

# Numéro

## Censorship, masturbation: who is Dorothy Iannone, the transgressive and feminist artist exhibited at M HKA?

Mathieu Jacquet – December 22, 2023



A transgressive artist and feminist before her time, Dorothy Iannone (1933–2022) is the subject of a major retrospective at the M HKA in Antwerp, on view until January 21. The show is a rich introduction to the protean work of the American painter and drawer, whose works, with their instantly recognizable graphic style, tackle subjects such as female sexuality and censorship head-on. Discover 3 things you need to know about this visionary artist.

### Love, the driving force behind Dorothy Iannone's work

To those discovering it for the first time, the work of Dorothy Iannone (1933–2022) may seem crude, even provocative. This is undoubtedly because the male and female bodies that she painted and drew in a wide range of media often highlight genitalia and sexual acts in a very frontal manner. In her unclassifiable works, we find the graphic, two-dimensional style of the comic strip—with texts and illustrations characterized by sharply defined black outlines and solid colors—as well as the presence of traditional and folk art motifs, and also some reminiscences of naive art in compositions that defy the rules of perspective. And yet, behind these explicit representations, which some may consider erotic or even pornographic, the work of the artist who passed away last year is driven by a single force: love.

Born in Boston, from a family of Italian immigrants, Dorothy Iannone began painting in the late '50s and, after studying literature, moved to New York with her first husband James Upham. While her first paintings

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were initially abstract, they gradually incorporated texts, recognizable motifs—such as flowers, vegetation, and objects of all kinds—and human figures with prominent genitals—especially from the mid-60s onwards. The year 1967 marked a real turning point in her career. From New York, the painter embarked on a cruise to Iceland, where she met the Swiss artist Dieter Roth, an influential figure in the Fluxus art movement. It was love at first sight: from then on, the two artists never left each other's side, to the point where their passion became an inexhaustible source of inspiration for Iannone.



“I no longer painted anyone but Dieter,” the *New Yorker* confided a few years ago to Joanna Zielińska, the curator of her fascinating retrospective shown this winter at Antwerp's M HKA. The two of us became the stars of my work, and, instead of embellishing my paintings with verses from poems I loved, I started to transcribe what we had said to each other, or I would write my own texts.” The most convincing example of this romance is *An Icelandic Saga* (1978–1986), which chronicles how they first met in a series of some forty black-and-white drawings, in which text and drawing are interwoven in the manner of a diary. At the same time, Dorothy Iannone's works became increasingly narrative over the years, reflecting both her growing interest in spirituality and Buddhism—through the carnal and spiritual union of bodies—and her fervent desire to defend a free and assertive female sexuality. A case in point is *(Ta)Rot* (1968–1969), a deck of cards inspired by the major arcana of the *Tarot de Marseille*, in which 27 colorful cards depict both everyday situations and scenes of coitus between herself and her muse Dieter Roth. Following their separation in 1974, love continued to permeate Dorothy Iannone's work: in 2009, she began the long-running *Movie People* series, in which she painted cinema's leading couples on small woodcut surfaces, ranging from Jeanne Moreau and Jean-Marc Bory in *Les Amants* (1958) to Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in *The Secret of Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

## **An overtly sexual work, repeatedly censored**

In the mid-20th century, works depicting the female nude body, even if sexualized, were generally accepted in the Western art world. Despite this tolerance, Dorothy Iannone's work upset the apostles of virtue, in particular because genitals featured prominently. This defiance began in 1967, when she was invited to exhibit at the Stuttgart gallery of poet and publisher Hansjörg Meyer: there, she presented a few oil paintings and dozens of wooden figurines from her *People* series, a gallery of mythical and real-life characters as diverse as the actor Charlie Chaplin and the Hindu goddess Krishna, a number of whom are depicted naked. The reaction was swift: following a complaint from a visitor that the works were pornographic, the police raided the gallery the day after the opening and confiscated the entire body of work, including the wooden figurines. Then, on the day the

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exhibition was due to end, the works were returned directly to the artist to ensure that they did not return to the gallery's walls.

Two years later, a similar experience at Kunsthalle Bern would have an even greater impact on Dorothy Iannone. Included in a group show ("The Friends Exhibition") at the invitation of Dieter Roth, recent works by the artist disturbed several fellow artists exhibiting alongside her, leading curator Harald Szeemann to cover the genitals visible on the figures with brown tape, for fear of outraging the audience. This precaution was not enough when the chairman of the museum's board of trustees visited. Shocked by the "inappropriate" works, he enjoined Szeemann to remove them from the exhibition. Outraged by this censorship and supported by Dieter Roth, who also withdrew his paintings from the exhibition, the American painter published the book *The Story of Bern (or) Showing Colors* (1970), which retraces the stages of the scandal through the perspective of its protagonists in several black-and-white drawings and texts. The first in a long series of artist's books by Dorothy Iannone, this work, currently on show at the M HKA, will inaugurate, in her words, "a new form of art history."



## **From a painted piano to masturbation to a Marlene Dietrich song**

Although one might think that Dorothy Iannone's work is limited to paper and wood, her Antwerp retrospective proves otherwise. A piano, an armchair, a roulette table, human-sized figures, a music box... Until her death last year, the American artist covered a wide range of supports with her scenes, motifs and raw, brightly colored figures. This eclecticism is complemented by her books of poems, as well as her music recordings on vinyl and audio cassettes, another important aspect of her practice. In 1975, while painting at home in Paris, the artist listened, over and over again, to a German song performed by Marlene Dietrich. This inspired her to record herself singing the chorus of the song on an audio cassette. Progressively, Iannone began to masturbate while doing so, to the point where her sensations would manifest through her breathing and the inflections of her voice, which grew louder and louder as she approached orgasm. The tape is not the only sound recording by the artist, who dedicated one to the story of her relationship with Dieter Roth, and another to her close friendship with Mary Harding, where we hear their confidences shared in the intimacy of the bedroom.

Dorothy Iannone was one of the first artists to depict female pleasure in such a crude way, and she also translated it into moving images. In 1975, in one of her "video boxes"—human-sized boxes adorned with her paintings of love scenes and containing a TV screen—we discover a close-up film of her face, whose expression changes, again, to the rhythm of her self-stimulation. There are three versions of this work, which remained unseen for a long time before being exhibited at the Tate Modern, the Whitney Biennial and now, at the M HKA, in a comprehensive retrospective of an unclassifiable, transgressive and eminently contemporary artist.