

WITNESSING VISIONS : BRION GYSIN, HENRI MICHAUX, JUDIT REIGL, UNICA ZÜRN

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Brion Gysin, Untitled, 1941.
Decalcomania (ink wash) & watercolor on paper 13 7/8 x 10 7/8 in.

Ubu Gallery is pleased to present *Witnessing Visions: Brion Gysin, Henri Michaux, Judit Reigl, Unica Zürn*, on view through February 28, 2014. Focusing on works on paper from the 1950s and 60s, the exhibition features automatic writings, drawings, frottage and decalcomania.

Although each artist has proven difficult to place in the art historical canon, the artists share a number of similarities—including, a tendency to utilize language and writing, the appearance of movement and fluidity across their works, and the use of automatism.

Unica Zürn (1916–1970), Judit Reigl (born 1923), Henri Michaux (1899–1984), and Brion Gysin (1916–1986) each explore a form of altered consciousness. All of the works on display demonstrate how these varied artists found processes whereby the artwork could in some way “make itself.” Whether this automatic state is a deliberate disorientation brought on by drugs or an inadvertent psychotic “spell,” the artist is left as a vehicle and then witness to an unveiling work of art.

Judit Reigl, the only living artist presented in the exhibition, listens to music while she works. In her words, “not to inspire, but to direct [her] range of movements and gestures.” The resulting works are script-like. They are subversive as they combine a physical yet subconscious translation of music, but leave a visual presentation that uses rhythm without sound in an illegible yet referential language.

Zürn and Gysin shared an interest in mysticism. Zürn’s enchanted beings seem cried into existence. Zürn, who spent a considerable portion of her artistic career in and out of medical institutions, created in a very personal state of fantasy, at times overwhelming and hallucinatory. The forms in her works emerge from her automatic scribbling. Through fiction, she recounts losing her Self in the artistic process: “the pen swims above the white surface, and locates the spot where the first eye is to be drawn. It is only when something gazes back at her from the paper that she starts to orientate herself.”

Gysin referenced Kabbalistic squares—magical spells that combine word and image—in several pieces in the exhibition. A painter, writer, sound poet and performance artist, Gysin was instrumental in further developing the “Cut-Up” method—emanating from Tristan Tzara’s method and made famous by William S. Burroughs (a close friend of Gysin’s)—in which text is literally cut apart and rearranged to create new prose. Gysin attempted to subvert what he considered to be the oppressive power of words, by creating his own amalgamated, visual, glyphic language.

An acquaintance to Zürn, Michaux took mescaline to record the ever-evolving “self”. Early works from the 1940s are exhibited alongside later post-mescaline pieces to illustrate Michaux’s full range of automatism, from early, mechanical, Surrealist inspired frottages to his recordings of the vibratory movements of the body and mind in his post-drug state.

The mark making on display in *Witnessing Visions* spans many disciplines, while referencing calligraphy, action painting, abstract expressionism, Dada and Surrealism. The works in the exhibition seem to hang on the precipice of language, familiar yet unspeakable.