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Regan Morris, *In Absentia*, Oakville Galleries, Oakville. March 29 to May 10, 1992

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ACTUALITÉS / EXPOSITIONS

TORONTO

Regan Morris, *In Absentia*, Oakville Galleries, Oakville. March 29 to May 10, 1992



Regan Morris, *Untitled (Double Glove)*, 1990. Latex on masonite, 106 x 78 in.

It is difficult not to wax poetic about the work of Regan Morris. Its striking beauty and simplicity seem to warrant such an immediate response, but its physicality also reveals a complex and compelling commentary. This Toronto based artist's *œuvre* has consistently dealt with notions of loss and precariousness, ranging from earlier rallies to the plight of endangered species, to subsequent comments on the long-rumoured demise of painting after Modernism. His most recent work explores bereavement and the struggle to preserve resonance in memory. Within this framework, Morris has indicated the implicit "fragility" of these issues by introducing a fragmentation in the

surface treatment. The images in this exhibition are lace garments, details of 18th century tapestry patterns and contemporary wallpaper patterns. In *Untitled (Hat)* 1990, the depiction of a lace hat has all but dissolved, and what remains of the image becomes integrated with the surface to produce an interdependent exit out of pictorial territory. This action references the fragile nature of individual memory as it depends on an already delicate system of collective memory used in constructing history.

The (apparently) worn and fragmented surfaces of Morris's paintings are achieved through an extraordinary mode of production in which successive layers of acrylic and latex are applied onto a base of plastic cement that holds an image painted in projection. The acrylic layers are later peeled back to reveal transfers of the original, while also retrieving a transfer of the parched topography created by the curing of the cement base. Each peeling (there may be two or three) exerts a diverse reading of the image, as the process disintegrates the "master" image. In this manner, the technique itself mimics the central thesis of the work, as memory is measured by individual

experience. And, while the source may be constant, the interpreted meaning and resonance are unique.

The works in this exhibition are commemorative in nature, standing as testaments to the memory of friends and peers lost to the ravages of AIDS. While the central thesis of the work investigates the fragile nature of existence and confronts our collective relationship to mortality, the physical representation bears on the methods by which memory is enacted. Recognizing the difficulty in elucidating abstraction in a pictorial plane, Morris has abandoned traditional modes of painterly expression, choosing instead to develop a technique that, while depicting an image on a two-dimensional



Regan Morris, *Untitled (Hat)*, 1990. Latex on masonite ; 120 x 120 in.

plane, also engages a physical representation of one of the instruments of memory: to locate in some manner the quintessence of the find. If these works appear at first as artifacts, aged and decaying, they are able to convey an unequivocal presence. In *Untitled (Double Glove)* (1990), a diptych in which the source image is paired with its mirror image, Morris has enlarged a pair of lace gloves to monumental scale. The presentation calls to mind the splitting open of a fossil dredged from centuries in an earthen tomb, a tangible reminder of what lingers in history as mere essence (coincidentally, the lace gloves depicted were plucked from a Danish grave, linking artifact to the cherished keepsake). Other artists, such as Andy Patton, in his large canvases of crystal bowls, extrapolate banal objects as signs from a designated point in history to illustrate a particular materiality, while also exposing contemporary methods of examining the past (objective scrutiny). Morris, however, has distinguished his practice by maintaining a reference to individual ownership that culminates in an attempt less concerned with notions of appropriation, but favouring the empowerment of an image to relate sentiment and nostalgia.

The power of a tangible memento to sustain and enhance recollective ability has informed Morris's choices in subject matter. Articles of clothing are commonly cherished objects, maintaining an aspect of the wearer's nature through a lasting indication of that person's taste. In *Untitled (English Collar)* (1990), a lace collar spanning ten feet hovers about a phantom neckline. The allusion to an inhabiting form also qualifies its opposite – absence – and Morris has extended this duality in recognizing the structure of the textile, as lacemaking is not only the sum of its parts, but also a calculation of the spatial areas it creates.

In this way, the works stand as testaments to memory, not simply the remembrance of an individual, but also the tenuous construct of the individual psyche to which we attribute our powers of recollection. "Because without memory there is no experience, which is nothing else than reiterated memory; in like manner, memory cannot exist without endurance of the thing perceived, and the thing perceived cannot remain where it has never been." (William Harvey, 1651) As Regan Morris has discovered, accuracy becomes secondary to evidence.

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