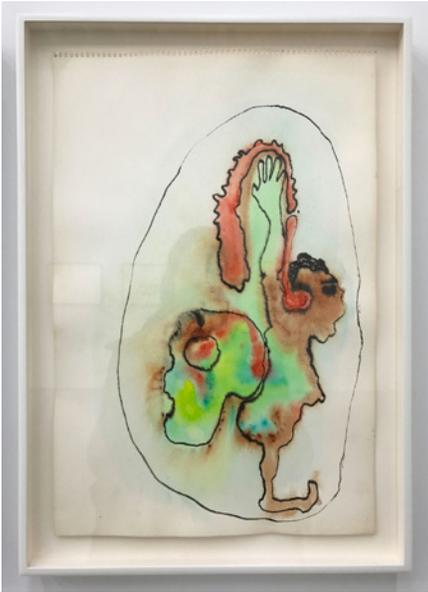


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THE DRAWINGS IDA APPLEBROOG MADE DURING A BREAKDOWN  
In 1969, THE ARTIST COMMITTED HERSELF TO SAN DIEGO'S  
MERCY HOSPITAL. WHILE THERE, SHE MADE WORK GRAPPLING  
WITH HER DEPRESSION.

by Jillian Steinhauer



Ida Applebroog, "Mercy Hospital" (1969),  
watercolor and ink on paper (all photos by the  
author for Hyperallergic)

In 1969, while a 40-year-old married mother of four, artist Ida Applebroog suffered a nervous breakdown. She had been at the San Diego Zoo with her two sons, she recalls, and by the time they left was unable to navigate the traffic to get home. "I wasn't really fit to drive. I remember getting there with my sons telling me 'mom, there's a red light, a green light, we can go now. Be careful of the car next to us,'" Applebroog has said. When she arrived, she called her psychiatrist and then committed herself to the local Mercy Hospital. She stayed for three weeks, returned home briefly, and then went back to Mercy for another three weeks.

During her time in the hospital, Applebroog — who was then still going by her married name, Ida Horowitz — made art. Using India ink, pastel, graphite, and watercolor, Applebroog grappled with her depression in more than 100 drawings. When she recovered, she put them in a box and forgot about them. Decades passed — she changed her last name, began exhibiting her art, got gallery representation, won awards. In 2009, her assistants rediscovered the box. The Mercy Hospital drawings were fully documented and published in a book earlier this year, and 97 of them are currently on view at Karma gallery.

American culture tends to glamorize mental illness in artists, but there's no glamour in these drawings — just a startlingly intimate confusion and pain. I found myself in awe of Applebroog's decision to publish and exhibit them — although, I quickly noted, this is a woman who has similarly shown a series of more than 150 drawings of her own vagina. Those works, close-up studies made in the bathroom, were done the same year as her breakdown, and they were similarly packed up in a box, stashed away, and forgotten for decades until assistants rediscovered them. But there's a continuity between the two sets of work beyond superficial similarities: both show Applebroog using

art making as a means to know herself.

The Mercy Hospital drawings feature biomorphic blobs, often in color, with lumpy bodies and body parts locked within them — a face here, breasts there, hands and feet and sometimes animals or menacing creatures. One gets the sense of a person caught in the grips of depression, pulled between her grounded, physical self and an unmoored psychic volatility. The circles and other globular forms recall cells, and the squiggles some kind of brain matter, with the dashed lines that often envelop these shapes standing in as membranes. But there's another metaphor at work as well. One splotchy, black-and-white drawing shows a pair of women's bodies with small, dashed-line rectangles appended to them: the tabs used to adhere clothing to paper dolls. The mix-and-match bodies are sandwiched between three men's heads in profile, suggesting Freud and other male torchbearers in a field with a history of judging women's emotional states and subjugating their bodies.

While the imagery in Applebroog's drawings is multifold, the text is almost agonizingly direct. "Over the Brink" reads one inscription below a pile of what look like stones about to fall; "The Mutation," says another, below a faceless creature whose one leg and arm form a lumpy crescent; yet another drawing, which shows maniacally grinning creatures emerging from a swirl of inky black lines and color, is captioned, simply, "Nightmare come true." Applebroog's dark phrases seem to buttress her flickering visuals, even as her unstable images belie the matter-of-factness of her words.

Many of the works forego text altogether, but in those that contain it, it usually functions in this way, as a kind of deadpan punctuation. In one drawing, however, Applebroog seems to treat the text almost as a diary entry. The bare image features a triangular form that could just as easily be a mountain as a misshapen body, with a bubble embedded in the base, containing small cells and the letters I-D-A. Emerging from that are a series of "why?"s, painstakingly repeated and progressing toward the edge of the page. In the bottom left corner of the shape, a text unfolds in another triangle: "A day of no sense; drawings of no sense; keep drawing, painting, working ... is this what keeps me alive? or is this what makes me so ill? why must I? why must I? why must I? why must I? why why ..." Standing in the gallery before a work throbbing with so much ache, I was struck by the glimpse of a hopeful possibility: maybe it was the art that kept her alive.