

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Glueck, Grace, "Drawings as Enigmas Wrapped in Metaphors," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2001

ART REVIEW

Drawings as Enigmas Wrapped in Metaphors

By GRACE GLUECK

There must be a few things, artistically, that the polymath German artist Rosemarie Trockel can't do. But what she does do has not escaped notice. She knits. She paints. She makes photographs and videos. She does sculpture and installations. And all the while she keeps on drawing — often wittily, sometimes weirdly and always with wild diversity.

It's easy to say what her work on paper is not about: the traditional notion of drawing as representation. Metaphorical, enigmatic, ambivalent and punning, her drawings blend mischief, whimsy and corrosive humor. They are often deliberately rough and unfinished, not to say clumsy. They catch the human in animals and vice versa, comment on gender, observe body structure and gesture, play off the work of other artists. To make them, she uses tools and techniques that run from felt-tipped pens to computers, photocopying machines and digital technologies.

Ms. Trockel's drawings have not been seen a lot in the United States, however, and only now, with two simultaneous shows — "Metamorphoses and Mutations" at the Drawing Center and "Manu's Spleen" at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery — is there a really representative sampling on view in New York.

The 70-odd sheets at the Drawing Center's show, organized by the Pompidou Center of the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris, form a kind of retrospective, starting in the early 1980's with drawings linked to Ms. Trockel's sculptures. They come right up to the present, with some new works done especially for the show.

The exhibition at the Gladstone gallery, which includes two videotapes, is devoted entirely to new drawings. It is, alas, decidedly the lesser of the two shows. More about that in a minute, but first, a word about the artist.

Born in 1952, Ms. Trockel arrived

"Rosemarie Trockel: *Metamorphoses and Mutations*" is at the Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, SoHo, (212) 219-2166, through March 31. "Manu's Spleen" is at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street, Chelsea, (212) 206-9300, through March 31.

in the 80's on a German art scene dominated by male stars: Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz and the like. Her subversive leanings soon pegged her as an enfant terrible. She addressed issues of sexuality, feminism and the human body, and also questioned the hierarchy of systems, political, social and even aesthetic.

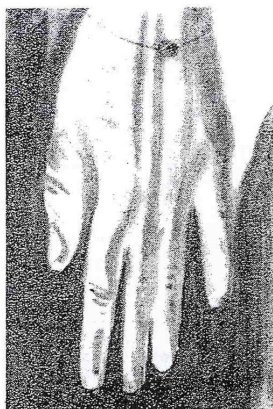
Challenging painting as high art dominated by men, she turned out "canvases" made of yard-goods wool, a woman's material, patterned with stereotypical logos like swastikas and Playboy bunnies. A knitter of quirky clothes, like sweaters to be worn by two people at once and cap masks similar to Green Party gear, she also made stove works, forged from enameled steel and hot plates, that converted female symbols from the kitchen into Minimalist objects.

On other fronts, she produced a video of caterpillars marching along in mindless regimental chains and one of spiders, given mind-altering drugs, making crucial errors as they tried to spin their webs. Representing Germany at the 1997 Documenta, she installed "A House for Pigs and People," in which a clan of pigs and their young carried on their lives as hordes of viewers watched, a living tableau that could today be viewed as a forecast of reality television.

Along with weighty projects like these, she kept on with the drawing she had always done as a way of trying out ideas, capturing feelings and savoring the pleasure of making marks on paper. Her strength often lies in series, groups of works that play with a single idea.

In one such cluster at the Drawing Center, done in the mid-80's, long noses. Pinocchio and phallic, prevail on faces. They range from a yellow potato head with a dot for an eye and a bananalike proboscis to a medieval-looking male head, like a character from an old German fairy tale, with scraggly hair and beard and what might be the scalloped collar of a doublet. His carrotlike nose, whose tip juts into an empty cartoon blurb issuing from his mouth, seems attached to his face by a blindfold. Are these comments on maleness or penis envy? The what and the why of them is the viewer's riddle, but seeing them together accentuates their humor.

Among the early Trockel classics here is a 10-part series of monkey faces titled "Hope" (1984), read by



Courtesy Barbara Gladstone

An untitled acrylic from 2000 by Rosemarie Trockel is on view at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery.

some critics as a group of self-portraits. Their broad visages, punctuated by dark eyes, prominent nostrils and wide mouths, run a gamut of expressions, from sweet, shy and self-deprecating to savagely aggressive. You could see them walking on any street.

Ms. Trockel's rapport with animals is strong. An engaging series of watercolors from 1992 deals with a group of them acting as puppeteers. A giraffe manipulates a long-nosed human head; a sardonic donkey works with what seems to be a crippled baby pig; a big-beaked bird appears with a big-beaked Punch head from the old Punch and Judy shows.

A more recent group of large-scale drawings, done last year, is quite different in approach, using modes and techniques borrowed from Warhol, David Hockney, and Gerhard Richter. They are studies of boys asleep, ranging from grainy close-up heads made to look like newspaper photographs to more conventionally realistic drawings, one or two in colored pencil, showing recumbent youths in the arms of Morpheus or maybe even death.

In "Reclining Nude," a youth lies splayed on the ground, his face obliterated by a blitz of purple and black strokes. Again the question of sleep or death is left to the eye of the beholder, but that is Ms. Trockel's way.

Probably not intended as part of this group, but somehow related to it, is "The Misfortune" (2000), a giant-scale deadpan drawing of a baby with closed eyes. Done in blue pencil, it is one of the most precisely evoked portraits of an aged person in infancy you are ever likely to see. Is this

neonatal octogenarian alive or dead? What might be a bull's-eye target drawn on its chest seems ominous.

There are more than a few clinkers in the Drawing Center show, works that don't, for me, work out. One is the series that deals in the imposition of one celebrity head upon another, like Jeff Koons over Cindy Sherman, or Ms. Trockel herself with another German artist, Jiri Georg Dokoupil. But even if the show needs editing, it is a welcome exposure to a hand that has helped to enrich and expand the medium.

Compared with the show at the Drawing Center, "Manu's Spleen" at the Gladstone Gallery is a disappointment. (Manu is the name of a woman who appears in both video shows, and spleen, Ms. Trockel said, is to be read as "strange habit.")

The subjects of its 40 or so recent drawings include casual, largely anonymous portraits (several men in chef's toques, children wearing paper hats, defiant-looking young women); bodies (including several views of a woman at play with a beach ball, suggestive of pregnancy); and body parts (disjointed hands and legs).

The drawing techniques in this rambling show vary, from deliberately hazy evocations that defy close reading to sharp, Stygian renderings like "Vater Morgana," a headless, footless man in a black suit with what appears to be a tail running down between his legs. Some of the works appear thin, slapdash or simply tossed off, among them "Birthplace," a hermetic heap that can hardly be read as a pile of magazines, made by wayward strokes of black on white, and pegged by a sign that reads "Vogue."

The two most interesting images are photographs, two similar life-size works in color, each of a woman reclining on a blanket in minimal garb, presenting her back to the viewer. In one, titled "Living Means I Tried Everything," a pigtailed woman attended by real (stuffed) birds examines a work called "Catalog of Sperm Donors."

Of the two video pieces, the weightier is "Manu's Spleen I," a scene in a cemetery. Two women and a man stroll, arriving at a shallow open grave where a second man lies — in death, or feigning it? One of the women jumps in to join him. The other two linger by the now double grave until the second woman revives, gets out, brushes herself off and walks away with her pals, leaving the grave's original occupant still in place. Running 7 minutes 12 seconds, it's too long for a site gag.

See the show at the Drawing Center first.