

REGEN PROJECTS

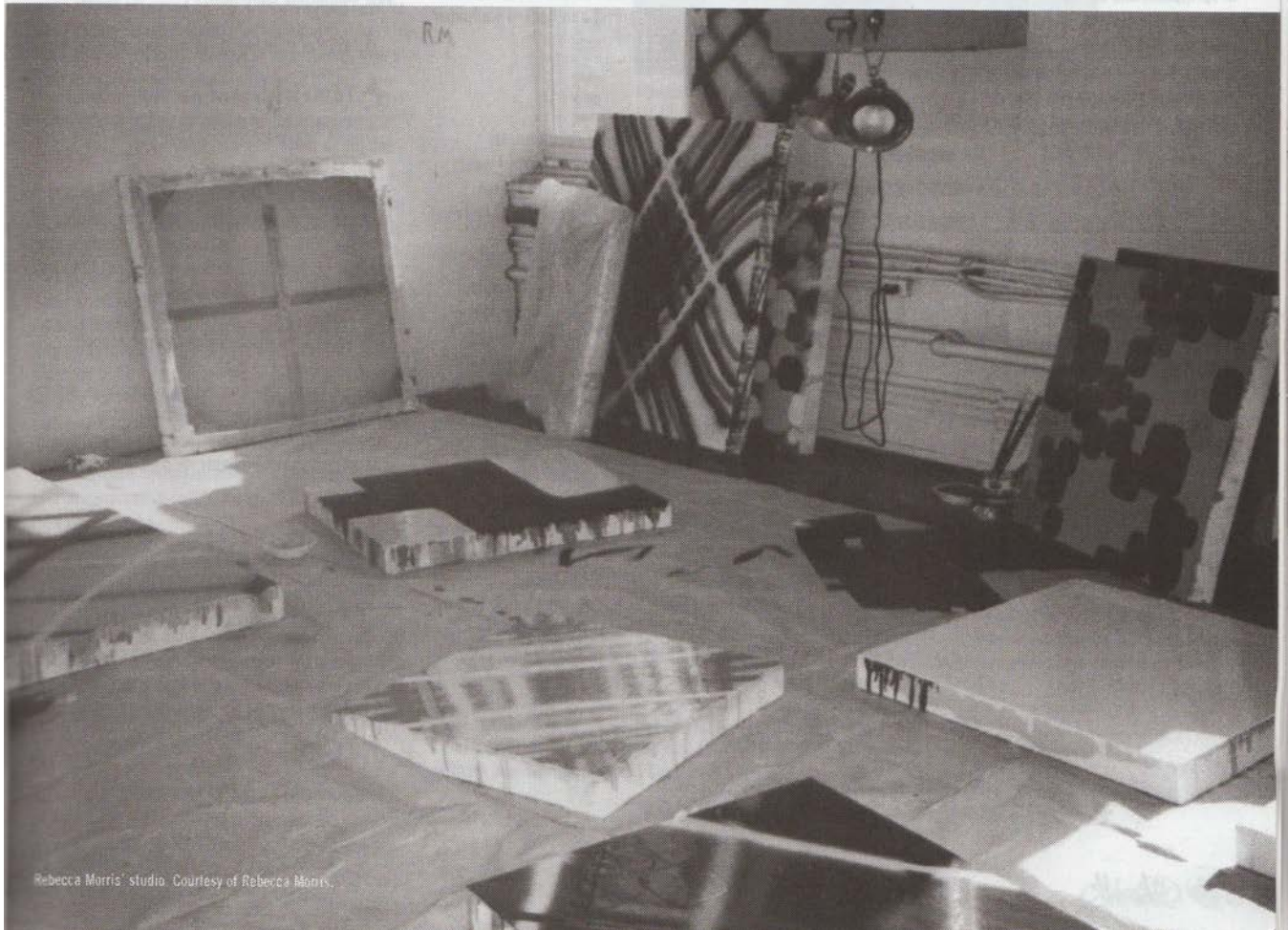
Eastman, Mari. "My Friend Rebecca." *Cakewalk* (Winter 1999) pp. 45 – 47 [ill.]



MY FRIEND REBECCA!



BY MARI EASTMAN



Rebecca Morris' studio. Courtesy of Rebecca Morris.

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Rebecca Morris is a painter and a good friend of mine. She graduated with an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1994 and began exhibiting her paintings shortly thereafter. She is represented by Ten in One Gallery in Chicago where she has had two solo shows. In addition, she has been in a number of group shows nationally and had a solo exhibition in Valencia, Spain. Her abstract paintings, textured and tactile multi-colored layers of thickly painted squares and rough criss-crosses painted in spraypaint and oil, have a distinctive look that plays with the tension between sleekness and grossness. They are simultaneously playful and sophisticated, raw and awkward. Her paintings have provoked comparisons to both modernists like Mondrian and generic kitschy architecture.

Concerned I was too familiar with Rebecca as a both a person and artist to ask appropriately objective questions, I approached some Cakewalk staffers who knew her work, but not her, and asked them what they would most want to ask her. Josh Rothkopf gave me the question I used to start the interview.

Mari (🐾): Did you grow up in a household with 70's decor?

Rebecca (🐾): No. But it's funny that Josh would think there was something about where I grew up or a house that inspired me because there is a house.

🐾 Really?

🐾 Yes. My grandmother and grandfather lived in Yonkers, New York and they had this beautiful big house that was a Tudor. It had a root cellar and a wine cellar and a full third floor with 3 bedrooms and a bathroom and an attic. All the bathrooms had beautiful little tiles. I just think about that house—you know I'm really interested in the whole tudor thing. The kitchen originally had super fire-engine red tiles halfway up the wall and later they redecorated and put fake woodgrain up. That's probably the most 70's thing. They had this porch that was built out of rough-hewn rock, slabs and chunks of rock all cemented together, that had two sets of French doors that went off the living room, it was like a terrace or loggia. I look at that, and it's all rock brick work and the house is tudor and there are funny tiles in the bathroom and flocked wallpaper in different rooms...

🐾 That's like sculpture!

🐾 The whole thing was like a beautiful sculpture. My grandparents lived there from before I was born until I was about 14. My sister and I went there once a month for ten years, regularly. My whole routine was: I had a desk in the tv room that was pretty much reserved just for me, and my grandparents bought me an 80 color set of prisma-color pencils. I would draw from the minute I got up to lunchtime, eat lunch, maybe go on some errands with my grandparents, come home, watch an entire afternoon of TV. I would just be drawing and at 4 o'clock my grandparents would make malted milkshakes and bring them up to my sister and me. I would keep drawing until dinner. I would draw so much—and I have really sweaty hands—there would be a pool of sweat like a lake in the palm of my hand. I would draw these interiors of houses—

🐾 You would? Get out!

🐾 No! I can show you these drawings. They're super tiny and detailed. It would be like if someone had sliced a house in half and you are looking into all the rooms. There were other drawings. They were all cat heads in a cat family tree. I did hundreds of them.

🐾 I feel like that explains a lot.

🐾 (laughing) Really?

🐾 What are your paintings about?

🐾 I don't know how to answer that kind of question, it's just too direct. People have said this 70's thing before. I automatically want to resist that conversation because it seems so trendy and limiting. I resist it, but I can't deny that's when I grew up. I spent my entire youth in the 70's. I look back at my childhood and find it comforting and if 70's furniture was in the background of a comforting childhood, so be it.

🐾 When you are painting are you thinking about your comforting childhood?

🐾 No. I'm thinking about making my paintings.

🐾 I'd like to talk about your whole system where you have a bunch of canvases on the floor. When did you hit on that?

🐾 I didn't want to make drippy paintings and the only way not to make drips is to do the painting on the floor. I did things on the floor in graduate school too, but because they were so small I put them on stools. I'd balance two on a stool.

🐾 What were you painting in grad school?

🐾 I'd take a 2x4 and cut it up into little squares and stretch canvas on them and do these experimental surface paintings with polyurethane and glitter. That's probably my best work from graduate school.

🐾 I remember one time you gave a lecture and you said you'd always wanted to do abstraction. I found that interesting. Can you talk about that?


🐾 I was the only person from my college (Smith College) in my major, who was going on to get an MFA. I felt a little like I was special but when I got to the Art Institute I felt absolutely unspecial.


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People's work was so much better than mine. I had this feeling when I was in (grad) school that I wasn't translating who I was and what I wanted to do in my work in a way that was natural. I'd do one body of work and then another that was absolutely different. I'd had a very literal training and it was hard to let go of that. The only value system I had was representation and representation pissed me off because you could be doing this still-life and it could look cool in the painting and the teacher would come, look over your shoulder and say, "that's not what it looks like." You were always corrected by life. I finally didn't want to have nature correcting me. I was tired of it. I felt, "no, I'm the expert! That is what it is supposed to look like. That is exactly how it looks in my head."





Rebecca as a child. Courtesy of Rebecca Morris.


 What about now? Where do you feel you are going?

 I guess I just try and out-do myself. Part of my work is about small permutations. Something I was trying to do in my last show was make sure I didn't just have 7 paintings about the same size with the same sized squares layered on top of each other. I wanted to shake up the proportions and make sure there was a variety that was really tight. I wanted the dialogue to be interesting and varied. When I am working for a show I'm thinking about that. When I'm just making paintings, I go idea by idea.

 You seem really committed to painting. Do you ever see yourself doing anything else? I know you also take photographs.


 I don't know. I can't tell you that I dabbled and did sculpture and this and that. When I was in college I did a lot of photography and have always been really interested in photography, if nothing else for visual notes.

 Do you believe secrecy is the best mode of working?


 Like if you have an idea you shouldn't tell


anybody because they'll steal it or do you mean secrecy if I tell you something it will lose its power for me?


 Yeah.


 I don't like to talk about things that much because I get really worried and think "Oh god, what if I ruin it?" It's not secretive paranoid, it's secretive losing the energy.


 Do you like bossing people around?


 Of course! You do too—but you're funny because you admit it more. I don't really talk about it.


 I think assertiveness is one of the things I like about you most. I admire your ability to say it like you mean it.

 It doesn't occur to me to hold back. I know that I can be difficult and just start giving people advice without ever being asked and I'm sure it's horrible.

 Do you think if you weren't an artist you'd be the CEO of some company bossing people around?

 I don't know. Sometimes I think about what I would be doing if I wasn't an artist. I have a rolodex of back-up careers in my head.

 Like what?

 Do you remember The Wolf in *Pulp Fiction*? They talk about this guy called The Wolf and you think he's going to be amazing but all he does is walk in and start ordering people around. "Just clean up the car! Get the soap!" It's exactly what they should have thought to do themselves but somebody is barking out orders. I think that would be a good job for me.