



Unica Zürn *Untitled*, 1964, ink and watercolor on paper, 19 1/2 x 25 3/8"

UNICA ZÜRN

UBU GALLERY

Unica Zürn (1916–1970) is probably best known as Hans Bellmer's longtime lover and sometime photographic subject, though, as Fassbinder succinctly indicated in the dedication of his 1978 film *Despair*—"To Antonin Artaud, Vincent van Gogh, Unica Zürn"—her contributions to cultural history go well beyond her role as flesh-and-blood *poupée*. She was a writer and artist who, like Artaud and van Gogh, operated in the zone in which visionary sensibility fades into mental illness—an easy place to romanticize but a difficult one in which to live.

The last decade of Zürn's life was defined by her deteriorating grip on sanity (she ultimately committed suicide, jumping out the window of the apartment she shared with Bellmer) but also by extraordinary productivity. While her writings from those years—particularly the autobiographical fictions *The Man of Jasmine* (1971) and *Dark Spring* (1969)—secured her place in the canon of twentieth-century experimental literature, her numerous ink-on-paper drawings from the same period have not received as much attention, especially outside Europe. Ubu Gallery's recent show featuring more than seventy of these works served as an important corrective.

For Zürn, the drawings were exercises in automatism, and their hypnagogic intensity evokes interim states, not only between sleeping and waking but between structure and chaos, depiction and discursiveness. They teem with oniric imagery (disembodied eyes, horned women, hypertrophied flowers, snakes with the faces of owls, flying rams) and intricate patterns (spirals, curlicues, dots, scallops, and undulating striations). At times Zürn's line is impossibly fine and delicate or swells and narrows, as if reacting to a

sonic pulse; at others it spikes irregularly like a cardiogram or swoops around the paper, describing graceful Art Nouveau curves. Magenta, blue, and olive green ink frequently come into play, along with daubs of white gouache.

Many of the drawings feature a single biomorphic form, its interior divided and subdivided into irregular cells, its edges sprouting podlike extremities (some of these look eerily like renderings of Lee Bontecou sculptures). Others comprise three or four discrete elements. In all of their variety, however, the works are united by an impulse toward self-containment and involution. Forms float in blank space, rarely touching the edges of the paper, giving the impression that Zürn worked from the outside in, on an ever-diminishing scale, like a fractal perpetually approaching some ultimate, irreducible end.

One of the earliest works in the show, *La Serpente*, 1957, was also the only painting. An amalgam of sinuous forms in oil on wood, it's successful in its own vaguely Matta-ish way, while also providing a clue as to why Zürn abandoned the medium—it's too slow. Her preposterously obsessive mark making seemed to signal an intention not merely to document the workings of the subconscious pictorially or textually, à la Surrealist dictates, but to register its entoptic effusions in real time—a subtle shift toward a conception of drawing "as a verb." Indeed, one of the compelling things about these drawings is how they seem to be in dialogue not only with the ideas of the artists of Zürn's own generation but also with those of the generation that was just then coming of age.

—Elizabeth Schambelan