

NEW YORK

Ida Applebroog

HAUSER & WIRTH

There were many reasons to wonder just how to approach the work presented in Ida Applebroog's recent exhibition at Hauser & Wirth. First was the practical question of how to get a complete picture of what was there, particularly when it came to the central element, a kind of schematic "house" in the main area of the gallery space. A smallish structure built from two-by-fours, whose "walls" were, in fact, made of tacked-up images, the house—since it offered no entryway—required viewers to peek and strain in order to look inside, not only granting them visual access to further images but also allowing only a partial view from any vantage point. Second, there was the logistical question of how to think about what, exactly, was on view: At once a historical show *and* a fully contemporary one, Applebroog's "Monalisa," in its combined components, spanned some forty years and worked to disable easy distinctions between which of its parts were new and which old. Finally, there was the self-reflexive question, asked on the part of the viewer, of how, exactly, to position oneself in relation to the work itself—this final inquiry preempted forcefully by the first two.

Art audiences, of course, experience some version of this last query when walking through *any* show; yet "Monalisa" rendered central the problem of its own situatedness—within artistic practice informed by feminism, in particular. A simple description of the works that were on view is not in itself difficult: The bulk of the show comprised hundreds of drawings of the artist's own vulva. But it is crucial to map the contours of this work and its forty-year trajectory: to ask, that is, what is at stake in this project in its various—now simultaneous—lives.

In 1969, mired by blockages both artistic and personal, Applebroog spent her evenings in the bath, and each night enacted a repetition of what was both a completely formal and totally intimate ritual: examining her genitals with a mirror and making drawings of what she saw. The resulting 160-odd studies (analyzed and contextualized by Julia Bryan-Wilson in the show's catalogue) were all but lost until they recently resurfaced in Applebroog's archives, water-stained and brittle but also newly relevant to the artist, who turned eighty-one this year.

These original drawings were on view in "Monalisa," framed and hung on the gallery walls, along with a suite of more recognizable self-portraits (i.e., depicting the artist's face) from the same period. But the images hung on and in Applebroog's makeshift house, were, while cousins to these much older works, also wholly new. To make them, she scanned a number of the existing images, digitally manipulated them, and printed them on thin, skin-like handmade paper, at times also adding liquidy washes of paint. (A couple of new figurative works, color-gorged yet spookily amorphous, also hung in and on the house.) These reprisals of Applebroog's own older sketches of her intimate anatomy were thereby granted a kind of strange blush, as though the new operations performed on them enacted a transfusion of sorts.

Such an emphatic return to imagery produced during an era when feminist consciousness-raising demanded that

women become acquainted with their bodies—both their own and each other's—feels strangely significant today, if also totally out of sync. Indeed, while one could argue that the female body has been all but turned inside out in contemporary, oversexualized renditions of it, a deep disconnect attends this ostensible full-frontality. Reading a review of Applebroog's show that appeared on the website of New York's *L Magazine*, I was dismayed—though not surprised—to see that the author, Kathleen Massara, began by discussing how embarrassed she was to be overheard by her presumably young colleagues uttering words like *vagina* and *Hannah Wilke* during a phone conversation she had conducted with the artist. Though seemingly informed about the legacies of feminism, Massara ultimately confessed to feeling more interested in the "form" than in the "content" of the work. It's a clean-cut distinction that Applebroog might find perplexing in this context (I know that I do), but it serves as an important reminder that debates around art informed by feminism—claimed by some to be far in the rearview mirror—are today both historical *and* urgently present.

—Johanna Burton

Ida Applebroog, Group A #9, 1969, ink on paper, 10 5/8 x 8 3/4".

