Unica Zün at Ubu

Already established as a journalist and author of fiction in Berlin, Unica Zün moved to Paris and turned to the visual arts after she became the lover and muse of Francis Picabia. An alias for her real name, Helene Belmler, whom she met in 1953. During the following decade and a half, she became a key figure in the Surrealist group, producing dreamy, extravagant and haunted pen-and-watercolor drawings, mostly of chimerical beasts that are now dispersed among the collections of multiple heads, tentacles, beaks and wispy wings) yet redolent of a human presence. Suggestive of dreams, draping their figures in floating, rippling water lines that emerge from one floating figure only to produce another) but tightly controlled, with the purity, preciosity and repetitiveness of some outsider art, Zün's images may have been inspired by the automatic drawing and investigations into the unconscious of the Paris Surrealists, whom Belmler introduced her to, including André Breton, Man Ray and Hans Arp.

Several drawings depict forms that have the amorphous shapes of sea life such as hydras and jellyfish, creatures that are lightly sketched, highly adorned and display multiple human eyes, like spots on a peacock feather, as they trail side by side in the drawing. Some other sheets feature tight, springy, insect-like elements that sport bent antennae, rigid limbs or vertebral columns, or they are made of fragile, pearly material, but appear to be simply playfully decorative lines as much as living creatures. Still others seem to start out one way and end up 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 outwards looking human eyes suggests an ingredient of self-portraiture. The human face, of all human faces are often subsumed in the overall decorative scheme, with faces composed of patterns of similar components, including other faces and profiles.

It was in 1957, when after she described as a fateful encounter with André Breton, that she became so enthralls and experimented with mescaline, that Zün 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 1977. For many years, the critical view at Ubu (all from the 1960s) were made during those periods of institutionalization, a fact that lends an air of fragility to the tentative, tentative and unresolved figures that they depict. Many contemporary artists have borrowed these drawings as an expression of Zün's mental illness, but an appreciation of their artistic strategies begins with the idea that the combination of unbridled imagination, the eschewal of artistic mastery or deliberate control—offers a more sustainable and more meaningful insight into Zün's peculiarity and power.

-Jonathan Gilmore