

HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

From Montage to Mounting: The Surprisingly Sexual Drawings of Sergei Eisenstein

Over the course of his life, Sergei Eisenstein amassed 5,000 sketches, including his “sex drawings,” which depict various sex acts that are not limited to humans.

Tanner Tafelski | 3 hours ago | 2/2/017



Sergei Eisenstein, “Untitled” (c. 1931), colored pencil on paper, 10.67 x 8.27 in (Private collection, image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York and Matthew Stephenson, London)

[Sergei M. Eisenstein](#) is one of cinema's greatest theorists and directors. *Battleship Potemkin* and *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* are staples in "Film 101" college courses. So are Eisenstein's essays like, "A Dialectical Approach to Film Form" (1931) and "Methods of Montage" (1929). That word, "montage," is synonymous with the Russian director's films. He and a bevy of filmmakers that followed in his footsteps, such as Alfred Hitchcock, Jean-Luc Godard, and Brian De Palma, consider editing the essential ingredient of cinema. In Eisenstein's thinking, which was tinged with violence, individual shots are not so much as linked together, but in conflict. Montage could create a certain rhythm for a film or a certain line of thinking that Eisenstein called "intellectual montage": shot "A," the thesis, juxtaposes with shot "B," the antithesis, to create shot "C," the synthesis.



Sergei Eisenstein: Drawings 1931-1948, installation view, Alexander Gray Associates (image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates)

Cinephiles are familiar with Eisenstein the filmmaker and theorist, but fewer people know of him as a sketch artist. Ever since his fin-de-siècle bourgeois childhood in the Latvian city of Riga, Eisenstein had been drawing, amassing 5,000 works over the course of his life. He drew constantly, only pausing in the 1920s when he made his first films. He drew the filmmaking process, the circus (a passion of his), storyboards from his films, as well as various sex acts that are not limited to humans. [Sergei Eisenstein: Drawings 1931-1948](#) at Alexander Gray Associates gathers together a slim portion of the Russian director's "sex drawings," as historian Joan Neuberger calls them in her article, "Strange Circus" (2012). They depict

men and women having sex, men with men, animals with humans, inexplicable creatures with humans, and humans with inanimate objects (masks, bottles, candelabras). Eisenstein's sex drawings are funny, violent, perverse, and sacrilegious. They're striking, immediate, and devoid of any real context with their chunky lines of black that are sometimes highlighted with red and blue. The colors recall the red flag in *Battleship Potemkin* or the otherworldly red and blue in *Ivan the Terrible, Part Two* (1958) — bright splashes in an otherwise monochromatic film career.



Sergei Eisenstein, "Untitled" (nd), colored pencil on paper, 10.67 x 8.27 in (private collection, image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York and Matthew Stephenson, London)

Where his historical films were public facing, Eisenstein's drawings were private affairs, gifts, and in-jokes meant for his eyes or the eyes of close friends, and therefore their meaning may come across as obscure and cryptic. Intentional or otherwise, aside from a one-off lecture by Neuberger and some minimal wall text, the exhibit offers little in the way of context. For what it calls "visual context," Gray projects a film the director shot while making sketches, the unfinished *iQue Viva México!* (1931–32), a documentary exploring the country's history, culture, and society. Eisenstein presented portions of the project over the years, and in 1979, Grigori Aleksandrov, who worked on the shoot with Eisenstein, prepared a restored version as faithful to Eisenstein's vision as possible. (A minor quibble: Wouldn't it have been better to pay his film as much respect as his drawings by putting it in a darkened room?) There are also, on a table near the stairs that lead to the exhibit proper, books by Eisenstein and scholars to peruse.



Sergei Eisenstein, "Untitled" (nd), colored pencil on paper, 14.65 x 10.63 in (private collection, image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York and Matthew Stephenson, London)

In 1931, Eisenstein was in various parts of Mexico (Colima, Jalisco, Oaxaca, Guanajuato, Mexico City, Tehuantepec) working on *¡Que Viva México!*, which was funded by Upton Sinclair. During this time, Eisenstein's drawings increased exponentially. As Neuberger notes, his prodigious output coincided with a "kind of freedom he had never before enjoyed — intellectual, emotional, sexual, artistic freedom." And it was in Mexico where Eisenstein had passionate sex with his Guanajuato guide Jorge Palomino y Cañedo (lovingly and irreverently depicted in Peter Greenaway's recent movie *Eisenstein in Guanajuato*, 2015) that made him briefly, but ecstatically happy.



Sergei Eisenstein, "Untitled" (1942), colored pencil on paper, 12.8 x 8.66 in (private collection, image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York and Matthew Stephenson, London)

Set in one room, the show groups Eisenstein's drawings according to themes, series, or similar imagery. There are the unholy ones such as priests either being impaled on a steeple or engaging in pedophilia. There are those featuring toreadors and bulls in threesomes. And in one, Eisenstein draws the set of a porn film shoot. You can even make out "Bell & Howell" on the camera being used.

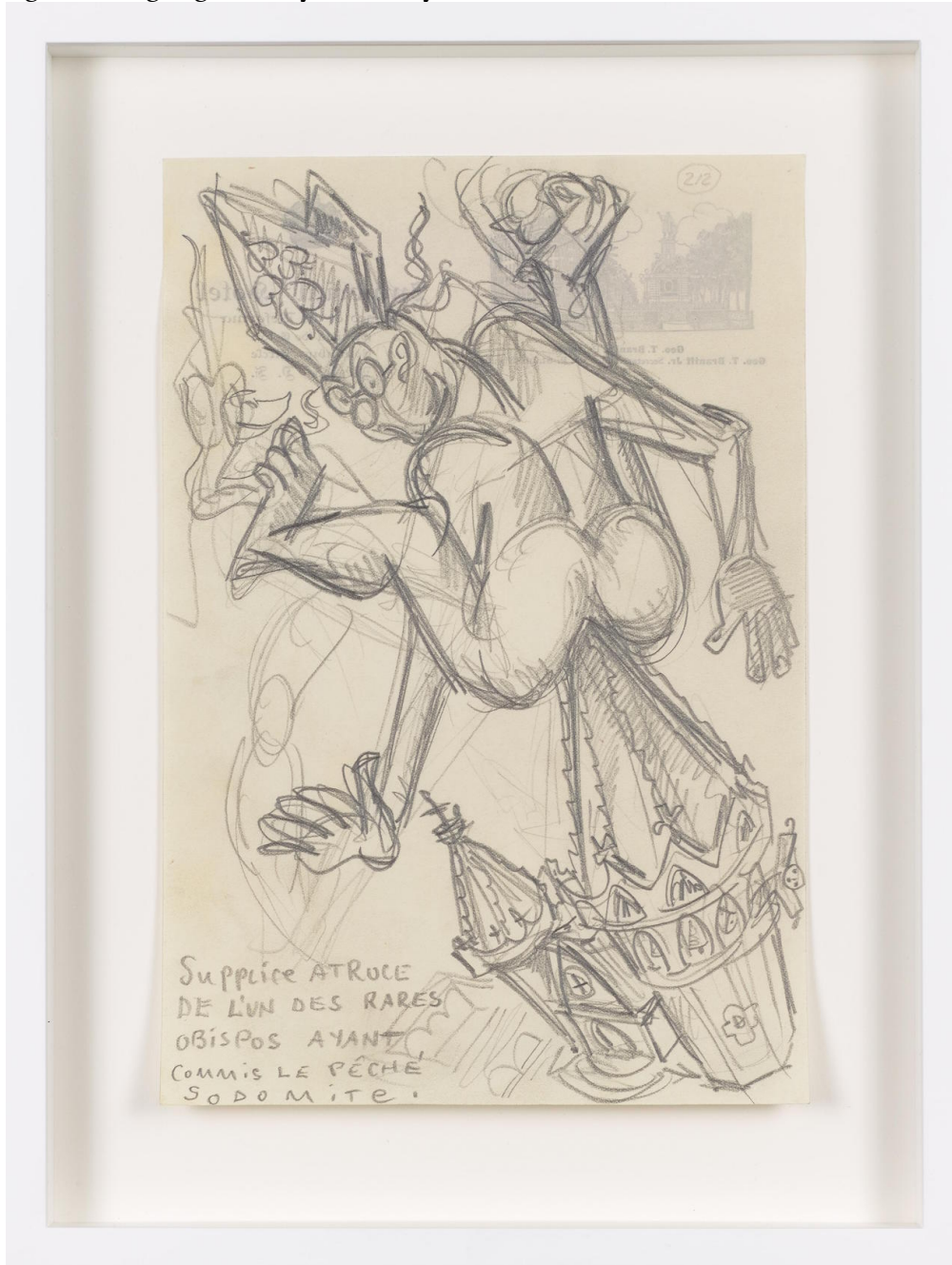
During my visit, I could hear faint laughter as visitors viewed the various sex acts on display. The laughter wasn't just tinged with embarrassment, but perhaps a pleasure in the drawing's apparent humor. An ardent admirer of Mickey Mouse's creator, Eisenstein once praised Walt Disney, saying his work was "the greatest contribution of the American people to art." With their curved contours and anthropomorphized figures, Disney's influence looms over his drawings.



Sergei Eisenstein, "Untitled" (1943), colored pencil on paper, 7.83 x 11.65 in (private collection, image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York and Matthew Stephenson, London)

In real life, sex was a rare thing for Eisenstein, who was bisexual. He hardly practiced it, though presumably not out of volition. As his drawings attest, he had sex on his mind. These playfully perverse sketches unleash his wild, carnal imagination. They evoke a kind of sexual utopia, liberated by gender or any form of constraint or taboo for that matter, and where anyone can fuck anyone or anything. Eisenstein let it all hang out on the page.

Towards the end of his Mexican adventure, he told his friend and guide to Mexican culture Anita Brenner, that drawings were just as important as his filmmaking and film writing. The drawings are part and parcel with Eisenstein's life and work. They are another expression of his dialectical thinking, in this case, of two people, or things, coming together dynamically.



Sergei Eisenstein, "Untitled" (1931), colored pencil on paper, 9.21 x 6.18 in (private collection, image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York and Matthew Stephenson, London)