

# SI

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Ken Johnson  
Hans Schärer: *Madonnas and  
Erotic Watercolors*  
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### 'Hans Schärer: Madonnas and Erotic Watercolors' at the Swiss Institute

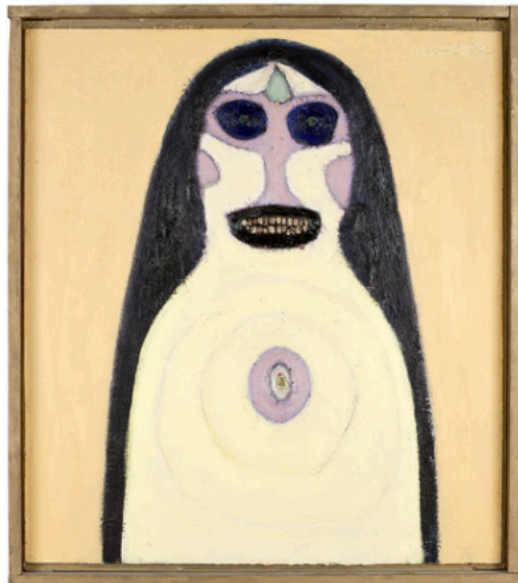
By KEN JOHNSON DEC. 24, 2015



Erotic to psychedelic: Hans Schärer's Madonnas, the focus of his first solo exhibition in the United States, on view at the Swiss Institute. [Swiss Institute](#)

One of Switzerland's most celebrated artists, Hans Schärer (1927-1997), created paintings that look as if made by a self-taught psychiatric patient. ["Hans Schärer: Madonnas and Erotic Watercolors,"](#) at the Swiss Institute, is the first solo exhibition of his art in the United States, and it's wholly delightful. The show presents two bodies of work produced between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s. In the institute's main gallery are 41 portraits of imaginary women, each called "Madonna." On the mezzanine level are 87 watercolors, cartoon images of voluptuous women cheerfully engaging in all kinds of sexual activities.

A musician, composer and writer as well as a painter, Mr. Schärer was an autodidact, but he wasn't crazy. The son of a physician, he quit school after World War II, gravitated to Paris and painted under the influence of Jean Dubuffet and [Art Brut](#). Back in Switzerland in 1956, he married, eventually had four sons, and became a convivial and influential participant in the Swiss art world. Lately, his work has attracted more widespread attention. Cindy Sherman included some of his Madonnas in [a section of the 2013 Venice Biennale that she organized](#). The present exhibition is an abridged version of one organized by the [Aargauer Kunsthaus](#) in Aarau, Switzerland.



"Madonna" (1972).  
Erben Werk Hans  
Schärer/ProLitteris,  
Zurich

The juxtaposition of the Madonnas and the erotic watercolors naturally calls to mind the virgin-whore complex, but that psychoanalytic formula doesn't quite fit. If you didn't know what they were called, you wouldn't take the Madonna paintings for pictures of the mother of Jesus. They seem imbued with an ancient, pagan spirit and to exude not purity but a primordial ferocity.

Rendered in heavily built-up layers of paint, the Madonnas have bodies like bottles with rotund heads for stoppers and long hair falling like hooded capes. Their faces are like masks with staring eyes and smiling or gaping mouths studded with little pebbles resembling real teeth. Seashells, hair, nails, buttons and other common objects also can be found embedded in the paint of different pieces. Earlier Madonnas have the figures inscribed with blunt implements into the thick paint surfaces. Later they acquire confectionery colors in stripes and spiral patterns, giving them a Pop-psychedelic spirit. All are spooky and funny.

The erotic watercolors look as if they had been made by a different artist. Bristling with joyful hedonism, they betray the hallucinogenic influence of the animated Beatles movie "Yellow Submarine." The weirdly comical erotic drawings of [Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern](#) also come to mind.



"Madonna" (1976).  
Erben Werk Hans  
Schärer/2015  
ProLitteris, Zurich;  
Aargauer Kunsthaus,  
Aarau

Mr. Schärer's watercolors revolve around at least one female figure — sometimes more than a dozen — a statuesque woman with long dark hair, big eyes and a red-lipped, toothy grin. The imagery is as ridiculous as it is unabashedly pornographic. One piece depicts a quintet of naked Amazons riding a bobsled down an alpine slope. Weapons of war appear in others. In almost all of these images the women are in charge. Male characters usually are the size of children and often have prosthetic noses and other kinds of masks strapped to their faces.

Mr. Schärer's images convey 1960s-type, countercultural sentiments not only in their defiance of puritanical censorship but in their implicit call for a new, sybaritic world order in which sex would be not shameful but a sacrament. In a seashore scene, a siren has climbed a ladder leaning against a tower and is waving her underclothes at a sailboat out on the water manned by an archaic warrior holding a spear and a shield. She's apparently urging him to make love, not war.

The erotic watercolors raise interesting questions about criteria: How should we reckon the value of artworks that feature sexually explicit imagery? Can the purely formal, aesthetic aspect be judged by itself aside from what is represented? As with the frankly pornographic art of [Tom of Finland](#), and, on an aesthetically higher plane, Japanese erotic woodcuts, some of Balthus's paintings and many of Picasso's libidinous prints and drawings, it's hard to separate style and subject matter. Certainly you can appreciate the graphic exuberance of Mr. Schärer's vision, with its zany choreographies of bodies in offbeat situations, as you can the visual impact and painterly sensuality of his Madonnas.

But it's the spectacle of the artist freely and openly working out in paint his relationship with female Otherness that gives his art its captivating intrigue. Can pornography be raised to fine art? Mr. Schärer is just one of many artists from myriad cultural traditions who have proved that it can.

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"Hans Schärer: Madonnas and Erotic Watercolors" runs through Feb. 7 at the Swiss Institute, 18 Wooster Street, Manhattan; 212-925-2035, [swissinstitute.net](http://swissinstitute.net).

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