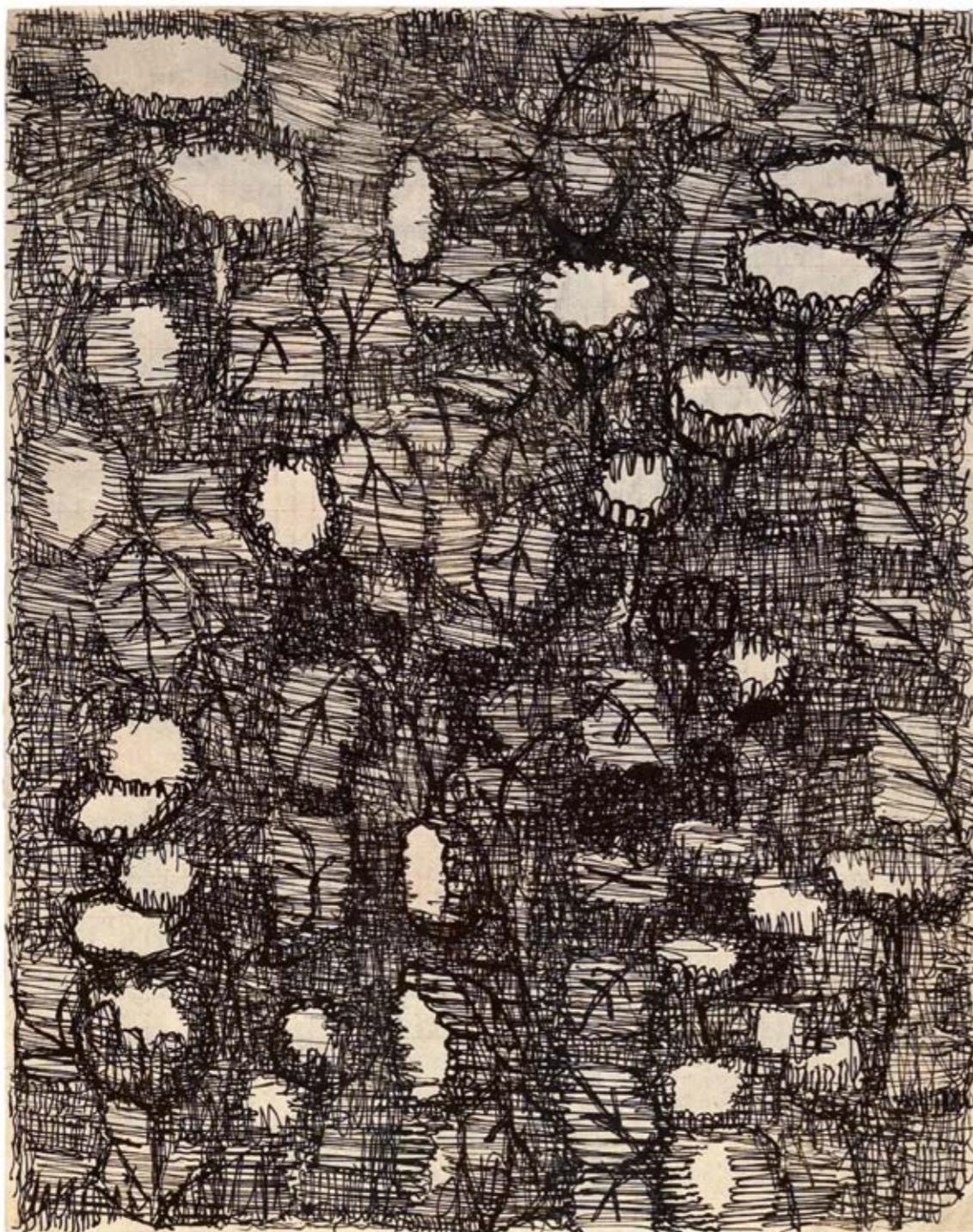




GALERIE KNOELL

LOUIS SOUTTER/ARNULF RAINER – Terra Incognita

Exhibition from 20 November 2015 to 5 February 2016



1 Louis Soutter, *Fleurs*, verso: *Demoiselle*

SOUTTER RAINER

Terra Incognita

GALERIE KNOELL

Terra Incognita

by Robert Knöll

Plus de fenêtres, ces yeux inutiles. Regarder dehors, pourquoi? Complications et coups à la beauté de l'Uni. Mes dessins n'ont aucune prétention, sauf celle d'être uniques et d'idée imprégnée de douleur.

Le Corbusier, *Louis Soutter – l'Inconnu de la Soixantaine*, 1936

Louis Soutter (1871-1942) did not create his figurative drawings and paintings in order to record a vista seen in his surroundings, as with the traditional paradigm of the *finestra aperta*. Rather they result from an inward-looking gaze and formulate Soutter's subjective introspection. Within the artistic landscape of the 20th century, Soutter's œuvre undoubtedly represents an enigmatic exception that belongs outside not only academic tradition but also what is generally seen as the avant-garde. His unique œuvre proved a great challenge for recent art history and remains one today. Yet it soon came to be greatly appreciated by Le Corbusier and Jean Dubuffet and thus, despite the art world's obstinate tendency to overlook Soutter, it has been able to cast its spell. The Austrian painter Arnulf Rainer (*1928), who has been one of the most committed supporters of Soutter's subsequent rehabilitation and amongst those who have done most to highlight his importance, viewed Soutter as a forerunner of his own post-war generation. Particularly on account of his use of the archaic, anti-academic technique of finger painting and his expressive pictorial innovation, Soutter left a deep impression on artists who came after him, particularly Georg Baselitz and A.R. Penck. Expressiveness always suggests a depiction of the kind of inner spirituality that inexorably surfaces in Soutter's works, often through religious pictorial motifs that seem to have been removed from their original context.

The undogmatic appropriation of religious content is shown in an exemplary fashion in *Le culte* (illustration 2), in which prehistorically inspired idolatry is systematically superimposed on the Stations of the Cross. The iconographical reference to themes drawn from Christ's

Passion (and more rarely from Islamic and heathen pictorial sources) are completely ambivalent. While the allusions to tradition are to some extent obvious, they are not clear-cut; rather the various references in Soutter's œuvre help to create a kind of "fundamental cultic experience". In order to formulate that experience, Soutter abandons conventional pictorial idioms and starts creating his own, completely original syntax of the unconscious.

Once he dropped out of society, which coincided with his admission to an old people's home in Ballaigues in the Canton of Vaud and his increasing isolation as from 1923, Soutter began to build his own world. In that interiorised state, objects seem to be divorced from their conventional meaning and purpose, acquiring a presence for him that is sometimes unfathomable and threatening. The apocalyptic Animal (illustration 24) takes on a life of its own beyond its existence as a drawing on a piece of paper, apparently wanting to leap into the boundlessness of the Apocalypse. The threat of the Last Judgement finds expression in the ecstatic rhythm and gestural acceleration of the pen, which embodies the prophetic tone of the Apocalypse of St. John and Soutter's excited state of mind.

It is often not only the subject depicted but also the very act of drawing and painting that is of a cultic nature. There is substantial evidence to suggest that Soutter went into a trance-like intuitive state while he was drawing. A maid from the old people's home once found him sitting nude on the floor while committing his drawings to paper in a totally remote state that made it almost impossible to talk to him. Soutter seems to have used undressing and other rituals to heighten the distance between him and his surroundings and to cultivate his intuitive manner.

The zenith of Soutter's artistic individuality was reached in the 1930s when, initially for health reasons, he laid aside the brush and the pen, those symbols of classic painting, and – as the first modern artist ever to do so – systematically started to paint with his fingers. That was his last creative liberation from the constraints of the conventional art scene, with which he had already severed his relationship much earlier. The tools that traditionally function as "translators" between the artist's hand and the artwork give way to a direct physical imprint. Every movement of the fingertip is inscribed on the painting ground, where it remains visible to viewers as a genetic footprint. Soutter's finger paintings, which he generally executed on cheap paper because of his impoverished state, can also be seen as tracks that continuously direct the viewer's attention towards the painting process. The very visible fingerprint often left by Soutter is a clear demonstration of this.

In his best works, Soutter's natural predisposition towards the intuitive and the unfathomable never wins the upper hand over the picture. There is always an attempt to control expressive forms, something at which he continuously worked during his academic career as a drawing teacher, and that is manifest in the high degree of workmanship found in his finger paintings. The forms he creates always testify to a tightrope walk between expressive abandon and conscious design, between archaic expression and iconographic referencing. Soutter's lasting significance for art may well lie in the combination of ecstasy and harmonious balance that he always strove to achieve, charged with tension as it may be.

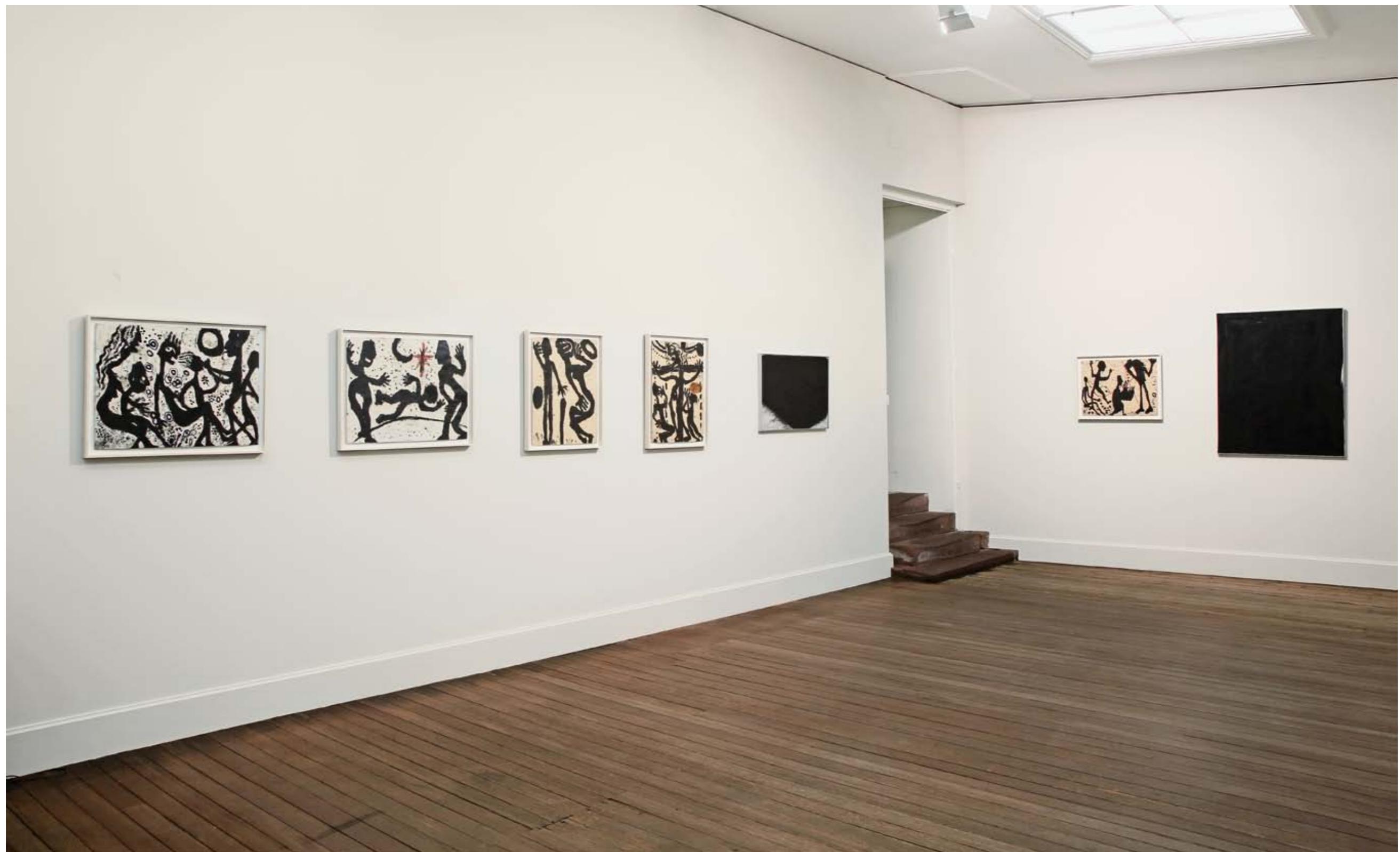
Arnulf Rainer's œuvre is characterised by the marked differences between the individual groups of works he has created in the course of his artistic career. His blind drawings from

the early post-war period, his subsequent over-paintings, his body poses and finger paintings from the 1970s show how different the various phases in his work have been.

The black over-paintings that started to dominate Rainer's œuvre in the 1950s have exerted a particularly long-lived influence on his status as an independent contemporary artist: the pictorial support, generally an existing canvas painted by Rainer himself and in a few exceptional cases by other artists, are covered with oil paint. The underlying pictorial motifs are overwhelmed, submerged and supplanted until, by the time the picture is finished, they have disappeared completely under the increasingly monochrome surface. The apparently uni-colored canvases are in fact the ardently achieved product of the permanent ousting and effacement of the original picture. The finished painting expresses this denial of the original image, which has become completely mute under its black cover. The artistic process of over-painting corresponds to a critical form of the appropriation of pre-existent images in which the original work as the representation of a historic pictorial identity is covered up and finally completely obliterated.

For Rainer, in the years following the Second World War, the muteness of his expanses of black paint represented a zero point of painting that seeks to usher in a new beginning for painterliness, rather than heralding the end of the picture. They are "existential showplaces" (W. Schmalenbach) in which the dialectic of annihilating and creative energy plays out: *Night, with a whole Day underneath* was the title of one of Rainer's early over-paintings.

Soutter's laying aside of conventional painting utensils and his transition to finger painting went hand in hand with a renunciation of art history's traditional language of forms, leading him simultaneously to what is possibly the most primeval form of painting, painting with one's hands. In their submersion of a pictorial motif under a black surface, Arnulf Rainer's over-paintings achieve the progressive effacement of the underlying model, culminating in a kind of tabula rasa of the iconic. The œuvre of both men is characterised by the necessary motif of a cæsura that, leading them away from historically prepared paths, brings them to the point of alienation from which they can then set out to explore the terra incognita of the picture.





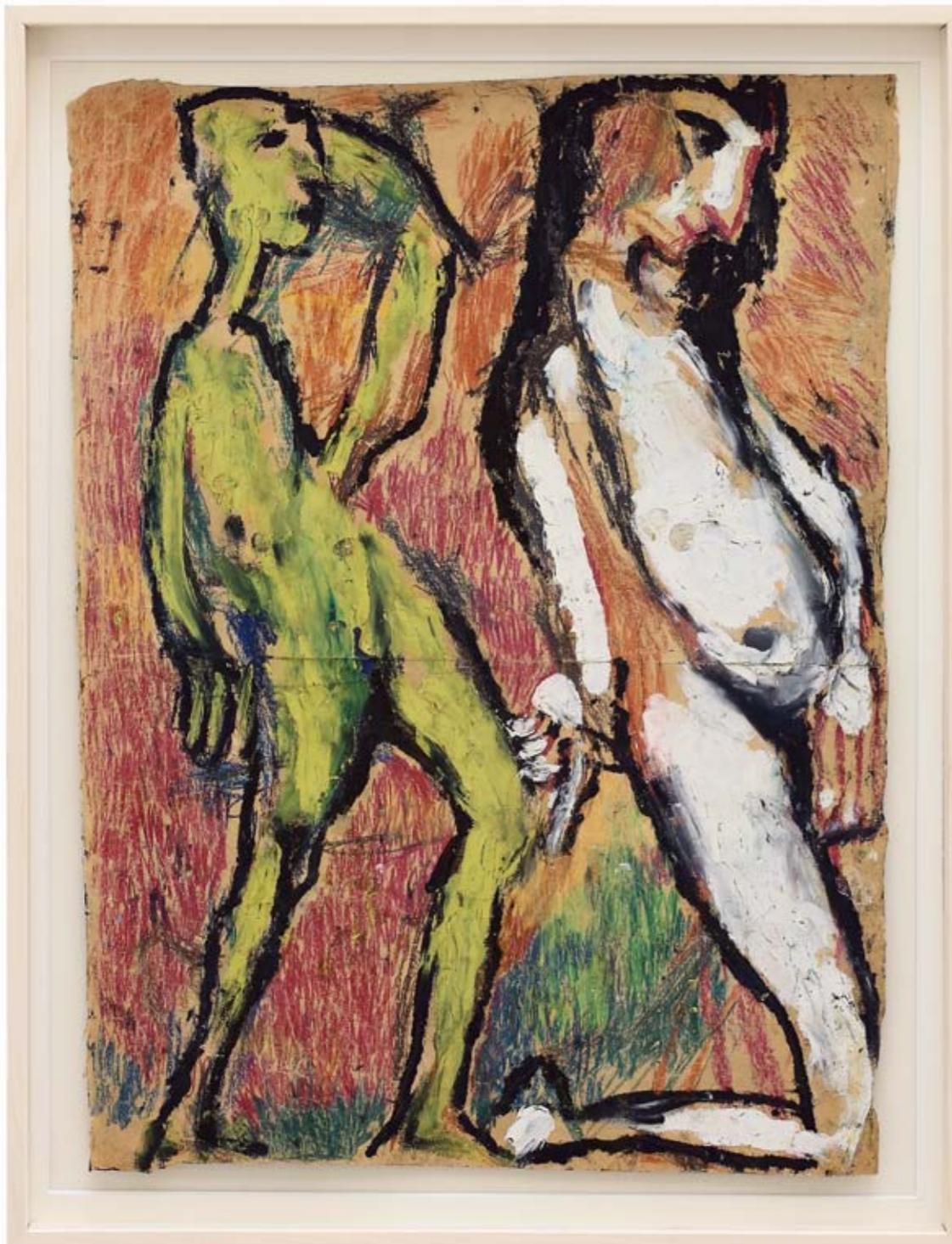
2 Louis Soutter, *Le culte*



3 Arnulf Rainer, *Übermalung*



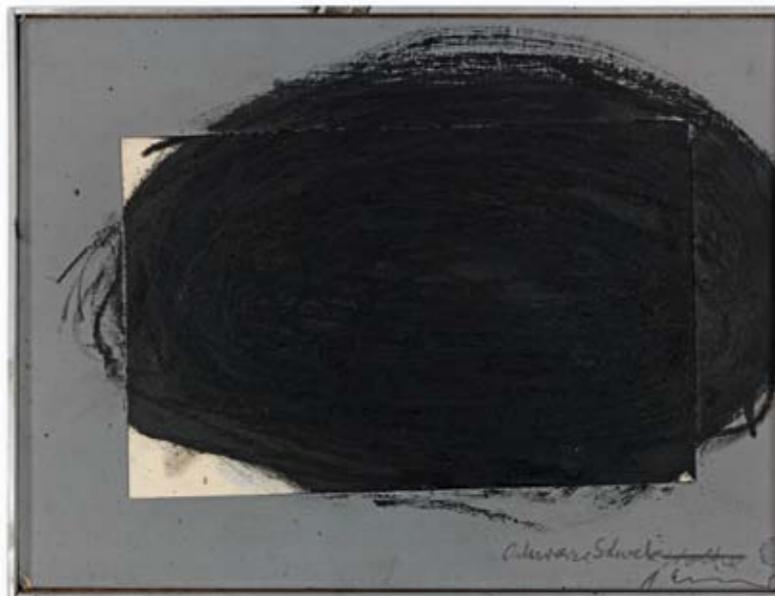
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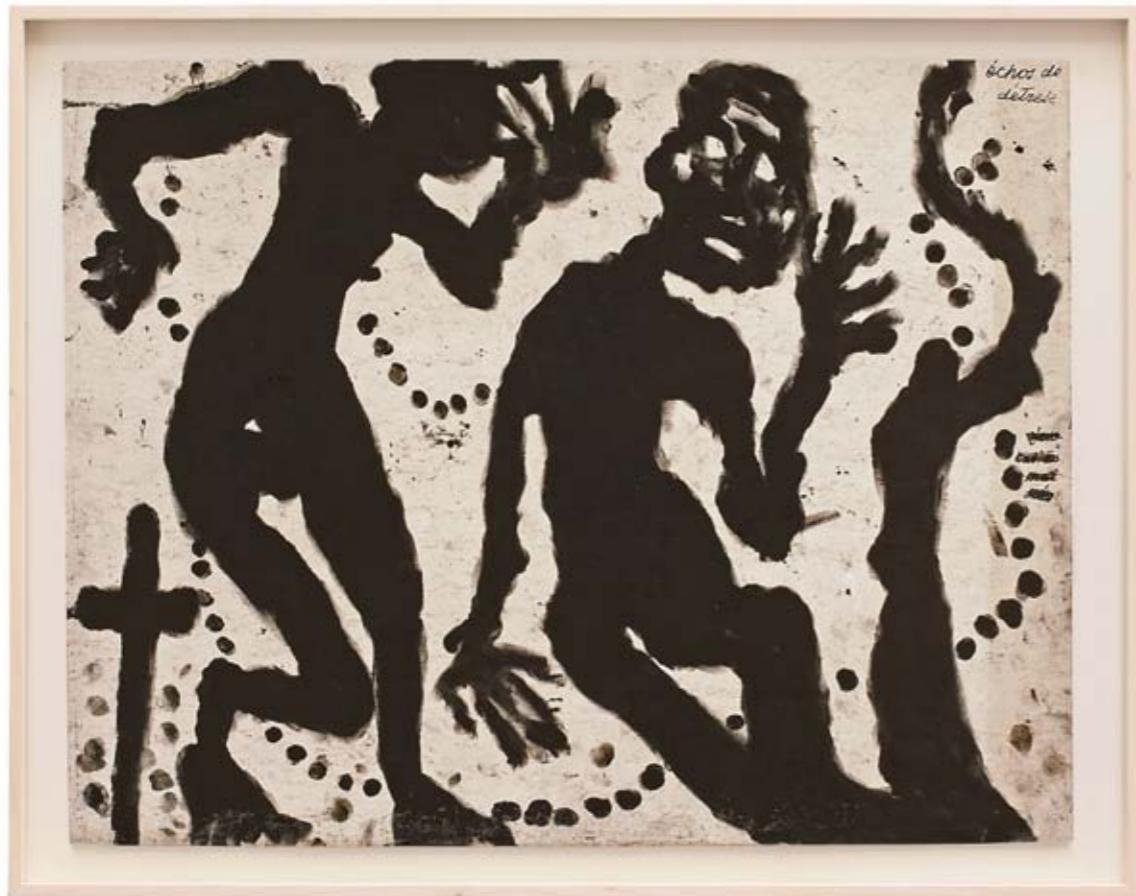
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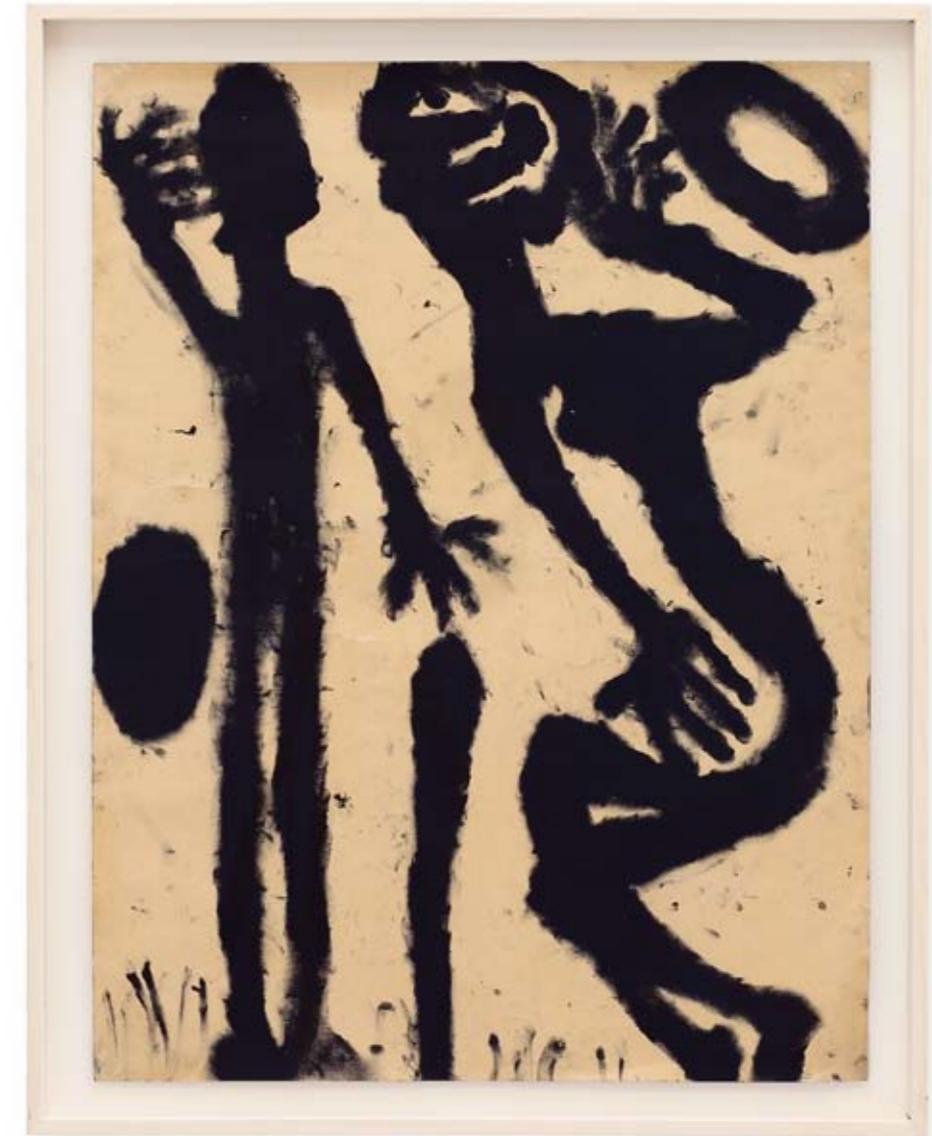
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7 Arnulf Rainer, *Schwarze Schwebende / Schräger Schädel schief / Torsö*



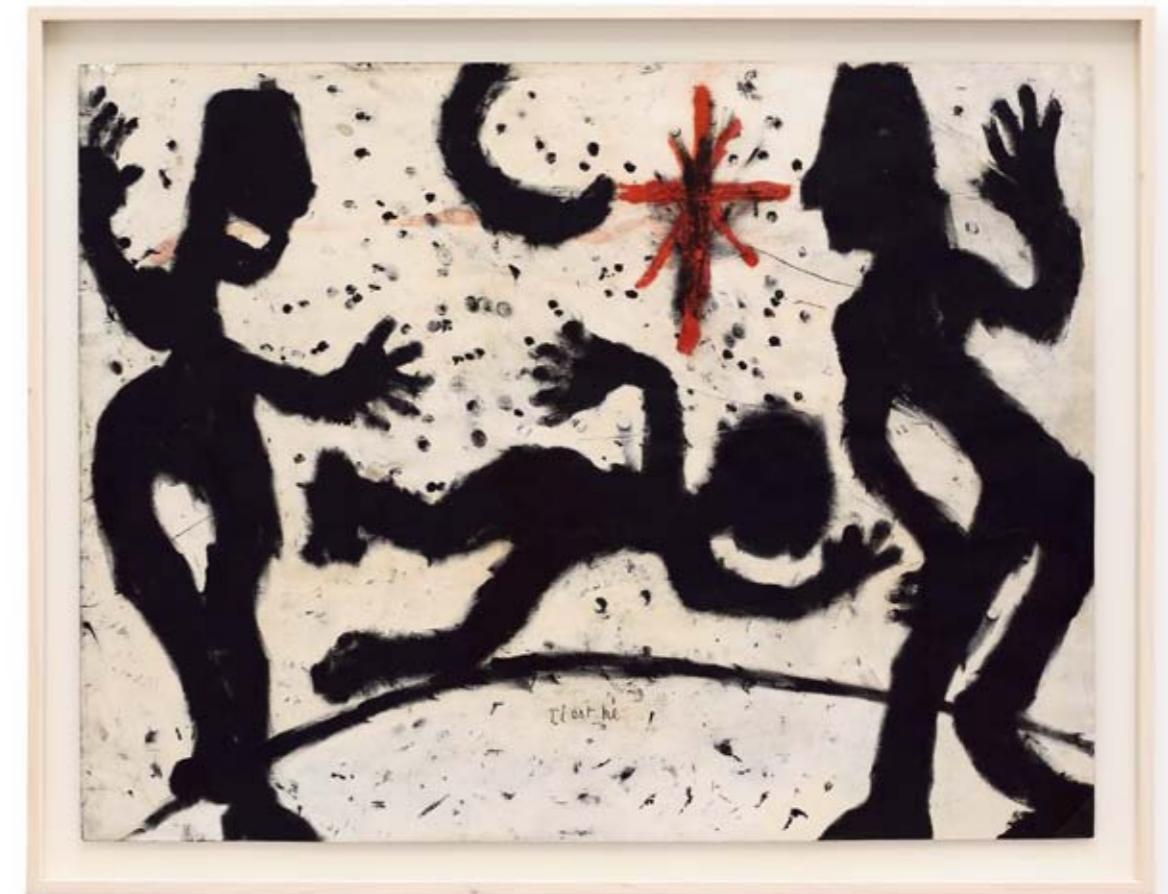
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15 Arnulf Rainer, *Untitled*



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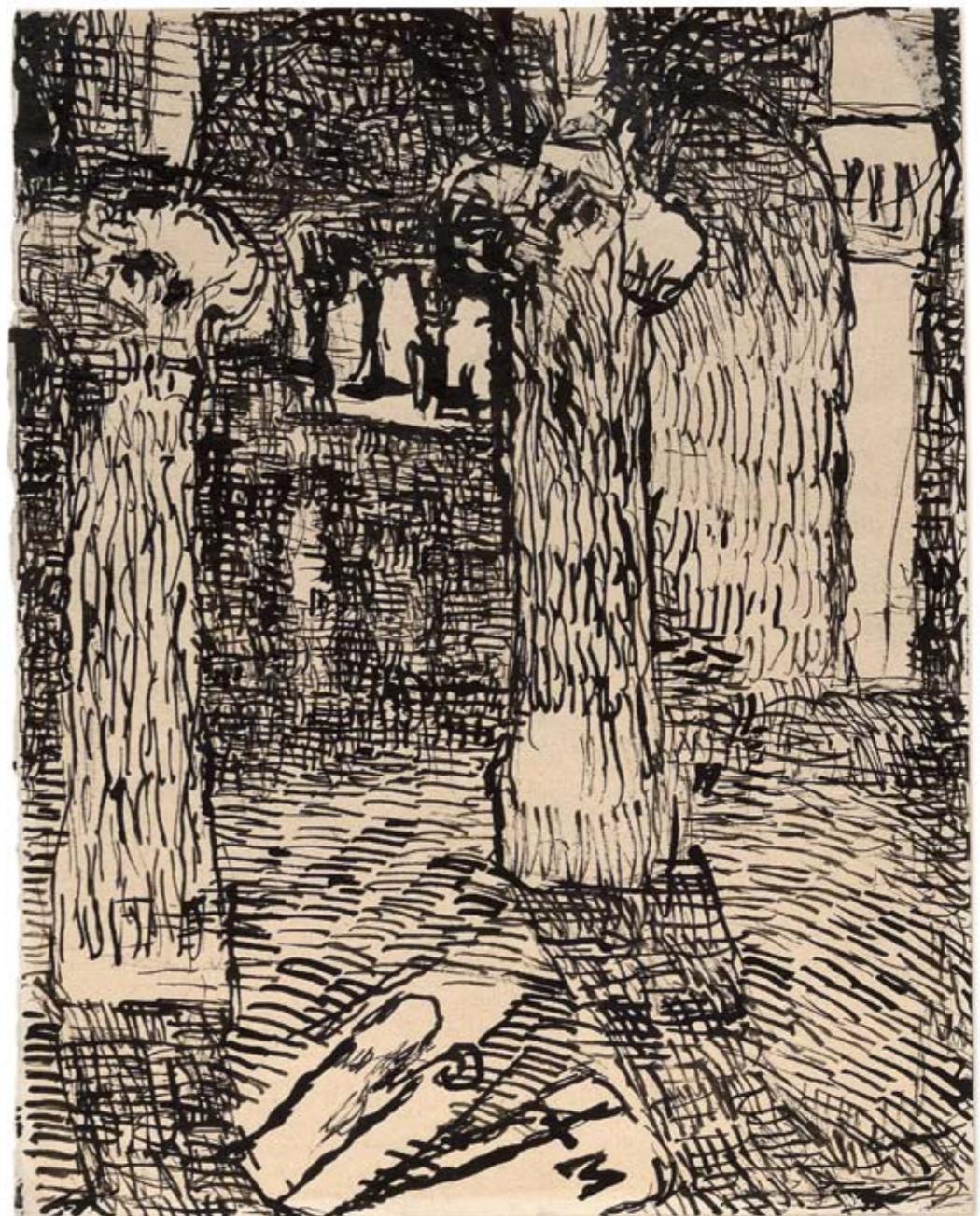
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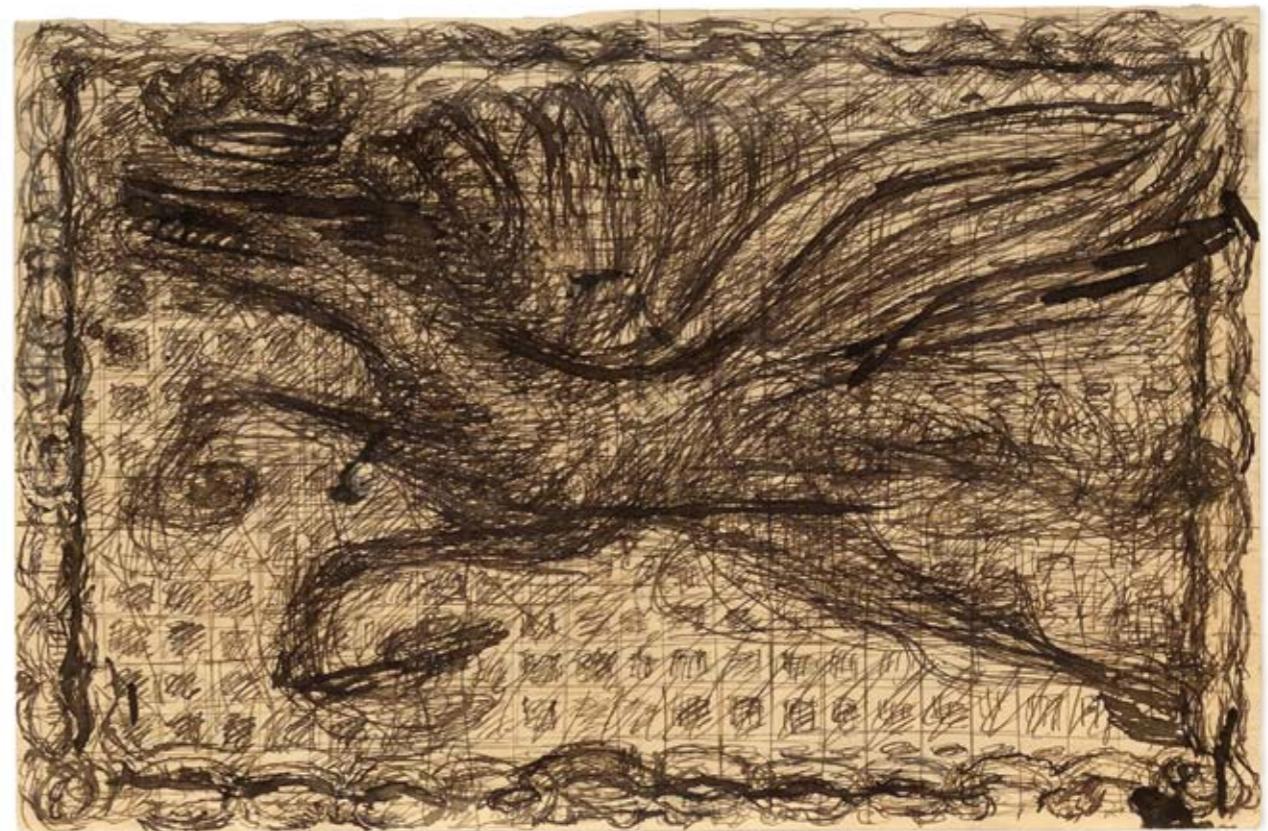
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The titles listed here correspond exactly
to those given by the artists.

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