

Frieze

Roy De Forest Maps the Phantasmagoria of His Mind

The works on paper at Parker Gallery, in Los Angeles, 'encounter memories, fantasies and dream images along the way'



Roy De Forest, *Untitled*, 1989, mixed media on paper with artist-designed frame, 92.7 × 116.8 × 10.2 cm. © 2019 Estate of Roy De Forest / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; courtesy: Parker Gallery and Brian Gross Fine Art

The categorical distinction between drawing and painting may be absurd, but it persists in both museums and the art market. (Why is a work on canvas superior to a work on paper, regardless of the medium used? Is it simply an issue of conservation?) Nevertheless, the activities of drawing and painting continue to serve distinct functions in most artists' practices. For the Bay Area painter Roy De Forest, who produced an unparalleled body of work between the 1950s and his death in 2007, drawing was rarely a preparatory exercise for painting, but rather an autonomous, exploratory activity that allowed him to work in a freer and looser style than he could in his acrylic paintings on canvas. Which, if you are familiar with his riotously colourful, compositionally freewheeling paintings, you will understand says quite a lot.

The selection of works on paper at Parker Gallery range in date from 1965 to 2003, beginning when De Forest was already a mature artist associated with the Funk movement (he was included in Peter Selz's epochal 'Funk' exhibition of 1967), and moving through his involvement with the self-named Nut Art group in the late 1960s and early 70s, and also with the coterie around Adeliza McHugh's remarkable Candy Store Gallery in Folsom, California, which operated from 1962 to 1992.

Jonathan Griffin, "Roy De Forest Maps the Phantasmagoria of His Mind." *Frieze* (July 23, 2019), accessed online.

Despite his art-historical credentials, De Forest can hardly be called canonical, and these drawings make clear why that kind of establishment endorsement was anathema to him. In contrast to painting, drawing is often a personal, even private activity; if painting is a major form, drawing is minor. De Forest's drawings take a meandering *dérive* through his psyche, encountering memories, fantasies and dream images along the way. They rarely seem to have one particular thing to say, nor a dominant narrative theme. Titles are no help in this regard; the works are all either untitled or called *Drawing* or, in one instance, *Miniature Drawing* (1973–80).

In the earliest, nearly abstract works, De Forest sets the hypnagogic tone with his use of an apparent aerial perspective, causing us to feel as if we were floating over fences and roads, ancient earthworks, or alien landscapes. De Forest was apparently influenced by Aboriginal Australian art, in which songlines or dreaming tracks – the traditional creation stories of particular pieces of land – constitute spoken or sung narrative maps. In *Untitled* (1966), cartographical space is complicated by De Forest's insertion of a large, pointing hand and jazzily sleeved arm. Spatially, the drawings become more elaborate over time. By the pastel *Untitled* (1978), only a whiff of the aerial viewpoint remains, and De Forest's compositions become more architectural, with figures large and small, human and animal, popping up in the foreground and background, inscrutably or perhaps not at all associated.

In this exhibition, things really heat up in the 1980s, when De Forest begins experimenting with outlandish handmade frames for his drawings. In that same decade, he acquired an industrial air gun, with which he applied paint to both his drawings and their frames. In *Untitled* (1989), De Forest depicts a desert landscape where a weary wanderer rests by a campfire beneath three bizarre plants – each of which has a grizzled human head of its own. He uses his spray gun for misty lines and spackled textures, along with pencil, pastel and thickly raised dots of paint. Another version of the explorer figure appears in *Untitled* (1996), part-conquistador and part-Don Quixote, perched with his smiling dog on an inauspiciously tiny desert island. The drawing's frame is adorned with painted grey knobs and sections of dowel that resemble steel handles – an improbable solidity encasing the nebulous apparitions within. The search, it seems, was both De Forest's primary theme and his pictorial methodology; the nobility of that quest – and its unfathomable compulsions – are embodied in the drawings' proudly off-kilter frames.

'Works on Paper: Roy De Forest' ran at Parker Gallery, Los Angeles, USA, from 14 April to 25 May 2019.

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