was four years out of school, and her work had been exhibited at prominent institutions, museums, and universities. She had recently

created a succession of three conceptually, personally, and professionally significant works within a period of less than two years: *Sister Perpetua's Lie* at the ICA in Philadelphia, *Souvenir Piece* at Artists Space, and *To Each Concrete Man* at the Whitney Museum. Each one could—and should—be written about at length, as each one was a perfectly realized push into newer territories of literature, personal experiences, methods, and materials.

Other writers have described the moment that falls around the time of this interview as one of artistic crisis for Ree, one where she was at a creative standstill. Soon, she would leave her teaching job in Philadelphia and her studio in New York for a visiting professor position in Bozeman, Montana. She started experimenting with celastic—a stiff, canvaslike material that softens in acetone and can be manipulated for a few minutes before it begins to harden—and would form the names of friends, sentimental words and phrases, curtains, swags, ribbons, and aprons. She candy-coated them with loosely painted combinations of pinks, yellows, greens, and reds, and hung them in arrangements on the wall. Taking descriptions she found in a children's book on wildflowers, she made a series of drawings and sculptures that incorporated light bulbs, wallpaper, glitter, and butterfly-like celastic bows. Horseshoe-shaped sculptures were decorated with celastic banners bearing glum phrases such as "Fading Flowers" and "Terminal Clusters." Drawings of leaf typologies with their common names and folk usages were framed in wood-grain paper. This work was exhibited that fall in Chicago in her first, and only, commercial gallery exhibition in her lifetime.

Up until her death three years later, her work continued toward more personal and poetic themes. It was simultaneously celebratory and foreboding, sweet and sorrowful, intellectual and emotional, serious and romantic. She revered the decorative, the homespun, the cliché, and the pun. She would return to painting, making colorful portraits of fish and bows. Her interest in artifacts would expand into souvenirs and memorials that celebrated family, friendship, and love. Her last completed body of work, a series of fourteen paintings, paid tribute to Louis Sullivan's ornamental architecture and idealistic writings. Her journals suggest that another transition was approaching, but it would never be realized. A year before the car accident that would take her life, she summed up her previous accomplishments for a grant application that she concluded by stating, "I figured out that life matters, too, and that being an artist is better than being a nurse. Not bad, for a girl."

HORSFIELD: Is there anything that you would particularly like to say now that has not been covered?

MORTON: *No, no way.* [She laughs and shakes her head.]

There is, of course, a lot that has not been covered. Kate asks Lyn if there is anything she would like her to ask Ree. Lyn says something inaudible. Ree looks around the room searchingly, then mentions the importance of color in her work. Her interviewers are silent.

HORSFIELD: What are working on now? Do you have any projects that you are getting into?

MORTON: *No, not specifically. Just sort of resting awhile. Just waiting.*

The interview ends here. A strange, muffled exclamation in the microphone, and the camera shuts off. ■■

All text in italics from the interview "Ree Morton, 1974" conducted by Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal. (Video Data Bank)