

Charles Steffen: After Rodin and the One-Eyed Nude
April 26 – June 4, 2017

Sometime in 1992, Charles Steffen (1927 - 1995) began drawing experimental nudes that morphed human, mostly hermaphroditic beings, with plants, line experiments, abstracted forms, and cartoonish imagery gleaned from comic strips. The resulting strange creatures are animated, occasionally translucent, and referred to by the artist as sunflower nudes, abstract nudes, scribble nudes, one-eyed nudes, and cross-eyed nudes. Many of these works were inspired directly by renowned artists whom Steffen had studied during his brief stint at the Chicago Institute of Design. This exhibition examines Steffen's artistic dialogue with De Kooning, Monet, Van Gogh, Picasso, Cezanne, Chagall, Rodin (and/or Redon), Michelangelo and Duchamp among others.

Steffen described many of these later works with some variation of the phrase "after Rodin and his one-eyed nude." He may have been thinking about Odilon Redon's prints of cyclops and floating eyeballs, as his spelling was consistently wrong. Indeed, many of Steffen's drawings are dedicated to or in memory of artists and works that came before him, with whom he communed both intellectually and aesthetically. In elongated cursive script the artist notated his inspirations or dedications: "deccated to william de kooning and his fine abstract nudes," "in memory of paul cazzaine's painting the card players," "in memory of marc chagall and his visial poetry," "after piccaso's blue proid," "after van gogh's painting of the church," or "in memory of marcel Duchamp." However strange the references may appear, Steffen certainly viewed himself as part of a visual conversation begun centuries before him.

Steffen's formal art education was cut short after he suffered a nervous breakdown during his second year of school. A diagnosis of schizophrenia led to his 14 year-long stay at Elgin State Hospital, where he underwent conventional treatments and electroshock therapy. After leaving the hospital, unable to take a job, Steffen went to live with his sister, Rita, in their childhood home, and spent most of his time drawing on brown wrapping paper, notebook paper, paper bags, deconstructed cigarette cartons, or anything else that could provide a suitable surface. All of Steffen's works made before 1989 were periodically destroyed during his lifetime at the behest of his sister, who forced him to throw them away, afraid that he might catch them on fire. He was, after all, a chronic smoker.

This marks the third solo exhibition for Charles Steffen at Andrew Edlin Gallery since it began representing his estate in 2007. Steffen's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne (2013), Intuit, Chicago (2010), Galerie Christian Berst, Paris (2008, 2012), and Russell Bowman, Chicago (2006, 2009). More recently, The Good Luck Gallery, Los Angeles held a solo show in 2016. Steffen's work is in the permanent collections of the American Folk Art Museum, New York; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; the Milwaukee Art Museum; Intuit, Chicago; and the Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, Switzerland.