

# Dorothy Iannone *Lioness*

The New Museum July 22 – October 18, 2009

Kara L. Rooney

Housed in the lobby of the New Museum, the cult of the eternal goddess and the dying god has come home to roost—at least that is the atmosphere of Dorothy Iannone's first and only U.S. retrospective, *Dorothy Iannone: Lioness*. Fusing the visual worlds of ancient fertility rites with a stylized contemporary bravado, Iannone, with an unapologetic adulation for the act of lovemaking, transforms the museum's small gallery space into a veritable aesthetic orgy.

Summoning a kinship with the kaleidoscopic mosaics of the Byzantine era, the erotic paintings of the Middle East, and the compositional flatness of Japanese woodcuts, Iannone's paintings, video, wood cutouts and illustrated text pieces, primarily from the artist's early career, reveal the visions of a matriarchal high priestess. Adorned in elaborate headdresses and jeweled designs, the female muses of Iannone's painted motifs (almost always self-portraits) commingle and collide at various angles with the male form—most often that of her longtime lover, the German-Swiss artist Dieter Roth—while intricately patterned mandalas radiate crystalline hues of gold, royal blue, and crimson. Exposed genitals abound in the work, from beneath the garments of kings, businessmen, harlequin dancers, and street thugs. But while Iannone's themes deal strictly with adult subject matter—sex, love, betrayal

and power, to name a few—a childlike exuberance defines her markmaking, placing this self-taught artist within the insider ranks of art world outsiders such as Henry Darger.

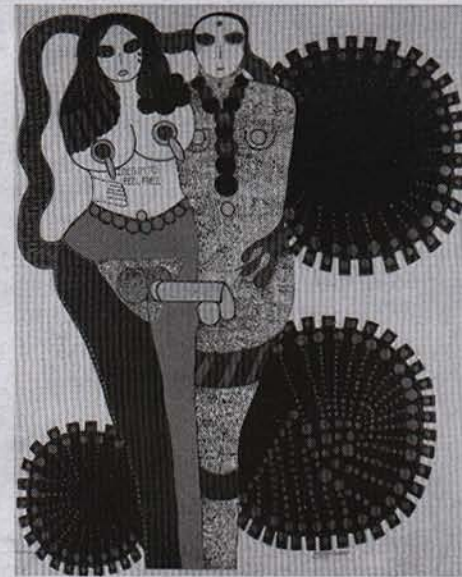
In the large-scale painting "I Am Whatever You Want Me To Be" (1970), a female figure bends at the waist while a male form, grabbing her throat with elongated arms, penetrates her from behind. Across the female's stomach reads the title of the piece, signifying a submission on Iannone's part that, in the pro-feminist eras of the 60s and 70s, not to mention the relatively conservative mindsets of artistic institutions up until the mid-90s, often resulted in the censoring of her work. In the New Museum show, however, this brand of self-objectification is balanced by the artist's cleverly illustrated reversals of power. "I Love To Beat You" (1969-70), for example, depicts the same scene as "I Am Whatever You Want Me To Be", but this time Iannone emerges as the dominant player. Wearing a mask and holding the male figure in place between her legs, she exudes a distinctly feminine authority as her hands clamp down on her lover's throat.

Another piece that is sure to raise eyebrows is one of Iannone's more famous works—the video-sculpture, "I Was Thinking Of You III" (1975/2006), a video loop of the artist's face as she reaches climax. For those who may remember it

from its inclusion in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, the effect is no less diminished at the New Museum. While in some ways synonymous with the work of her salaciously oriented feminist peer, the performance artist and videographer Carolee Schneemann, "I Was Thinking of You III" offers a confrontational assault on the senses that, thirty years later, remains equally shocking and impossible to turn away from—the end product of a prurient rebel spirit.

Text is an integral component of the artist's repertoire, often contextualizing the work's explicit imagery with a sense of playfulness and sincerity. In fact, one of the most poignant pieces in the show is the three-part artist's book and memoir created after Iannone's first encounter with Dieter Roth. Aptly titled "An Icelandic Saga" (1975/78/83), it chronicles the journey of Iannone with her then husband, James Upham, to Iceland, their meeting of Roth, and her subsequent decision to leave her husband and return to Iceland only one week later. Rendered strictly in black and white, the combination of ink drawings with Iannone's childlike cursive and block printing reveal a truthfulness and vulnerability rarely exposed in an artist's oeuvre. It is this same vulnerability, I would argue, that inscribes Iannone's imagery with such powerful magnetism.

In a culture that categorizes the sexual act in word and action as taboo,



Dorothy Iannone (1933), "I Begin To Feel Free" (1970). Acrylic on linen mounted on canvas, 74 3/4 x 59 inches. Courtesy the artist, Air de Paris, Paris and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

as something that should only happen behind closed doors, Iannone's erotic symbolism is palpably refreshing. In the concurrent show of her work at Anton Kern Gallery, a collection of more recent paintings (and lovers) lines the walls, solidifying the idea that for this artist, sexual intimacy is not something to be hidden, nor are the spiritual and emotional bonds that emerge from such an exchange. Rather, it is to be celebrated, made visible and exalted, much in the same way the cults of the ancients did. Perhaps we too can learn from the example of such a passionate advocate; given the visual punch dealt by Iannone's amative iconology, it would be hard not to. **BR**



# Unconsciousness Raising by Anne Pundyk

Her eyes are closed and her mouth smiles quietly. Pulsing slightly, she is silent for several seconds, then her mouth pops open. She cries out a sharp, barking moan. As if surprised from sleep, but not yet awake, her eyes open wide and the camera catches a glint in the whites of her eyes. With her eyes and mouth still open, her head rolls slowly back, dropping below the camera frame. The black-and-white video loop shows a woman's face during orgasm. Made more than 30 years ago by artist Dorothy Iannone, the video elicits different reactions: women stop and watch while most men quickly move on, impatient perhaps for the "money shot."

This summer it was possible to wade in the waters of pornography, erotic art, psychoanalysis, and feminism by visiting four almost concurrent art exhibitions: *Peeps* at CUNY's James Gallery; *John Currin: Works on Paper—A Fifteen Year Survey of Women* at Andrea Rosen Gallery; *Dorothy Iannone: Lioness* at The New Museum; and *The Female Gaze: Women Look at Women* at Cheim & Read. Taken together, these shows trace a line of erotic imagery from the crass commercialism of pure pornography to the more refined commercialism of the art gallery, raising questions about how these forms relate to modern sexuality. Let's be explicit: sex sells. It sells itself—always one click away—and it sells other commodities: beer, cars, tennis rackets, and, yes, art. Certainly, the aspiration for erotic imagery presented in an art setting is that it would stimulate reflections on desire, sexism and human rights. Working from the opposite direction, however, the exploitative forces at work in the making and selling of pornography cannot be completely sugarcoated in a fine art frame.

In *Peeps*, curator Amy Herzog exhibits genuine pornographic film shorts made from the 1950's to the 1970's, but positions them within the context of the history of peepshow technology, free speech and privacy legislation, cinematic iconography, and sociological trends. The films are presented in an elaborate warren of spaces, designed by artist Pierre Huyghe, to mirror the experience of the original peepshow arcades. The ordinary bodies of the women in these films poignantly underscore their amateur role-playing; these girls could actually live next door. These films may seem quaint compared to today's pornography, making it easy to overlook the exploitation at their core.

Some of the related art photography, films and videos exhibited in *Peeps* by such figures as Jean Genet and Alvin Baltrop touch on homoerotic themes, which fill out Herzog's story. The peepshow arcades were often raided on obscenity charges, but Herzog suggests the underlying reason was a fear of public homosexual activity. While her approach to the history of pornography provides an academic armature for showing explicit subject matter, a queasy discomfort comes from the thought that the blue nature of the films might also be a come-on for the show. Whether this show rises to the level of art or is simply cultural artifact, we have to ask why we are looking.

If *Peeps* aims to raise pornography to art, the Currin show is more than willing to meet it in the middle. Dressed up in traditional fine art trappings, his drawings of nude women betray a mocking smugness infused with Hugh Hefner's Playboy philosophy as well as stylized commercial imagery dating from the same era as the "Peeps" films. Grouped by type of distortion to female anatomy—most notably breasts—the physical morphing of his subjects trades on the innocence associated with yesteryear, while bringing to mind today's pumped porn stars. Currin's approach to nude women has been amply rewarded by the market, where it appears that naked exploitation needs to be elevated only by the sheerest of winking ideas.



Alice Neel (1900 - 1984), "Olivia 1975" Oil on canvas, 54 x 34 inches. Courtesy Cheim & Read Gallery

Responding to Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975)—her feminist "call to arms" against crippling phallogocentric attitudes in Hollywood filmmaking—*The Female Gaze* is a diverse selection of depictions of the female form by forty women artists. Mulvey's argument posits that "the roots of [woman's] oppression" in patriarchal society are in an unconscious language mirrored by and built into narrative cinema. It is the language of men, who, as its creators, show women to be dangerous unless they are confined as desirable fetish objects. (Could there be a better description of Currin's work?)

Current sexist attitudes and other breaches of human rights, such as female infanticide, bride burnings, girls denied educational opportunities, and even the press' recent trivialization of our Secretary of State, can be traced to the male gaze. Feminist thinking has evolved: gender—now more broadly defined—is seen as occurring along a continuum of female/passive and male/active qualities available to both men and women. The audience of *Female Gaze*, (and by extension, the three other shows) must decide how Mulvey's argument applies to the exhibition's broad range of fine art and how the artwork expresses her hope for an empathetic alternative language. Alice Neel's oil portrait, "Olivia 1975," painted the year of Mulvey's essay, offers some clues: it shows a seated pre-teen girl, casually dressed who "double dares" the viewer to objectify and commodify her.

Neel's painting links us back to Iannone's video; both artworks employ an active female voice to express the essence of the individual portrayed, not something you'll find in the *Peeps* films. Iannone is an American artist long-based in Berlin and her video is part of a modest-sized retrospective. The show includes brightly colored paintings, small plywood cutout figures, and narrative drawings. Her cartoon-like, flatly painted work emphasizes the erogenous zones of the figures in her narrative tableaux. It may look primitive next to Currin's work, but it pioneers a revelation in erotic art: Iannone exalts our variable sexual identities and

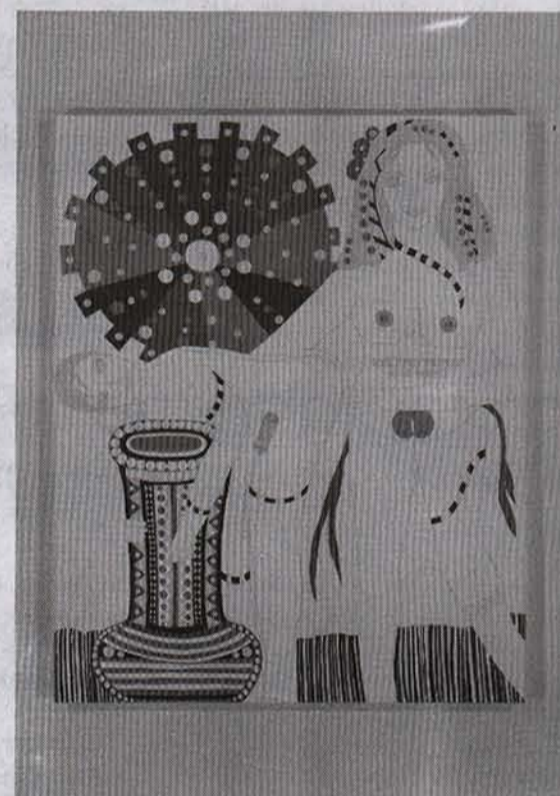
*Peeps*  
The Amie and Tony James Gallery  
The Graduate Center, CUNY  
May 15 - July 12, 2009

A symposium called "Pornography in the City" will be held at the James Gallery on December 15, 2009, 2 - 6 pm. Speakers include Douglas Crimp, Samuel Delany, and Amy Herzog.

*The Female Gaze: Women Look At Women*  
Cheim & Read  
June 25 - September 19, 2009

Dorothy Iannone: *Lioness*  
The New Museum for Contemporary Art  
July 22 - October 18, 2009

John Currin: *Works on Paper - A Fifteen Year Survey of Women*  
Andrea Rosen Gallery  
June 19 - August 21, 2009



Dorothy Iannone, "Metaphor" (2009). Acrylic on wood. 74 3/4 x 59 x 2 1/4 inches. Courtesy of Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

urges. Her work candidly documents a personally risky journey in pursuit of sexual expression that leaves feminists, Freud, and even free speech on the sidelines. In the process, she meets Mulvey's challenge to advance our understanding of the female unconscious.

The cumulative effect of these shows is to accentuate the question of whether erotic art can move beyond exploitation to affect our thinking about healthy gender identity and human rights. *Peeps* sets the stage, documenting the roots of the commercialization of sexuality. *Female Gaze* generously offers a rare alternative, one in which only the most self-hating woman could produce images like those in Currin's show. Perhaps its best to see Currin's work simply as a foil for the work of the brave and underappreciated Iannone. Yet it is *Peeps* that stays with you: the show may archive a minor historical moment, but it has a troubling poignancy. What looks like more innocent times are not innocent at all; rather they stand as a benchmark of just how little our view of women has progressed in sixty years. **BR**

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