



John Graham: *Marya (Donna Ferita, Pensive Lady)*, 1944; oil on canvas, 48 inches square.

# At Cross Purposes

*As initially entranced by Picasso's work as he was later dismissive of it, John Graham went on to pursue his own, ever more esoteric vision—both of painting and of the women who were his primary subject.*

**BY RICHARD KALINA**

The Allan Stone Gallery's recent show of paintings and drawings by John Graham (1886-1961)—a mini-retrospective, really—gave us a rare opportunity to take a detailed look at one of the most interesting American artists of his time. John Graham is scarcely a household name, but among artists his fans are legion. Handsome, nattily dressed, urbane, intelligent and unusually appealing to women, Graham, in addition to being an extraordinary artist, was a confabulator of the first order. The past is for all of us a malleable substance, but Graham was especially prone to revising his personal history to suit the moment or the listener, and if an official document needed forging, it rarely failed to appear. Born in 1886 (or 1887 or 1881) in the Ukraine (or Poland), to the minor gentry (not the nobility, as he repeatedly suggested), Graham started out life as Ivan Dombrowski (or Dombrovsky or Dabrowsky), went to law school and was in all likelihood not a judge (as he liked to claim). In 1915 he joined the Russian cavalry, possibly served in the Czar's foot guard and fought on the side of the anti-Communist Whites (although later he habitually and enthusiastically participated in Communist May Day parades in Manhattan).

He arrived in New York in 1920 and began his study of art. Three years later he changed his name to John Graham and over the next decade or so became a key figure in the New York art world. Graham seemed to know everybody who mattered or who would one day matter. He was an artist, theorist (author of the much talked about but perpetually out-of-print *System and Dialectics of Art*), connoisseur, dealer (and wheeler-dealer), as well as a friend, facilitator and inspiration to many of the younger artists associated with Abstract Expressionism—Gorky, Pollock, de Kooning and David Smith chief among them. Charming but difficult, Graham was virtually impossible to pin down: he was the kind of person who could happily participate in the exhibitions of the Ten Whitney Dissenters, supporting their boycott of the Third Whitney Biennial, in 1936, yet still have his work shown at that very Biennial, claiming, in all innocence, that he had no idea of how his painting had found its way there.

Like his good friend (and fellow self-inventor) Arshile Gorky, Graham was initially and powerfully attracted to the work of Picasso, and similarly ended up rejecting it—more vehemently than Gorky. The Allan Stone show put a number of the Cubist and Picasso-influenced paintings of the '30s and early '40s on display, along with the

New York, 1940, oil on canvas,  
21 1/8 by 28 1/8 inches.



Sum Qui Sum (I Am That I Am), ca. 1952, ballpoint pen and pencil on buff vellum, 23 1/2 by 18 7/8 inches.

later and better-known figurative works. Small-scaled, crusty and often overworked, the early paintings have about them an amiable if not particularly distinguished air. An untitled oil from 1930 gives us a tipped-up table and some overlapping, semitransparent patterned planes that could possibly be read as still-life items. The ensemble is rendered in shades of pale gray, tan and pink. *New York* (1940) is closer to Juan Gris than to Picasso and is the better for it. While similar to the earlier untitled picture in subtlety of coloration, it has considerably more tonal variation, and with its vase, pitcher, bunch of grapes and folded newspaper, possesses more readily identifiable subject matter. Graham did not confine himself, in his Cubist work, to quiet hues and simple compositions. Indeed, it is not surprising that someone greatly influenced by the Picasso of the '30s would try out aggressive color and complex patterning. Works like *Queen of Hearts (Dame of Elche)*, 1940, and *Untitled Abstract* (1939), with their sharp chromatic contrasts, quickly brushed linear elements and cubo-surrealist air, seem to be rather perfunctory exercises in avant-garde timeliness—interesting more historically than esthetically.

If Graham had remained loyal to his Cubist roots, his work, not well known to the general public even now, would probably exist as a footnote to the larger enterprise of mid-century American art. But Graham headed off in

**In Graham's most famous painting, *Two Sisters*, the contours accurately limn the figures but also take on an abstract order of their own.**

another direction. Rather than going down the Abstract-Expressionist path, as he might very well have done, considering his friendships with the leading members of the group, he moved toward a psychologically and historically charged figuration that was undeniably his own. His Cubist paintings, even the more highly colored ones, might have had an appealing modesty, but when he moved into figuration, his commanding personality took over.

The show at Allan Stone was titled "Sum Qui Sum" (after a 1952 drawing of the artist on a rearing horse, surrounded by mystical symbols) and refers to the name God claims for himself in the Old Testament—"I am that I am." This is scarcely self-effacing, and the exhibition features a number of self-portraits that show the artist in the heroic mode (*Self Portrait as a Warrior [Tablier de Sapeur]*, ca. 1957), the martyred mode (*Roses and Thorns*, 1942) or the mystic mode (*Self Portrait as Laureate*, 1958). Sometimes, if his ego

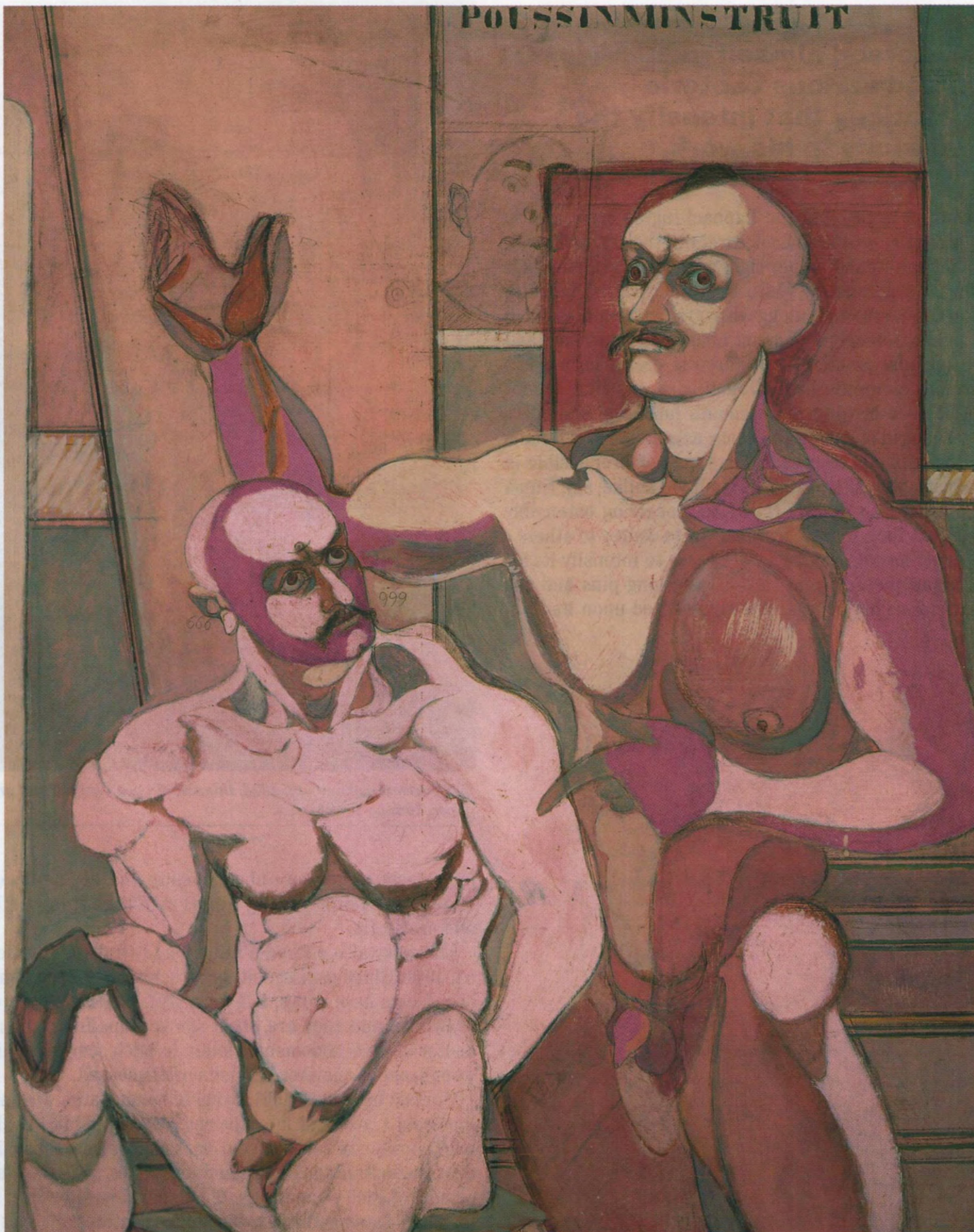
was operating at peak efficiency, he managed to hit all three at once, as in *Apotheosis* (1955-57), with its muscular, sword-wielding figure festooned with esoteric symbols and pierced in the right side by an arrow dripping blood. Perhaps the most interesting of the self-portraits, though, is *Poussin M'instruit* (Poussin instructs me), 1944. In this rather large-scaled oil Graham gives us two nude, well-built, bald and mustached male figures, one a bit larger than the other, but both undeniably the same man. The smaller one is sitting and the larger, standing figure raises his right hand and points to the seated figure with his left. The figures are highly articulated anatomically—over-articulated, really—with the musculature defined with classical academic precision. The painting is rhetorical and exaggerated, and its color—the full range of pinks—is wonderfully grating. Among his contemporaries, only de Kooning could pull off pink, a notoriously difficult color, with as much flair.

As good as the self-portraits are, Graham's reputation rests on his paintings and drawings of women, of whom he was obviously fond. He married four times and had numerous affairs. A 12-year relationship, beginning in 1943, with Marianne Strate-Felber, the mother of the noted art dealer Ileana Sonnabend and thus the mother-in-law of the even more influential dealer Leo Castelli, left him with a trust fund and a house in Southampton. Graham was highly distressed by Marianne's death in 1955, but managed to recover, romancing Picasso's lover, Françoise Gilot, and engaging in a series of affairs with very young women, including the 22-year-old Isabelle Colin du Fresne, who was to become the Warhol superstar Ultraviolet.

Graham's most famous painting is *Two Sisters (Les Mamelles d'outres-mer)*, 1944, now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. The work depicts two striking women seated side by side. The woman on the left holds a dove on her lap and wears a red, archaic-looking dress that exposes her breasts and her midriff. The woman on the right has a low-cut black dress that shows off her shoulders. Her right arm is covered by what appears to be a turquoise shawl, and her left arm lies gracefully on her lap. Both women's long necks are circled with impressive chokers, and their eyes—their most striking features—are unmistakably crossed. The painting's background, a room interior, is divided geometrically. Its main color is a vibrant turquoise, which highlights the bold pinks of the flesh. As with de Kooning's figure paintings of the '40s, the lines and contours both accurately and elegantly limn the figures, but also detach themselves from representation to take on

*Two Sisters (Les Mamelles d'outres-mer)*, 1944, oil, enamel, pencil, charcoal and casein on composition board, 47<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> by 48 inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York. © MOMA/SCALA/Art Resource, New York.





Poussin M'instruit, 1944, oil on masonite, 60 by 48 inches.

an abstract order of their own. Graham varies his surface and technique, moving between the sketchy and open and the fully filled-in and smooth. The range of materials that the painting employs—oil, enamel, pencil, charcoal and casein—reflects its formal complexity. While Graham might avoid the even, licked look of academic art in favor of a more modern, discontinuous and irregular surface, his virtuoso draftsmanship is still unabashedly on display in this painting and in other works like it. In them Graham deliberately evokes Ingres and Raphael, just as Paolo Uccello serves as an inspiration for a number of works with equestrian themes and clear perspectival

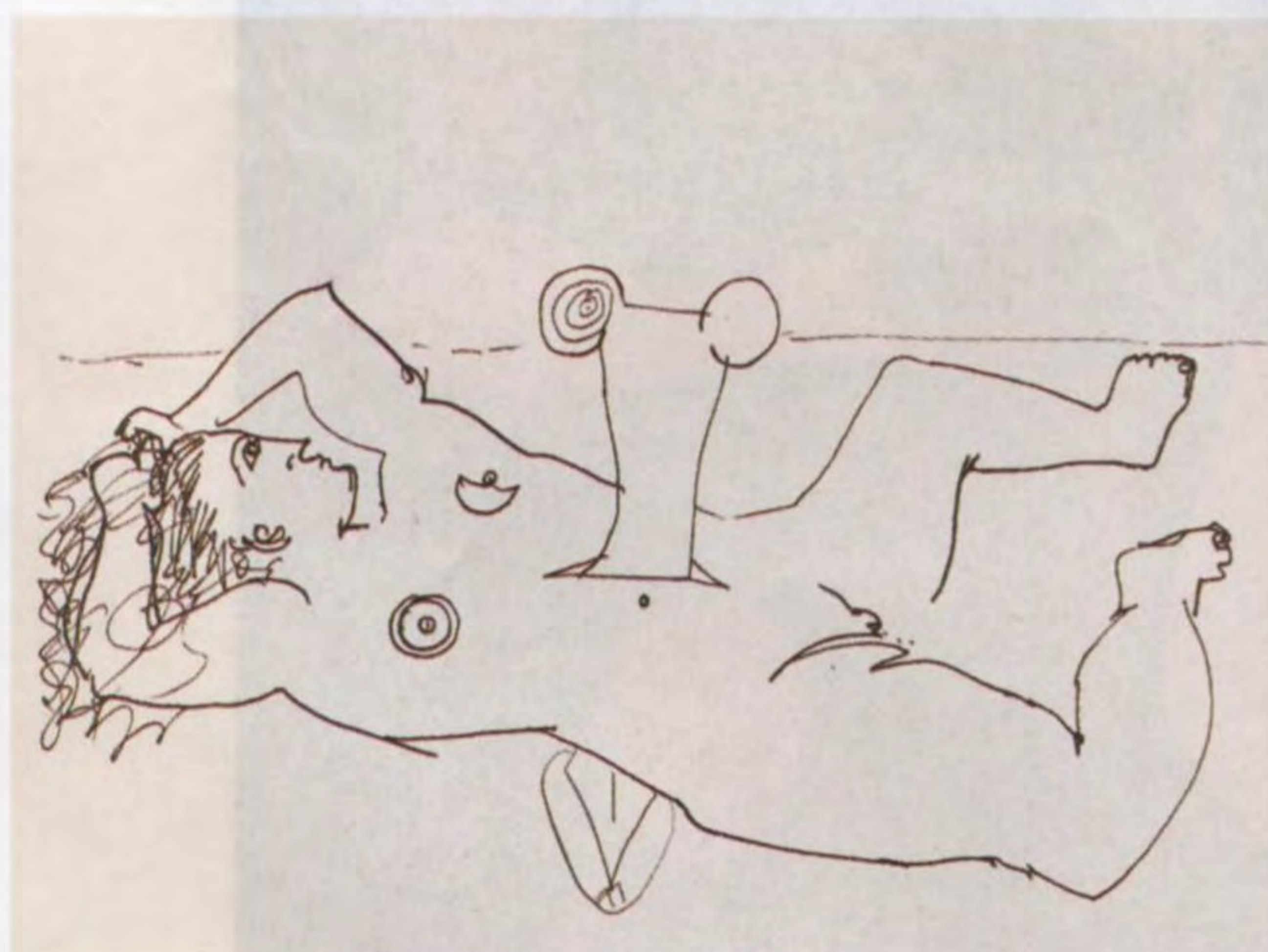
structuring, such as *Horse* (ca. 1940) and the powerful 1952 drawing *L'eagle noir se transforme en lion rouge*.

**E**ven though *Two Sisters* offers considerable formal and art-historically referential pleasures, its biggest impact (at least initially) comes from its psychological charge. It is mysterious, erotic, compelling and very odd. The strangeness quotient in Graham's work seems to have increased over time. *Marya* (*Donna Ferita*, *Pensive Lady*) and *Celia* (both 1944, the year of *Two Sisters*) are fairly straightforward portraits, although the eyes in both are crossed.

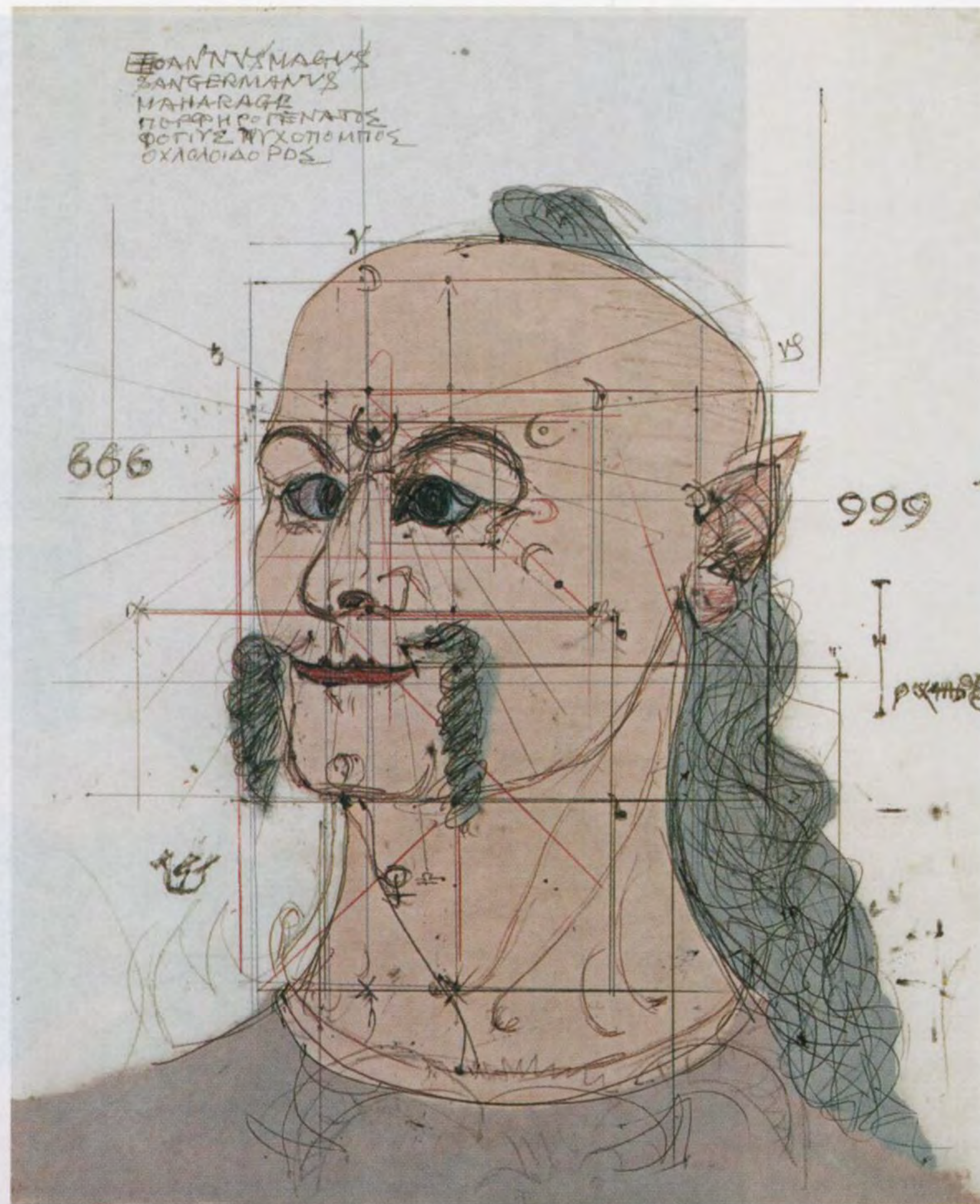
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They feature beautiful drawing in the Raphael-Ingres mode, subtle color and lovingly applied surfaces. Look carefully, though, at *Marya*, and you can see a fresh wound on her right wrist. Wounds, piercings and even blindness (suggested by white irises and pupils) begin to occur regularly in Graham's work, along with mystical accoutrements and flourishes. Graham deeply immersed himself in mysticism and various esoteric spiritual practices, and those interests surfaced in his art. The arcane elements he includes in works like *Venere Lucifera* (ca. 1951)—a drawing of a woman's head and shoulders with a superimposed grid of geometric forms, astronomical references, numbers, letters and odd ideograms—are not comprehensible in any kind of systematic way, at least to me. Graham, unlike, say, Hilma af Klint, was not part of a group of initiates receiving ostensibly secret knowledge that they, in turn, were meant to convey to others.

The mystical trappings of Graham's work serve to intensify its air of eccentricity, as do the cuts and slashes, the long pins and the little swords that adorn his figures. The cuts visited upon his sub-



Above, top and bottom, *Untitled (Erotic Drawing)*, ca. 1941, ink on paper, each 8 7/8 by 12 inches.



*Self Portrait as Laureate, 1958, thinned oil, pen and ink and graphite on paper, 16 1/2 by 13 5/8 inches.*

jects seem to be more about beauty and ecstasy than about pain. There is, of course, a long tradition of such things in both religious and erotic art.

The show also offered a selection of Graham's erotic drawings, all ca. 1941. Giant penises, either attached to men or flying off on their own (some have wings, à la Mercury), are the subject of most of the drawings, and they are often shown impaling women through the center of their abdomens. Violent as such scenarios might seem, the women appear neither harmed nor displeased.

Graham lived until 1961, dying in London after a number of years of incessant travel and intermittent painting. While his figurative work might once have seemed a curious offshoot from the main path of mid-century abstraction, contemporary tastes are now much more welcoming of such strangeness. The happy fate of Francis Picabia's once maligned later paintings, the intense interest in that very peculiar pedophilic Outsider artist, Henry Darger, and of course the success of contemporary painters like John Currin or Francesco Clemente, who fuse psychological content with an elegantly mannered academic style, are indications that John Graham is an artist whose time has quite possibly come. As influential a figure as he was—an argument can be made that the history of Abstract Expressionism would have been different without him—his importance ultimately rests on his art, not on his life. Fortunately, the work on display at Allan Stone made a most convincing case for including Graham on the shorter list of significant mid-century American artists. □

"Sum Qui Sum" appeared at Allan Stone Gallery, New York [Oct. 22-Dec. 22, 2005].

Author: Richard Kalina is a painter who also writes about art.



Horse, ca. 1940,  
oil on canvas,  
70<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> by 46<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches.  
All photos this  
article, unless  
otherwise noted,  
courtesy Allan Stone  
Gallery, New York.