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5 ART GALLERY SHOWS TO SEE RIGHT NOW

By The New York Times



An untitled 1962 work by Lee Lozano in the exhibition “Lee Lozano: Drawings 1959-1964” at Karma.
Credit: Estate of Lee Lozano, Karma and Hauser & Wirth

Lee Lozano

Through Aug. 13, Karma, 22 East 2nd Street, Manhattan; 212-390-8290, karmakarma.org.

Lee Lozano was, to borrow the title of Nell Painter’s wry 2018 memoir, “Old in Art School.” She had already earned a bachelor’s degree at the University of Chicago in 1951 before beginning art school and graduating with a B.F.A. from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1960. From there she quickly moved to New York. “Drawings 1959-1964” at Karma tracks the early blaze of her career, from student work to finding a voice as an artist.

Perennial art school subjects dominate the drawings from 1959 and 1960, most of which are untitled. There are human skulls rendered in graphite on paper, portraits and fragments of still life: a stray walnut, an asymmetrical strawberry. Then the work takes an abrupt turn. Phalluses, crucifixes, planes and tools appear, drawn in bright crayon and charcoal, often as crude sight gags. Tag lines taken from New York subway advertisements are subverted into vulgar slogans, most of which can’t be printed here.

Elements of Pop Art, comics and surrealism enter Lozano's vernacular, which overlaps with painters like Philip Guston and Judith Bernstein, whose turn away from "pure," nonobjective Abstract Expressionism was an emphatic political statement, and sculptors like Yayoi Kusama and Louise Bourgeois, who treated the phallus as a sculptural amulet or plaything. Within a decade, Lozano, who died in 1999, would shift toward outré conceptual performances like dropping out of the art world and boycotting women. These actions demanded discipline and commitment, but you can see the same impulse here, as Lozano learned to draw like a conventional, competent artist — then unlearned everything to become a great one.