

REVIEWS

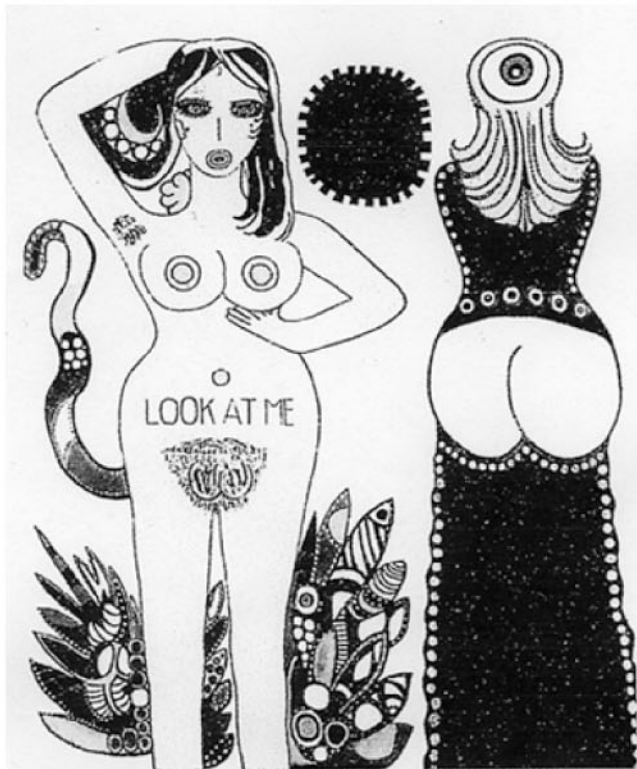
Dorothy Iannone

ANTON KERN GALLERY

In the preface accompanying Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), Anaïs Nin (or, some claim, Miller ghostwriting) argues, "If there is here revealed a capacity to shock, to startle the lifeless ones from their profound slumber, let us congratulate ourselves; for the tragedy of our world is precisely that nothing any longer is capable of rousing it from its lethargy." The long-term censorship of Miller's work in America and Britain made clear that the book indeed had such a capacity: *Tropic of Cancer* was not published in the US until 1961, when it became a central object in the era's fierce obscenity trials. American-born artist Dorothy Iannone was a key figure in overturning the ban on the distribution and circulation of Miller's work: By informing the US Customs officials who had confiscated her copy of *Tropic of Cancer* that she was reading it purely for pleasure (as opposed to, say, "research"), she effectively moved forward the trial that eventually cleared Miller from the government's blacklist.

Iannone's involvement in this famous battle is mentioned in most of the (still scant) literature surrounding the artist, but it is worth mentioning again here as a means of reflecting on the significance placed on pleasure by Iannone—not only with regard to Miller, but as a baseline for her own work. (It's remarkable, after all, that even today, when Miller's work is largely regarded as venerable, it is admired despite rather than because of its explicit content.) Indeed, Iannone's own work is centered so singularly and unabashedly on pleasure and its vicissitudes that she has, for the most part, been disregarded in recent art history. For however much our culture would seem to embrace sexuality, there is too often a failure of courage when it comes to discussions around its representation and effects. Iannone's work, therefore, has been too often reduced to its ostensible subject matter—sex—without much comment on the ways in which the artist's recourse to pleasure exceeds the act of coitus that she so often turns to in her images.

Now seventy-six and long resident in Berlin, Iannone recently visited New York to mount a solo show at Anton Kern Gallery (as



Dorothy Iannone,
Look At Me, 1970–71,
acrylic on linen
mounted on canvas,
74 3/4 x 59".

well as an exhibition of early works at the New Museum). Although the show at Kern featured fewer than a dozen works, it managed to evince the through line at the core of the artist's production over more than forty years. In pieces from the early '70s as well as those made this year, viewers encountered Iannone's brand of toughly decorative, ornately direct, literal-allegorical work, which is at once evocative of Aubrey Beardsley and Persian miniatures. Flatly outlined figures of men and women (legible as universal types but also as Iannone and various lovers, most notably and repeatedly Dieter Roth) strike graphic poses, thick penises and swollen vulvas assuming pride of place. In some instances text is inscribed, in ink, on the bodies presented: In *Look At Me*, 1970–71, a woman with a tail bears the words of the title immediately above her pubis; in a later work, *Hommage Aux Femmes Et Aux Hommes*, 1983, words operate more as a manifesto, detailing the artist's dedication to a kind of feminism that refuses to denounce men. In a very recent work, *Play It Again*, 2007, Iannone's humor and play are punlike—a naked woman astride a piano, legs askew, reveals a crotch of black and white keys, just waiting to be stroked.

That Iannone's work is finding a kind of traction today is remarkable, for if the kind of real arousal that Nin called for so long ago seems increasingly hard to imagine, it is important to remember the more insidious ways in which censorship continues apace (via repressions of history, for instance) or, more worryingly, the ways in which far-reaching work on the topic of sexuality (largely by women) is neutered. Iannone refutes such maneuvers with some of her own: In *Metaphor*, 2009, a big-breasted blonde leans over a young man, whom she has bent over a table, his cock hanging down. SOMETIMES YOU MUST ALSO SUBMIT reads the text on her belly. Both figures gaze out at us, wearing huge grins.

—Johanna Burton