Making Muses: Dorothy Iannone’s Erotic Art Was Inspired by Dieter Roth

by Neri Rudich on December 14, 2014

It’s fitting that the experimental Sage opens Sigismondo Passi’s new collection of Dorothy Iannone’s image and text artworks. Writing the Sage retrospectively — in 1972, 1963, and 1960 — Iannone describes her trip to Reykjavik in 1967 as the “journey which seems to have made all other journeys possible.” It was there she met the artist Dieter Roth, with whom she swiftly fell in love and with whom she left her husband and a comfortable life in the United States. But it also marks the start of another kind of journey: Iannone’s maturation as an artist and her lifelong quest to achieve ecstatic unity, or “becoming one with another” by way of erotic love.

The idea has parallels in ancient cultures, both in and out of religion, and certain sects of Christianity — an early conceptual influence for Iannone was Saint Teresa, whose immortalization in marble, by Bernini, she saw in her twenties — and though Iannone also borrowed visually from these antecedents (from fertility goddesses and Tantric figurative art, for instance), her method of exploration is very much her own, a journey of both flesh and spirit, life and art, one inseparable from the other.

And in fact, a half dozen pages into her iconographic Saga, she momentarily breaks from the tale to express her gratitude for art. “Art is the world I have created which never lets me down,” she writes, “a world to which I can return again and again and smile and be immersed.” (Was she thinking of Bernini’s sculpture at that moment?) Iannone is often smiling in her work, especially toward the end of the Saga, when she says her new life with Dieter unfolding before her. She is also smiling in “Was Thinking of You” (1979), which is a very different work. On the front of a large wood box covered with dense, vibrantly colored plant motifs and ornamental designs, Iannone painted a life-size man with a huge erection manually asterisking a woman’s drapes and touching her breast. In place of the woman’s head is a small video monitor, on which Iannone’s closely cropped face appears in a loop, as she smiles again and again.

These two works, which appeared together at the New Museum in 2010 (she was then seventy-five, and it was her first, and to date only, US museum solo show), represent two interconnected aspects of Iannone’s art: on one hand, her memorialistic, narrative approach to art making in which her life is both subject and object of art; on the other, her active, unfeigned eroticism. These two aspects are explicit in her work, but it’s never intended as provocation or as an object (or voyeurism, though it can be amusing). What, in “Lists JVI” (1968), she recounts all of her loves before Dieter, the chronicle is given rather discursively. Except for the subject matter, the work resembles a child’s primer.

In an interview with Tristin Dalton republished in the book, Iannone recalls a carpet that covered the floor of her playroom as a child. “It was divided into large square areas and in each square a nursery rhyme was printed with big illustrations in bright, gay colors.” “Lists IV” is a lowercase equivalent. Next, handwritten columns designating each man’s name, Iannone’s age at the time of the encounter, and a checklist assigning for whether their activities constituted “fucking” or “other.” An illustration corresponds to each interaction: these are drawn, as is much of Iannone’s art, as flat, two-dimensional spaces packed with ornament and interior detail; Iannone and her suitors engage in their pursuit in increasingly stylized, thus rather crudely drawn poses. The vignettes are not theatrical, but representational, employing the language of iconography, as her paintings do.

In such pairings, writing is a form of drawing. Another of these, “Lists” (1970), is a conglomerate of five lists juxtaposed with one another on a single page. Text becomes an object, no longer is there an image and a piece of writing on a page, but a multiplication of images. The spaces between lines and words, the rows of sentences and grouping of paragraphs, and the squiggly squiggles of Iannone’s covers resembling provide graphic interest. When they are read, the lists offer a picture of what a period in Iannone’s life looked like; they are words on a page, but cumulatively they form a portrait of their maker.

Another, and very different, example of this impulse is Iannone’s Cookbook (1969), a sixty-page book that is excerpted here in 26 pages. Iannone used felt pens to write densely packed text and to decorate the pages, which are tiled with color and framed by patterned designs. Interspersed among the lists of ingredients and instructions are bits of introspection, sentences or fragments that are written in the flat script of a colored marker or in the thinner line of a black pen and then traced over or highlighted with a colored one.
The scene is set on the book's first page, where Lemon, combines her alternation of annoyance and admiration for Dieter with her pleasure in cooking for him, noting that she should have made the book not for the joy of reading it, but to prove as an outfit for both decoration and self-reflection. On the facing page, amidst a recipe for gempachi, she writes, “can you find the recipes?” Lemon's questions gives pride of place to her ruminations, as if to say that among the reflections on recipes, formally, it's less clear what came first. Did the moments of introspection occur in her after she had cooked the meals, or are the recipes simply a method for expressing her thoughts? In fact, the two are indistinguishable, and Lemon's self-reflection fragments flavor the recipes. At least one can turn pain to color,” she accompanies the recipe for gempachi. Directly below it is one for lentil soup: “Misty's wild in this green and yellow.” A recipe for local pastureime peas; Instructs one to cook the meat until tender. The colors on the page are tender too,” she writes. As are her feelings for her friend Bennett. “What I like about Bennett is that he has never hurt me.”

The Cookbook includes dialogues of humor — “what happens to my sensual animal theory when I am walking ten hours a day? You've heard of a work horse?” — and workday, too in a recipe for baked red snapper with grapefruit, Lemon offers that “the women's liberation movement proved their worth when they put out to pasture the valiant domesticated as an insult.” At the top of the page, almost lost in a red border, she quietly queries, “why do you like my red snapper?” The thought and conversations in the Cookbook make Lemon an essential ingredient; she becomes inseparable from the making of the food, as when a recipe for chicken giblet loaf is written over a self-portrait; her Greek from gymnastics excites to try some instruction.

When it's a form of dialogue, then the conversation takes turns; drawings, too, are meant to be read, as Lemon's narrative winds around so much of comic books. I wrote on this aspect of her work for Comics Comics in 2010 ("Dialogues") (1982) tells the story of her seduction of Dieter on a night as they're turning off the lights to go to bed. The single-page work is illuminated with panels that are minimalistic, as that the dialogue primarily tells the story. She uses the same device in "Dialogues V" (1985) and, more abstractly, in "Dialogues X" (1989).