

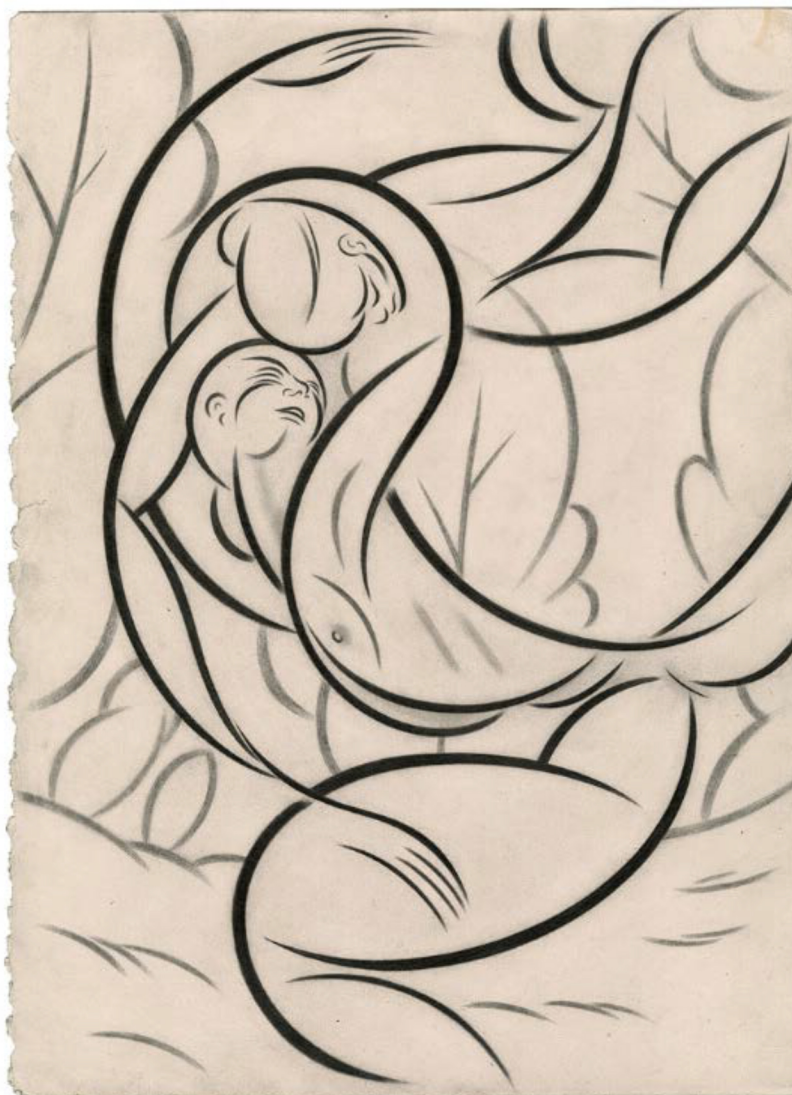
Koak

*The Potrero View,
The Human Touch*

May 2020



SERVING THE POTRERO HILL, DOGPATCH, MISSION BAY, & SOMA NEIGHBORHOODS SINCE 1970



The Human Touch

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In her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” French theorist Helen Cixous coined the term *Écriture féminine*: writing by women for women as a means of self-examination. By writing about pleasure and taking pleasure in writing, Cixous posited that composing could constitute an act of feminine liberation. So, too, it might be with visual art, as suggested by a new body of work at Altman Siegel in Dogpatch.

In *Return to Feeling*, pseudonymous painter Koak creates a world of female characters marked by melancholy and desire. The twenty-nine paintings and drawings on display, all dated 2020, continue the artist’s recent preoccupation with female nudes of all shapes and sizes, rendered with delicate and exacting line quality. Koak only recently broke into the art world with these voluptuous figures; in the last few years the work has been shown across the United States and abroad. Before that, she sold small drawings and prints at art fairs while earning a Master of Fine Arts in Comics from the California College of the Arts.

Koak’s paintings vary in size, from the central diptych *Moat and Bridge*, each 77.5 by 62 inches, to the smallest entry, *Trimmed*, 15 by 12 inches. *Moat and Bridge* illuminate two sides of an emotional spectrum: identical female figures seated back to back, one grey and melancholic the other orange and aroused. Generally, though, Koak works in muted tones, shades of blue and grey, the few bright colors burst forth with sensational vibrancy.

In *Trimmed*, depicting a female figure with ribbon-like arms, unspooling her hair by moonlight, a sampling of Koak’s myriad strengths are exhibited: delicate, variable line quality, mastery over texture – from sanded flat to sculptural build-up – and a wide-ranging color palette.

While critics have compared Koak’s work to Matisse and Picasso, her aesthetic owes more to Asian brush painting and modern comic books than it does to post-impressionism or cubism. The drawings, which are small but together fill most of the second room in the gallery, brim with narrative. *The Crush*, for example, tells a story of desire in the simple act of one figure lighting another’s cigarette, while the apparent embrace depicted in *Disaster* makes us wonder just what the title is getting at.

If a connection must be drawn to one of the so-called “old masters,” Rodin comes to mind as a more apt comparison. The same emotional intensity and movement exhibited in his sculptures make Koak’s drawings leap off the page. *The Hurricane*, especially, could pass for a rendering of Rodin’s *Eternal Springtime*, c. 1884, showing two bodies entwined in a dance-like tangle of passion.

Koak's own sculpture, *Bench*, is a walnut slab with two pairs of bronze human arms for legs. The visual pun is furthered by the feet of the bench – which are in fact hands – straining to touch each other beneath the seat. Exhibited here is the show's central theme: a straining to achieve feeling – physical touch, in this case – that develops into an unsettling sense of desperate longing.

The exhibit's emotional and sensorial narrative ultimately ends on a melancholy note. *An Immovable Mass of Longing* is a quiet drawing of a curled female figure gazing despondently at a wilting rose. A dark cloud and an arch-backed black cat envelop the figure, signaling a sense of deep loss. If *Return to Feeling* is a love story, it's one of self-love: of painting as a form of sensual self-examination and empowerment; of viewing as an act of empathy and pleasure.

Return to Feeling is on extended view at Altman Siegel through mid-May and can be seen by appointment during the shelter in place mandate.

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