

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

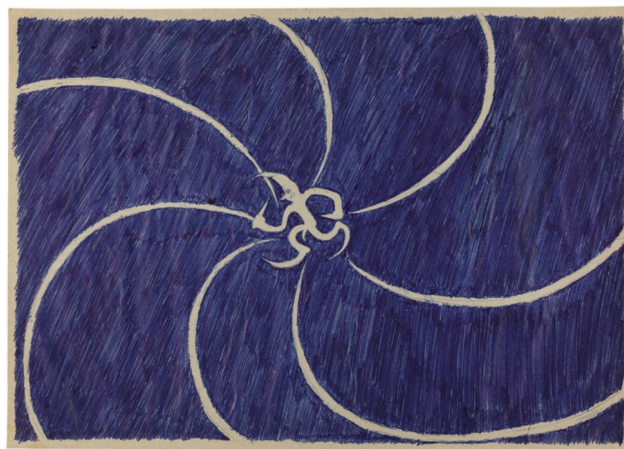
**DAVID WEISS:
DRAWINGS**

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
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BY HOVEY BROCK

Seldom does a contemporary art exhibit leave an aftertaste of joy. But this one does. It covers works on paper by David Weiss (1946 – 2012) from the early '60s through the early '80s, the majority were finished before he teamed up with fellow Swiss Peter Fischli in 1979. These drawings foreshadow the irreverence and whimsy that marked the Fischli/Weiss collaboration, which produced such masterpieces as the Rube Goldberg video *The Way Things Go* (1987). The over 50 pieces in the show cover a swath of subjects, genres, and techniques. Some reflect Weiss' wide-ranging travels during that time through London, Montreal, the East and West Coasts of the United States, Mexico, Morocco, and Italy. Many mix pop culture appropriation and hallucinogenic imagery, a tripped-out Situationist International sensibility reminiscent of Sigmar Polke's early work. There is also a tinge of melancholy, encapsulated in *Untitled (Self-Portrait)* (1979), which shows a cartoon Weiss with dark circles under his eyes, wreathed in cigarette smoke. Sweeping all in its wake is Weiss's delight in the fluidity of visual form.

Weltkarten/World Maps 1-14 (1980) is a series of graphite, ink, and watercolor sketches of the world's continents. There is no effort to try to separate countries. Sometimes Weiss fills in the negative space of the oceans, leaving the landmasses in the background. Is he making a statement about his earlier wanderings



David Weiss, *Untitled (from Untitled 1-8)*, 1975. Ink on paper, 8 1/4 x 11 3/4 inches. © The Estate of David Weiss. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

across the globe? The randomness of these maps, with their candy colors and goofy shapes, defies any attempt at interpretation, and instead points to the same deadpan humor that was a hallmark of Fischli/Weiss. That humor crops up time and again elsewhere in this show.

Just as Weiss ranged across space with humorous intent, he similarly ranged across time. *I Wish I Was Born a Thousand Years Ago* (1976) is a spare piece covered with ink that includes a few straight lines scratched into the black surface to represent pyramids, along with a few squiggles to suggest a rugged landscape. In the lower right corner is the plaintive title of the piece, in English, etched in block type. While not quite as sardonic as Polke's 1969 work *Higher Powers Command: Paint the Upper Right Hand Corner Black!*, it too is a send-up of art world pretension, particularly Minimalism and Earthworks. Also quoting Egyptian art, but sillier—in a good way—is *Untitled (from Neocolor)* (1978). On a small DIY scratch art board, Weiss superimposes the head Anubis (the Egyptian god) on that of the Disney character Goofy who is facing a crumpled version of Mickey Mouse, smoking a cigarette.

Another hilarious art history spoof with cigarettes, *Untitled (Giacometti)* (1978) is a watercolor, ink and graphite on paper of three of Giacometti's signature striding figures, pointed in different directions, two of them smoking. Weiss's propensity for playing both ends against the middlebrow also results in abstract works that come off like doodles but can be strikingly beautiful. Another of the *Neocolor* series, *Untitled* (1978), is a series of scratches of different widths and speeds. The prismatic lines vibrate against the black ground, creating a hypnotic rhythm.



David Weiss, *Untitled (from Neocolor)*, 1978. Oil pastel on paper, 7 1/4 x 4 7/8 inches. © The Estate of David Weiss. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

Weiss excels when he skims between abstraction and figuration. *Untitled 1-8 (from Frauen/Women)* (1977) is a series of watercolors and inks on paper. Each image has a central figure that has a vaguely feminine silhouette, with variations on the degree to which it dissolves against the background. Weiss gets a number of effects with slashing lines of ink and color that suggest speed and motion, transforming the figure/ground relationship with each iteration. The very idea of serial transformations is clearly a core concern for Weiss because it comes up so often elsewhere in the show: the aforementioned world map series; *Untitled 1-6* (1977) an ink-on-paper set of heads within heads, a riff on the young girl/old woman optical illusion; and several series called *Untitled (from Wandlungen/Metamorphoses)*, one from 1975, the other three from 1978.



David Weiss, *Untitled (from Weltkarten/World Maps 1-14)*, 1980. Watercolor and ink on paper, 8 1/4 x 10 3/4 inches. © The Estate of David Weiss. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

The *Wandlungen* series from 1975 shows Weiss at his most antic, with a sequence of truly Baroque changes. The first sheet begins with an earthworm that shifts into a two-headed dog, becoming through figure/ground swaps a pair of trees, an animal's paw, and finally toes on a foot. The changes get wilder, moving from a Jack Frost-looking character, through sperm, until finally arriving at an array of seascapes featuring battling sea monsters that culminates in a whirlpool. Just following the changes is great fun, and clearly Weiss was deriving a good deal of pleasure from the process. This series especially, but also many of the other works assembled, gives voice to a worldview that not only sees things in constant flux, but relishes the fact—the same worldview that animates *The Way Things Go*. The challenge of perpetual change is not for everyone. For Weiss, embracing it was the only way to live life to its fullest. ☺

HOVEY BROCK is an artist and has an MFA from the School of Visual Arts Art Practice program. He is a frequent contributor to Artseen.