

LEE LOZANO: DRAWINGS 1958-1964

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LEE LOZANO'S DRAWINGS

By Helen Molesworth

She is sitting behind a table covered with metal parts: dies, bits, screws, pipes, and bolts arranged in a totemic line as they edge out the books to the right and the stack of papers to the left. Every word for these industrial things is a homophone, each object is a part of something else. The blacks and whites and grays and silvers of the photograph are rendered as both depth and clarity. The left-hand corner sits in darkness; the right-hand corner hosts a blank screen in the background. A gamine face sits like the moon above a landscape, a short mop of bangs cut straight across her forehead, with, no joke, a small curl in the middle. Her coal-black eyes—eyes the color of fuel, round as polished stones—look out, level, steady, penetrating. Our eyes meet hers. Look at me. Look at this.

My wife peers over my shoulder. “That’s an amazing photograph,” she says. “Hollis Frampton took it,” I say. “Oh,” she replies, with an inflection that registers both confirmation (that’s why it’s so good) and a trace of disappointment (it’d be nice to learn a new name). It turns out Lee Lozano knew exactly what she looked like. Her self-portraits from the 1950s depict her with the same intensity—a set of eyes whose energy radiates from the sockets in her skull. I have been flipping through the drawings in this book in the same order that you have or are about to. I’m as moved by their pacing and development as I am by the individual drawings themselves. I cannot divorce the drawings from the order of their appearance, one after another. Some arrest me. Others flow over me like a current. This means I don’t find it accidental when Lozano’s drawings of skulls follow her self-portraits, as if she were straining to see underneath the flesh and the veins, the blood and the viscera. As if she were trying to gather information about the structural housing of the human body’s first, and most difficult, registration of difference—the eye. The eye, like nothing else on the body, a set of cones and rods, a viscous floating orb with a dilating and contracting center, in a constant state of judgment about the quality and amount of light in any given situation. No other texture on the body approaches it. Its precariousness are legion. The eye itself is not Lozano’s forte. Her pencil tends toward renditions of its lodging. Her skulls are all apertures, all nooks and crevices for the shelter of soft things. Because Lozano is restless, the drawings crackle with the energy of kindling, and, as such, her skulls and skeletons quickly combust as they give way to cross sections of the body. Truncated limbs belie their messy interiors, and, in Lozano’s hands, the human form begins to feel like a farcical lie—a cover-up, a scam, all those soft bits on the outside and the hard stuff in the middle. Lozano would later call it out as bad design:

THE HUMAN FIGURE IS IMPOSSIBLE TO DRAW!

PROLOGUE

WHOEVER OR WHATEVER DESIGNED HUMAN BEINGS & ALL EVOLUTIONARY

FORMS THAT LED UP TO THEM WAS A BAD ARTIST WHO TOOK THE IDEA OF FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION TO ITS ULTIMATE DISASTER. ANY RUMINATION ABOUT MANKIND'S SHAPE WILL DISCLOSE HOW EXCEEDINGLY UGLY HE OR SHE IS. THE SILLY LITTLE HEAD SITTING ON THE GOLF-TEE NECK SITTING ON THE GREAT GAWKY BODY, THE SEPARATENESS OF FRONT & BACK, THE SUD-DEN PROTRUBERENCES UNRELATED TO THE MAIN SEQUENCE, THE MESS OF MOUNDS, ANGLES & HOLLOWES, THE EMBARRASING VULNERABILITY OF THE EYES AND GENITALS, THE DEAD & STUPID BLANKNESS OF THE BACK OF THE HEAD, THE PISSHOLE COYLY HIDDEN IN THE SEX ORGAN, THE ASS-HOLE NOT SO COYLY SHOVED UP BETWEEN THE CHEEKS IN BACK ... OUT-ASIGHT (DESIGNER LUMPS SEX & ELIMINATION TOGETHER!) ... THE CORNY S-CURVES, THE RUBBERINESS, THE INELEGANT MOVEMENT.¹

For Lozano, the socket comes before the tools. See it there, lurking in the background of the drawing on page 127? Innocuous, inert, waiting. To be sure, I was looking for it. I wanted to find it. After falling down the rabbit hole of the skull as a housing for the eyes, knowing her love of homophones, it was inevitable that she'd end up thinking about the sockets in every room she'd ever been in. Those two dumb holes, silent, everywhere. Those two holes called a word with two meanings, here courtesy of the Google Dictionary: (1) a natural or artificial hollow into which something fits or in which something revolves; "the eye socket"; (2) an electrical device receiving a plug or light bulb to make a connection.

And isn't that what Lozano wanted to do, make a connection? Isn't that what *Dialogue Piece*, her magnum opus, is all about, an attempt to use art as a way to connect with people? Isn't that why, even in her "Private Books," she never tells us what she talked about, only that she met with people under its umbrella? What I love about Lozano—besides the crazy, ham-fisted quality of her drawn line, pictures made with pencils that appear to have been held with a fist—is how her demonstration of the word "connection" is not bound to any of the anodyne ways we currently use it. There's nothing about "listening" or "building community" or "empathy" in any of these drawings. For Lozano, connection is fraught and hairy. Connection is dangerous. Connection is static. Connection is the coming together of two states, objects, or planes of existence. This is not Sesame Street. This is not Marlo Thomas singing "Free to Be ... You and Me." This is sparks flying out of two holes in the wall.

By the time the second socket appears it's cloistered in a junction box, a housing that acknowledges the danger inherent in the situation (page 163). And on the very next page is her somewhat infamous graphite and crayon drawing of a floating toothbrush and a knife slicing through what might be sausage, or maybe it's a loaf of bread—in either scenario the phallus has made its appearance. Below is written, in now nearly obsolete cursive, an instruction: "Eat cunt for mental health." I don't need to look up *cunt* in the dictionary to know that it's putatively the worst word you can call a woman. That our epithets and our genitals are one and the same is not so surprising. What's surprising is that "dick" is so available and "cunt" so scandalous. I don't think this is due to any particular sympathetic geniality when it comes to the category "woman"; after all, according to Edison Research exit polls from the

¹ Lee Lozano, *Seek the Extremes!* (Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2006), 50.

2016 presidential election, 53 percent of white women voted for Trump. What was a cunt for Lozano? A hole you could eat from? A hole that could guarantee your mental health? A hole that made things? A hole in the wall that you could insert all of those dumb tools into? A slot that allowed for connection? If a cunt was a woman, was a woman just a set of holes? Was a woman not whole?

Tools and connectors, just like human bodies, are gendered male and female. The Wikipedia page on “Gender of connectors and fasteners” is a hilarious read. I recommend it for studio rats, rage-filled feminists, and gender theorists alike. For Lozano, the Canal Street of hardware, plumbing supply, and electrical parts stores must have been on par with the old days of 42nd Street, a veritable porno of protrusions and holes, screaming with the electric energy of screwing, boring, plugging, and drilling (page 661).

For Lozano, dicks are tools: like thumbs, they are set apart from the body (another example of the faulty design logic of the human form). Alone, it seems, they need somewhere to go—a mouth, a socket, any hole will do in order to make them whole. A “tool” is also slang for a stupid bro-ish dude who thinks much of himself—good for only one thing (and maybe not even that). Pages and pages of this book are filled with dicks, dicks as noses, as thumbs, as cigars, as tools. They are as dumb as the sockets that enliven them. Dicks are like Frankenstein, jerkily animate, teetering on consciousness. Inelegant and clumsy, fleshy and elephantine, in Lozano’s world they migrate everywhere. You can’t flip a light switch, or brush your teeth, or thumb your nose, or screw in a light bulb without encountering the terrible reality of dick logic: they have to be needed all the time. And, as if she can sense the embarrassment all these dicks might cause, she scrawls “FUCK TACT” on a drawing where a drill bit emanates from the center of an ungendered face (page 465). A few drawings later and some dude has a dick poking out of his ear (page 468). “Is that a dick in your ear or are you just too full of yourself to hear me?” skitters through my Trump-addled and fury-filled brain. Much has been made of the fact that Lozano stopped talking to women; very little has been mentioned about what she might have said to men.

Then there are the soft holes filled with hard parts. Teeth. Bone that tears through flesh (gum, another homophone), tools for eating. Vagina dentata. Sheela na gig. Cunts are soft holes that squeeze out hard screaming baby humans. More design flaws in the prototype (explained to me succinctly by a mother of two, “it’s the shoulder following the skull that’s the real problem”). A dick gets hard, although surely, it’s called a boner precisely because that is what it is not. (I dread the algorithm Google will produce for me as a result of this essay. My internet fate currently resides somewhere between Old Skool red and white checkered Vans and some porno situation I’m too vanilla to fathom.) Teeth are the tools that permit speech, pushing your tongue up against them allows you to make sounds that cohere into something more than guttural. Teeth are the enablers of the language that spills out of that soft, wet hole in your face. All that talking, all those opinions, everywhere, all the time, the ego in search of its match; the ego always boring, in service to itself.

Dicks and more dicks. Dicks that become planes, planes that look like cigars, cigars that look like cigars—things to be sliced, lit on fire, and gnashed between teeth. Each drawing is as propulsive, rich in velocity, and hyped up on adrenaline

and hormones, as the next. The plane drawings (my favorites are the ones that fly in and out of the ear, an underused orifice if ever there was one) are followed by *A Boring Drawing* (1963), a cross section of an electric drill, unique in that it is drawn with the precision of Albrecht Dürer (page 589). Sliced in half we see its bloodless interior, a compact arrangement of negative space, gears and screws, housings and cavities. All the words have two meanings. Boring a hole. Bored to death. *A Boring Drawing* reminds me of how arrested I was by her earlier drawing of a walnut, tightly encased in its uncracked shell, the severity of its closed seam, the implicit cracking to come (page 90). I think I understand why *A Boring Drawing* is boring, drawn as if an exercise in a mechanical engineering class. Only Lozano's cursive handwriting betrays her more typically spastic energy. It is cramped in the small hollow on the bottom right-hand side of the paper, which puckers around the "b" and "d" and the two "g's." The title makes it clear that this "realism" is something she won't repeat. Instead, the claw of a hammer lifts up a penis. And a three-headed hammer has a slot in it, a little cunt for the day laborer, another hole for the artist's studio. Flat-head screwdrivers thrum with the energy of erect dicks. Blood-red wrenches, drawn with an aggressive crayon, grip straight-edge blades with fury. Canal (anal) Street will be pronounced the asshole of New York (page 661). In a graphic parade of "slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am," the drawings careen toward the end of the volume, the last pages a welter of threaded screws, bolts, and nuts: the agents of structural connection, the parts that make wholes. Now that all the tools and the connectors are gendered, what's a girl to do? What do you do when every hole is a cunt and every cunt is a woman? The only answer I can summon bubbles up from the Borscht Belt of my unconscious: hold your nuts, screw, and bolt.

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