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PSYCHEDELIC
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ART

KEN
JOHNSON



PRESTEL

To Claire and Noah

In memoriam: Gayle Johnson, 1953 – 1995

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FRONTISPIECE: Jim Isermann, *Untitled*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas over panel, 48 x 48 in. (122 x 122 cm).

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Sex and Sensibility

IN 1967, DOROTHY IANNONE went on a trip from her home in New York to Iceland with her well-to-do husband, a painter. There she met and fell madly in love with the artist Dieter Roth. It being the freewheeling '60s, she immediately left her husband and embarked on a seven-year love affair, which became the inspiration for a lifetime's worth of autobiographical, eroto-psychedelic painting, sculpture, and drawing.

Garishly colorful, stiffly cartoonish, and busily patterned, Iannone's paintings feature images of men and women in sexual encounters, sometimes including text commenting on the action, like "I have a beautiful cunt" or "I have a beautiful cock." With their explicit depictions of states of sexual intercourse and male and female genitalia – oddly, women's labia are often depicted so engorged that they resemble testicles – they look as if they'd been created by an unusually talented, sex-obsessed psychiatric patient. And, to add another layer, they have an archaic quality, as they resemble icons for a Byzantine, Middle Eastern, or Tantric sex cult. Her paintings illustrate a kind of sexual alchemy in which the carnal would be raised to the heights of mystic spirituality.

Iannone was not alone in this endeavor. In a modern world relentlessly alternating between shameless pornographic display and sexual anxiety, fear, and shame, the psychedelic counterculture sought to redeem carnal love as not only a natural human capability but as a path to higher consciousness and sacred experience, unifying mind and body in sensory and mental ecstasy.





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Until the '60s, modern artists largely ceded the field of the erotic to popular culture. Painting could not compete with the ability of photography and movies to project sexual allure, and kitsch in general was to be abhorred for its intellectual decadence and vulgar commercial avarice. With some idiosyncratic exceptions – Balthus, for example – sexy women almost disappeared from high art. Then, with the advent of Pop, they returned with a vengeance, but the form in which images of women returned was something new. In paintings by Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Tom Wesselmann, and others, they are not depicted as realistic representations but as generic types. Airbrushed playmates in Mel Ramos's paintings appear as hallucinatory equivalents to the oversize consumer goods they straddle, lounge on, and emerge from.

Dorothy Iannone
Human Liberation, 1972
 Silkscreen print on paper
 20 x 27 in. (50.8 x 68.6 cm)

The sexy girl in Pop art reflected a mood of hedonistic excitement and youthful energy in a newly prosperous society. As the straitlaced of the 1950s loosened, possibilities for indulging libidinal desire prompted widespread, instinctual euphoria. I think this was partly attributable to the more or less unconscious freeing and embracing of feminine energy – on the part of men as importantly as on the part of women. Businessmen sported colorful shirts and ties; men in general started wearing their hair long and some even began wearing jewelry. For a while in the early '60s, the Western world's most important magazine may have been *Playboy*, which made indulgence in sensual pleasure and high-end consumer products an obligation for sophisticates. Feminism had to wait until the next decade to flourish, but young women in the '60s reveled in their newfound freedom – thanks in part to the Pill and, for many, psychedelics.

Mel Ramos
Val Veeta, 1965
Oil on canvas
60 x 70 in. (152.4 x 177.8 cm)

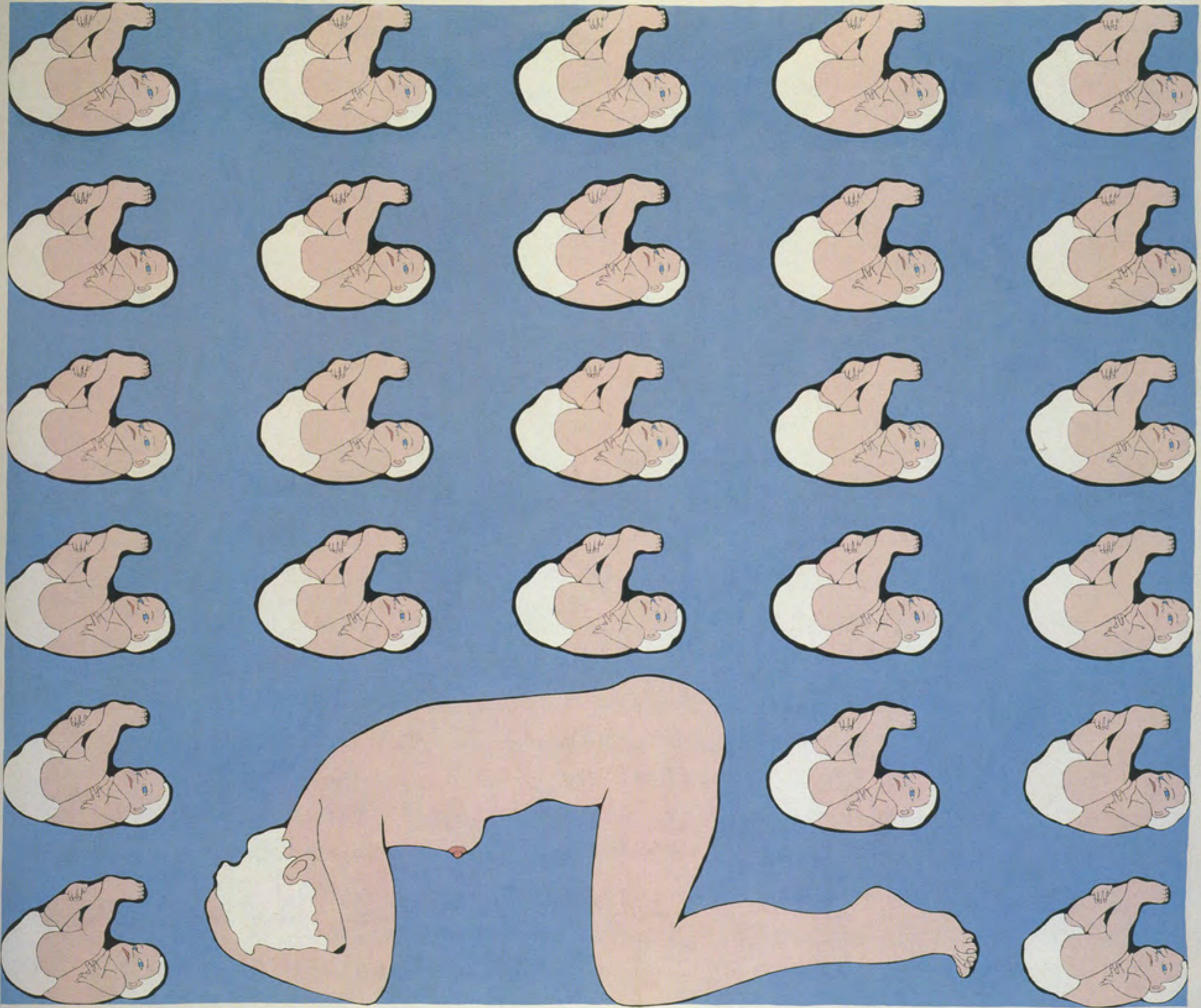


The painter John Wesley captured the burgeoning erotic/hedonistic zeitgeist in the mid-'60s with uncommon poetic grace. His paintings were viewed as a form of Pop art at the time because of the simplified cartoon style, but they had a dreamy, idiosyncratic introversion. Abounding in images of animals, children, and comic book characters like Popeye, Blondie, and Dagwood, his work was also sweetly and sometimes anxiously funny. His paintings of women are sexually exciting and meant to be so. But they are unlike the sexy women in most Pop-related art of the '60s, which tended to treat them satirically and even scornfully as quasipornographic clichés, or personifications of celebrity and consumer culture; Wesley's women exist on another plane of fantasy – an oneiric space where instinct and intuition meet. In *Plague* (1967) a nude woman hunkers down beneath diapered babies floating in or falling from the sky in grid formation. Considering the title, the rain of infants could be seen as a young parent's nightmare. But it could also be a vision of cosmic fertility, all those newborns metaphorically reflecting a rebirth of creative imagination taking place in the '60s.

In the 1980s, Carroll Dunham painted violent, cartoonish images of block-headed men with penis-shaped, bullet-firing noses and snarly-haired, big-busted women in hectic stories of sexual conflict and global warfare. They look like drawings by an unusually talented five-year-old boy unconsciously expressing the anxiety of living in a dysfunctional family in which mom and dad fight all the time.

In recent years, Dunham has turned away from this angry gender warfare. With candy-bright colors separated by fat black lines, his most recent paintings have an engrossing sensuality and pastoral atavism suggesting a new, hippie Eden. Some of the landscapes feature a big, leafy tree with a massive trunk and colorful, daisylike flowers scattered about under a lovely blue sky. The trees appear animated, as if seen through the eyes of a Druid. Some of the new paintings picture a woman with pendulous breasts bending forward to wash herself in translucent blue water. In others she bends over pre-

John Wesley
Plague,
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 84 in. (182.9 x 213.4)



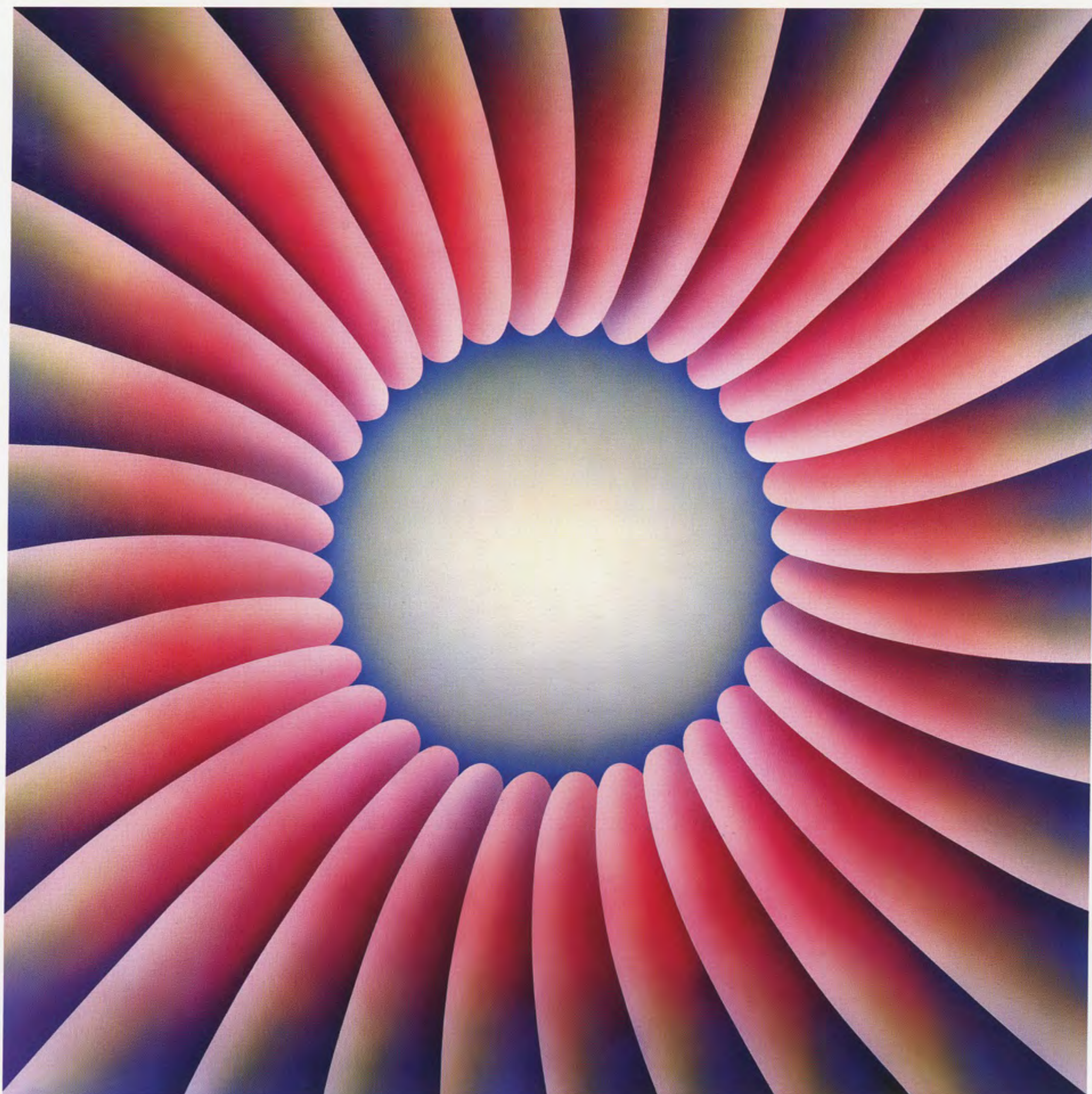


Carroll Dunham
Bather (one), 2009
Mixed media on canvas
71 x 71 in. (180.3 x 180.3 cm)

178 sending her naked posterior and hirsute pudenda. There's a naughty formalist joke here: you are implicitly invited to imaginatively enter the picture – to penetrate the surface and go into a virtual world conceived of as female. More broadly, Dunham is mischievously toying with the old romantic equation of nature and femininity (think Gauguin), envisioning a paradisiacal alternative to our industrial male-dominated world.

Feminism was not, of course, a psychedelic movement. But the intersection of sexual freedom made possible by the Pill (introduced to the American market in 1960), psychedelics, and feminism spawned something unprecedented in the West – and anywhere at any time, for that matter – as female artists began to make art based on their own experiences rather than trying to conform to the values of modernist tradition.

Judy Chicago
Through the Flower, 1973
Sprayed acrylic on canvas
60 x 60 in. (152.4 x 152.4 cm)



One manifestation of the search for art true to women's experience was the enactment of shamanistic rituals in nature. In the 1970s, Mary Beth Edelson did solitary, outdoor performances for which she painted her own naked body with concentric circles and stripes, as if she belonged to a primitive tribe. She posed for the camera in aggressive postures and added to the resultant prints elements of collage and paint to create images of a fierce, masked, warrior goddess, channeling the archaic female energy that modernity vehemently repressed.

A new kind of feminism emerged in the 1980s as artists like Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Kruger made work focusing on the social construction and representation of femininity. This "second-wave" feminism was based on the idea that the feminine is not an essential universal

quality embodied by women; rather, the feminine came to be seen as a constellation of traits conventionally attributed to the female psyche and repeatedly reaffirmed by the mass media's stereotypes of women.



Mary Beth Edelson
Woman Rising/Sexual Energies, 1973
Photograph with ink, paint,
and chinagraph pencil
10 x 12 in. (25.4 x 30.5 cm)

While second-wave feminism alerted viewers to signifiers of “natural” femininity and thereby promoted greater critical consciousness, it denied the spiritual dimension that inspired artists like Edelson and Ana Mendieta, another shamanistic performance artist. But insofar as it focused attention on standard clichés, metaphors, and other familiar signifiers of the feminine, it opened the door to more imaginative ways of putting the feminine into play.

Lisa Yuskavage’s paintings of highly sexualized fantasy women, more or less unclothed and in erotically charged situations, could be mistaken for

Lisa Yuskavage
Smiley, 1999
Oil on linen
34 x 30 in. (86.4 x 76.2 cm)



works by a lubricious Rococo painter like François Boucher magically transported to the late twentieth century. In recent paintings giant, voluptuous goddesses blend into bucolic landscapes, allegorizing nature animated by feminine spirit. They satirize sexist, essentialist ideas about women, but to some degree they also embrace archaic, politically incorrect notions about women and varieties of imaginative experience, from neo-pagan spiritualism to carnal debauchery. Being free means being free to act out a whole spectrum of possible selves.