

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



View of Ida Applebroog's installation *Monalisa*, 2009, gampi, Mylar, ink, wood and mixed mediums, approx. 9 by 12 by 12 feet overall; at Hauser and Wirth.

NEW YORK IDA APPLEBROOG HAUSER AND WIRTH

Anyone who still thinks female sexuality is defined by lack, take note: three substantial exhibitions running concurrently in New York recently presented vaginas in rather stunning abundance. Two of the exhibitions were wonderfully various group shows called "The Visible Vagina." (They appeared at the Francis Naumann and David Nolan galleries.) The third was Ida Applebroog's "Monalisa," the centerpiece of which was an installation of the same name using images derived from more than 150 drawings of her own vulva that the artist made in 1969; dozens of the originals were also on view.

Monalisa (2009) is built on a wooden scaffold nearly 10 feet high and roughly 12 feet on each side; its upright studs (the humor of construction terminology is not subtle) are spanned both inside and out by digitally manipulated versions of Applebroog's 40-year-old drawings, which she made lying in a tub and using a mirror. Greatly varied in detail and graphic approach, they range from reticent to bold, wispy to lush. Water damage that occurred in storage adds atmosphere to many. As output onto vellumlike Mylar and gampi paper, they are each distinctive enough to seem like faces thrust against misted windows. Since those on the inside could only be glimpsed through narrow openings, viewers had to press their faces against the metaphoric glass in turn, assuming a position both beseeching and erotic.

Applebroog also included images of two actual faces in *Monalisa*, one over life-size and staring boldly from the middle of the exterior front wall, though its dark sepia contours are liquid enough to seem in danger of sliding off the surface. The second sits atop a body to which it appears ill suited, the whole rendered in saturated blood red. A single piercing blue eye stares straight out; the figure's other eye is obscured by a thatch of hair. A kewpie-doll mouth pouts. The body below is lumpy and childish; one leg is bent, exposing the girl's pudendum. Based on a greatly enlarged photo of one of the tiny figures Applebroog has lately been forming in nondrying clay expressly for use in such compositions, this image is a powerfully disturbing mix of defiant sensuality and infantile helplessness.

Ranging across nearly a century of art production with work by artists from Picasso to Carolee Schneemann to David Humphrey and Michelle Segre, and accompanied by a substantial catalogue and a lively panel discussion, "The Visible Vagina" had an irrepressible spirit of collective celebration. By contrast—and the comparison was useful—Applebroog's show was retrospective and profoundly personal. Its repetitions were those of furious concentration, loneliness and deep private pleasure. Though a much broader exhibition of the 81-year-old Applebroog's remarkable, often devastating work would be widely welcomed, this was a terrific tease.

—Nancy Princenthal