



COCKY: From the Divine to the Erotic

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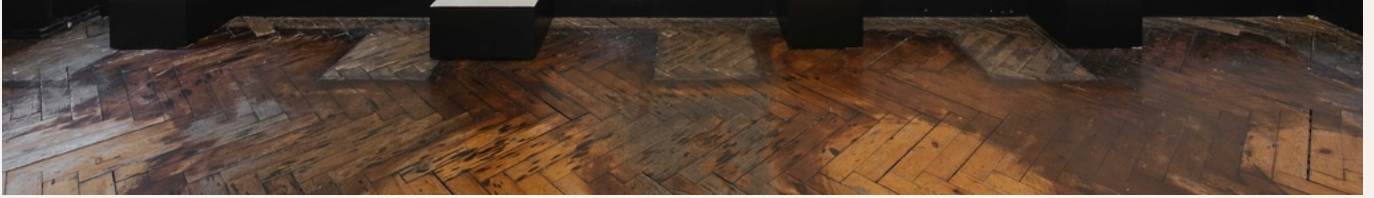


## COCKY: From the Divine to the Erotic

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Penises are among the earliest – and most enduring – subjects depicted by humans. From phallic scrawls in cave art to ancient Greek statues of idealised male beauty, from graffiti in Roman Pompeii to Japan’s tradition of erotic Shunga woodblock prints, the penis has populated our thinking and making for as long as we have been doing either.





COCKY, installation shot. Image courtesy: The Gallery of Everything.

Yet, while phalluses are ubiquitously alluded to and aggressively symbolised in gallery contexts, rarely is the organ itself the focus of our attention. Step into a museum like the National Gallery and it's hard to move for female nudes – penises, on the other hand, are comparatively few and far between. In patriarchal society, we're perfectly accustomed to ogling women's bodies – but men's, especially their most intimate parts, are less familiar territory. For some, that lack of visibility only makes penises all the more preoccupying – certainly, taboo is the animating force behind many of the works in *COCKY*.

*COCKY* surveys our diverse interpretations of the penis, from the divine to the erotic. Some combine the two – such as the work of Brazilian sculptor Chico Tabibuia. Born Francisco Moraes da Silva in Casimiro de Abreu, 1936, Tabibuia began making sculptures in his teenage years before commencing his practice in earnest aged 40. Infused with the Afro-Brazilian syncretic religion of Umbanda as well as Pentecostal Christianity, Tabibuia believed he was finding entities who already inhabited the wood he worked with (from the Trumpet Tree, the local word for which gave the artist his name).





Chico Tabibuia, 'Untitled (Clock)', 1988. Image courtesy: The Gallery of Everything.

Frequently depicting messengers between humanity and deities, Tabibuia's figures are largely humanoid, many with faces, arms, legs – and all with pendulous penises, out of any proportion with the rest of their bodies. Most are absent embellishments, though several feature clocks on their torsos, beneath penis-horned heads and supported by tripods of limbs: legs, and cock. But despite their starkness, the religiosity of Tabibuia's objects is hard to deny. Tethering sexuality to spirituality, the artist's organs clearly represent more than the sum of their (substantial) parts.

What are we to make of Tabibuia's entourage? Well, the answer to that question will necessarily reveal as much about its viewer as its artist. Insistent, proud, strong, Tabibuia's penises embody many of our most fundamental and cross-cultural conceptions of masculinity – tellingly, they exhibit no signs of the pearl-clutching that Western thought has historically applied to genitalia.



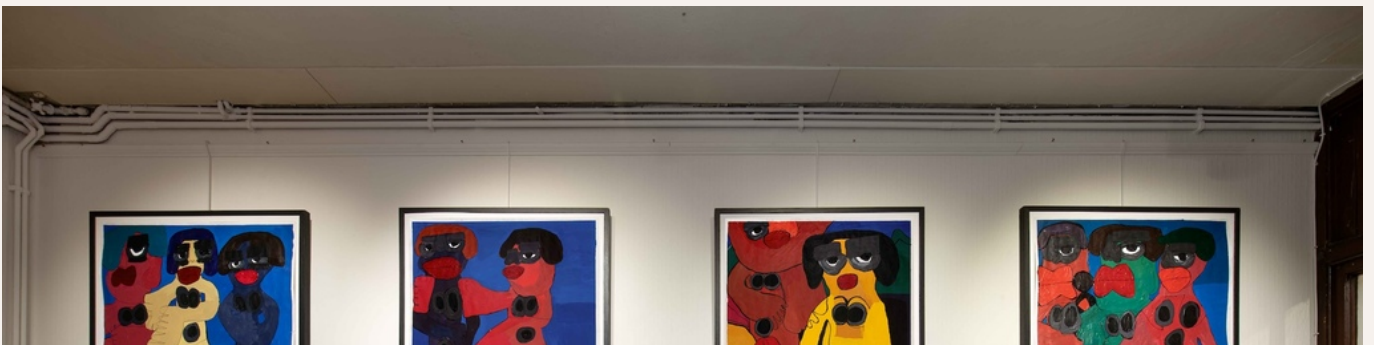


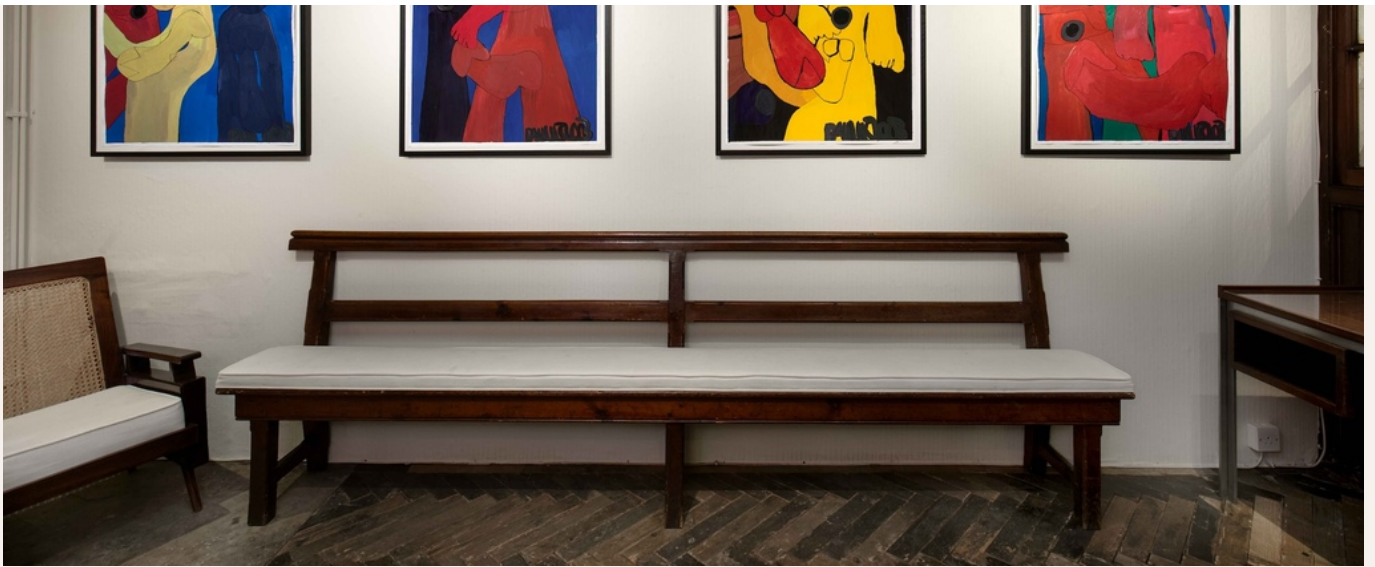


Paulus de Groot, 'Zelfmoord (Suicide)', 2004. Image courtesy: The Gallery of Everything.

That squeamishness is internalised so early that many aren't even aware of harbouring it – yet, one only need see a product of a different cosmology to have their own gnarled internal landscape illuminated. Forbidding something is an excellent way of ensuring it is obsessed over – certainly, Dutch painter Paulus de Groot's graphic tableaux make much of that counter-intuitive titillation.

Besides the explicit sex scenes featured in the exhibition, the artist draws much of his subject matter from horror films. From vampires to vamps, de Groot's practice engages our most heightened senses and combines the things we want with those we are afraid of – the colour red, for instance, for de Groot, represents "AIDS and scary diseases". In other works, featuring dangerous animals, de Groot stages similar collisions of fear and desire coupled with a kind of outrageous silliness – excitement in all directions.





COCKY, installation shot. Image courtesy: The Gallery of Everything.

*COCKY* surveys the erotic alongside the enigmatic, presenting a series of drawings of beautiful young people masturbating by Dean Henry. Although they are pornographic, the context in which we are perhaps most accustomed to seeing penises in media today, the drawings retain a (slightly uncanny) innocence. Perhaps, their subjects suggest, penises needn't always be so complicated – pleasure is simple.

Despite their enduring mystery, the inclusion of several Woodbridge figures offers another – similarly straightforward – context for the organ: that is, the indefatigable human urge to reproduce ourselves, in art and offspring alike. Part of a strange collection of wooden sculptures discovered in Woodbridge, New Jersey, in the 1960s, the origins of the Woodbridge figures – with their removable genitalia and hole-bored heads – remain the subject of healthy debate. Nonetheless, it is agreed that they are likely fertility idols, resembling figures like the Venus of Willendorf which is estimated to be more than 30,000 years old.



COCKY, installation shot. Image courtesy: The Gallery of Everything.

While we'll never know if their maker was deliberately emulating such models, the shared characteristics are perhaps unsurprising – after all, humans' physical appearance, and longing for children, are largely unchanged between 60s New Jersey and Paleolithic Austria. A pleasing companion to Tabibuia's work, wherein genitalia is loaded with sacred meaning, the naked Woodbridge figures remind us that genitals can be eminently practical: a means to a fertile end, as well as part of a ritual.

Babies. Orgasms. Magic. Penises are much agonised over, but rarely looked straight in the eye – *COCKY* takes on that challenge, revealing as much about its audience as its subject matter in the process.

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