

November 2016
IN PRINT

Carol Rama

FERGUS MCCAFFREY



Carol Rama, *Autorattristatrice n. 9*, 1969, glass eye, spray paint, mixed media on canvas, 39 3/8 × 31 1/2". © Archivio Carol Rama, Torino.

Tongues, serpents, penises, orifices, and eyes populate the wonderful and terrifying world of Carol Rama's art. Lewd and menacing, they're there even when they're not—one senses them lurking just outside the frame, smothered by strips of tire rubber, or abstracted into scabby, flaccid shapes. Rama (1918–2015) was born in Turin and worked there her entire life, producing paintings, drawings, and assemblages with profeminist, antifascist vigor in an untrained, sophisticated style that defies easy categorization. Her frank sexual content, Surrealism-inflected figuration, and evocative abstraction elicit parallels to Louise Bourgeois; her raw depictions of agony, aggression, and embattled femininity can be compared to Frida Kahlo's. But the stunning, funny painting that attracted me initially at her recent gallery show at Fergus McCaffrey was most reminiscent of AbExer Franz Kline. Rama composed her black-on-white *Autorattristatrice n. 9*, 1969, from a tangle of bold spray-painted lines and a leathery area of what looks like an enamel pour. Were it not for the little glass eye affixed dead center on the vertical canvas, the piece would be a nonobjective gem, pure gesture toying with our reflexive perception of pictorial depth. Instead, we want to know if this shadowy, claw-footed Gumby-Cyclops has its head between its legs or if it possesses a seeing cock.

The exhibition, which included more than forty works spanning some seventy years, was light on her earliest works, featuring only two from the late 1930s and early '40s, both in beautiful peach-gold-crimson and exemplary of the small-scale pornographic watercolor provocations that first announced her as a great talent and/or *art-brut* hysteric. *Untitled*, 1938–40, depicts a woman, her eyes purple craters with spider-leg lashes, giving a man a blow job—or licking his balls, rather. Rama multiplied his genitals to denote movement, satirizing the Futurist's speed trope by depicting his crotch as a flurry of dicks. Both participants let their red tongues loll, while the taunting figures of *Untitled*, 1939–45, dart theirs out. The three women in this punchy Picassoid composition wear only low-heeled black pumps. Squatting, legs spread, they flash us. Maybe they're masturbating. Rama's gallery debut in 1945, in the wake of Mussolini's reign, featured dazzling, obscene works in this vein—and it was promptly shut down by the Turin police.

Subsequent phases were well represented here: her mixed-media "Bricolage" works of the 1960s, which incorporate image-objects such as the aforementioned glass eyes as well as beads and other found materials; her "Gomma" series of the '70s, in which dark rubber hangs like skin, flab, or organs (Rama's industrialist father, who committed suicide, owned a bicycle factory); and then, many fine examples of her return, in the '80s and beyond, to her signature practice of confrontational figuration. Her "Mucca Pazza" (Mad Cow) works of the new millennium depict sinister udder-breasts, fresh symbols of sex, sickness, abjection, and revolt that echo her forever-favorite wagging pointed-tongue forms.

This fantastic minisurvey, a rare chance to see Rama's work in New York, coincided with the last leg of "The Passion According to Carol Rama," a major traveling museum retrospective in Europe. Though it is tiresome to note that this wave of attention is too little too late for a remarkable woman artist (Rama was in her nineties, suffering from dementia at the time of the European exhibition's first museum installation, and she died last fall), it must be noted nevertheless. Rama was wise to every major artistic movement that coincided with her long life, but she belonged to none. She suffered from a denial of art-historical intelligibility as well as outright censorship; she was treated as a psychiatric phenomenon, an eccentric, and a woman. Her relative obscurity is the product of radical, cellular, and institutional sexism that impoverish the legacy of European modernism as well as Western culture more generally. So all correctives are welcome. Every opportunity to see Rama's exuberant, hilarious, and hateful visual outbursts is a joy.

—*Johanna Fateman*