

Sol Kjøk's Intertwined Figures by Donald Kuspit

Sol Kjøk's figures—male and female nudes—are exquisitely drawn, often down to the least detail of their muscular flesh and expressive faces, indicating that she is not only a master draftsman but a student of the human condition. The figures—generally with a greenish or bluish cast—seem irradiated from within, giving them an uncanny glow. Sometimes they are imbued with the whiteness of the paper, emerging from it to breathe life into its flatness. Sometimes they seem quickly sketched, their contours seemingly improvised. More often the contours are emphatically given, suggesting a linear intensity verging on pure abstraction.

Sometimes the figures have flaming red hair, suggesting not only sexual passion but élan vital—the force that creates the womb-like ball of red figures held in one hand by a rather grim looking gray man. Something similar appears in the womb-like space between the embracing figures—they seem woven together—in another drawing. Kjøk's red—sometimes whole figures are delicately drawn in red, making them stand out from the white paper even as their transparency turns it into indwelling light—adds an iconoclastic emotional intensity to figures that, for all their tempestuous togetherness, have a certain classical quality. However often they may be in motion, circling in the empty sky like some strange planet, they have the noble self-containment—indeed, self-possession and purposive concentration—of the figures in Pallaiuolo's *Battle of Naked Men*, c. 1465, as their well articulated, seemingly ageless physiques suggest. They are always in clear “classical” focus, suggesting their traditionalist character, however absurdly placed in empty space—like the tower of entangled figures in Klimt's *Death and Life*, 1909–11 (many of Kjøk's figures also have their eyes ambiguously closed, suggesting a correlation of death and ecstasy, and have a similar primal, existential aura)—suggesting their modernist “age of anxiety” character.

Kjøk has a strong sense of the physical presence of the body, but once one get over the shock of physical recognition triggered by her figures—and their often shaven heads—one realizes that her works are reflective statements about the human condition. It is burdensome, as the two Atlas-like nudes—a male and female couple—holding up an enormous globe of figures suggests. Human beings need the tender loving—not simply sexual—relationship evident in the drawing of a seemingly lesbian couple, the one female holding, indeed, cradling the other, and keeping her from falling in the void below them. The mothering figure has a sure footing in the void, the embraced figure is full of fear, but the point of the picture is their intimacy and closeness.

Kjøk repeatedly touches on the theme of relational closeness, but it cannot be taken for granted. The point is made exquisitely clear in one poignant drawing, where we see an isolated male figure, squatting on a balloon of hallucinatory figures, almost touching, with one extended finger, the finger of a hand reaching out of the balloon of inchoate figures above him. They relate, but don't connect: the fingers are in the same space, but the figures remain in separate spaces, and as such irreconcilable with each other: the bridge of fingers between them is broken, suggesting the unfathomable distance between them.

In another drawing several figures push—force—other figures into a communal mass, but it is not clear that they will hold together, for the massive ball of figures seems to unravel even as it is being formed. The labyrinthine balls of anonymous figures are densely packed, but they seem on the verge of falling apart and collapsing into a meaningless heap of bodies. In another drawing isolated female figures hang on for dear life, precariously suspended from globular balloons of figures by somewhat thin ropes. Perhaps they want to join the group inside the balloon, but they're outside it—“hangers on” or outcasts in the emptiness.

All of Kjøk's figures are individualized, however much they have a family resemblance, suggesting that the conflict—the inner drama—of the ostensibly erotic works has to do with the tension between the individual and the group. Clearly orgiastic sex is not the glue that holds the world together for Kjøk, however often it holds individuals together—temporarily.

Centrifugal disintegration, as well as centripetal integration is evident in Kjøk's intertwined figures, with disintegration usually signaled by a sort of ingrained melancholy, not to say morbid introspection or introversion. It is also conveyed more insidiously by the curiously impersonal, even ritualistic character of their “romantic” intimacy. Integration is conveyed by their ecstatic—but also anxious—mingling and merging in the cocoon-like globes. They may circle together, forming a chain of common emotional being, as they do in one work, but the figures that forms the links in the chain seem too self-absorbed—lost in their own body egos—to empathically bond with one another. It is this contradiction that gives Kjøk's bodies an ironic edge that trumps their nakedness: they may seem shameless, but their relational predicament suggests they are not exactly in paradise.

