

## Unica Zürn at Ubu

Already established as a journalist and an author of short fiction in Berlin, Unica Zürn moved to Paris and turned to the visual arts after she became the lover and collaborator of Hans Bellmer, whom she met in 1953. During the following decade and a half, she created a series of delicate, dreamy, extravagant and haunted pen-and-watercolor drawings, mostly of chimerical beasts that are fantastic in aspect (with multiple heads, tentacles, beaks and wispy wings) yet redolent of a human presence. Suggestive of doodling (with ever-extending watery lines that emerge from one floating figure only to produce another) but tightly controlled, with the purposeful intensity and repetitiveness of some outsider art, Zürn's images may have been inspired by the automatic drawing and investigations into the unconscious of the Paris Surrealists, whom Bellmer introduced her to, including André Breton, Man Ray and Henri Michaux.

Several drawings depict forms that have the amorphous shapes of sea life such as hydras and jellyfish. The creatures are highly adorned and display multiple human eyes, like spots on a peacock feather, as they trail folds of diaphanous flesh. Other sheets feature tight, springy, insectlike elements that sport bent antennae, rigid limbs or vertebrae, and dried wings, but appear to be simply playfully decorative lines as much as living creatures. Still others seem to show one animal combined with another, less a melding of the two than a trapping of one being within another. In these drawings in particular, the near-constant presence of outward-looking human eyes suggests an ingredient of self-portraiture. Throughout, depicted figures are often subsumed in the overall decorative scheme, with faces composed of patterns of simple, repeated forms, including other faces and profiles.

It was in 1957, after what she described as a fateful encounter with Michaux, with whom she became enthralled and experimented with mescaline, that Zürn experienced the first of a series of mental crises that would lead to intermittent hospitalizations (she was eventually diagnosed with schizophrenia) until her death in 1970. A number of the works on view at Ubu (all from the 1960s) were made during those periods of institutionalization, a fact that lends poignancy to the often fragile, tentative and unresolved figures that they depict. Many commentators too quickly see these drawings as an expression of Zürn's mental illness, but an appreciation of their artistic strategies—the blending of fact with fantasy, the suggestion of fragmentation and alterity in the supposedly unified human self, the apparent eschewal of artistic mastery or deliberate control—offers a more sustainable explanation of the work's peculiarity and power.

—Jonathan Gilmore