

Title

Ida Applebroog's drawings from Mercy Hospital

Author(s)

Maria Walsh

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About the author(s)

is Reader in Artists' Moving Image at Chelsea College of Arts, London. She is the author of *Art and Psychoanalysis* (2012) and *Therapeutic Aesthetics: Performative Encounters in Moving Image Artworks* (forthcoming 2020).

Cover image:

Ida Applebroog's drawings from Mercy Hospital

by Maria Walsh • 16.07.2020

Mercy Hospital (1969), a series of just over one hundred drawings by the American feminist artist Ida Applebroog (b.1929), was first exhibited in London at Hauser and Wirth in 2017. A small selection of approximately thirty-five went on display in February at the Freud Museum, London, before it closed temporarily during the COVID-19 lockdown. Similar to the Hauser and Wirth exhibition, which was also organised by Barry Rosen, a friend and consultant to Applebroog, the drawings at the Freud Museum are displayed in groupings of between six and twelve as determined by the sketchbooks they originated from. It seems fitting that the drawings, which were made by Applebroog during a six-week stay on a mental health ward at Mercy Hospital, San Diego, when she was suffering from depression, should be exhibited in a museum dedicated to the founder of modern psychoanalysis. Stashed away in boxes until they were discovered by her assistants in 2009, the drawings were made in lieu of doing occupational therapy and not originally intended as artworks. However, rather than viewing them as unmediated expressions of the artist's fragile mental state, which is how art is wont to be seen in therapeutic contexts, Applebroog, in a rare comment on them, asserts that the person who made them 'was a pretty good artist'.¹ And in their use of 'wet' media, such as India ink and watercolour, and their play with line to disaggregate the human form, they convey a self-reflective intimacy that has a paradoxically joyous, rather than purely symbolic, tenor.

Ascending the staircase to the main exhibition room, six vibrant works testify to the artist's know-how in controlling the amorphous bleeding capacity of watercolour **FIG. 1**. Their transparent, yet vivid, colouration leaps out at the viewer, particularly in a circular mass of snaking intestinal forms on an orangey wash, whose outer rim is framed by a halo of words: 'I'm just waiting for this to dry', repeated over and over **FIG. 2**. The sardonic humour of the text read in conjunction with the dehiscent bodily forms speaks to experiential fragmentation and its soldering using highly mediated scraps of speech. Throughout Applebroog's life, she would fill notebooks with ironic witticisms – fragments from conversations, advertisements and films – that she would later deploy in her paintings. Although the delicate use of script in the Mercy Hospital series differs greatly from the bold iconographic text in her mature painting, her use of diaristic text in the series seems to be equally reliant on the clichéd forms of

speech we use to express feelings **FIG. 3**. As Hal Foster puts it, while 'expressionism insists on the primary, originary, interior self, it reveals that this self is never anterior to its traces, its gestures, its "body". Whether unconscious drives or social signs, these mediated expressions "precede" the artist: they speak [her] rather more than [she] expresses them'.² Even Applebroog's use of broken, meandering line to create bodily topographies that pulverise anatomy can be said to derive in part from the conventions of representation that precede the desire to articulate inner states of being.

Originally trained in graphic design (1948–50) and fine art (1965–68) at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Applebroog was well-equipped with an iconographic repertoire with which she could translate a distress that was not simply personal but related to the social oppression of women in the 1950s and 1960s, a time in which the only degree they were expected to obtain was a 'Mrs. Degree'.³ As a mother of four and an art graduate without an art community – her family moved from Chicago to San Diego shortly after she graduated because of her husband's job – Applebroog lost direction, a loss underscored in some of the texts included in her drawings. On one such drawing, she annotates an aggregate of biomorphic forms with the feathery script: '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', with the question 'why must I?' repeatedly scrawled across the page **FIG. 4**. However, it is a mistake to read the texts as overdetermining the significance of the drawings, even in this museum of the 'talking cure'. Her delineations of expansive and contractive bodily forms, although different in weight, recall Jean Dubuffet's paintings of female nudes as well as Unica Zürn's 'automatic' drawings in India ink from the 1950s and 1960s rendering intrapsychic phenomena. The auratic colour and inky splodges of some of the Mercy Hospital series are evocative of Henri Michaux's 1950s drawings under the influence of mescaline as well as Louise Bourgeois's use of the medium to articulate intersubjective relationships.

Although the drawings cannot be reduced to being unmediated expressions of mental breakdown, an alternative reading opens up in relation to the texts selected by Applebroog to accompany the exhibition: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), extracts from Freud's case studies of Dora and Little Hans and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915). This symptomatic reading evokes the psychoanalytic idea that breakdown is a resistance that can lead to transformative breakthrough.⁴ Charting the breakdown of a woman forbidden a 'room of her own', Gilman's short story became an iconic text of feminist resistance. Dora, in her rejection of Freud's interpretations, was appropriated by some feminist thinkers as a heroine of women's emancipation (Applebroog was involved with the Women's Liberation Movement as a member of the pioneering publishing collective Heresies,

founded in 1977). In *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa's animal mutation can be read in relation to patriarchal oppression as can Little Hans's phobia of horses, which Freud could only interpret in relation to the Oedipus complex rather than seeing the more creative possibilities of the symptom. Applebroog scribbled 'The Mutation' at the bottom right-hand corner of a drawing, my favourite, in which a biomorphic kind of armature holds aloft a severed organ, an offering that implies torture but also the emergence of a new form of being. Losing one's sense of self is painful but having the skills to translate this sensibility into colour and line preserves the 'glimmer of light' FIG. 5 necessary to a life of one's own.

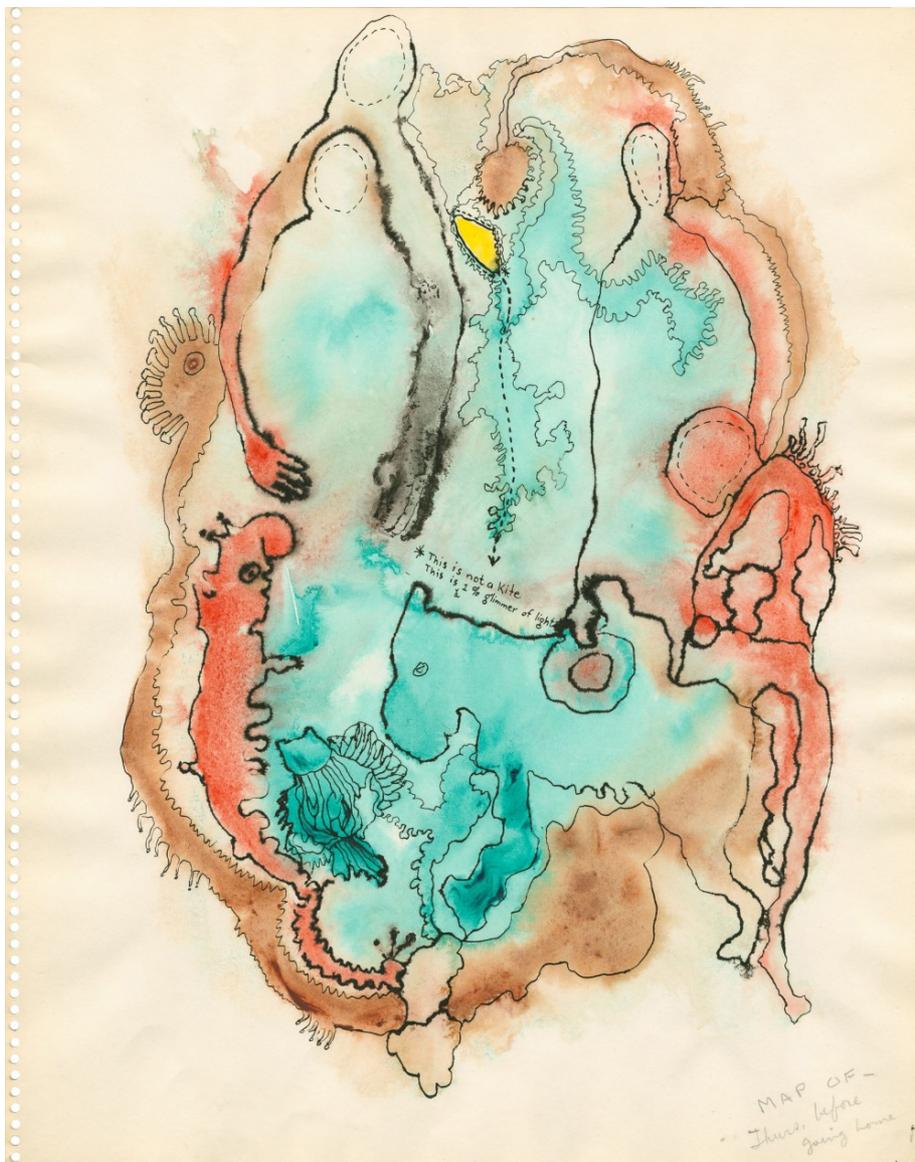


Fig. 5 From the series *Mercy Hospital*, by Ida Applebroog. 1969. Watercolour, ink and pencil on paper, 35.6 x 27.9 cm. (© Ida Applebroog; courtesy Hauser & Wirth).

Exhibitions details Ida Applebroog: Mercy Hospital
Freud Museum, London
28th February–6th September 2020

Footnotes

- 1** Ida Applebroog in J. Chiaverina: 'Work happens for a reason': Ida Applebroog talks 'Mercy Hospital', her current exhibition at Karma in New York, *ARTnews* (13th April 2017), available at <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/work-happens-for-a-reason-ida-applebroog-talks-mercy-hospital-her-current-exhibition-at-karma-in-new-york-8107/>, accessed 9th July 2020.
- 2** See H. Foster: 'The expressive fallacy', in *idem: Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Seattle 1985, pp.59–77, at p.62.
- 3** Ida Applebroog in 'Jo Applin in conversation with Beth B. and Ida Applebroog' at the Courtauld Institute, London (12th October 2016), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3F2OqiOxkV4>, accessed 7th July 2020.
- 4** This idea is developed by the psychoanalyst and paediatrician D.W. Winnicott. See his essay 'Fear of Breakdown', *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 1 (1974), pp.103–07.

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