

Camden Arts Centre, Arkwright Road, London NW3 6DG, 15 Apr 2013

## Dorothy Iannone: Innocent and Aware



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**Artist :** Dorothy Iannone

**Title :** Installation shot, Camden Arts Centre

**Website :** [www.camdenartscentre.org](http://www.camdenartscentre.org)

**Credit :** Photo: Andy Keate

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### Dorothy Iannone: Innocent and Aware

Camden Arts Centre

8 March – 5 May 2013

Review by Rachel Guthrie

Her works are vibrant painted murals dedicated to sexual intimacy, patterned quilts that lay beneath two bodies. Her figures are like adorned icons – primitive in both their carnal desire and their shameless nudity, and the wildernesses they inhabit. The triumphant protagonist in 'The Next Great Moment in History is Ours' (1970) for example, is dressed in a heavy Egyptian fringe, has unshaven armpits, a cat's tail that doubles as a serpent, and embodies all the prowess of a sexual predator. She's straddled between Egypt, India and Ancient Turkey; and the jewelled divas of Chris Ofili, the imagination of the terrible Chapman two-some, Grayson Perry when fashioned in female dress, and the ever-wanting Tracy Emin.

Robert Fillion described Dorothy Iannone as a “freedom fighter” in the opening of her exhibition, a phrase that resonated with me throughout my touring about ‘Innocent and Aware’ – her first full show in UK. Looking around it is easy to see how artistically she fought for freedom – by creating art that was controversial enough to require censorship, she campaigned against censorship itself – and in her personal life, she fought for sexual freedom, a journey which began at the height of the age of sexual liberation in the sixties, and which has consumed her life, and art, ever since. And so the two – art and sex - have become enmeshed in the kind of erotic bond that covers the Camden Arts Centre walls.

The show opens, surprisingly, with some of Iannone’s newest contributions to her oeuvre. Chronologically backwards, it would appear an unusual way to open a show that serves as a retrospective, except that the art – openly autobiographical – not the exhibition, tells the artist’s story, and so this beginning collection of pop culture pieces on unconditional love becomes an apt scene-setter. ‘The Movie People’, a series of wooden cut-outs from 2009-10 are displayed like stage sets but speak as case studies of the artist’s understanding of the unconditional love she dedicates her life to pursuing.

Her feature piece ‘Follow Me’ is a reconsideration of the term unconditional love as it is most frequently used in western cultural tradition – of the Christian God’s love of his children. The plywood triptych is an altarpiece to the artist herself who poses as a hedonistic goddess, speaking and singing over her followers from a TV set implanted in central panel. Iannone advocates a kind of freedom that is an alternative to the freedom from sin that is found in Jesus Christ’s crucifixion. The language of freedom is eroticised – a kinky Christ is chained like a sexual slave to the cross, the crown of thorns turned into a symbol of free loving – a ring of roses on a hippie’s head. What the artist sells is sexual liberation, permitting her disciples to follow their human desires.

Pleasurable as a life devoted to love may sound, half a century of art making with unconditional love as its muse has led to times saturated in the melancholic. In her most openly autobiographical piece, a storyboard called ‘The Adorable Trixie’ (1975/8), Iannone’s anxiety during a period of loneliness is told in the third person voice, “she fears a little that her art alone (that idea of love which is the impetus of her life) will be her mate and her comfort.” There have been ups and downs in her career and personal life, with many men serving as muses for long or short stints. The most successful stretch was with Dieter Roth and is signified in the grand bed sheet mural to their relationship, ‘An Icelandic Saga’ (1989) that lines the sidewall of the second gallery. She is the first to admit – as expressed in her artist’s books – in her drive towards the confessional; she makes art that often resembles ‘A much more detailed than requested reconstruction’. Despite signs of (to be expected) vulnerability, Iannone rises as a figure that has re-emerged onto the exhibition scene at 80 years old with all the self-assured gumption of a celebrated artist and a knowing lover.