

Dorothy Iannone: art's original bad girl

Decades before Tracey Emin was commemorating her conquests on canvas, American artist Dorothy Iannone was baiting the censors with sexually explicit work celebrating her life and loves. But her art is more about candour than coitus.

Adrian Searle 13 March 2013



In painting after painting, erect willies wave, bottoms and breasts bulge, vaginas are proffered and everyone's at it. The life and loves of the artist, movie romances, sex and yet more sex are Dorothy Iannone's subjects.

Born in Boston in 1933 and now living in Berlin, the 80-year-old American artist's work is as raunchy as ever it was. One can only applaud. But it is more than a matter of stamina; there are lots of other ways one wants to celebrate a woman who was once bitten on the bum by Allen Ginsberg. She has made work after work celebrating her great love affair with the artist Dieter Roth – who looks in Iannone's paintings like a man both naked and wearing a monkey suit – and has been fearless in her pursuit of personal freedom.

Iannone was arrested by US customs in 1961 for importing the banned novels of Henry Miller, and won a court case against the authorities, overturning the censorship of authors including Miller. In 1972, some of her own artists' books were also destroyed by UK customs. The censoring of a show in Berne, Switzerland, led to the resignation of the great curator Harald Szeemann in protest. This woman is trouble.

Decades before Tracey Emin and her tent, Iannone made an artist's book naming all the men she'd ever slept with. In fact, much of Iannone's spirit, and her artistic style, with its confessions and written rants, prefigures Emin. She has been called an original bad girl. On the evidence of her videos, she is at least a bad singer. In one, she sings along with a German Pastor lover, and wails in another. She might also win a bad sex award.

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In her well-known *I Was Thinking of You*, a video monitor contained in a Punch-and-Judy painted box, we watch Iannone's face in closeup as she giddily masturbates. When this was exhibited in the Whitney Biennial, Iannone was happy when a reviewer said it was the most transgressive work in the show. "To say that it contributed to any sexual or artistic revolution isn't really my line," she told curator Maximiliano Gioni. She said instead that she wanted to give a glimpse of the soul.

Her paintings are as disconcerting for their shrill blend of the naive and the hippyish, Gustav Klimt, tantric art and pop, as they are for the riots of ass-wiggling exhibitionism, androgyny, and screwing. The penises come in all shapes and sizes, and the fattened labia of her women are as rounded as peaches or a man's balls. Yet somehow, all this sex neither arouses nor titillates. It is repetitive, I suppose in the way most sex is. I don't think she intends her work to turn us on; I have seen sexier Giacometti's and hotter Miró blobs. I am keener on Iannone's candour than on all the coitus.

Celebrating matriarchy and men, solitude and togetherness, and art (as well as living) as exercises of freedom, Iannone depicts herself as powerful and submissive, goddess and whore. Iannone's feminism has always been nuanced; not for her the separatism of 1970s radicalism. Her art is more childlike and innocent than strident. And Iannone obviously likes men. "You will not be vanquished although you are a man," reads one of many annotations that litter her work. "Centuries of gazing at your fragility have augmented my love for your sex."



There are words everywhere. One huge series of prints, *An Icelandic Saga*, details her journey by ship to Reykjavik with fluxus pioneer Emmett Williams to meet the Swiss artist Dieter Roth, with whom she falls instantly in love. It is as much memoir as art. In another drawing about her sexual rites of passage, she writes: "Domesticity is dull and deadly, the thing to realise is that everyone knows this." She goes on: "Try living mostly alone. Maybe you will learn to be more connected to people."

Often, you have to get up close, to squint and peer, and read more than you look. Each of her ongoing *Movie People* series of little wooden cutouts describes the plot of a movie, alongside painted silhouettes of the film's protagonists. There's a nice plainness to the calligraphy and the way everything is drawn. Here's Ennis and Jack, hugging in *Brokeback Mountain*, and here a couple carousing in *The Piano*. There's *Lolita*, in the arms of a funny caricature of James Mason as Humbert Humbert. All this is fun, though it can give you a backache, leaning in to read. An earlier series of small cutouts called *People* features a cast of famous names and mythological beings – Charlie Chaplin and JFK, Henry VIII and Jackie O among them. Genitals poke through their clothes. The men look like they're wearing strap-ons.

I don't know how she is as a cook, but her hand-drawn and painted collection of recipes, lain out under glass, is spattered not so much with sauces as with a spillage of thoughts on life, eating – and all the other stuff she's got up to in her long life. One reads "Never cry when you cook" and another, "Immortal is like pregnant – there's no such thing as a little bit". It's all a mix of the homely and the ironic; the grubbier a cookbook, the more likely it is worth recommending. Cookery, like art, is a libidinous business.