

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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ART MAZE Mag

Koak's bold and defining lines create curves that outline twisted bodies, expressing a range of raw emotions. It is easy to get lost in the flowing curves of her figures, as each winding limb can at once create such wild movements and tranquil poses. Like that of the cubist masters, Koak's paintings and drawings abstract the figure; bodies are simplified, features are broken down. Hands become circles and limbs become a series of ovals, reducing the body to simple shapes, forming a beautiful universality within the narrative of her work. The subjects in the artist's compositions appear to be part graphic novel, part art historical allegory, giving birth to an altogether new expression that resonates loudly in a contemporary world. As Koak explains that being an artist is part of who she is, art has become her language, her voice. In her case, a picture is unmistakably worth a thousand words, as each of her compositions contains insurmountable emotion, with each figure embodying joy, anger, sadness.

Join us in conversation as we delve deep into Koak's artistic practice, discussing the influence of blues music in her work, the significance of art in communities, and the possibilities of an unexpected narrative.

*Koak:
learning to be
comfortable
on uncertain
ground*

www.koak.net

Text and interview by Christina Nafziger

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- Koak

AMM: What inspired your interest in creating art? Were you brought up in a creative environment?

Koak: Creativity was an inseparable part of life growing up. From the time I could hold a crayon I loved to draw, and, in that way, it became a natural form of expression. Both my mom and stepfather, on top of having intense careers, celebrated their creativity in different ways — through music, art, and dancing. I think growing up in a house filled with band practices and art supplies definitely gave me the support to start making artwork at a very early age, but it's difficult to pinpoint my desire to make art as existing after a moment of inspiration. There was never any question of becoming anything else — it was just who I was.

AMM: Tell us about your journey forming your incredibly unique and compelling style. What were some ups and downs you experienced along the way?

Koak: The core of my work has always been about language — about how to utilize imagery as communication. In that way, the style of my work feels to me like the sound of my voice — something difficult to focus on when you're in the thick of talking. I've had different things to say at different points in my life, and each time the intonation of my work has shifted to fit the narrative. It has involved a process of re-learning how to speak in order to tell the story. In that way, there haven't been ups or downs to the formation of my voice, as it's more something that was grown out of necessity. There were times, however, when I said embarrassing things.

AMM: The winding and twisted shapes of your figures are highly expressive, creating what seems to be an inner turmoil in the subjects. Can you speak to this mood present in your work?

Koak: There have been many instances in life where, despite having my own vivid experiences, I am distrustful of my narrative. There's that little voice that sneaks in and questions my perspective, shades happiness, discredits the validity of anger — I think this is a common thing for people, and in particular for many of the women I know. It's this experience of going through life, learning to be comfortable on uncertain ground, that has made the grey areas, the tumultuous, or the sense of opposing forces, important aspects in my work. I am more interested in the areas that seem uncertain, not only because they feel more realistic, but also because they allow space for mystery and diversity — by that I mean more than one point of view or a singular way of being.

AMM: Your figures and compositions have a modernist flavour to them, with qualities that bring to mind Frances Bacon or perhaps the work of artists working in cubism. What artists inspire you stylistically?

Koak: I pull a great deal from music, from thinking about pacing, rhythm, repetition, and

tone. For a while, my comics looked up to the great blues musicians, Skip James or Lottie Kimbrough. Now, my paintings and drawings pull from music as well. It is very common for me to listen to a single album, or handful of albums, repeatedly while creating a show. As far as visual artists, everything I can get my eyes on. There are elements in nearly any era of art that I can, or have, found inspiring. Francis Bacon for his ability to turn figuration into raw emotion, Bruegel for his wickedness, Käthe Kollwitz for her politics, Charles Burchfield for his ability to bring a canvas to life — I think every form of art holds some form of inspiration.

AMM: Although your figures do not depict realistic features of a person, do you use real human subjects as your reference? If you draw from life, do you use live models?

Koak: I don't. The work is very rarely about an individual as much as it's about the universal. Just as it isn't about nudity, as much as using the naked form as the quickest way to tap into expressions of emotion and the physicality of being human. The bodies I'm drawing are not dependent on physical realism as much as they are rooted in symbolism and the emotive connections tied to those symbols.

There's portraiture, like Alice Neel or David Hockney, where I'm in awe of their ability to capture their subjects candidly in an amalgam of moments that could never be achieved without the process between artist and model. Someday, I think I might like to attempt portraiture like that, but I think in the wake of a history of the clothed artist musing over a naked model, it's too soon. I can't do it. Maybe in the context of a life drawing class, but for the purposes of making work, I can't imagine looking at someone naked and having to think the sort of thoughts that are necessary for me to make the work. The process is too personal, and I would end up feeling like I was the naked one. It works much better for me to close my eyes, grit my teeth, and put my brain down into those parts I'm trying to draw on the page.

AMM: How do you choose which mediums you will finish a piece with? Do you think certain compositions lend themselves better to specific mediums, or does it depend more on what materials you are in the mood to use?

Koak: I always know whether a piece will be a painting, drawing, or sculpture before I start. It's inherent to the work. From the moment that the thought of the piece exists, it is tied to its medium. It feels very unbreakable to me to imagine changing it.

AMM: You have an MFA in Comics from California College of the Arts. Tell us about your experience in this program. As comics often form a narrative, do you feel your paintings and drawings do this as well?

Koak: The program was founded (and is

chaired) by my very dear friend and editor Matt Silady. My experience was sleepless, grueling, and incredibly good. It is a whirlwind of change and you don't come out the same. When I went to the program I needed that, to be pushed out of retreat and back into the world of deadlines and being challenged — back into the world of interacting with insanely talented and passionate humans.

As far as narratives in my art...I think everything forms a narrative, especially the things that do not force that narrative onto us. You see a slip of folded paper lying on the sidewalk, and, because you don't already know the path that brought that scrap to that point, a narrative of possibilities is formed. It is not just some mundane slip that should've ended up in the bin after you went for groceries; it has the infinite possibility of being a love note, a first poem, a critical plan—it becomes possibility. Finding that line between offering possibilities and not forcing them is one of the most critical balances that I'm pushing for in my work.

AMM: When it comes to your process of creating a single piece, what have you discovered to be your biggest challenge as an artist?

Koak: It's a toss-up between my mind and my body — I'm not sure which one wins as far as getting in the way. My body hurts, gets stiff, or feels frustrated by the amount that I ask it to work. A part of my brain constantly needs to be reminded that there is a purpose to this — that somehow it helps — that I am pushing myself — that being an artist isn't selfish. That last part is the most difficult. Growing up in a country that does very little to support the arts, that sees art classes as the first things to be cut from public schooling, that knows too well the confusion that spreads across non-artists' faces when you tell them your profession — even though I deeply know the importance and power of art in communities, there is still that ingrained stigma that tells you it is trivial.

AMM: Having lived in San Francisco for many years, how would you describe the art scene there? How has your experience living there impacted your practice?

Koak: People here are thinking and caring and making. They show up for one another. They push themselves. They work hard to keep the communities alive, but we need more support from the communities around us. We need more arts writers and patrons. We need someone to step in and contextualize what's happening here. The hardest thing to come to terms with — outside the fact that we've lost too many brilliant artists and galleries due to the cost of living — is the knowledge that even if you survive and put your heart into it, the chances of being recognized by our community is low. It's not that there isn't anything important happening here, but there needs to be more support.

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It's impacted my practice in that it's made me feel a part of something. When I first started making and showing the sort of work I'm doing now, I was terrified that I wouldn't have a place in the art community. Instead, they made me feel incredibly welcomed and at home.

AMM: *Do you ever experience creative blocks? If so, what never fails to get you out of them?*

Koak: There is a difference between getting through versus getting out. I was sick a lot as a child, and one of the few things that got me through the moments of discomfort and loneliness was the ability to project my thoughts to the time when I would inevitably be better. That thought, that this would pass, was the one thing that quelled that skin-crawling feeling of not having agency over my body. But it was also, in a way, the knowledge that I would be sick again. That being ill wasn't a singular moment of discomfort that could be escaped, but an ebb in the process of living that would return, that would need to be gone through again.

Making art is like that. There are blocks when you can't work, there are blocks when you are trying to start again after a long time off, there are blocks when you're just at the finish line and you feel so defeated that you want to tear everything up and start over, or maybe just give up and lie on a beach somewhere pretty. It's unbearably uncomfortable sometimes, especially in the moments when you think it should be easy — but those moments of discomfort and failure are part of the process. You have to show up and sit through them — you have to realize that failure is recurring, that being blocked is part of the process, that those moments are necessary and meant to be waded through but never escaped. I can never get out of the moments of being blocked, but that's what gets me through.

AMM: *Do you have any projects in the works right now that you would like to share with us?*

Koak: I'll be in a few group shows this summer, but mostly I'm focusing on a solo exhibition with Ghebaly Gallery (in Los Angeles) that opens in December. After that I'll have a solo with Union Pacific early next year in London.



Image (p. 18):
Koak
The Flow
graphite, watercolor ink, and casein on pearl grey rag paper
16 x 13 inches

Photos Copyright The Artist
Courtesy of American Medium

Image (p. 16):
Koak
All Your Darlings
graphite, acrylic ink, watercolor, and casein on white rag paper
14 x 68 inches

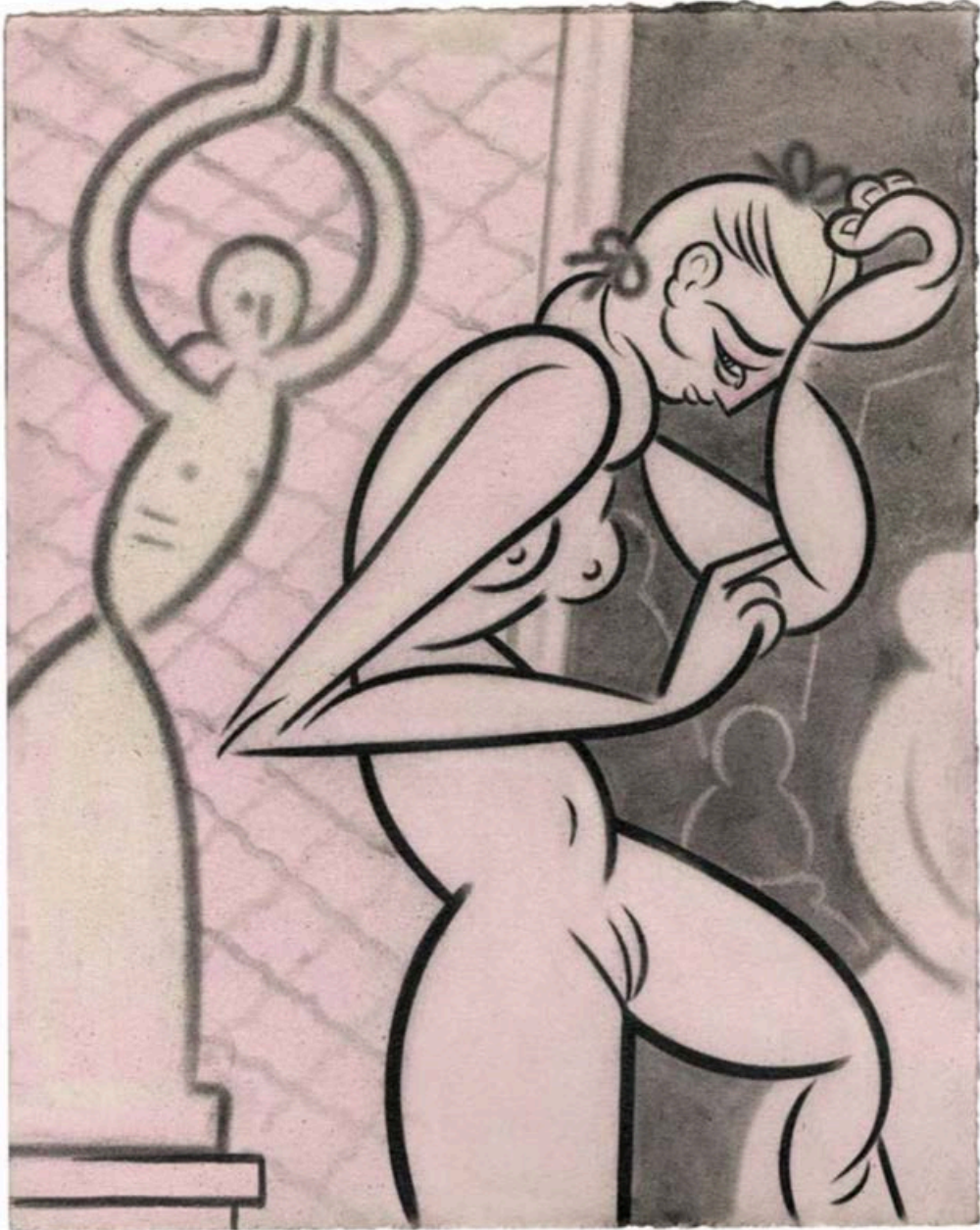
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Courtesy of Walden Gallery

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Koak
The Mockery
graphite, ink, and casein on pearl grey rag paper dyed with watercolor
10 x 8 inches

Photos Copyright The Artist
Courtesy of Walden Gallery

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Koak
Feol
graphite and casein on cream rag paper
15 x 11 1/4 inches

Photo: Copyright The Artist
Courtesy of Walden Gallery

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Koak
Iana

Signed and dated on verso
graphite, pastel, and casein on rag paper
14 x 11 inches

Photo: Copyright The Artist
Courtesy of Aher Space

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Koak
Beccy
Signed and dated on verso
graphite, pastel, charcoal, and casein on rag paper
10 x 7 inches

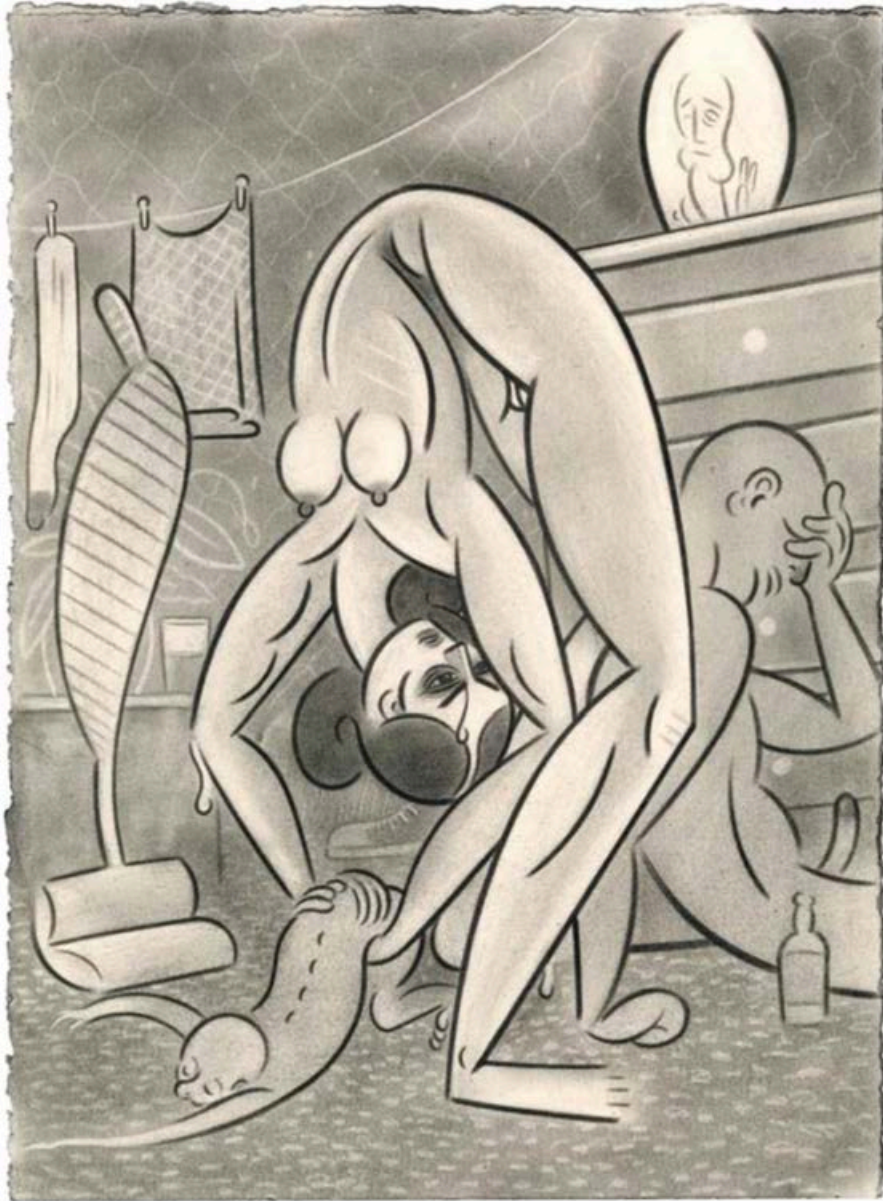
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Koak
The Infinite Loop
graphite and casein on rag paper
15 x 11 inches

Photo: Copyright The Artist
Courtesy of Alter Space

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Koaak
Till the End
graphite and casein on powder blue rag paper
16 x 11 inches

Photo: Copyright The Artist
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Koak

Launch Break

Signed and dated on verso

pastel, graphite, house paint, and casein on rag paper mounted to panel
16 x 12 inches

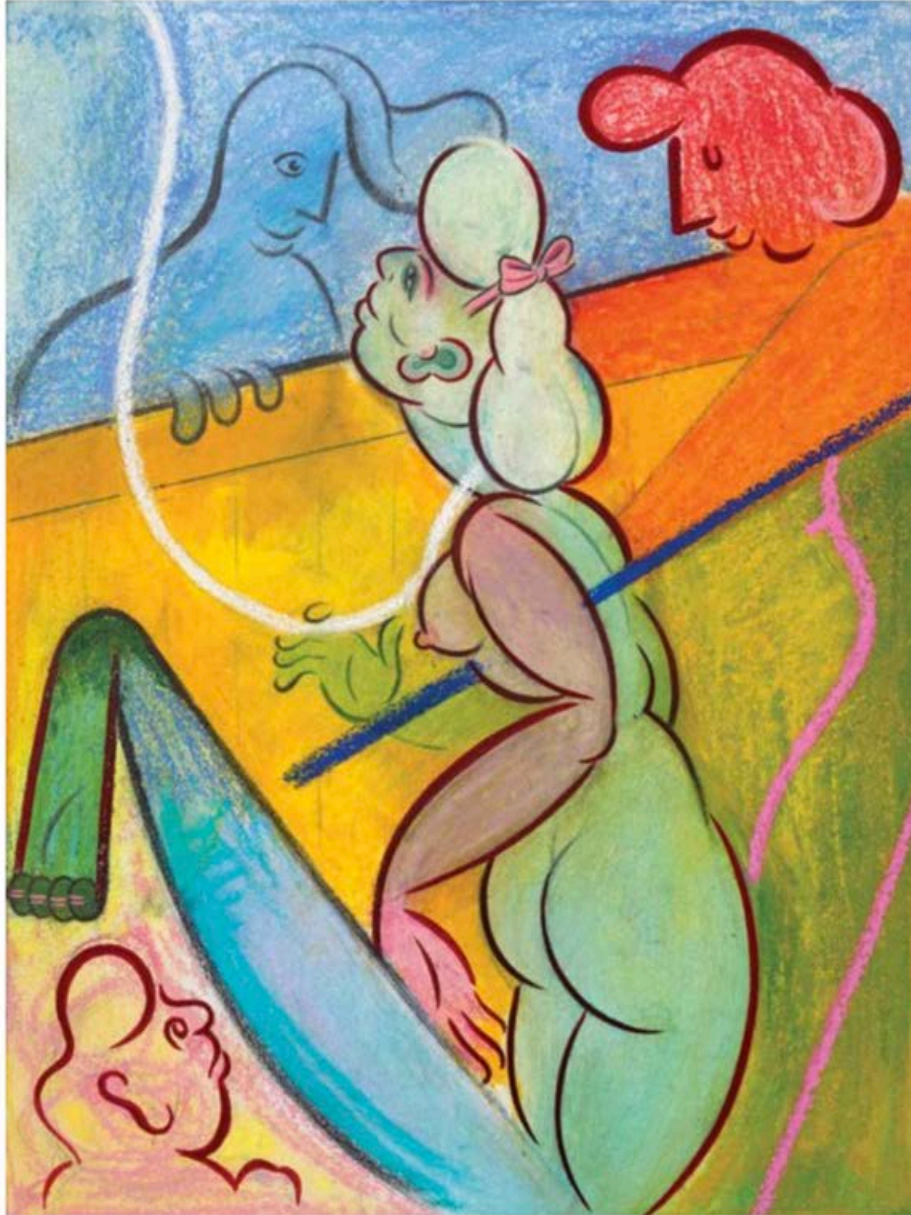
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Koak
The Mirror
pastel, graphite, and casein on rag paper mounted to panel
16 x 12 inches

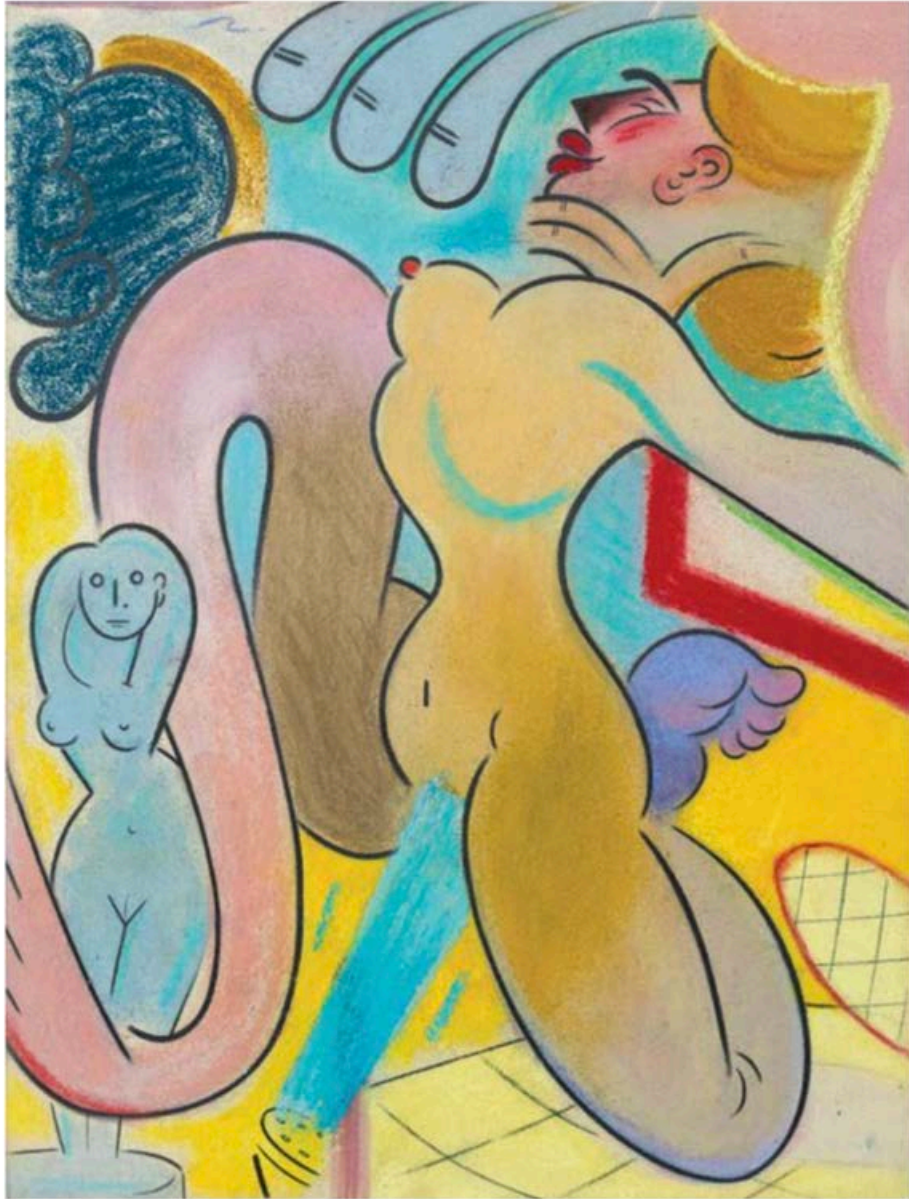
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Koak

Shower Head

Signed and dated on verso

pastel, graphite, casein, and grout on rag paper mounted to panel
16 x 12 inches

Photo: Copyright The Artist
Courtesy of Alter Space