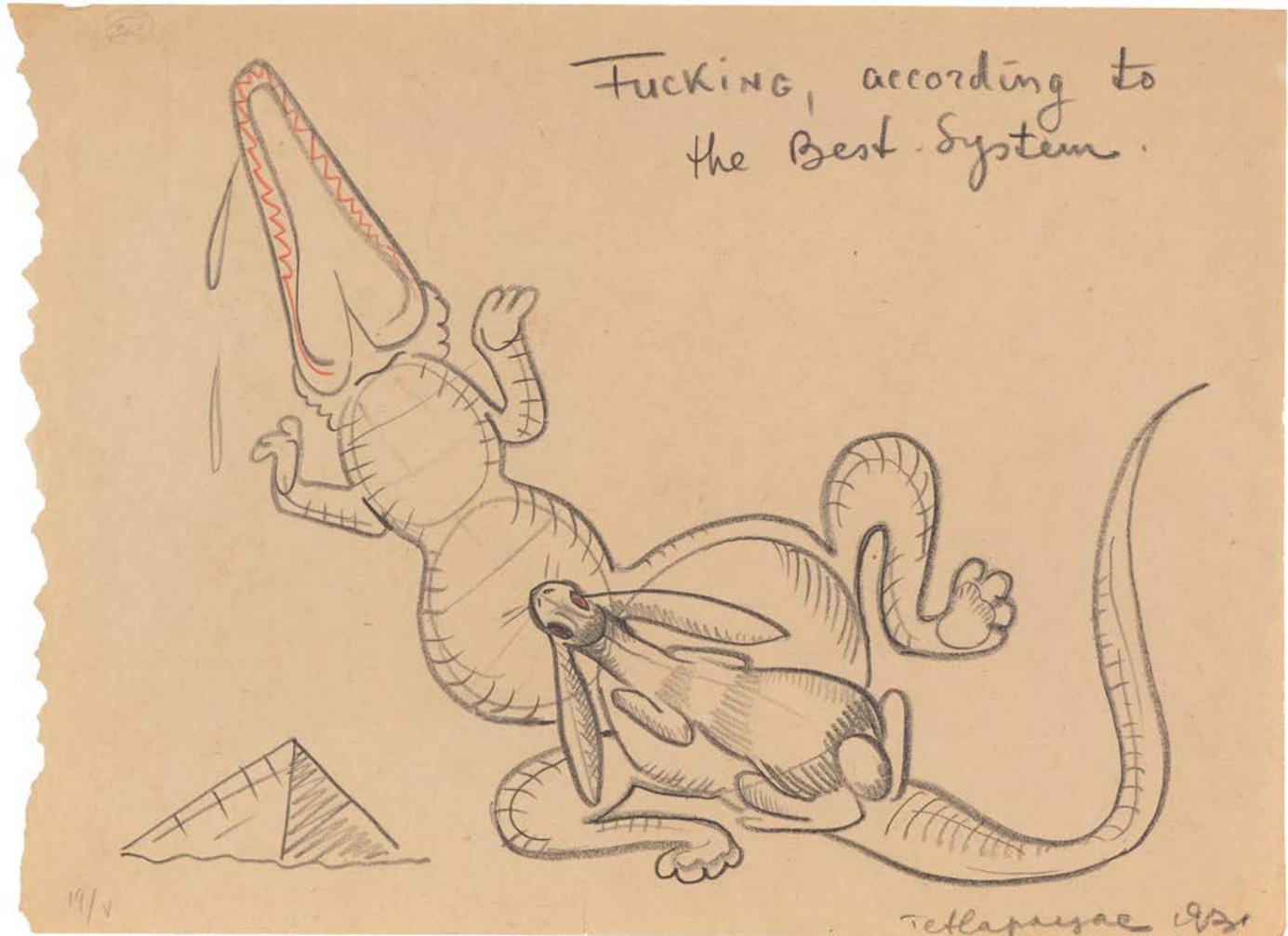


SEX WITH KNIVES AND GIRAFFES: SERGEI EISENSTEIN HAD A MIND FOR DRAWING

BY **Andy Battaglia** POSTED 01/27/17 10:59 AM



Sergei Eisenstein, *Untitled*, 1931, graphite on paper.

COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK AND MATTHEW STEPHENSON, LONDON/PRIVATE COLLECTION

Sergei Eisenstein was a cinematic visionary who, from his early prime in the 1920s, pioneered the use of montage and stirring Socialist Realism in epochal films such as *Strike* (1925) and *Battleship Potemkin* (1926). He was also, it turns out, the maker of bizarre and intensely captivating sex drawings.

“Aren’t these unbelievable? They’re so insane,” Alexander Gray said, strolling through his namesake gallery in Chelsea, where 84 illustrations by Eisenstein made their way after years of being hidden or otherwise hardly known. Their path to New York was circuitous: snuck out of Mexico in film equipment packed to cross the border, secreted away by wives and widows, passed between just a couple of collectors who held them tight. (The tale might make a movie of its own.)

Now the drawings have time and space to make a lasting impression in a show at Alexander Gray Associates, on view through February 11.

Gallery-goers are greeted first by footage from a film that Eisenstein never finished, *iQue Viva México!*, an aspiring historical epic begun in 1930. It was in Mexico that many of Eisenstein's sexual imaginings found their way to paper, though there were other fertile periods, too, in Los Angeles (where he was close with Walt Disney and Charlie Chaplin) and New York.

“He was able to tell a story with very simple mark-making,” said Carly Fischer, associate director at Gray and an organizer of the show. That kind of concision was key to Eisenstein's cinema—his influential montage technique grew out of a desire to move the maximum amount of narrative with the most minimal means.

The drawings were private and personal, but they are not bashful, or the least bit constrained. In a 1931 drawing graced with the words “Fucking, according to the best system,” a rabbit with beady red eyes performs what appears to be an awkward but pleasurable sex act on an alligator in the throes of ecstasy. Spittle drips from the reptile's mouth onto a sparsely sketched ancient pyramid below. In another from the same year, an odd sort of swami/alien creature gives himself a foot job with his toes wrapped around a penis as long as his torso. In yet another, scrawled with the words “drag” and “New York,” a figure reaches a hand up the dress of a lover-to-be reclined on a festive cabaret lounge.

The drawings—in graphite and colored pencil on aged pages set elegantly on walls painted a shade named Mannequin Cream—took shape primarily on scrap paper as well as hotel stationery and even the back of working movie scripts. Text sometimes figures in, in Spanish,



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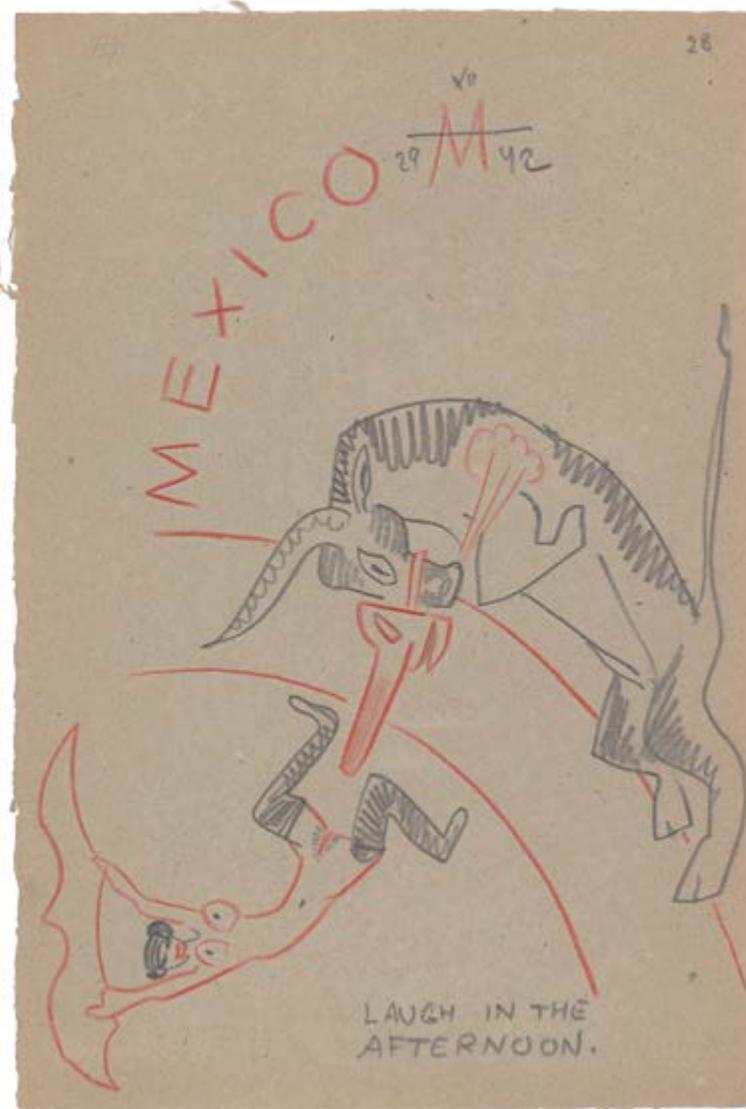
English, French, and Eisenstein's native Russian. Otherwise, inhibition and viscerality reign.

"The giraffe's face is so Disney," Fischer said of an illustration of a naked man holding onto the extended neck of an animal up to no good. "Now he comes to Mexico," Fischer said, moving on through the show, "and gets interested in the legacy of bullfighting." Bulls feature in a number of violent drawings streaked with blood and horror of lascivious kinds, including one with a bull wearing a long-nosed mask with which it prepares to penetrate a woman lying flat with a cape above her head. Beneath the picture, a few words: "Laugh in the afternoon."

"Some dildos are really unpleasant," Joan Neuberger, a historian at the University of Texas, writes in "Strange Circus: Eisenstein's Sex Drawings," a lengthy essay in *Studies in Russian & Soviet Cinema* in 2012. Elsewhere, she notes, "When no lover is available, there is always [a] tree."

Neuberger sets the sex drawings in a psychological context steeped in Freud and in Eisenstein's lifelong interest in a "unity of opposites" that prevails in much of his work. Involvement with dualities—in the drawings' case, "sex/violence, humor/pathos, attraction/repulsion"—resonated with Eisenstein's bisexual self-identification, Neuberger proposes, even if the filmmaker was less sexually active than the drawings might suggest.

In any case, the work intrigues—all the more intensely the more one looks, as Eisenstein's playful strangeness compounds. "It's a Pandora's box," Gray said.



Sergei Eisenstein, *Untitled*, 1931, colored pencil on paper.

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