

DOROTHY IANNONE

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[NEW MUSEUM AND ANTON KERN](#)

by *julian kreimer*

NEW YORK Almond-eyed, bare-bottomed, penises erect or vulvas engorged, Dorothy Iannone's figures conjoin, ecstatically reaching galactic heights through physical love. These two shows, concurrent for a time last summer, together presented over 40 years of Iannone's work, from a few small painted wooden cutouts of 1966-67 (she did about 400 over the years, depicting all the people she could think of, some clothed and some nude but all with genitals exposed) on through paintings and text-filled drawings depicting her great loves, bodily and spiritual.

Iannone's style and subject matter have changed little over the years: a combination of naively drawn figures and bright, psychedelic backgrounds of flora, mandalas and biomorphic patterns. These decorative details often double as settings for the lovemaking and metaphors for enormities like suns, mountains and seas. It's not surprising to learn that Iannone was the plaintiff in the 1961 Supreme Court case that famously allowed Henry Miller's books into the U.S., since her own explicit sexual imagery has prompted the exclusion and removal of her work from exhibitions over the years. Like Miller, she depicted sex in terms of darkness and light, violence and playfulness, dualities that channeled the ancient sex-filled myths she had studied as a literature student and world traveler.

Especially bold and amusing are the words she writes in her paintings, all in caps, often on the bodies of her figures. In *I Love To Beat You* (1969-70), the title phrase appears on the stomach of a woman standing spread-legged over a seated brown figure whose head is nestled under her vagina. In another work, from 1970-71, a one-armed Iannone stands over a supine armless man reaching with a thumbless five-fingered hand for his penis. Sporting stylized chest hair and jewelry, he is Dieter Roth, her muse and lover from 1967 to '74. On her stomach is written, "LET ME SQUEEZE YOUR FAT CUNT AM I YOUR FIRST WOMAN."

One of the best works in either show, *The Icelandic Saga* (1978), at the New Museum, uses the tropes of ancient narratives (and the form of comic books) to show and tell, over 48 16 1/2-by-11 3/4-inch panels, how she left her then-husband James Upham for Roth during a trip by the three to Iceland. As we follow the story of mounting tension and eventual release, the union of text and image amplifies the sense of a cosmic saga where all is connected—as in the fourth panel, where black shapes representing the walls of a ship's stateroom crowd the three travelers and their cocktail snacks, creating a claustrophobic feeling described in the accompanying text as well. We come away with the sense of an artist whose humor is inextricable from her fearlessness. Like the medieval manuscript illuminators she brings to mind, she focuses on getting us to feel the power of her story rather than on reinventing visual forms.

Photo: View of Dorothy Iannone's exhibition "Lioness," 2009; at the New Museum.

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