

Barbara Rossi: Poor Traits



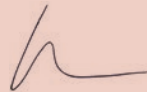
September 16, 2015–January 3, 2016

FOREWORD

The New Museum is pleased to present “Barbara Rossi: Poor Traits,” a selection of Rossi’s enigmatic graphite and colored pencil drawings from the late 1960s and meticulously rendered reverse paintings on Plexiglas from the early 1970s. The exhibition marks Rossi’s first museum show in New York as well as the most significant presentation of her work since the early 1990s.

I would like to thank Natalie Bell, Assistant Curator, for guiding this project and working closely with Barbara Rossi. Massimiliano Gioni, Artistic Director, supported the exhibition throughout, as did Sam Rauch, Director of Exhibitions Management, Walsh Hansen, Chief Preparator, Kelsey Womack, Exhibitions Associate, and Derya Kovey, Associate Registrar. I am grateful to the entire Museum staff and, in particular, Karen Wong, Deputy Director, Regan Grusy, Associate Director and Director of

Institutional Advancement, Frances Malcolm, Editor and Publications Coordinator, Olivia Casa, Associate Editor, and Nicole Adsit, Design and Production Manager. I would also like to extend my thanks to John Corbett, Jim Dempsey, and Benjamin Chaffee at Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, for their coordination; to Karen Lennox, for her indispensable aid in locating Rossi’s early paintings; and to the institutional and private lenders for allowing us to bring these works together for the first time in over twenty-five years. I am also grateful to Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, Charles and Kathleen Harper, Laura Skoler, Michael J. Robertson and Christopher A. Slapak, and an anonymous donor, whose support, along with the generosity of the Producers Council, has made this exhibition possible. Above all, I would like to thank the artist for her gracious collaboration and for these delirious innovations that compel our intense observation.



Lisa Phillips
Toby Devan Lewis Director

INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA ROSSI

by Natalie Bell

Natalie Bell: I wanted to start by asking you how you came to making art. The drawings we’re showing as part of this exhibition are early works of yours, which are somewhat unconventional pseudo-portraits. I’m wondering if you could talk about how you first began making these in the late ’60s?

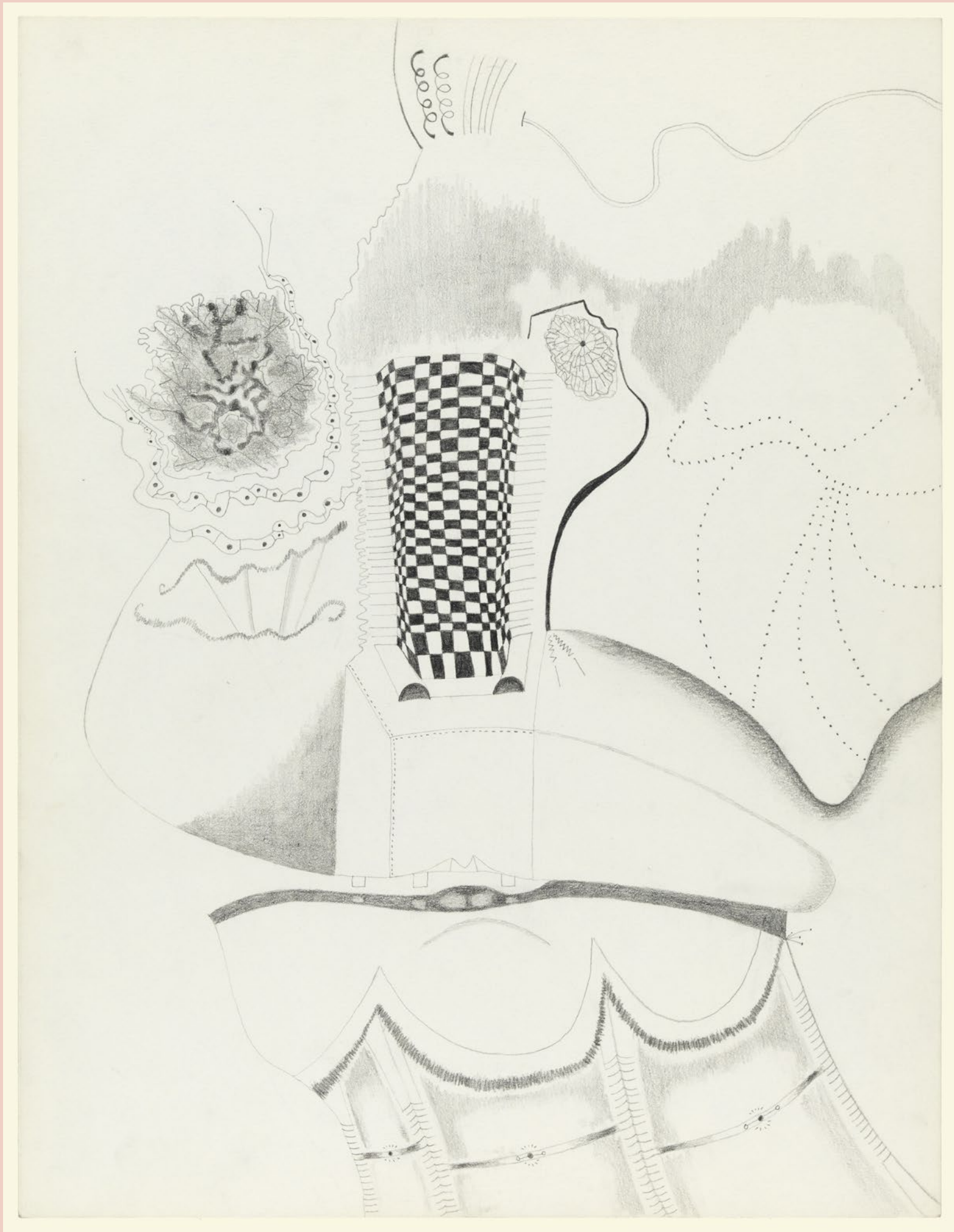
Barbara Rossi: Well, I knew I could draw realistically, but I did not want to use realism to make my art. And I also did not find Abstract Expressionism terribly interesting. So around this time, I developed a self-taught way of drawing without a predetermined end. I would start in the middle of the page and make a drawing that was relatively small, and I gave myself the rule of not erasing anything or making any changes, and when I was satisfied with the form at the center, I would begin attaching something that was different from what was drawn first. I never knew ahead of time what would become of these forms, which is why I started calling them “magic drawings.”

NB: Did you share them with anyone?

BR: Well, I was living in a religious community then, but I did not show my drawings to anyone, probably because I did not know what to make of them. I submitted one to an annual juried exhibition called “Chicago and Vicinity” at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1968, and happily for me, it was accepted.

NB: I know that in 1966 and 1967 the Hairy Who had very popular shows at the Hyde Park Art Center, and I’m wondering when you first met this group or became aware of their works?

BR: In the “Chicago and Vicinity” show my piece was hung between Suellen Rocca, who was in the Hairy Who, and Ray Yoshida. And Gladys Nilsson [also of the Hairy Who] was one person away from Ray. And I looked at their works and thought to myself, I’d like to know these people [laughs]! But I didn’t then. I tried to see the last Hairy Who exhibition [in 1968], but because I didn’t drive at the time, I asked the mother of one of my students to take me. Unfortunately, no one showed up to open the Art Center that day, so I could only peer through the windows.





Chicago Antigua—Artful Codgers: Sarah Canright, Edward Flood, Ed Paschke, Suellen Rocca, Barbara Rossi, Karl Wirsum, 1971. Poster for the group exhibition “Chicago Antigua,” the Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago. Photo: Don Bulucos, 1971. Image: © 2015 The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago

NB: I imagine that these friendships developed when you enrolled in the MFA program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago?

BR: Some, yes. When I started, [Philip] Hanson had just finished, but Christina [Ramberg] and Roger [Brown] were there, and so we got to know one another. Karl [Wirsum] was no longer in school but was part of this group. I remember an early gathering at Karl’s house, and I noticed that he had a very peculiar tin toy with a big mouth. I was so surprised to see this because I had found exactly the same object and hung it in my room. It was a confirmation for me that I was connecting with the right people [laughs]!

NB: And some of them you showed with a year later in “Marriage Chicago Style.” What did “Marriage Chicago Style” mean, as an exhibition title?

BR: Yes, the artists in that show were Sarah [Canright] and Ed Flood, [Ed] Paschke and Suellen, and Karl and myself, and we all dressed up as brides and grooms. The title was meant to suggest that our marriages were on thin ice because we were mixing artists that had been in other groups like the Hairy Who and the Nonplussed Some—plus myself who hadn’t been in any as yet. The women bought fancy white gowns at the Salvation Army and donned first-communion veils and wore ice skates along with the grooms. We were given a shower before the opening and had a wedding cake and the punch that was always served at the Hyde Park Art Center! And the opening was announced as a marriage in one of the daily papers, so many people came expecting a real wedding ceremony!

NB: And the “Chicago Antigua” show was one year later?

BR: Yes, that was to celebrate our maturity as artists! It was the same group, this time dressed up like old people with wigs or white powder in our hair, a lot of makeup, and old fashioned clothes [laughs]. We posted invented proverbs to imitate the way old people like to tease by answering questions with proverbs. We allowed a bit of malapropism and spoonerism in the proverbs, like “A crone is as strong as her leakest wink,” and hung them below the art as if they were titles.

NB: There’s a lot of wordplay and alliteration in your titles too—it’s not far from a Dadaist or Duchampian sensibility.

BR: Oh yes, there’s a connection with humor and wordplay. I think of myself and many in this group as being on the same plane when it comes to language.

NB: And yet a lot of historians and critics have talked about multiple generations of Chicago artists sharing a Surrealist sensibility. Was Surrealism an influence for you personally or in your formal art education?

BR: I was personally attracted to Surrealism in high school and had the chance of seeing a number of shows of work by [René] Magritte and Max Ernst at the Art Institute. Later on, in grad school, I was introduced to the work of James Ensor, and I’ve loved everything that he did—and I especially appreciate that he did not have just one subject. In a class called “History of Fantastic and Eccentric Art,” taught by Ed Plunkett, I had my first view of artists like August Natterer and Adolf Wölfli. I still have a paperback from that class called *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* by Ernst Kris, and couple of drawings in that book really got into my head and gave me some hope that I, too, could make weird drawings!

NB: And you visited the Prinzhorn Collection¹ and a number of other collections in Europe in the mid-'70s when you were on a residency, right?

BR: Yes. Christina, Phil, Roger, and I all had a residency in Eisenstadt at the invitation of Alfred Schmeller. And I thought, if we're going all the way to Austria, we ought to get more out of the trip, so I persuaded my friends of this and made appointments for us to see several collections.

NB: What impressed you during these visits?

BR: The intensity of the work was phenomenal. At [Jean] Dubuffet's collection in Paris, we were able to go through a stack of blue ink drawings by Laure Pigeon and were blown away. This artist, who did not claim to be an artist, was interested in spiritualism and produced these incredible mediumistic works with ambiguous organic forms. At the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg we were allowed to browse many drawers; I remember a small but tantalizing drawing of a totally stippled male figure with an oversize head dominating a setting brimming with various plants, numbers, swans, ships, and more; it reminded me of medieval prints of wild men who lived in forests. Close to Bern, we visited the Waldau Clinic, where Wölfli spent his adult life, and saw his works as well as those of other patients. We also had the honor of meeting [Wölfli scholar] Elka Spoerri in her home, where she showed us fold-out drawings by Wölfli, which were still in book format. Both his extraordinary artistry and the sheer volume of work were staggering, and we were just in awe of the genius of this person. His work was entirely his own and made such an impression on us that when we got back to Chicago, I went to Stephen Prokopoff, who was head of the MCA [the Museum of Contemporary Art], and urged him to bring these collections to Chicago because I knew practically every artist would be interested in them—and he *succeeded* in bringing Wölfli in 1978 and, somewhat later, the Prinzhorn Collection.

NB: I know that Dubuffet came to Chicago in 1951 and gave a lecture [entitled "Anticultural Positions"] that resonated with many artists, and that several professors at the School of the Art Institute fostered a similar attitude, encouraging students to look at nonacademic traditions like self-taught, tribal, and folk art, and non-Western art.

BR: Yes, Whitney [Halstead] and Ray were certainly the teachers who conveyed how important it was to



have more than one idea of art. Whitney would show all kinds of slides in class, many of which he made himself, and he let us know what we were looking at, but he never told us what to think. You know, at that time, we often got together at someone's house to share slides and just look at images together. We also took many day trips together to see exhibitions and visionary environments like the Dickeyville Grotto in Wisconsin.

NB: Who else did you share slides with?

BR: Roger, Ray, Whitney, Karl, Christina, and Phil... Gladys and Jim [Nutt] were in California; they came back to Chicago later.

NB: So this was early on then?

BR: In the early '70s, yes. Lots of conversations and exchanges. That whole period was just magic time.

NB: I suppose that's another way to understand the Chicago Imagists—as constant collectors of images.

¹Psychiatrist and art historian Hans Prinzhorn (1886–1933) developed the art program at the University of Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic and in the course of his career collected over 5,000 works made by hundreds of patients. Prinzhorn published *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* in 1922, through which he sought to appraise his patients' drawings on their own aesthetic merits and "as free of prejudice as possible." Prinzhorn's book influenced Dubuffet's idea of *art brut*—art made outside of social and cultural norms.

BR: Yes, that is absolutely true.

NB: In the 1980s, you spent the better part of the decade collecting images of vernacular painting traditions in India and eventually published a book on the subject,² but I imagine you were exposed to South-Asian art much earlier.

BR: Yes, in grad school I got this book—*Indian Miniatures* by Mario Bussagli—which inspired a couple of different works: *Eye Deal* (1974) relates to a Mughal painting of the Emperor Jahangir holding up a portrait of his father Akbar, and *Rose Rock* (1972) came out of the narrative of Krishna lifting up a mountain to protect his friends from a hurricane. But the funny thing in both cases was that I didn't start out trying to recreate these images but realized that, in the course of working, I was referring to them.

NB: What was it that attracted you to miniature painting?

BR: Well, I really appreciated the treatment of space, which is something I admire in Sienese paintings from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as well as the way color is used and the exquisite application of paint. I was also interested in narrative and how these images have historical or spiritual functions. I once read an exhibition review in which the critic described Indian miniature painting as a special format that makes us aware of *how much* there is in the scene you are looking at—so much that it requires you to study the *entire* picture very slowly.

NB: A kind of saturation?

BR: Well, it's a multiplicity. It's a special kind of image that lets us know how much there is in the world. The abundance of realities is mind-blowing!

NB: The forms from Indian paintings seem to seep into your Plexiglas paintings, but some are also informed by Catholic themes.

BR: They come together! In many works, religion is there, and I'm not unhappy about that. I try to make it more than just one thing—which is maybe more evident in the works that developed from my exposure to image traditions in India and devotional pictures generally.

NB: I know that you spent some time in a religious community as a Catholic nun. Was religion or spirituality a presence in your life from a young age?

BR: When I was in grade school, I remember being introduced to the Baltimore Catechism, which started with questions about God, and from that point I knew I wanted to know what God *really* was. I also had aunts who had some connection to theosophy, and I remember one Christmas my Aunt Laura was reciting poems of the American Transcendentalists as we were drying dishes. We weren't singing "Jingle Bells" [laughs]! Whether it was their influence or something else, I always thought it was a great way of being Catholic *and more*.

NB: Going back for a moment, in the 1960s and '70s, a lot of women artists were embracing craft as part of feminism. And while I know it wasn't a motivation for you personally, I wonder what effect, if any, the feminist movement had on your life and work.

BR: Well, I knew that I had to be twice as good as a man. That was very clear from the popular culture of the time. And I did use mostly satin, sequins, feathers, and human hair as well as machine sewing in making and embellishing some of my prints, comforters, and paintings. I used these materials in part because I was inspired by Ensor's printing on satin, and in part because I had the skills—I had grown up sewing.

NB: Was there some camaraderie among the women artists at the time?

BR: Well, not much, because there were very few of us. We were six women in a class of forty-one, and there was only one other woman full-time in painting, and I didn't see too much of her. Christina was not full-time so she wasn't around on a regular basis. Fortunately for the classes that followed mine, a more balanced student body and faculty emerged.



Krishna Holds Up Mount Govardhan to Shelter the Villagers of Braj, folio from the *Harivamsa*, ca. 1590–95. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 11 3/8 x 7 7/8 in (28.9 x 20 cm). Collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Purchase, Edward C. Moore Jr. Gift, 1928 (28.63.1). Image: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

²Rossi authored *From the Ocean of Painting: India's Popular Paintings, 1589 to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 1998) and curated the related exhibition at the University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City; the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, the University of Chicago; and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California.



Barbara Rossi with a scarecrow, 1974. Courtesy Roger Brown Study Collection, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Photo: Roger Brown

NB: But at the same time you were already part of a strong community of women—which in your case happened to be a religious one. Do you think that had an effect on how you perceived the feminist movement?

BR: It's true—and yes, in a way it was already present. I had a community, but on the other hand, women in Chicago were recognized and respected as artists even before the feminist movement. And that was true of Evelyn [Statsinger] and Miyoko [Ito]. Chicago was different from New York or other places in this regard.

NB: What types of works of art have been important to you?

BR: I have traveled to see many kinds of art over the years—early American paintings, quilts, Mexican folk *retablos*, Mexican masks, Hopi Kachina dolls, Eskimo drawings, Northwest Coast Indian carvings and textiles, and paintings and drawings by prisoners. I have also admired medieval artwork and older landscape paintings that have unusual ways of depicting space.

NB: And I know you've always collected images through photography.

BR: Oh, yes. I would go around to different neighborhoods in Chicago in the '70s and photograph as much

as I could, whatever I found interesting, especially store windows with strange window displays. And the other favorite was handmade signs, which were incredible. I of course have a huge number of photographs from India, of similar things—handmade signs and shop windows.

NB: Vernacular sources like hand-painted signs were a shared reference for a number of Imagist artists, just as many Pop artists looked to commercial design, though they typically preferred the sleek and polished to the handcrafted...

BR: Not for me! I would rather see the hand in the craft.

NB: Well, a lot of art historians have written about the importance of craft for Chicago artists. H.C. Westermann, in particular, is an artist who is often regarded as influential. Were you familiar with Westermann's work?

BR: I was indeed. There were very few galleries in Chicago in the early '70s, and only one when I was in grad school that showed work that was important, at least to me and other artists. That was Frumkin [Allan Frumkin Gallery]. He showed Westermann and artists like Saul Steinberg and Peter Saul, who was at the time very vocal against the war in Vietnam. The shows there were always amazing.

NB: Saul Steinberg and Peter Saul are artists who have a strong interest in the figure, so I can see how their shows would appeal to many of the artists in Chicago.

BR: Yes, but of these artists, Westermann was the most important to me. Although his work was very different from mine, I appreciated the fact that the work was entirely his. It's very hard to think of many other people that made work that was only theirs. And all of it was *perfectly* made. I also remember going to New York and seeing a wonderful Saul Steinberg show at the Whitney, and comparing Steinberg's work to work by Jasper Johns on another floor. I came out of the museum and I remember saying to myself, Steinberg does it better, it's more efficient; he's not patting himself on the back. It was striking to feel the contrast; I knew where my heart was.

Barbara Rossi was born in 1940 in Chicago, Illinois, where she lives and works. Since 1971, she has taught painting and drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she also received her MFA. Rossi has exhibited internationally, and her works are in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago; the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Wisconsin; the Milwaukee Museum of Contemporary Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, the University of Chicago; and the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, DC.

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IMAGE CAPTIONS

Cover: Barbara Rossi, *Rose Rock*, 1972. Acrylic
on Plexiglas panel and frame, 27 3/4 x 23 3/4 in
(70.5 x 60.3 cm). Courtesy the artist and Corbett
vs. Dempsey, Chicago

Page 2:
Barbara Rossi, *Untitled*, 1967. Graphite on paper,
13 x 10 in (33 x 25.4 cm). Courtesy the artist and
Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

Page 4:
Barbara Rossi, *3-D Do*, 1973. Acrylic on Plexiglas
panel and frame with metallic fabric and human
hair on archival board, 39 1/4 x 29 1/4 in (99.7 x
74.3 cm). Collection the Museum of Contemporary
Art Chicago. Photo: Nathan Keay. Image: © Museum
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