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Beatrice Wood, *Untitled (Head in Abstraction)*, 1996, pencil and colored pencil on paper, 10 1/4 × 13 1/4".

Beatrice Wood

L.A. LOUVER

Beatrice Wood died in 1998 at the age of 105. Her life was fantastic, if implausible in the details that made it so, seemingly even to her (she titled her 1985 autobiography *I Shock Myself*). While she was dubbed the Mama of Dada for her involvement with Henri-Pierre Roché and Marcel Duchamp—with whom she formed the Society of Independent Artists and published the journal *The Blind Man*—it was nevertheless the ceramics she made beginning

in the 1930s, after moving to Los Angeles in 1926, that have been the subject of more recent recuperation. Featuring iridescent puckered lusterware skins, these clay platters and tea sets, campy figurines, and magpie-splendorous chalices appeared prominently in the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time programming a decade ago, anchoring a show at the Santa Monica Museum of Art (now the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) in 2011. Writing at the time, Christopher Knight distinguished Wood's technique from that of her mentors Gertrud and Otto Natzler as distinctly embodied, "settled and mature, not idealized and ethereal." The terrific "Beatrice Wood: Drawings, Prints, Ceramics" at L.A. Louver reintroduced her comparably frank drawings and related prints alongside the vessels, which here sat atop pedestals throughout the space, encircled by dozens of works on paper that Wood made between 1917 and 1996.

Indeed, despite the allure of the gleaming coffee cups and bowls, to say nothing of the sardonic *Dear Pussie*, ca. 1985 (a tabletop sculpture of two red-booted but otherwise naked women cut off at the torso, an emerald cat gazing up from between one's feet) and its kin, the emphasis was on the walls. The show unfurled from a lithograph, *The Blindman's Ball*, 1917, where Wood's design of an exuberantly kicking stick figure announces a fete celebrating the publication's second and final issue. As did most other pieces on view, it came from the collection of art historian and dealer Francis Naumann, a longtime friend of Wood's. If this opening placed Wood on the scene of New York Dada, other pieces made in the mid-1930s showcased her time in LA. Another body of works on paper, produced in Ojai, California, beginning in the 1970s, was in turn prompted by her recovery of the earlier sketches. They were unfailingly intimate throughout, depicting friends and train rides, torsos with breasts unbound and, in a recurring theme, figures embracing. Wood is keenly attuned to gesture as located in extremities—gnarled fingers become so many balletic legs in the pencil-and-watercolor *Fear*, 1934—as much as she is to round, almost caricatural-expressive pupil-dotted eyes (see *Insomnia*, 1977, a rendering of the artist very much awake).

Those eyes recurred in later instances, notably *Untitled (Duchamp, Beatrice, and Picabia Going Down the Rollercoaster in Coney Island)*, ca. 1976, a subtractive interpretation of the caption showing the trio in free fall against an overwhelmingly blank page. Paired with *Untitled (Visiting Varèse)*, 1976, a pencil-on-paper remembrance of Wood's rendezvous with her friend, composer Edgard Varèse, in the hospital many decades before—a meeting punctuated by the appearance of a fly, which darted into her mouth—it suggested that the regular making of drawings had become a mnemonic practice while also remaining a diaristic process of recording. Around the

same time, in 1977, she also re-created her notorious contribution to the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibition, *Un peu d'eau dans du savon* (*A Little Water in Some Soap*), a headless Venus formed of glazed earthenware and punctuated with a heart-shaped soap covering and reiterating the vulva in an expression of sexual agency and self-possession. Wood was clearly involved in a project of retrospection. Yet far from being solely nostalgic, later works pictured friends and cocktail parties and contemporary debates (e.g., *Discussion About Abortion*, 1991). The latest work, *Untitled (Head in Abstraction)*, 1996, centered a solemn moon-faced head, eyelids washed with turquoise, amid a field of planar geometry. At once literal and allegorical, it lent the affair a proper ending, a kind of personal apotheosis alongside so much material alchemy.

— Suzanne Hudson

<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202210/beatrice-wood-89763>