



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

UNICA ZÜRN (Berlin, 1916 – Paris, 1970)

Drawings from the 1960s

January 13 – April 16, 2005

Ubu Gallery is pleased to announce “Drawings from the 1960s,” an exhibition of works by the tormented and visionary Unica Zürn. Both an accomplished author and artist, Zürn remains best known as the companion of the German Surrealist, Hans Bellmer, with whom she was involved for 17 years until her suicide in 1970. The bulk of her relatively small artistic output was created during Zürn’s relationship with Bellmer, most famous for the erotically charged photographs he made of two adolescent female dolls he built in the 1930s. The works on view at Ubu were made during a period of intense productivity, but one marked by her deteriorating mental health and the unraveling of her relationship with Bellmer.

Born in Berlin on July 6, 1916, Zürn grew up surrounded by exotic, ephemeral objects collected by her father, a cavalry officer stationed in Africa. Inspired perhaps in part by her father’s gifts from afar and a longing for greater contact with him, Zürn developed a rich fantasy life and a vivid imagination. This is evidenced in her dense, otherworldly drawings of fantastical creatures meticulously constructed out of finely rendered, obsessively repetitive shapes and lines.

From the mid-1930s, Zürn worked as an archivist, editor and artistic advisor at the Berlin-based film production company, UFA. In 1949, she took up journalism, publishing extensively in the German and Swiss presses. By this time, she was also engaged in short story writing and painting. Although Zürn’s career as a writer of short fiction was already established, it was through the encouragement she received from Bellmer, whom she met at the opening of an exhibition of his drawings at Galerie Rudolf Springer in Berlin in 1953, that she found her strongest artistic voice and motivation. As natural extensions of Zürn’s established interest in hidden meanings and coincidences, Bellmer urged her to experiment with “automatic” drawings and anagrams. In summer 1954, Zürn published *Hexentexte (Witches’ Writings)*, a book reproducing ten drawings and anagrams, with a short postscript on anagrams by Bellmer. (Thirty deluxe copies also had an original drawing by him).

Simultaneously, the couple returned to Bellmer’s apartment on rue Mouffetard in Paris’s 5th Arrondissement. It was a tiny, squalid affair and, although they lived in increasing isolation, each fueled the other’s work. Zürn had a number of exhibitions of her drawings in the 1950s (including one in 1959 with Daniel Cordier, who also represented Bellmer) and continued to write. Bellmer, well established in Surrealist circles in Paris, introduced Zürn to many of his contemporaries, including Victor Brauner, André Breton, Hans Arp, Man Ray, Max Ernst and, most significantly, Henri Michaux. A poet and painter, Michaux engaged in a ten-year drug experiment beginning around 1955 in which he sought to understand – primarily through the use of mescaline – the mechanics of human consciousness. The encounter with Michaux, by Zürn’s own account, triggered the mental illness that plagued the last 13 years of her life. Zürn believed Michaux to be the incarnation of a childhood fantasy figure, which she described later in her final book – a reflection on her illness – *The Man of Jasmine*: “A few days later she experienced the first miracle in her life: in a room in Paris she finds herself standing before The Man of Jasmine. The shock of this encounter is so great that she is unable to overcome it. From this day on she begins, very very slowly, to lose her reason.”

Throughout the final eight years of her life, Zürn was in and out of psychiatric clinics. During brief periods of improvement, she continued writing, producing an autobiographical novella, *Dark Spring*, and recording her impressions of schizophrenia and institutionalization in *The Man of Jasmine*, both in 1970. In October 1970, having been released from a clinic following a relatively productive stay, Zürn, with nowhere else to go, returned to Paris and to Bellmer, who was partially paralyzed and bedridden following a stroke. Despairing over the impossibility of continuing to live with Bellmer, who felt incapable of coping with her instability, Zürn leapt to her death from the balcony of the apartment they had shared in the rue de la Plaine (20^e) on the morning of October 19th. Bellmer died on February 24, 1975 and was buried, at his request, next to Zürn in Paris’s Père Lachaise Cemetery. Their marble tomb is marked with a plaque inscribed with the words Bellmer wrote for Zürn’s funeral wreath nearly five years before: “My love will follow you into Eternity.”

Gallery hours are 11:00 AM – 6:00 PM, Tuesday through Saturday. Ubu Gallery is located at 416 East 59th Street between First Avenue and Sutton Place.

For further information or for visuals, please contact Adam J. Boxer, Gile R. Downes, Jr. or Miriam Kienle at (212) 753 4444 or info@ubugallery.com.