

M + B

ARTFORUM

Josh Mannis

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By Travis Diehl

The tightly wound formalism of “Sexus,” Josh Mannis’s recent solo show at Thomas Solomon Gallery, might at first have seemed to run counter to his cutely pornographic subjects—grinning figures who stroke and fondle one another in parks and on floors. These scenes fill ten nearly square ink-on-paper drawings—eight in black, two in red—that were hung evenly on the gallery’s three white walls. But this buttoned-down hang and Mannis’s conventional medium were both support and stimulation for the works’ lecherous charge. Like Fernando Botero’s paintings of voluminous couples picnicking or Édouard Manet’s 1863 *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, the drawings here contribute to an art-historical tradition in which portraits of bourgeois meals serve as pretexts for pushing both moral and stylistic good taste. In *A Toast!* (all works 2014), a couple sips wine on a blanket, their backs turned to two uniformed officers. Oblivious to—or perhaps egged on by—the cops’ presence, the man slides a finger into his partner’s panties. The tension between the clothed and exposed bodies, their glances and positions, and what is seen and hidden here intensifies the crude quality of the rendering. An almost obscene density of marks resolves into risqué social compositions—entwined twosomes or threesomes, with still others watching. While voyeurism is explicitly represented in only some drawings—in the prying eyes of soldiers, police, or analysts—an eerie, lurking quality remains throughout. Each orgy is framed in whitewashed wood, a secret in plain sight.

Other situations are stranger still. *Tomorrow’s Story 2* shows another picnicker, a boy who swings an ax at an anthropomorphized, surprised, gaping tree while his companion hides behind a camera. In *What About This Love?*, a midcentury-styled couple is pictured slinking through a brick alley and buying an ice cream cone from a vendor dressed as a cop. He shines his flashlight in the couple’s direction: As the man offers his date a



Josh Mannis, *What About This Love?*, 2014
ink on paper, 25 × 22 1/2"

cone, her hand helps his erection slip through his seersucker trousers. The flashlight, penis, and cone are presented here as a trinity of forms; the logic of composition shapes this encounter. Indeed, Mannis’s characters always seem to be playing out fantasies, brazenly engaged in illicit acts as if no one was around to look. Formally, too, the drawings approach the queasy reality of dreams or drugs. Daylight is rendered in black ink, squirming patterns swarm around the pictured figures, and hatch marks effect sinews and exposed muscle. The dress an analyst wears in *The Technique Is the Technology* has the same filleted quality as a naked man’s chest, and in *Boyfriend and Girlfriend*, the squiggly gingham of a beach blanket bleeds into the texture of a woman’s hair. Mannis’s figures always seem on the verge of dissolving into abstract tangles of marks.

Time periods crossbreed in “Sexus,” too: flapper haircuts and 1950s-style horn-rimmed glasses; psychoanalysis-type notepads and iPhones. The show’s title, of course, nods to Henry Miller’s 1949 novel of the same name, an account of the author’s licentious youth in 1920s Brooklyn. This underlying literary reference seems to ground the drawings’ otherwise anachronistic elements in the debauchery of Miller’s modernist bohemia. Like Miller, the artist has a yen for an art so strange that what it might liberate in a viewer has the potential to seep into life—as though these spermy marks and sated expressions could penetrate even the most traditional social situations. Yet, like the squirrely patterns of psychedelia, Mannis’s drawings throb with anxiety—the thrill and threat of voyeurism or the paranoid fantasies of the outcast. “Sexus” reifies the fear that ultimate freedom might not simply be the enlightened flouting of social norms, but the pervy pleasure of the public masturbator.