

# NIJINSKY



*Thank you to the Ricco Maresca Gallery for their cooperation with this project.*

**Essay and photographs by Meg Sparling**

## On a recent rainy Wednesday,

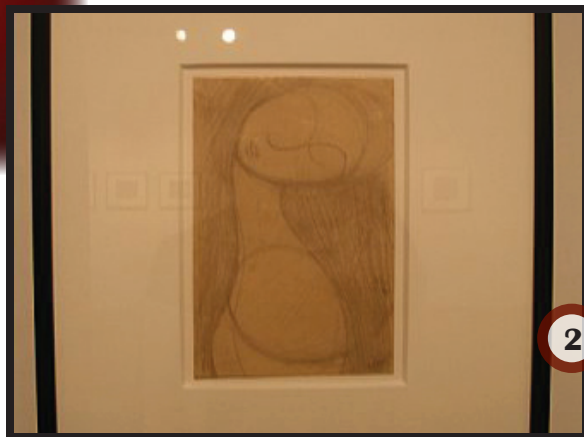
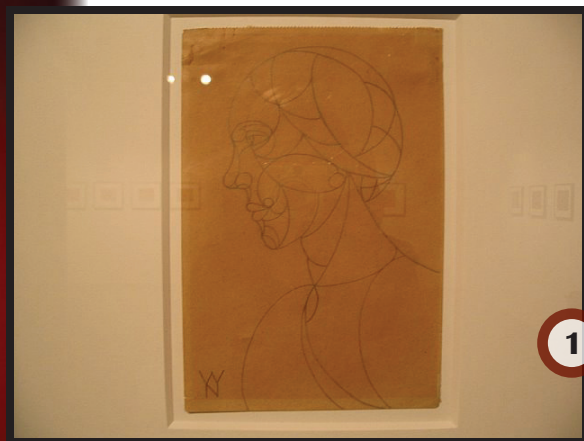
mid-December morning I caught the E train to Chelsea and viewed a selection of Vaslav Nijinsky's artwork at the Ricco Maresca Gallery on 20th Street. The collection consisted of three pencil drawings, ten crayon drawings, and ten small gouache paintings created between 1918 and 1919, in the period leading to Nijinsky's diagnosis of schizophrenia. During this time he kept an obsessive and amazing diary, which is still in print, and covered his bedroom walls with drawings, often featuring the image of a single staring eye. The Ricco Maresca collection contains a number of these drawings, among others.

The pencil drawings are whimsical, two of them consisting of figures composed out of circles and circular shapes (Figures 1 and 2). They were composed on paper that has aged to resemble brown lunch bag paper, and the pencil strokes are light and airy. The crayon drawings are also somewhat light, transparent and elementary, however they do exhibit obsessive compulsion. Most of the crayon drawings are circular shapes formed into elaborate geometric designs, often resembling a human face (Figure 3), or an eye staring out from a web (Figure 4).

It occurred to me that some of the crayon drawings, like Figure 5, could be interpreted as a stage seen from above, with dancers moving in circles around each other and in place. This interpretation came to me while I was posing other perspectives to approach the drawings other than mental illness: e.g., "Nijinsky being a dancer, what do these circles have to do with dancing?" The art of Nijinsky, the greatest dancer of the twentieth century, cannot be separated from the genius of his dance and choreography. If the image of an eye emerges from his artful representation of dance, I believe Nijinsky would call it the eye of God.

One of the crayon drawings stands out in contrast, and shows me a more obvious representation of the madness that was quickly taking hold of Nijinsky's mind. While drawings like Figures 3 and 4 look controlled and clean, Figure 6 is a precarious and asymmetrical image. There are eye shapes within eye shapes, yet they are canted and unbalanced, filled with a demonic red. When I stood before this drawing, I felt the presence of illness.

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The gouache paintings are different from the pencil and crayon drawings in a number of ways. Where the latter are weightless and childishly whimsical (with the exception of Figure 6), the gouache paintings are opaque, thick, and disturbing. The black is nearly blue and dried so heavily that tiny silver crinkled cobwebs appeared on the paintings' surfaces. Often a black silhouette in a black landscape emerges, recognizable only by a brilliant white smile or bright red hat (Figure 7). I imagine that the silhouettes were painted first, then covered over with heavy black; this creates the nightmarish impression of a shadow emerging from the night. I wondered, looking at these gouache silhouettes, about the human face to a person with schizophrenia. Would it appear, as these faces do, as deep and dark as night?

I took some pictures and sat at a small table in the middle of the room, my notebook resting on my knee. I scribbled down some thoughts. My mind wandered. I imagined Nijinsky appearing in the room: an older, crazier Nijinsky, physically heavier, but perhaps more buoyant. Would he be mute? Ranting? Drooling? Rushing at the drawings? Cowering from the drawings? I wasn't sure. I remembered the tone of much of his diary and imagined instead a mild mannered, meticulous man with eyes infused with energy. Only after talking with him for a moment might one realize that something was off, that this man was in a mental dimension foreign to the average intelligent being.

As I was leaving, the gallery owner approached me about a book of Nijinsky artwork they would soon be publishing. She asked what my interest in Nijinsky was and I told her that I had been writing poems about him, off and on, for several years. She seemed surprised at this, and interested in the work, so I provided her the Revelator website address. We spoke at some length about the legend of Nijinsky and the wealth of interest it offers.

Before I jumped back on the E, I stopped at a diner for a sandwich. It was a small, orangesicle-painted Chelsea diner. I ordered a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich and waited, watching a soccer game on the flat screen television. When my sandwich arrived I was deep in thought about Nijinsky and his place in the pantheon of insane artists. As Joan Acocella says in her introduction to his diaries, simply classifying Nijinsky as the genius-madman is both tiresome and unhelpful in approaching his art (implying that, being mad, his art is inaccessible to the sane). One cannot dispute, however, that his psychosis had an effect upon his creative acts.

As Acocella speculates, Nijinsky's rejection of "realistic" acting may have stemmed from his difficulties with normal social intercourse, and his experimental choreography could have been a further result of a neurological idiosyncrasy (Marie Rambert: "Everything that he invented was contrary to everything he had learned"). While other artists, when introducing revolutionary ideas, struggle with social boundaries and customs, a mentally ill artist like Nijinsky may not even see these barriers, or at the very least not feel beholden to them. But, as anyone who has thought on the subject knows, to begin tracing artists' innovations back to their individual psychological conditions or traits or illnesses feels like an attempt to explain away the greatness of a work of art scientifically, and also implies that the link between creator and creation is of vital importance, when in actuality it is not.

Halfway through my first sandwich half I noticed there were three: three sandwich halves. I froze in mid-chew. How was this possible? What did they do with the other half? Was it the cook's lunch? Did they feed it to a dog? I was tempted to ask, but I was afraid they would assume I was upset, and not simply curious. Later on the train I stared at the gallery flyer: "Nijinski: A Dance With Madness." It is very possible that I could have titled one of my Nijinsky poems, or the poem series, this exact arrangement of words, though as I consider it now I don't necessarily like it. Nijinsky lived with schizophrenia for over thirty years and could in turn be either completely mute and helpless or startlingly violent. If Nijinsky "danced" with madness, it certainly would have been a long, frightful, and heart-rending dance to observe.



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