

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

JANUARY 2012



Minnie Evans: *Untitled*, ca. 1940, graphite and wax crayon on paper, 7½ by 4¾ inches; at Luise Ross.

MINNIE EVANS LUISE ROSS

Minnie Evans (1892-1987), a proudly self-taught black artist from North Carolina, made her first two drawings in 1935, compelled to do so by a voice in a dream. She created no more pictures for five years, then took up making art again, never stopping until a few years before her death. She is best known for stylized, mandalalike compositions composed of intertwined figural and floral designs, but she also produced surreal landscapes, interiors and biblical scenes.

Evans's images were informed by her Baptist faith, her interest in classical mythology and her own life and history. She may have been inspired, as well, by the decorative objects in the homes where she worked as a domestic and by the public gardens where she was employed as a ticket taker between 1948 and 1974. In her drawings and paintings, symbols uncannily like those found in Tibetan thangka alternate with Indian paisleys and Persian arabesques, and anodyne, golden-haired angels share flower-filled edens with winged beasts and dark-skinned goddesses.

One of the great pleasures of this small but representative survey of some two dozen works on paper was its inclusion

of rarely seen early pieces. From the late 1930s and early 1940s are diagrammatic pencil drawings, touched with color, whose axial symmetry, scroll designs and motifs of eyes, suns and leaves anticipate Evans's work to come. From the mid-1940s are more brightly colored and densely shaded pictures done in crayon, featuring patchworks of biomorphic forms. In one such work, these shapes appear to be proliferating out of control, engulfing a person in an elaborate headdress; in another they are contained within the outlines of a classical amphora.

While Evans, as well as her family and religious community, took the visions on which she based her drawings as messages from God, the drawings themselves frequently seem to reflect a pantheistic worldview with little, if any, relationship to Christian beliefs. Among the images in the exhibition were a troop of hybrid creatures resembling caducei on legs gamboling in a moonlit orchard; a fiery offering, bracketed by two wriggling snakes, laid out on the floor of an empty room; and the disembodied features of a supernatural being floating in pink-tinged air.

Evans maintained that her pictures were "as strange to me as they are to anybody else," according to Nina Howell Starr, a

photographer who championed her art from the 1960s on. Undoubtedly they were; Evans's drawings were amazingly subversive for their time and place, their vision of a feminized, eroticized universe free of hierarchies a refutation of the limitations imposed on her by her socioeconomic status and also, perhaps, by her own community. Evans's resistance to the constraints of race, class, gender and churchly conservatism—although almost certainly limited to her art, and surely hidden even from herself—makes her a forebear of more overtly political artists such as Thornton Dial and Miriam Schapiro, her work less folkloric than truly countercultural.

—Anne Doran