

# frieze

## Dorothy Iannone

### September Gallery

In the last few years, the American-born, Berlin-based artist Dorothy Iannone has finally been getting a little more attention for the work she made in the 1970s. Her video sculpture *I Was Thinking of You* (1975) – a sarcophagus-size box, painted with a joyously erotic love-making scene and including a built-in monitor screening a close-up video of the artist's face while masturbating – was plucked from relative obscurity and remade in three different versions for presentations in *The Wrong Gallery* at Tate Modern in 2005 and in the 2006 Whitney Biennial. Her most recent solo exhibition of paintings, works on paper and two other video sculptures from the same period, as well as some recent screen prints, offered a rare opportunity to see more of her work. These shows also confirm a wider and welcome readiness to understand the 'contemporary' part of contemporary art as an indication of context and currency of ideas, regardless of the age of the artist or of their work.

By all accounts something of a bohemian grande dame, Iannone has a colourful and varied biography peppered with intense friendships with male artists and writers, all of which are integral to an appreciation of her art, particularly because her personal mythology, experiences, feelings and relationships are often the subjects of her work. A literature graduate, she illegally imported Henry Miller novels in the early 1960s into the USA and successfully contested their censorship at trial. But her life-changing moment came slightly later, in 1967, when she took a cruise from New York to Iceland with her then husband. Waiting for them on a pier was artist Dieter Roth, holding a fish. He and Iannone became lovers, Iannone left her husband, and she and Roth remained companions until 1974, and lifelong friends until his death in 1998. During their time together they were immersed in the vibrant Dusseldorf Fluxus scene, although she would later inscribe on a piece: 'I am she who is not Fluxus.' While they were together Iannone's practice matured from her take on Abstract Expressionism to a multimedia, ornamental, figurative and folkish style shamelessly celebrating what she describes as her 'ecstatic unity' with her lover. In 1976, after receiving a DAAD scholarship to come to Berlin, Iannone moved to the city where she still resides and holds court today.

Decades on, 'Follow Me', a satisfying if modest exhibition – in terms of its scale and the number of works on display – picked up the story. In recent interviews, Iannone has

### About this review

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By *Dominic Eichler*



Dorothy Iannone, *The Heroic Performance of Pastor Erik Boek...* (1980)

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seemed philosophical about the ups and downs of her career (which never actually stopped), citing commercial disinterest in her work, censorship of her shows and her increasing involvement in making artist's books. On display were three sex paintings from the pivotal chapter in her career: *I Begin to Feel Free* (1970), *I Love to Beat You* (1969–70) and *Think You There Was ...* (1972). These are as radiant and provocative as the day they were made. One of the first striking things about the paintings is the artist's graphic depiction of male and female genitals. For Iannone they are best pictured swollen with the anticipation of pleasure, not so much awkward appendages as rudders, compasses and festive brooches. Her labia, for instance, usually look as visually prominent as any scrotum or erectile tissue a male might have to offer. Though apparently heterosexual to the core, her take is a Utopian one in which the perspective and power is shifted to the female – always a triumphant, self-defining being, not a vessel or a victim.

Interestingly, Iannone maintained a distance (albeit a respectful one) from emergent Feminist theory and its protagonists. To take an extreme comparison, one could think of the gulf between Iannone's position and, say, the rhetorical battle cry of Valerie Solanas' *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* (1967). The work that lent this exhibition its title, *Follow Me* (1977), is nonetheless a kind of celebration of a lost matriarchal golden age. It takes the form of a three-panel black and white paravent with a video monitor built into it. The video shows the artist's face as she sings one of her texts, which is also copied out on the panels. The front is ornamented with her self-portrait as a naked, opulent siren or goddess beside her lover. Next to this piece stood the altar-like painted video box *The Heroic Performance of Pastor Erik Bock ...* (1980). For this work, the artist fixed her camera on her then lover, a sexy preacher man, who awkwardly delivers an hour-long sermon on Christian love and community, while the painting on the box looks more like a free-love nudist colony. But the real spirit at work is Iannone's, and her own infectious blend of playful seduction, iconoclasm and particular brand of sexual liberation – something that, in many quarters, is still much needed.

### **Dominic Eichler**

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