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ARTFORUM

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David Weiss

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Before there was Fischli & Weiss, there were Peter Fischli and David Weiss. Fischli was still only in his twenties when they began collaborating in 1979, so presumably his solo oeuvre was as yet rather small. Weiss, on the other hand, was already thirty-three. And, as it turns out, he had already been quite prolific, if only on paper, despite the fact that, as Stephan Kunz writes in the catalogue for “David Weiss: Works, 1968–1979”—which was previously shown at the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur, Switzerland, where Kunz is the director—his “entry into the world of art did not follow a straight line.” In New York, the exhibition included 125 items (mostly individual sheets but also several books). While a few of these were large-scale nonrepresentational works composed of reticula that seem to test the potential of abstract painting, the majority of the works that were on view might suggest a future, not necessarily in fine art, but in more vernacular forms of expression—illustration and comics. Although there were occasional allusions to, say, Alberto Giacometti (in a drawing from 1978) or Paul Gauguin (the book *Frauen* [Women], 1977), such figures are simply part of the general culture, just like the Velvet Underground (the 1976 book *I Wish That I Sailed the Darkened Seas*) or the Ramones (a 1979 flower drawing titled *We Are a Happy Family, Me, Mum, and Daddy*).

Rather than the output of a budding art star, all this could be more easily imagined as the work of an underground cartoonist of considerable technical range and with a surprising propensity toward the visionary, despite the omnipresence of a saturnine humor that may be typical of underground comics but also recalls the wit of Sigmar Polke (with whom, Kunz informs us, Weiss was in touch during these years). A drawing of a steaming turd is captioned GOOD DAVID! YOU DID THAT VERY WELL! But paradoxically, this caustic humor entails a shift toward



David Weiss, *Untitled*,
1979, ink and
gouache on paper,
36½ × 52¾".

hippie cheerfulness: Things keep turning into flowers. One undated drawing, titled *Timothy Leary*, has the apostle of psychedelia assuring the artist, DAVID, YOU'RE THE ONLY SAINT I KNOW.

Only one drawing here is actually a comic strip, and it is one of the earliest—*The Big Board Game or the Story of the Beagle Commune*, 1968, starring Minnie Mouse herself. (The artist was living in a commune around this time.) But Weiss never abandoned the practice of squaring off a picture space within a sheet—something I noticed in more than half the drawings on view—suggesting that he saw his drawings as potential “frames” within an ongoing sequence. For all that, however, only a few of these drawings are accompanied by captions. The absence of punch lines leaves their meaning or intention in suspension; this reticence or irresolution only heightened by the fact that the vast majority of the drawings are untitled and undated. In a number of small pieces, calligraphic flourishes recall nothing so much as the free-handed doodling that cartoonists use to indicate an abstract painting when one has to be shown in the background of a scene. But even when, let's say, the scene is a quite legible city street at night with rows of streetlights, it reads like a kind of abstraction thanks to its combination of graphic stylization and incommunicativeness.

Although Weiss exhibited his solo work in Switzerland in the 1970s, it had been mostly forgotten. Only in the months before his death from cancer in 2012, it seems, did he begin to reexamine the work he'd done before teaming up with Fischli, preparing a reprint edition of several artists' books from 1973 to 1979—a project realized last year. Seeing his early work for the first time now was like discovering, a little too late, a new artist—a bittersweet pleasure.

—Barry Schwabsky