

Art in America

REVIEWS MAR. 13, 2015

Susan Te Kahurangi King

NEW YORK,
at Andrew Edlin

by Faye Hirsch



Susan Te Kahurangi King: Untitled, ca. 1965, colored pencil, 8 by 7 inches; at Andrew Edlin.

Cartoons have long inspired non-cartooning artists. Joyce Pensato unleashes a painterly rage in Donald Duck and Homer Simpson; Nicole Eisenman bestows upon *The Thing* a Brechtian pathos. Some artists avoid direct quotation but harness the slapstick energy of cartoons for surreal transformations (Elliott Green) or broad satire (Peter Saul). It's probably safe to say that New Zealander Susan Te Kahurangi King, who has not spoken since age four (she is now 63) and grew up far from the mainstream both physically and psychologically, knows nothing of such artists and their worldly strategies. Regardless, she channeled the dark undercurrent of animation in images featuring a range of TV cartoon characters that one presumes she grew up watching. Whether whole, grotesquely distorted or all chopped up, these and her own cartoonish figures function as building blocks, enmeshing lucid form and indecipherable content in modest graphite, crayon and colored-pencil drawings.

The selection of 28 untitled drawings and four sketchbooks at Andrew Edlin, organized by independent curator Chris Byrne, included a few examples from King's childhood. Clearly, she was a prodigy, but in this sampling from 1961 to 1980, at least, she seemed to hit her stride in her mid-teens and 20s. Some of the drawings are teeming with bodies and fragments rather gracefully massed together by type (rubbery limbs, gloved hands, headless torsos, etc.) within sectors; they form sediments and striations, and eventually compound into whole landscapes of undulating contour and brimming energy. Abstract shapes also appear, but they are always biomorphic to a degree, and one peers closely at them to determine whether they are

in fact nonrepresentational. In any case, within the context, they are sheer potentiality.

In earlier work, the figures are distinct and visible, some traced, and set in restless struggles. They aggressively populate the sheet, and as a community vault the surface from side to side and top to bottom. In one, from 1965, a stack of fish heads and a blue Daffy Duck-like creature regard a giant floating hand with gnarled, bandaged stumps for fingers. In another, dated 1967, a raucous bundle of body parts hovers like the demon-studded St. Anthony in Martin Schongauer's well-known 1470s engraving. King's panoramas particularly reward close scrutiny, as in a relatively large (17-by-27-inch) two-sheet seascape in graphite and ebony from 1965. Wavy lines at left and right signify water; present are bathers, turtles and alligators. Diabolically grinning clowns party in the sky, sipping through straws. At the center stands a goddess figure with her hand raised, as if conjuring the froglike monster that wades through with a crowd upon its back. Is the bather in the foreground of this bizarre conclave waving to greet or gesturing in terror? As with most of King's drawings, it is difficult to read the emotional tenor, seemingly more Grimm Brothers than Looney Tunes. A 1978 landscape consists of two hills made of acephalic, Mary Jane-shod goblins. The valley between is cratered with empty ovals and studded with colored duck heads. The underlying impulse feels libidinal. But, in a way, it is a gift to pure visual delectation that such a work offers no inroads by way of biography, nor does it fit into any particular art history, at least not by design. Apparently King was one of 12 children, her work prized and preserved by a doting relation. That is all the biography one really needs; the exhibition is its harvest.