

Art in America

EXHIBITIONS THE LOOKOUT

January 26, 2017



Sergei Eisenstein

at Alexander Gray,

through Feb. 11

510 West 26th Street

Drawing is an intimate art, cinema an industrial one. Sergei Eisenstein obsessively practiced both. He generated ideas by sketching sets and shots, and in his leisure he made doodles that reveal a wicked erotic imagination. The latter drawings were long kept hidden by Eisenstein's colleagues to protect his reputation, but have been exhibited and published in recent decades. The selection on view at Alexander Gray, with works dating from 1931 to 1948, includes several of humans copulating with fantastic beasts. One angular drawing, faintly reminiscent of the Mayan art that Eisenstein saw while traveling and shooting in Mexico in the 1930s, shows a shepherd sucking on the beak of a giant bird as it swoops down to embrace him; in another, curvier sketch, a man penetrates what appears to be a living tree from behind as one of its serpentine branches bends back to inspect his buttocks. One of the most detailed drawings shows a bishop getting anally impaled on a church's gothic spire. The work takes the anti-religious caricature popular in the Soviet press to exaggerated heights of profanity. In another comic-like drawing, a photographer puzzles over a Leica lens as it projects a huge erect penis as a small, flat image. "Why so small?" wails a large-breasted woman to the side. "Why is it pointing DOWN?!" It's a wry comment on the varying potentials of scale and fantasy in two mediums Eisenstein had mastered: the free hand on paper and the camera's mechanical eye. —*Brian Droitcour*

Pictured: Sergei Eisenstein: Untitled, c. 1931, graphite on paper, approx. 9/4 by 6/4 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray, New York.