

Late Nudes, 1985–1995

As it did for Picasso, the nude came back to centre stage in Appel's late work, starting with larger-than-life-sized nude drawings from life models in the mid-1980s. His renewed interest was perhaps initiated by a series of works from 1984, for which Appel overworked erotic illustrations from a taboo-busting 1969 publication for sex education – another example of the found object (or subject) as a trigger for a new artistic practice (p. 162). A year later, he began drawing nudes from life models again, only now they were larger than life. He ordered a stock of large-format paper rolls and had a huge desk built in his New York studio. One of the drawings included in the Berlin exhibition depicts a couple in the act of love, their position perhaps a reference to this series of reworkings of erotic illustrations (pp. 174/175). The other drawings show reclining or upright individual figures, as do most works of this spectacular series, on which Appel worked throughout the second half of the 1980s. The Albertina in Vienna, which dedicated an exhibition to the series in 2007, owns an extensive selection of them.

Throughout Appel's artistic career, drawing has been the field of experimentation par excellence. Drawing is easier and faster than oil painting and somehow less definitive. These larger-than-life drawings, however, were demanding and required an astonishing mastery of drawing technique. Accordingly, and also in view of their formats, they can be understood as artistic statements. Appel was in his mid-sixties at the time, and with these drawings he inaugurated his late work, where the nude was to play a dominant thematic role. It soon resulted in equally monumental experiments in other media – initially as painted diptychs in which bodies merge with the landscape (pp. 32/33), then in the recently rediscovered object paintings constructed with oversized Polaroids of the late 1980s (p. 131), and finally in the black-and-white, pastose nude paintings on a smoothly neutral ground from the turn of the decade, some of which were shown in the London exhibition (pp. 36/37 and 39).

These oversized nude drawings were not the main theme of Galerie Max Hetzler's initial Berlin exhibition; it featured five of them from 1985 and 1987. Rather, the show focused on 14 pictures from 1994 and 1995 (pp. 177–207). These are in a



smaller format, painted in oil, mostly portraying male nudes with their genitals worked out ostentatiously. Their style seems rather atypical for Appel: the shrill, non-naturalistic colours and the nervous brushstrokes with which these pictures are constructed, in connection with the theme of the nude, possibly in the great outdoors, are most reminiscent of German expressionism, from which Appel – while sometimes classified as an expressionist – rather stayed away.

Again and again, into old age, Karel Appel sought to experiment with the unknown – an unknown that could also be an unaccustomed style – in order to prevent any slippage into routine, into automatisms, and this pursuit often led to surprising results, as in these peculiar nudes from the mid-1990s.

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