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ART REVIEW / DOROTHY IANNONE An Iconoclast Who Valorizes the Erotic and Ecstatic

By Karen Rosenberg

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High priestess, matriarch, sex goddess: the self-taught American artist Dorothy Iannone has been called all these things and more. Since the early 1960s she has been making paintings, sculptures and artist's books that advocate "ecstatic unity," most often achieved through lovemaking. The stylized couples in her art, modeled on figures in Indian erotic paintings, Japanese woodcuts and Byzantine mosaics, flaunt their sexual and spiritual bonds. Often they represent Ms. Iannone and her lover and muse, the artist Dieter Roth. In a fascinating way, they combine apparent submission on the part of the woman and obvious self-objectification on Ms. Iannone's part with a clear sense that this artist is firmly in control of her story. If these works were being created by a young artist today, you might call them postfeminist. But Ms. Iannone made them in the late 1960s and early '70s, when the first wave of feminism was cresting. She painted herself having intercourse decades before Jeff Koons documented his sex life with his porn-star wife, La Cicciolina. Ms. Iannone made an artist's book in 1967 listing all the men she had slept with a project later echoed by the Young British Artist Tracey Emin.

Now, at 75, Ms. Iannone is having her first solo show at an American museum: "Dorothy Iannone: Lioness," at the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Why has it taken so long? As she noted in a recent interview in the art magazine *Modern Painters*, "when my work was not censored outright, it was either mildly ridiculed, or described as folkloric, or just ignored." For the last couple of decades, she has been working quietly and intermittently from an apartment in Berlin. The first

PERES PROJECTS

signs of a comeback were in 2005, when the curatorial team known as the Wrong Gallery included Ms. Iannone in a show at the Tate Modern in London. In 2006, her sculpture “I Was Thinking of You III” made a memorable appearance at the Whitney Biennial. (It featured a video of her face as she masturbated.)

Organized by Jarrett Gregory, a curatorial assistant at the New Museum, “Dorothy Iannone: Lioness” is small enough to fit into the lobby gallery. It includes just a smattering of early work: four paintings, one sculpture, an artist’s book and a series of wooden cutouts. It is complemented, however, by an exhibition at the Anton Kern Gallery in Chelsea that spans the 1960s to the present. Both shows deliver an invigorating shock to an art world lulled, as of late, by the tasteful, conservative and blue-chip.

Born to a Boston family of Italian immigrants, Ms. Iannone studied literature at Boston University and Brandeis. The rest of her biography reads like a series of intuitive decisions, privileging love and art over everything else.

In 1958 she married the painter and investor James Upham, giving up a doctoral fellowship at Stanford. The couple lived comfortably in New York, where they were active in the 10th Street gallery scene, and traveled frequently.

On trips to Europe and the Far East, Ms. Iannone saw Japanese woodcuts, Greek vases, Egyptian reliefs, classical Indian art and Byzantine mosaics. The common denominator for all of these art forms was the human body. Her own work started to move away from 10th Street-style gestural abstraction.

During this period she made small, painted-wood likenesses of luminaries like Charlie Chaplin, Jacqueline Kennedy, the Rolling Stones and Norman Mailer. A selection of these cutout figures is at the New Museum; all have sex organs visible through their clothing, as if Ms. Iannone were reverting to Freud’s genital stage or mocking the false intimacy of celebrity.

She became a minor celebrity herself when her copy of Henry Miller’s “Tropic of Cancer” was seized at the old Idlewild Airport in Queens in 1960. With some help from the New York Civil Liberties Union, Ms. Iannone sued the Collector of Customs. After a preliminary hearing, the book was returned and the ban on Miller’s work was effectively lifted.

But the real catalyst in her development was a 1967 trip to Iceland, where she first met Dieter Roth through a mutual friend. Ms. Iannone later documented the experience in her artist’s book “An Icelandic Saga,” on view at the New Museum.

Its third-person narrative, supplemented by charts and packing lists, details Ms. Iannone’s instant chemistry with Roth, the ensuing sexual tension and her decision, just one week later, to leave her husband and start a new life in Reykjavik. It’s a “Dear John” letter recast as a Norse myth.

In the paintings made during their seven-year relationship, a hirsute and bejeweled Roth and a statuesque Ms. Iannone commingle over and over, in a variety of positions. Hand-lettered texts exalt the couple’s union: sometimes a quote from Shakespeare, sometimes one more along the lines of a Harlequin paperback. Leaves, starbursts and other decorative motifs heighten the florid sensuality.

In “Your Names Are Love Father God” (1969-70) and “I Am Whoever You Want Me to Be” (1970), Ms. Iannone appears to surrender her identity to her lover. There’s a sense that she does so willingly, and that she retains a measure of power. In her writing at the time she often referred to Roth as her muse; he called her his lioness. Then, there’s the curious fact that the rounded pudenda in her paintings look more like testicles.

PERES PROJECTS

Also at the New Museum is the extravagantly decorative videosculpture “I Was Thinking of You III,” made in 1975 and updated in 2006 for the Whitney Biennial. On its exterior, the hand-painted wooden box depicts a man and woman in flagrante delicto; a cutout where the woman’s face should be holds a video monitor displaying a loop of Ms. Iannone’s face. On the sides of the box, a cryptic text urges men to surrender.

What she’s up to in the video is obvious, yet the treatment is gentler and spookier than in, say, Vito Acconci’s “Seedbed” of 1971 or Lynda Benglis’s 1974 Artforum advertisement, featuring herself naked, oiled and with a dildo. Ms. Iannone has said she tried to capture the “soul passing over the face,” and as her eyes flash at the climactic moment you can almost see it happen.

In the later works at Kern, the phenomenon described by Ms. Gregory as “the blurring of love and idolatry” evolves into something less worshipful. Roth appears, but so do other lovers. In “Metaphor” (2009), a painting of a zaftig blond woman and a waiflike man bent at the waist, the woman is clearly the dominant half of the couple. The text on her stomach reads, “Sometimes you must also submit.”

It’s easy to see why the art world has been slow to warm to Ms. Iannone. In the late 1960s she was repeatedly censored, including in a 1969 exhibition in Bern, Switzerland, where the museum’s board of directors wanted to give her figures black-cloth fig leaves. She didn’t fare much better in the politically correct 1990s.

Today her idiosyncrasies are likely to be not only tolerated, but also embraced. She may resonate especially with young gay artists — because although the couples in her art are straight, she expresses erotic love with a freedom that can only be described as liberating.