

ARTFORUM

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein

FLEISHER/OLLMAN GALLERY

1216 Arch Street, 5A

October 10–December 7

Sweet and carnal, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's expansive and exploratory work on view here is a relic of the deeply private world shared between the artist and his wife and muse, Marie. A series of slides reveal posed photographs Von Bruenchenhein took of Marie in various guises—pinup girl, exotic princess, cheerful domestic—and her apparent joy in posing indicates not only a trusting sincerity but also the fun that the couple seem to have experienced creating these pictures together. The slides feel intensely private, a boudoir collection made for the Von Bruenchenheins' clandestine appreciation—respite, perhaps, from the icy winters of Milwaukee, where the couple kept a small home.

Von Bruenchenhein's work often feels primitive and ultrahandmade. The exhibition's ceramic sculptures—scores of them—are tactile and corporeal objects that draw in elements of nature, portraiture, and fantasy. (A baker by trade, Von Bruenchenhein fired the pieces in his home oven.) A sensual series of small works depicting flowers and leaves (for example, *Untitled [Leaf]* and *Untitled [Blue Flower]*, both 1947) is echoed in larger vessels composed of leaflike shapes (*Untitled [Dusty rose closed-top vessel]*, date unknown). Marked with fingerprints and crudely molded, the objects are at once strangely alien and evocative of sex—some, like *Untitled (Green triangle vessel)*, date unknown, assume overtly vaginal forms, while others project salaciously interwoven tentacles melded with slippery-looking petals.

Von Bruenchenhein's paintings delve further into his own inner world of fancy, depicting unusual plantlike scenes as well as colorful landscapes. A self-taught, so-called outsider artist, he worked on and with materials available to him, using corrugated edges of cardboard scraps as a tool with which to paint textured layers onto other cardboard surfaces. The pictures have a shellacked, glowing translucence that transforms them from pictorial reality into abstract psychedelic mirages, an effect that also references fertile foliage and a warm smoggy haze of industry. A lavish selection of Von Bruenchenhein's various homespun works are presented here in tandem, constituting a survey that speaks at once to the artist's active imagination and to the happy, sheltered closeness of a partnership that, in its seclusion, encouraged participatory ingenuity.



Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, *Untitled*, c. 1940, 35mm transparency.

— Anne Prentnieks