

CRITICS' PICKS

New York

Sergei Eisenstein

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The vulgar doodle is a genre seldom given the chance to blossom outside of adolescence. Yet some, such as Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, carry the lickerish art well into adulthood, even becoming consumed by it. This exhibition offers a trove of the *Battleship Potemkin* director's "pornographic" drawings, made during trips to Mexico and the US in the 1930s until his death in Moscow in 1948, and marks the first time they've been shown in the Americas.

Divided into small islands by theme or technique along the gallery walls, this erotica, enthusiastically unsexy, parades various styles. Manic, scratchily shaded compositions accompany orgies evoked in fewer, more assured lines. The most profound sketches exploit an elegantly primitive minimalism to convey both longing and what Eisenstein called, in his memoirs, an "ocean of brutalities." Like depraved storybook illustrations for recurring wet dreams (or nightmares), these carnivalesque tableaux record fucking—bestial, heterosexual, and gay—in nightclubs, churches, and circuses. On paper ochred by time, graphite, ink, and colored pencil curl and zigzag, escorting lines into interlocked bodies frequently stained with rashes of lascivious crimson. In one vision scrawled onto hotel stationery circa 1931 (all works untitled), a caricatured pope is impaled by a steeple as furious hatchings and stray wisps of graphite cohere in squalid vertigo. In another, from 1943, a *madame loyal* dips her limbs into four nearby orifices, firmly etched in red.

Unlike the collectivism extolled by Stalinist ideology, Eisenstein's ribald renderings celebrate individual desires. The fact that his motherland would never have exhibited or even condoned these drawings—the USSR outlawed sexually explicit imagery—grants them a curious heroism, a quality often furthered by the subjects' gladiatorial physiques. At times tender and others gleefully sadistic—regularly both—these perverse pageantries tell no clear story, simultaneously relegated and exalted to baser pleasures, shameless and woozy with want.



Sergei Eisenstein, untitled, 1943, colored pencil on paper, 8 x 12".

— Zack Hatfield