

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Sly, Sardonic Feminism From a West German

By ROBERTA SMITH

Rosemarie Trockel's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, the latest in the "Projects" series, offers the first extended look at the work of a European artist who has attracted a great deal of interest on this side of the Atlantic. This look, which consists of three walls full of small, delicate drawings made between 1982 and 1987, and two examples of recent sculpture, is somewhat surprising. Miss Trockel is best known here for tough machine-knit paintings that are frequently filed under Neo-Geo. The work at the Modern emphasizes a Neo-Expressionist side of the West German artist's sensibility that is more accessible, but also more conventional.

Miss Trockel's greatest influence is clearly the art of Sigmar Polke, but in place of Mr. Polke's scrappy, offhand delivery, her images tend to be finely spun. Done in pencil or gouache on a variety of unassuming papers, some of which are printed with lines or graphs, these images are often tissue-thin, even ghostly. But, for the most part, they're laid onto the surface with an unerring sense of rightness and an economy of means that makes every line, smudge and dab of color count.

The subjects here are diverse, but there runs through many of these drawings a thread of sly, sardonic feminism, a concern for the role of women in art and in the world at large that is their most distinguishing characteristic and that is, once you think about it, what connects all of Miss Trockel's varied production.

In two drawings, the head of an androgynous Christ is crowned in thorns; it makes one think simultaneously of Morticia Addams and Rogier van der Weyden. In several others, schools of homely mermaids drift about. Following these is a sketch of a woman's chest that has two red apples for breasts, perhaps a reference to the interpretation of Cézanne's apples first put forth by the art historian Meyer Schapiro. One of the most awkward on view, this image has a cartoonish effect, like The New Yorker's Roz Chast with a degree in art history.

Here and in other hybrid figures, however, Miss Trockel gives the term "exquisite corpse" new meaning. She also studies various natural and geometric structures, executes some relatively colorful abstractions and makes a few studies on graph paper for the machine-knit paintings.

Miss Trockel's two sculptures center on little horrors. One, displayed in a small box on the wall, seems to be a study in cultural contrasts. It compares a distorted, seemingly Expressionist clay head (roughly the size of a British squash ball) with a more schematic head, also small, that tops off a pestle-like form. In the second piece, a three-burner stove made of steel is paired with an open wooden crate, at the bottom of which lies a small burned mermaid figure, its charred skeletal face screaming with pain or rage or both.

This exhibition confirms that Miss Trockel is at home with a variety of media and styles, with past, often Surrealist, influences, and with contemporary issues. In a season that has recently included impressive exhibitions of drawings by Louise Bourgeois and Nancy Spero, this show is a particularly significant addition.

Rosemarie Trockel's "Projects" exhibition remains at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street, through April 3.



"Untitled" (1983), an ink and gouache on paper by Rosemarie Trockel.