Unica Zürn:  
The House of the Father

Rebecca Ann Winterfield

University of Colorado, Boulder  
Art and Art History Departmental Honors Thesis  
Fall 2012

Thesis Advisor:  
Albert Alhadeff (Art History)  
Committee Members:  
Robert Nauman (Art History)  
Juan Wang (French Literature)

November 6, 2012
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Abstract:

This Thesis examines Unica Zürn’s China Ink Drawings with reference to her autobiographical writings and family history. These works from the 1960’s are obsessive line drawings. Their complicated structure and imagery makes them appear impossible to navigate. However, certain themes connect the drawings and provide points of reference making them intelligible. Zürn transforms her fixation with the idealized image of her father, a Lacanian object of loss and desire, Ralph Zürn, into the figures and landscapes in these most visually difficult and entrancing drawings.
Introduction

Unica Zürn (1917-1970 CE), surrealist artist and author, was a fractured soul. Her art walks a line between delirium and startling grace. Zürn met Hans Bellmer, her mentor and sexual Svengali, in 1953. He introduced her to Surrealist art forms including automatic drawing and anagrammatic poetry, which she took to with obsessive fervor. Bellmer was the driving force behind Zürn’s copious artistic output during their seventeen-year relationship.\(^1\) Her art reached maturity in the 1960’s, and she is especially known for her “Chinese Ink Drawings.” These “China Ink Drawings”, as Zürn refers to them, are studies she produced in mental hospitals between cycles of mania (dating from 1956 to 1970).\(^2\) The trauma of her adult life caused by her mental illness,\(^3\) her sadomasochistic relationship with Bellmer, her poverty, and her inability to

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\(^1\) Bellmer introduced Zürn to a life of exile in Paris, as well as to the world of surrealism and art. She began producing anagrams and drawings with his encouragement. She shifted from the cheerful narratives of her 1950’s stories towards the lugubrious for which she is now remembered. Zürn’s masochistic relationship with Bellmer is the topic of several studies. These studies depict Zürn as a ‘talking Nadja’ or automatic woman, whose partner gave her the tools to voice her subconscious.\(^4\) An example of this categorization comes from João Ribas, the curator of Zürn’s exhibition at the Drawing Center in 2009. In his essay Ribas states: “[l]ike the eponymous protagonist of Breton’s Nadja, Zürn may be thought of as an authentic Surrealist subject, one that is poetically mimed by automatism. Nadja herself draws, and her imagery evinces a hallucinatory, symbolic universe similar to Zürns.” (João Ribas, “Unica Zürn: Oracles and Spectacles,” in Unica Zürn: Dark Spring (New York: The Drawing Center, 2009), 22.) As Bellmer makes clear in a letter, he believed he discovered Zürn’s unusually strong connection to her psyche: “With my clearly experienced eye I immediately recognized her remarkable gift for automatic drawing. I pointed it out to her: after two or three days, she was making, with intense delight, drawings of which each one was good quality.” (Hans Bellmer, quoted in “Unica Zürn’s Vision of Madness,” in Catherine Conley, Automatic Woman: The Representation of Women in Surrealism (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 80.)

\(^2\) What Zürn refers to as her “Chinese Ink Drawing’s” are her works in drawing books, which she labels as individual “Albums” and “Books.” Many of these books were hand made, as she explained: “Next to housekeeping, writing anagrams and drawing are my main activities. I experience great joy in making books,” see Zürn’s letter to Mia and Johannes Lederer, Palavas 20.8.1960; Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 4.2, 649. I will only examine a few of these works, but each notebook is truly a single work, images flow into one another, showing Zürn’s mediation on specific images and themes. Over three-hundred of Zürn’s heretofore unknown drawings were published by Erich Brinkmann in Unica Zürn Alben: Bücher und Zeichenhefte, (Berlin: Brinkman & Bose, 2010).

\(^3\) Much of the research into Zürn’s art involves the art of the insane and Art Brut. This is in itself a limiting category. If we give Zürn’s madness credit for her work and see it as the spontaneous outpourings of a mad woman, then why study it? The Man of Jasmine was marketed as a ‘case history’ when it was first published in German in 1977. However, it is an artist’s text and not merely the manifestation of insanity. Instead, it performs madness, conveying the impression of a split consciousness, which has far too much control to be written by a person truly in that condition. This means the book, and her drawings, are not simply Art Brut. (Caroline Rupprecht, “The Violence of Merging: Unica Zürn’s Writing (on) the Body,” in Subject to Delusions (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 133.) Zürn has been connected to Art Brut by several critics, especially in regard to her drawings. The term Art Brut refers to Jean Dubuffet’s collection of outsider art by people with no formal training including the
care for herself, created her nostalgic longing for her lost past. This nostalgia is symbolized by her father and seen throughout her art and writings.

In her writings and her art, Zürn agonized over the painful reality of experiencing personal loss, as well as the equally painful task of attempting to recreate a lost past. In particular, one figure from the past dominates the fantastic landscapes in her drawings: her father, Ralph Zürn. For Zürn, her father is the tall, elegant man she spent countless hours of her childhood waiting to see. In Zürn’s China Ink Drawings, the absence of her father is transformed into the presence of exoticized men and orientalized architecture. Throughout her written works and her artworks, Zürn attempted to define and discover her ideal masculine ‘other’— a figure that was able to fill the gaping hole her father created with his extended absences from Zürn’s life. For Zürn, this ideal male is ultimately a creation of her imagination, the mystical ‘Man of Jasmine’.

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mentally ill.) In her own words, she chose to remain ill. Her psychosis was deliberate. Although her art, especially her written works, circulates around her illness there is much more than mania to be found. In fact, Zürn’s association with schizophrenia has recently been questioned. In her article on Zürn, Jennifer Cizik Marshall argues that Zürn actually suffered from bipolar disorder. (Jennifer Cizik Marshall, “The Semiotics of Schizophrenia: Unica Zürn’s Artistry and Illness,” published in Modern Language Studies, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Autumn, 2000), 21-31.) Caroline Rupprecht and Erich Brinkmann, two of Zürn’s most thorough scholars also cite the inaccuracy of Zürn’s diagnosis. The present day diagnosis would be “bipolar affective disorder” with “psychotic features.” (Rupprecht, 134.)
Memories of Childhood: Dark Spring

Unica Zürn’s childhood and early adult life circulated around German imperialism and the Third Reich. Zürn’s father, Ralph Zürn, and brother, Horst Zürn, were active in the German military, and, ultimately, they were both killed in battle in WWII. Her stepfather, Heinrich Doehle, was a top ranking dignitary in the Reich and introduced Zürn to her first husband, Erich Laupenmühlen. Laupenmühlen and Zürn had two children, a daughter and a son named Katrin and Christopher, respectively. Katrin was born in 1944, and Christopher was born in 1945, during the bombing of Berlin. After the fall of the Reich, in 1945, Zürn’s life changed dramatically, as did the lives of many Germans who were forced to reckon with personal and cultural guilt over the Holocaust. In 1949, Zürn divorced her husband, willfully granting him sole custody of her children; Zürn’s divorce also resulted in her decision to permanently cut ties with her mother, Helene Heerdt (later Zürn and Doehle). However, before continuing with any discussion of Zürn’s life post-WWII, it is important to understand her father’s connection to the war.

Ralph Zürn was a Calvary Lieutenant in the German army. In 1901, he was stationed in Namibia, then a German imperialist colony, where he moved with his first wife Orla Holm, a colonial novelist. From 1902 to 1904, Zürn was in charge of the Okahandjia district in Namibia, where he came into extreme conflict with the chief of the Nambian Herero people, Samuel

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4 Her father Ralph Zürn died in 1939 in Rapallo, Italy, and her brother Horst Zürn died in 1944 in Vitebsk, Russia.
5 Zürn’s parent’s were divorced in 1930 and her mother, Helene, married Dohele in 1931. During this time Unica worked as a screenwriter at UFA, a Nazi-propaganda machine, as well as a volunteer for the women workers section of the Nazi party.
7 One of these books includes Aus Mexhiko, collaboration between Ralph Zürn and Orla Holm published in Berlin in 1908.
Maharero. Zürn is, to this day, blamed for inciting a conflict between the Herero and the Germans that ended in the annihilation of 85% of the Herero people. In the chapter of *Herero Heroes*, dedicated to “Zürn’s War,” historian Jan-Bart Gewald explains how a: “German officer, Lieutenant Zürn, who, troubled by his conscience and his perceptions of what was happening in Herero society, panicked, over-reacted and effectively initiated the Herero-German war.”

Shortly after the war began, Zürn was relieved of his command and sent back to Berlin with his wife. The couple decided to continue traveling around the world, journeying as far as Mexico and India. In 1907, they began constructing a mansion in Grünewald, a suburb of Berlin. Ralph Zürn filled the house with the exotic trinkets, art, and furnishings collected during his travels. Lurking behind all the objects in the house are the traces of Ralph’s conflict in Africa, which destroyed his career and later prompted Orla Holm’s suicide. After Zürn’s and Holm’s divorce in 1910, Zürn met Helene Heerdt, who came from a very wealthy family. They were married in 1913 and Unica (Nora Berta Unika Ruth) Zürn was born in 1917, which was incidentally the same year Holm committed suicide.

Ralph Zürn’s controversial military career greatly influenced Unica’s psychology and work. The events surrounding Ralph Zürn’s dismissal, and the objects he collected on his

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10 Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 156. “Indeed, following the outbreak of the war, Zürn was recalled to Germany. Upon his return the possibilities of instituting court martial proceedings against him, for having instigated the war, were investigated. Fortunately for Zürn, he was never court martialled and the investigations regarding his role in the outbreak of the war were quashed as the war caught the Kaiser’s and public imagination.”
11 Orla Holm committed suicide by poisoning at a mental hospital in Vienna at age 34. Felka and Brinkmann, “Unica Zürn: Biographical Background,” 99.
12 Several art historians mention Zürn’s latent feelings of guilt over the German atrocities of WWII, but mention nothing about Ralph Zürn’s connection with German Imperialism and the Herero Uprising in Namibia in 1904. They also mention the ‘treasures’ her father decorated their home with, but fail to connect this fact with Zürn’s drawings. These are Mary Ann Caws, “Unica Zürn: Beyond Bizarre,” in *Unica Zürn: Dark Spring* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2009), 42.; Malcolm Green, “Introduction” to *The Man of Jasmine & Other Texts* (New York: Atlas Press, 1994), 8.; Sepp Hiekisch-Picard, “Unica Zürn. Remarks on the Development and Reception of her Oeuvre,” in
travels, essentially set the stage for Unica Zürn’s artworks. Through her exposure to the exotic objects in Grünewald, her childhood home, her drawings became a chaotic blend of the grotesque and the marvelous. The following section will examine Zürn’s childhood fixation on an increasingly exotic masculine figure. This figure represents her absent, traveling father and can be seen throughout her memoir *Dark Spring* and her China Ink Drawings.

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The absence of Zürn’s father manifests itself in her writings as well as her drawings, especially as seen in her 1967 memoir *Dark Spring*. Although *Dark Spring* is written in the third person, it deals directly with Zürn’s own childhood and family. The characters and events in the story bear strong resemblances to those in her graphic works. *Dark Spring* is a coming of age story, but the title reveals the anxiety of these years. Zürn’s autobiographical protagonist, whom I will refer to as Unica, never fully evolves into adulthood. Instead, she remains a child stuck in the springtime of youth. The book focuses on the duality between male and female; a duality that leads her to glorify men and condemn women, including herself. The mother and father in the story are Zürn’s archetypes for each sex.

The most important figure Zürn’s novel introduces is her father. As the story’s narrator, Zürn explains: “The first man in her life is her father….From the first moment on, she loves him…. She prefers him to the women who usually surround her. His smell, his powerful large hands, his deep voice!” She fiercely idolizes him, and continues to glorify men throughout her work. At another point in *Dark Spring*, Zürn says of the men she knows: “They toss her up in the

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14 Zürn never wrote a word or drew a picture which was not based upon her own life, as Caroline Rupprecht states: “As critics have observed, it is difficult to separate her life from her work, for they seem inextricably interwoven,” see Rupprecht, *Subject to Delusions*, 133.

15 Zürn, *Dark Spring*, 35.
air and she, fully confident in whatever males do, feels herself caught at the last second before a terrible fall. In her eyes the male is a great magician, a creature able to accomplish anything, no matter how impossible.”¹⁶ Now the figure of man, signified by the father, moves from idol into magician. His greatness can only be described as magic, in contrast to the uncomfortable, corporeal language she uses to describe the mother.

Early in the novel, Unica climbs into her mother’s bed in search of comfort. Instead, the woman she finds at her side rolls over her and crushes her under piles of “gross tepid flesh”. This woman simultaneously attacks her with a long phallic tongue that “resembles the thing in her brother’s pants.”¹⁷ In Unica’s eyes, this evil woman causes her father to stay away from home. She contrasts her mother against her father, so that her mother’s grossness enhances her fathers appeal. Her father, and by extension all males, is a mythical, benevolent magician, and her mother, and by extension all women, is an evil monster.¹⁸

In **Dark Spring**, Unica’s father is a beautiful adventurer whom she loves endlessly, but he disappears into faraway lands. In his introduction to Zürn’s memoir *The Man of Jasmine*,¹⁹ Malcolm Green describes Zürn’s relationship with her father: “Ralph Zürn, senior Calvary officer was stationed in Africa and…would return to Berlin after long months of absence, looking dashing in his boots and with his sun tan, to treat her as a lady, kissing her hand, giving her exotic gifts and calling her his princess.”²⁰ His absence only serves to exaggerate her obsession with him. She decides that distance enhances love. Noticing the long periods in which her father stays away, Zürn states in **Dark Spring**: “[Unica] senses the attraction emanating from

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¹⁶ Ibid., 37. The male simultaneously places Zürn in danger and is the source of her rescue.

¹⁷ Ibid., 40.

¹⁸ The scene in which Zürn’s mother attacks her young self occurs in several of Zürn’s works including *The Man of Jasmine*. This originates Zürn’s categorization of women as monsters. For example she states: “From my earliest childhood, the first woman’s eyes I encountered conveyed the same uncontrollable anguish spiders cause me.” Unica Zürn, quoted by Felka and Brinkmann, in “Unica Zürn, Biographical Background, 100.


those who remain distant and mysterious. This is the first lesson she learns.\textsuperscript{21} Already, the concept of ‘absence’ is becoming important to her. Her father’s absence only intensifies her desire and solidifies him as her central object of desire, in order to be fulfilled as a person. The central object is important because it fuels all of Unica’s actions in \textit{Dark Spring}. When the father is around, she observes and adores him: “She sits down beneath his desk in the dark and caresses his polished shoes.”\textsuperscript{22} He becomes her artistic obsession, a figure whom she recreates countless times in her drawings. But, because he is not present in her daily life, she begins to search for his image in other men in order to fulfill her need for completion.

Throughout \textit{Dark Spring}, Zürn transforms her desire for her absent father into her desire for another man to complete her. We see the importance of her masculine ‘other’ through the symbols of the sexes that she identifies throughout the family’s home. At night in her room, she explains her feeling of incompleteness and need for her ‘other’: “She thinks about finding something that would complete her, too. She takes all the long, hard objects she can find in her room, then puts them between her legs: a cold, shiny pair of scissors; a ruler; a comb; and the handle of a brush. Gazing fixedly at the cross-shaped panes in the window, she searches for a male counterpart that would complete her too.”\textsuperscript{23} The absent father, the cause of the feelings of incompleteness, sparks Zürn’s search for prospective candidates who could fill the male void.

For Zürn the ‘cross-shaped’ panes in the window signify the sexes. She continues to say: “In her bedroom, when she is supposed to fall asleep, she studies the panes in the window. Looking at how the two lines intersect in the shape of a cross, she thinks about man and woman: The vertical line is man and the horizontal line is woman. The point where they meet is a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Zürn, \textit{Dark Spring}, 36.
\item Ibid., 38.
\item Ibid., 38.
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secret.’’ The secretness of the meeting point emphasizes her desire to discover that unified center; her focus on its mysteriousness hints at the fact that she has not yet found this “complete” center in herself.

Zürn’s search for the prospective candidates to replace her absent father begins inside her home. In *Dark Spring* a painting hung in the family’s hall by Peter Paul Rubens [Image 1] is transformed into a family portrait; the men in the Rubens become her father, and the women become her mother. Zürn notes: “In passing, [Unica] looks, as she does every night, at the large Rubens painting depicting *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. These two naked, rotund women remind her of her mother and fill her with loathing. But she adores the two dark, handsome robbers, who lift the women onto their rearing horses.” Her sympathy for the masculine bandits begins a fascination with exotic men, fuelled by her longing for her father. She feels that women, including herself, are inferior to men. Men, in her mind, are capable of acting and creating, whereas women simply wait to be acted on and influenced. She admires the two “dark handsome robbers,” whose darkness connects them with ‘otherness.’ For Zürn ‘otherness’ is anything that is not German. These ideas about the exotic and Oriental come from the objects her father leaves in the house; eventually for Zürn, these objects come to symbolize her father.

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24 Ibid. 39.
25 Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) is a Flemish baroque painter who is famous for his extravagant style that emphasizes movement, color, and sensuality. See: Gilles Neret, *Peter Paul Rubens, 1577-1640: The Homer of Painting* (New York: Taschen, 2004).
26 Ibid., 50.
27 In his introduction to Unica Zürn’s, *The Man of Jasmine*, Malcolm Green explains the limitations Zürn feels as a woman, he writes: “She can create something not determined by her own contingency, which she identifies as her womanly feelings, her limitations as a woman (“And painfully she feels the boundaries, the limitations, the monotony which being a woman sometimes entails.”)’, 12.
Another prospective male candidate introduced in *Dark Spring* is a dark stranger, a man Unica sees at a public swimming pool in her neighborhood.28 The dark skinned man at the swimming pool is one of the first foreign men she has ever seen; she decides he is a movie star. He resembles the masculine thieves and robbers in the paintings her father brings back from the Orient; and, he is similar to the actor Douglas Fairbanks in the *Thief of Baghdad*, a film cited in her book.29 She silently worships this dark man, just as she passively worships her father. Zürn keeps her adoration a secret, held inside her, only allowing herself to watch the object of desire, rather than interact with it. She writes: “To observe! A source of infinite pleasure for her!”30 This trend of ‘observing’ continues throughout her work. She often discusses her preference for interacting with a world of imaginary love, represented by objects of desire such as her father

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28 Zürn, *Dark Spring*, 81-82. “She sees… a group of foreign looking men. When she looks at the tallest of them, her heart starts beating faster. He looks exactly like one of the dark men who wait for her at night with burning torches in order to kill her. With an intense and unique affection, she chooses this man to be her deep, secret love… Now she finally knows why she is alive: to meet him.”
29 Ibid., 52.
30 Ibid., 81.
and the pool stranger, rather than by connecting to the physical world, represented by her mother’s gross body.

One day in *Dark Spring* the pool stranger disappears. His absence causes the same anxiety that her father’s disappearances inflict. Unica decides to find him; transforming herself into an active participant, rather than staying a passive observer. Perhaps this transformation occurs because she is frustrated that she cannot pursue her father when he departs. She walks to the pool stranger’s house, and he gives her a photo of himself as a reward for her pursuit. At home that night she takes the photograph and draws the man’s face over and over again. This act transforms her figurative ‘other’, a sign of her lack, into a visual and literal symbol of the ‘other’ in her art. In other words, she tries to control the ‘other’ by tying its symbolism to a definite form. However, this artistic creation does not fulfill her. In the end, she eats the image, merging herself with it and temporarily fulfilling her desire to “find something to complete her too.” After becoming complete, she puts on her favorite nightgown and jumps out of her bedroom window. By self-defenestration, Zürn passes through the crossbars in the window, which, as described earlier, signify the sexes. In doing so, she finally discovers the mystery point at which they meet.

Unica Zürn’s memoir *Dark Spring* addresses characters and themes, including loss, the ‘object’ of desire, and the exotic masculine ‘other’. Now I will turn to several of her drawings. These drawings share these themes with *Dark Spring*, with the interesting exception that Zürn’s romantic notion of her father as a noble adventurer slips away. Instead, he is represented as a German Imperialist, or Nazi.

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31 Ibid., 82.
32 Ibid., 38.
The Image: Ralph Zürn

In her analysis of Zürn’s oeuvre, art critic Rike Felka states: “In the context of her individual mythology, she dates or mystifies the ‘beginning’ of her system of madness back to the fixation on the ‘solemn and foreign looking,’ yet beautiful face of a man.”  

This is, undoubtedly, the face of her father, who we see looking grave in a photograph [Image 2], a study that bears a mysterious resemblance to many of the faces in her drawings. One of these is a portrait of a single face from one of her China Ink notebooks [Image 3].

Image 2:
Photograph of Unica Zürn’s father, Ralph Zürn (1874-1939), in 1917.

At first glance, Zürn’s China Ink drawing appears to be a random accumulation of patterns and lines that vaguely resemble the face of an animal or a person. However, when compared with the photo of Zürn’s father, physical similarities can be seen. Ralph Zürn’s nose in the photograph is quite distinct. It has a nasal hump and large bulbous tip; this is the exact same

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34 The only remaining photograph of Ralph Zürn, except for an image of the study at Grünewald in which he looks out of the window with his face turned away (Image 14).
form as the nose of the creature in Zürn’s drawing. Ralph Zürn wears a small dark moustache, similar to the moustaches of Charlie Chaplain or Adolf Hitler. This moustache is also present in the drawing. Zürn’s father’s hairline is also unique. He has dark hair with the distinct line of a widow’s peak and a straight part. The man in the drawing bears the same receding hair that drops down at the forehead and sweeps upward over the eye, returning downward over the edge of the face. The eyes share an equal intensity. However similar this drawing and picture appear, the differences between the representations are also significant. This image is created as much to emphasize his absence as it is to recreate his presence. Her maze-like lines draw the viewer into a visual cage. When looking at this drawing, the viewer becomes trapped inside Zürn’s hopeless attempts to create anew what was never real. In other words, Zürn’s drawing signifies her desire, but cannot transport it into reality. The patterns used in this image seem random but are in fact deliberate. They link this face to the buttoned army jacket Ralph Zürn wears in the photograph, tying him to the German military.
Nazi Figures

Zürn’s recollections of her father are tainted by his links to the Nazi party. She often writes about how memories of Nazi crimes against humanity often initiated her periods of mania. One of the clearest descriptions of her latent feeling of guilt over the Nazis’ actions during WWII took place in 1970. She wrote this description in her “Crécy Notebook” during her last stay in a mental hospital, shortly before her death. She describes staying up all night smoking. In the early morning, she suddenly awakens from her stupor and ‘realizes’ that the smoke from the night before is suffocating the inhabitants of the hospital. This smoke then continues to suffocate the inhabitants of Paris, and eventually it chokes the entire world, “making her as terrible a murderer
as the Nazis.”35 Also in 1970, she wrote that her hallucinations were often brought on by thoughts of “the Nazi atrocities and her guilt at being a German.”36 These atrocities are connected with the absence of, as well as the death of, her father, who passed away in 1939 while he was fighting for the German army in Rapallo, Italy.

In Zürn’s book The House of Illnesses37, she illustrates an image of a Nazi general, and labels it “my death” [Image 5]. The general wears a buttoned army jacket that resembles the one her father wears in the photograph [Image 2]. Her ‘death’s’ jacket is riddled with medals and ribbons. The general stands on only one leg. Looking at her drawings from St. Anne’s Hospital in 1961, similar figures and patterns appear. The Nazi general has the same intense eye as in the drawing of her father’s head [Image 3]. This figure appears repeatedly throughout her drawings.

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36 Green, introduction, 8.
“Suddenly a row of medal ribbons appeared on his chest and the buttons began to sparkle on his jacket. He stamped his left foot on the floor so that the spurs on his japanned riding boots rattled. He craned his neck and emitted a high pitched cock’s crow. Maybe I was experiencing a hallucination, but some of it must have been true. I had the most revolting death of all: an army officer.” Zürn, *The House of Illnesses*, 47.

The pages of Zürn’s 1961 journal, *VI. Album from St. Anne*, are filled with men, such as the figure below [Images 6 & 7]. These men are formed out of obsessive patterning, which, at first glance, appears to be random and merely ornamental. However, they are all only one man: the general man figure. He is obsessively repeated. The “obsessive repetition” process is similar to the end of *Dark Spring*, when Unica continuously redraws the image of the pool stranger from his photograph. Each of the multiplied men in the drawings wears the same jacket and has the same intense, exotic face. The jackets are formed from patterned, horizontal bands. In the instances of some of the men, these bands leak into their faces, assimilating their sole individual possession back into their standardized bodies. A vertical line of buttons divides their jackets. This is the same row of buttons that can be seen in Zürn’s drawings of the Nazi officer, titled
“her death” in *The House of Illnesses*, and is on the jacket worn by her father in the photograph taken in 1917. Like Zürn’s father, these men represent both, the exotic ‘other’ and the Nazi officer.

Several resemblances exist between the men in the drawings and Zürn’s portrayal of her Nazi officer/father. The first resemblance occurs with Zürn’s strategic use of the ‘bands’, which visually construct the jackets and the skin of the men and are identical to the “[rows] of medal ribbons”38 that appear on the chest of the Nazi officer in *The House of Illnesses*. Another similarity can be seen in Zürn’s drawing from November 1961, in which the man depicted stands on only one leg, as does the Nazi officer in *The House of Illnesses*. All of these men in the journal bear traces of her father, as well as ‘exotic’ facial features that are signified by their slanted dark eyes and pointed ears. The presence of these exotic features in Zürn’s drawings is not surprising. This is because Zürn’s memories of her father were created and defined as much by the oriental souvenirs he left behind, as by the visual memory of the man himself. The stereotypically exoticized men, formed by the composite images of army jackets and military honors, represent Zürn’s attempts to visually portray her nostalgic impressions of her father. In so doing, Zürn is attempting to mediate between her childhood, blissful memories of her father, and her adult, realistic awareness of her father’s active role within the Nazi regime. This combination of awareness and artistic subterfuge is seen in Zürn’s China Ink Drawings as well as in her works in other media.

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38 Zürn, *The House of Illnesses*, 47.
Traces of the Father: Collage Work

One of Unica Zürn’s collages from October 1964 reads: “Day of memories of my father: Thursday” (Jour de souvenires DE MON PÈRE: Jeudi). The image is a collage, but its pieces are stacked on top of one another rather than glued or taped. The collage consists of: two recto/verso drawings on a sheet of accounting paper, two brown note cards, two black and white photographs, and a piece of sheet music. When the layers are flipped in succession they slowly reveal hidden drawings within the collage that each contain secret symbolism [Images 8 - 11].

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39 Zürn disliked blank paper and often drew over musical scores making it easier to start her work. This score is a piece by Robert Schumann (1810-1856). A great Romantic composer who also suffered from bipolar disorder with psychotic features. (Erich Brinkmann, “Unica Zürn’s Albums,” in Unica Zürn: Alben, Bücher, und Zeichenhefte, (Brinkman & Bose, 2009), p. 11. Although Zürn was diagnosed by doctors and psychiatrists as a schizophrenic during her life, and continues to be regarded as such, she was actually bipolar. See Jennifer Cizik Marshall, “The Semiotics of Schizophrenia: Unica Zürn’s Artistry and Illness”, published in Modern Language Studies, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Autumn, 2000), pp. 21-31.
Zürn declares that: “The ordinary stuff of days and events is unbearable for her, and there comes a burning urge to pull back from reality. The daydreaming needed for inventing her tales, the excitation and the temporary respite, the flights of imagination – these become her daily bread.”\textsuperscript{40} The accounting sheet, a symbol of the everyday, ordinary activities that are inhibiting to the creative process, blocks our view of the other objects behind it. On one side of the sheet we read October, and on the other side November. In red pen Zürn writes the year, 1963, on each side. In the same red ink she places zeros in the slots for ‘recettes’ (income), ‘dépenses’ (spending), and ‘total.’ These zeros represent a nullification of the physical world that relies on money to operate. Instead of filling her accounting book with expenses, Zürn fills the pages with drawings and zeros. This image sends the viewer on a journey into Zürn’s mental landscape, a landscape that is filled with the exotic, oriental images from her father’s travels.

The first sketch, on the October side of the accounting sheet, is a China Ink drawing done in Zürn’s typical grotesque style. The image contains eyes, flags, insects, and hands; these are symbols that merge together into one being with Zürn’s obsessive line. The bands of army medals and ribbons, as seen in Zürn’s St. Anne drawings from 1961 [Images 6 & 7], are still present. This alludes to the continual symbolic presence of the Nazi/father figure in Zürn’s art. At the bottom of the sheet she transforms the lines, meant for calculations, into a cage. A face peeps out of the cage to observe the grotesque figure described above. The vertical barring lines symbolizing the everyday prevent the mysterious, observing face, a symbol of Zürn’s nostalgic longing for her father, from truly becoming one with Zürn’s desired and daydreamed reality.

Another, less visually complex, image lies on the verso side of the music sheet. This drawing is of a face with a clawed foot, and an eye encased in a fish’s body. Another eye is seated at the bottom of the image, clutched in the claws of the fish’s foot. This eye watches as a

\textsuperscript{40} Zürn, The Man of Jasmine, 104.
dotted line sinks off the paper, leading the viewer further down into the collage and Zürn’s memories.

Two note cards sit beneath the accounting sheet. The first reads: “October 64: There, where it is hotter, in the days of Africa.” (Octobre 64: là, ou il fait plus chaud, dans la jour d’afrique). The lower note card reads: “October 64: The winter begins with distant memories – into the night of Africa” (Octobre 64: l’hiver commence avec des souvenirs, lointaines – dans la nuit d’afrique). A separate handwritten heading lies to the right in red ink. This is the most important line in the image, and perhaps Zürn’s entire artistic output; including books like Dark Spring, China Ink Drawings, and combinations of prose and imagery such as this collage. It reads: “With the father – everything begins” (Avec le père – Tout commence). All the texts related to her father are written with red ink, while all others are written in black.

The note cards hide two photographs. The first, situated beneath Zürn’s note about the hot African day, displays a safari landscape. A strange shadow dominates the foreground, and may be the shadow of the man who took the photograph. The bottom photograph is a night scene, and accompanies the note about winter and night. A white tent and covered wagon emerge from the darkness. The photographs fit Zürn’s descriptions about the loneliness of her winters spent with souvenirs of her father, while he was far away in the night of Africa. Ralph Zürn may have photographed these two scenes during his travels as a Calvary officer of the German Army. Regardless of where they were shot, they show Zürn’s vision of the landscape that took her father from her.

This collage is a snapshot of Zürn’s daily concerns in October 1964. She does not care for money and reality; the focus is on the memories of her father. As the collage hints, everything starts with the father. The drawing on top can never be understood without the slow process of
picking through Zürn’s hidden desires. This collage is in effect a journey through Zürn’s consciousness. As the viewer moves down the layers of the page, they see increasing evidence of the father’s presence in Zürn’s art. She imagines the hot days and distant nights her father spent in Africa and feels abandoned. For Zürn, winter begins when her father leaves and gives her trinkets to remember him by. Her life has become this cycle of arrival and departure, defined by her continuous attempts to make the objects he left behind as meaningful as the man himself.
Zürn exposes her desire to recreate her father by placing things that remind her of him into her drawings and writings. In *Dark Spring*, she mythologizes her father, making it clear that he is her perfect ‘other’. She casts him as a ‘beautiful adventurer’ and ‘magician’ whose constant absence serves to amplify his charm. This absence drives her to search for a new object of desire. She begins her search inside the home, where she looks to the bars in the window to provide the solution, and then outside the home, to the stranger at the pool who she passively adores.41 Zürn’s drawings tell the same story, only visually, and with the lurking menace of her father’s true Nazi identity. In the aforementioned collage Zürn reveals: “It all starts with the father” and

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41 Zürn sought to admire from a distance in her actual life. In a journal she described the happiness she felt when Bellmer allowed her to watch him work on a series of portraits of famous Surrealist men commissioned by a gallery. These included Man Ray, Gaston Bachelard, Henri Michaux, Matta, Wilfredo Lam, Hans Arp, Victor Brauner, and Max Ernst. She states: “There are those who must be adored and other who adore. I have always belonged among the latter. Being full, constantly full of wonder, admiration and adoration. Remaining in the background, watching, looking – that is the passive manner in which I lead my life.” Green, introduction, 10.
places memories of her father in the imagined landscape of Africa. All of these works are the manifestations of desire, twisted to fit into the hole created by the absence of her father.

In order to understand the continual presence of desire in Zürn’s work I will look at the psychoanalytical theories of Jaques Lacan (1901 – 1981 CE). The terms ‘lack,’ ‘desire,’ and ‘other,’ are used in Lacanian psychoanalysis, with which Zürn was undoubtedly familiar. Zürn assisted Bellmer in writing his manifesto *Little Anatomy of The Image* which extended with Lacan’s statement that “the unconscious is structured like a language” into his own concept that “the body can be compared to a sentence that would entice us to disarticulate it so that its true content might be recomposed.” Lacan gave a famous series of lectures at St. Anne’s Psychiatric Hospital while Zürn was interned in St. Anne’s from September 1961 to March 1963; during this time she filled six notebooks with her China Ink drawings. Lacan’s 1961 lecture took place only a few meters from her room according to her doctor, Jean François Rabain. Zürn and Bellmer personally knew Lacan, and many of her psychoanalysts were his disciples. Zürn even dedicated her book *The Man of Jasmine* to “Monsieur le prof LACAN.”

For Lacan, desire is the unachievable object that a person believes will resolve a fundamental lack, Zürn’s absent father. This lack forms after the ‘Mirror Stage’, when an infant first recognizes itself in the mirror. The child sees its image as whole and perfect, and understands itself as the complete object of its mother’s desire. However, this perfect self is destroyed when the child is introduced to the realm of the ‘Symbolic’ through language. After being given language, the child sees itself as a small and fractured part of an enormous world. It

44 Ruprecht, *Subject to Delusions*, 134.
45 Ibid.
sees the competition it faces for the desire of its mother, in what Lacan terms the ‘name of the father.’ Also, in his lecture ‘The Mirror Stage’ Lacan introduces the ‘Innenwelt’ and ‘Umwelt’, or ‘innerworld’ and ‘outerworld’, as two realms that have to be navigated after the Mirror Stage.

The name of the father, literally the understanding that the child bears the name of its father and is not complete in itself, refers not to the father specifically, but all aspects of society that control the child. The name contains the ‘phallus’, all the power the child lacks, which is separate from bodily needs (being about desire instead of need) and is not the penis. Thus language creates the child as an isolated, controlled, and fractured being who uses language in an attempt to recapture its once complete image, or ‘object petit á’. However, language is only symbolic and cannot convey the ‘real’, meaning that the child will never be able to resolve its lack.\footnote{Summary of Lacan’s theories paraphrased from Sean Homer, \textit{Jaques Lacan} (New York: Routledge, 2005).}

The ‘other’ is both the perfect self seen in the mirror and the other person who is expected to resolve its lack in the world. Zürn explicitly looks to the crossbars in the window in hopes of “finding something that would complete her too.”\footnote{Zürn, \textit{Dark Spring}, 41.} Lacan’s theory of lack and desire accompanies his discussion of the ‘gaze’. Before the mirror stage the child understands its existence through the gaze of the mother who sees and adores it. However, during the mirror stage the child is introduced to the ‘I’. By seeing its form the child understand its completeness. In other words, the gaze or eye gives the child a conception of themselves as a single, unified, I. Then introduced to language, the child becomes a ‘me’, a self-image created in relation to the name of the father and the image the child wishes to be seen as. The object of desire is only a
screen for the child’s narcissistic projections, and to approach the object of desire is to see that its desire is nothing but its lack, and therefore irresolvable.48

For Zürn, the object of desire is not the mother but the father. In her reality the mother is purely physical repulsive. It is the masculine she desires to incorporate into herself to resolve her fundamental lack. However, every time she believes herself close to finding this perfect masculine ‘other’, she painfully realizes it cannot be obtained. Hence why Zürn is unfulfilled by drawing the face of the ‘pool stranger’ and eats it – only to find that this act is unsatisfactory as well. Zürn’s art is a search for her ‘other’. She is an artist who never stopped working on the same project. From the time Bellmer gave her the tools to create, she used them to rebuild her life as her art. Zürn worked to record her psyche on paper and become more than she could be as an alienated woman. In order to trace a path through Zürn’s complex images the first step is to find the trail of her desires. As seen in the previous section, this all begins with the father. However, the image of her father seen in Dark Spring and her China Ink Drawings was created as much from his absence as his presence. He left souvenirs behind as he traveled throughout the world. These objects and the house they decorated become the body of her father, a body created from loss and desire. This house-turned-body is Grünewald, Zürn’s childhood home, and the topic of the next section.

Unica Zürn grew up in a mansion built by her father in the suburb of Grünwald, outside of Berlin. The house was filled with furnishings and decorations brought back from Ralph Zürn’s travels. In 1929, Zürn’s childhood came to an end when her father and mother divorced and auctioned off the house and all of its possessions. In a sense, for Zürn the house was her father; every souvenir he left behind between his travels retained his image and memory. The house had become a metaphor for his body, as well as the symbol of his absence. Zürn “thinks about finding something that would complete her, too”, and searches for the answer in the panes of the houses window and all the objects in her room.

Zürn’s story *The House of Illnesses*, like *Dark Spring*, assists in understanding Zürn’s *China Ink Drawings*. In the book, Zürn converts her body into a house, or a labyrinth, in which each body part represents a different room. In each room, she is trapped with “her death,” the image of the Nazi general that resembles the photograph of her father. The Nazi general eventually forces Zürn to leave her fantastical body house, although she would rather stay in the house and remain ill. In his introduction to Zürn’s drawings, Roger Cardinal asks, “Is it possible to trace a valid path through the thickset maze of these designs?” The answer is yes: it is possible. The designs become intelligible if we understand that Zürn herself was trapped inside her memories of Grünwald. Her books reveal the patterns and meanings behind her drawings, giving clarity to images that seem impossible to interpret. Houses and labyrinths become very

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49 Green, introduction to *The Man of Jasmine*, 12: “The parents divorced in 1931 and the home, an Aladdin’s cave containing the fantastic objects her father had brought back from distant lands, and which later appeared in her hallucinations, was auctioned off.”
50 Zürn, *Dark Spring*, 41.
important in Zürn’s writing and art; the images begin with her childhood home Grünewald. Objects, such as Grünewald, start to replace people in Zürn’s psyche’s hierarchy of importance, as is reflected in their repetition throughout her art.

A photograph of Zürn as a teenager, taken in 1928, shows her with the Grünewald house. The house in this photograph becomes the template for the houses Zürn depicts in the backgrounds of her China Ink drawings [Image 12]. The luxurious interior of Grünewald’s study room is shown in another black and white photograph [Image 13]. The study’s walls and floor are crowded with framed landscape paintings and desks crammed with papers, postcards, and trinkets. The crowding of items in this room resembles how much ‘stuff’, or patterns and motifs, Zürn packs into her drawings. Two figure statuettes are visible in the study. One figure, the statue of a lovely woman on a column, points towards the ghostly form of Ralph Zürn. In this photograph, he is forever captured gazing out a bright window at an unknown scene. The other, smaller, figure is located on a desk in front of him. The detached and tiny female on the desk recalls Zürn’s statement in Dark Spring about silently worshiping her father: “She sits down beneath his desk and caresses his polished shoes.”

These two female figures are present in the room, yet they are very detached from Ralph Zürn, who remains remote and aloof. The wallpaper is a repetitive floral pattern that often appears in Zürn’s drawings. The small round window to the right of Ralph has the vertical and horizontal bars Zürn discusses in Dark Spring; these are the same bars Zürn associates with the sexes and the mystery of their meeting point. This is the house Zürn daydreams about daily. In these lucid dreams she wanders around the house in secret. She describes the importance of the house in The Man of Jasmine:

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53 Zürn, Dark Spring, 38.
54 For examples see: Erich Brinkmann, Unica Zürn Alben: Bücher und Zeichenhefte (Berlin: Brinkman & Bose, 2010), 7.09 & 7.10.
In her thoughts she endlessly returns to the house and garden of her childhood in Grünewald. Countless times she goes up and down the stairs, crosses the dozen rooms, looks at the fireplace in the big living room where the fire burned in winter. She runs her hand over the furniture her father brought back from his trips to Asia and the East; this furniture turned the house not into a museum, but a magic cavern where her imagination could run free. Since the day of the auction she sees again the furniture, the pictures, the shapes of all the objects she had grown up with; over the years she has never stopped repeating this exercise, only she has brought to perfection. In truth, since her fifteenth year, there has not been a day in which she has not taken unseen strolls through the house whose loss brought a grief she has never overcome.\textsuperscript{55}

Here Zürn directly states that the house is her lost Lacanian ‘object’, however the house is nothing without the father, who built and furnished it. The house is a powerful symbol for nostalgia in Zürn’s life and works. In her writings, the house is turned into a magical cavern that is presided over by her father. In \textit{Dark Spring}, her father is represented as “a great magician, a creature able to accomplish anything, no matter how impossible.”\textsuperscript{56} There are magicians, princesses, and palaces in many of Zürn’s China Ink drawings; these are the mythological representations of Zürn’s father, herself, and Grünewald.

\textsuperscript{55} Zürn quoted in Felka and Brinkmann, “Unica Zürn: Biographical Background,” 100.

\textsuperscript{56} Unica Zürn, \textit{Dark Spring}, 37.
An early example of Zürn’s ink work introduces the two figures found in all of Zürn’s drawings: the figures of herself and her father. In this work [Image 14], we see, two figures interacting in a simple room with a fireplace. The man points a wand at the woman, who represents Zürn herself, causing the woman to dance on the ceiling. The woman is wearing a strange dress covered in bells. At first glance, this drawing shows a mysterious magical scene. However, with a little more attention from the viewer, this scene easily descends into a drawing of mania and terror. When inverted [Image 15], the room with the comfortable fireplace transforms into an asylum cell with a barred window. The woman stretches on the floor with her mouth extended in a silent scream. The magician turns into a man on the ceiling who is torturing and manipulating her. Some of Zürn’s later China Ink Drawings, from the 1960’s, show similar scenes of Zürn’s inability to escape. This drawing conveys how her father controls her in many different ways, taking on a variety of personas to do so. The man in this drawing is simultaneously her father, her magician, and her torturer. In Dark Spring, the man who rescues her from a ‘terrible fall’ is the same as the man who tossed her in the air, subjecting her to danger for his amusement. This drawing introduces the major characters found in Zürn’s drawings. In Zürn’s later China Ink works, these figures come together within landscapes that evoke the exotic objects found throughout Grünewald.

57 Unica Zürn, Dark Spring, 37: “They toss her up in the air and she, fully confident in whatever males do, feels herself caught at the last second before a terrible fall. In her eyes the male is a great magician, a creature able to accomplish anything, no matter how impossible.”
Zürn’s drawings reinterpret ornate furnishings and artworks that exist inside the Grünewald house. They are “faux-exotic”, or western caricatures of the eastern lands to which
her father traveled. The collection of figures and creatures in the Grünewald house reflects her father’s taste in art; his taste includes works such as Rubens’ “Rape of the Sabine Women”, which was previously introduced in relation to Zürn’s Dark Spring. Zürn’s elegant lines resemble Chinese, Japanese, and Arabian textiles; the styles are merged into Zürn’s numerous ‘eastern’ patterns. All of these ornamental decorations in her works represent her fascination with the exotic, the oriental, and the ‘other’. This fascination extends into depictions of exotic male figures in her art.

One particularly violent scene in Dark Spring introduces Zürn’s fascination with her exoticized foreign men. She lies in bed, imagining a circle of men coming to bestow upon her the honor of being a sacrifice. Zürn notes:

With all the strength of her imagination, she longs for [these] wild, murderous [men]…The circle of men in black appears and they close in on her. Glowing eyes stare at her through the eyeholes of repulsive masks. Some wear gleaming helmets. When they tear off their masks, she sees the wild faces of Arabs, Chinese, Blacks and Indians. She prefers the colored men to the white ones. None of them look like any of the men she knows.58

Zürn’s oriental figures and landscapes present no actual place, they are simply “other”, or anything that is not German. This is apparent by her generalizations about the locations to which her father traveled. She says “his trips to Asia and the east”59 instead of naming any specific location. She also lumps together the infinite amount of artistic and design variety that could have been brought to the house from the ‘east’. The same lack of differentiation and stereotyping is seen in her description of the circle of men who come to her room at night in Dark Spring. She prefers their ‘wild’ colored faces to the faces of the men she knows, precisely because they do not resemble the men she knows. By creating these exoticized, foreign male counterparts, Zürn is filling the absence created within her due to her desire to be in her father’s presence.

58 Zürn, Dark Spring, 62.
59 Zürn quoted by Felka and Brinkmann, “Unica Zürn: Biographical Background,” 100.
Ultimately, they help her to stave off her anticipation for her father’s return to the “magic cavern” in Grünewald.

Zürn’s reinterpretations of her household’s objects also passed into the realm of hallucinations. A passage from The Man of Jasmine ties the house to Zürn’s hallucinations and art. In this passage, she introduces several of the objects inside the house and praises the mania that gives her the chance to revisit her childhood, Unica exclaims: “What gifts madness is able to bestow on her.”

In this scene, Zürn describes an evening spent hallucinating while staying at the Hotel Minerva in Paris. She looks out the hotel’s window and sees:

…there— at the far end— appears the house of her childhood in Grünewald like a night-time fata morgana. Who is it that made her a present of his hallucination with his supreme love?... She sees the Indian Buddha from the Rock Temple, the large Chinese dragon which is embroidered in silver and gold threads on black velvet, the Arabian lamp with its red, gold, and green light.

Zürn’s fascination with this manic hallucination comes from her nostalgic desire to revisit the lost house. She connects the phantom house with the exotic objects inside it: the Buddha, the Dragon, and the lamp. Therefore, she connects her father with the phantom house and hallucination. She believes that this vision is a gift from an ‘other’, and questions who in the universe loves her so much as to give her something so wonderful. Zürn believes her father to be this ‘other’ and she sees the objects inside the house as proof of his “supreme love”, despite the fact that her father was mostly absent from her life. Now the exotic gifts of childhood have become the “gifts of madness.” However, as seen in the collage “It all starts with the father” [Images 8 – 11] and the magicians cube [Image 14 & 15], menace only lies inches beneath the marvelous surfaces of Zürn’s visions and drawings. Ralph Zürn was able to travel the world, collecting wonderful artifacts, only after his supreme failure in Namibia.

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60 Zürn, The Man of Jasmine, 93.
61 Ibid.
62 More information about the loss of the house on pg. 27 in note 44.
The reality of her father’s, and German, imperialist exploits is idealized in many of her China Ink Drawings. One such image is a collage-drawing from 1960 [Image 16]. This collage-drawing incorporates a German anthropological textbook, with a pen and ink drawing by Zürn. The unidentified text in the paper used for the drawing describes the art and hieroglyphs from the 18th Egyptian Dynasty’s Theban city of the dead. This necropolis sat on the opposite bank of the Nile to Luxor and reportedly holds over 450 tombs. A text such as this one would have greatly contributed to western civilization’s Egyptomania and interests in colonialism in the 19th century.

In this collage-drawing, Zürn manipulates the page of the book, transforming it into the emblematic images of her father, herself, and Grünewald. She deliberately covers certain words with ink, while leaving others visible. In doing so she creates a poem out of the text. Visible phrases that contribute to the poem at the bottom of the page include: “Something that has not yet been erased…without a doubt soul maintained.” In the foreground of the image, near the bottom of the page, there is a woman with three faces. She delicately holds a flower in one hand. In the middle ground of the drawing, there is a goat or donkey; this is the creature Zürn associates with herself. In the background, there is a palace with a variety of huge windows. The palace also has numerous towers and turrets looming in the distance.

The building is a composite of Zürn’s fantasy architecture, another instance of her “faux-exotic” style. The architecture of the palace resembles Arabian palaces, African mosques, Roman arches, and European Medieval cathedral windows. This imagery is similar to what a child would see in young adult adventure books. Ralph Zürn filled the library at Grünewald with

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63 Some of the visible text from the unidentified german book includes: “In Entwurf Schiffes doch eher /nicht erklärt/man glauben /gewesen In natürlich /erhalten ein /gefältelten/Zweifellos /lichkeit der Seele.”

64 In a radio piece titled The Wondrous Animal from around 1950 Zürn tells the tale of a princess who goes on a walk on her 17th birthday, discontent at her reality she finds herself transforming into a donkey and is thrilled. Felka and Brinkmann, “Unica Zürn: Biographical Background”, 100.
these books, and Unica spent much of her childhood reading them. The castle the castle of this drawing is similar to the mansion in the photograph of teenage Zürn. As described earlier, teenage Zürn is standing in front of the Grünewald house, a distinctive fortress with its large windows, chimneys, and peaked roofs. There is no male figure in this collage-drawing, however, the text behind the drawing explains this absence. The text describes distant lands and cultures, which obviously alludes to Zürn’s father. This culture is another of Zürn’s imaginings of the location to which her father traveled. Again, the phrase “It all starts with the father”, as previously discussed in relation to one of Zürn’s collages, appears as a strong theme throughout her works.

65 Jules Verne’s 20000 Leagues Under the Sea is one of the books from Grünewald’s library. It tells the story of Captain Nemo and his ship the Nautilus. Captain Nemo is one prospective father figures Zürn discusses in Dark Spring (see Zürn, Dark Spring, 62). In the story he is the son of an Indian Raja, exploring the world and fighting imperialism. By connecting her father to Captain Nemo she effectively reverses the role he played in Nazi Imperialism she is effectively transforming him into an honorable adventurer.

66 This collage [Images 8- 11] reveals the same African obsession (“memories far into the night of Africa”) in more explicit phrasing.
Image 16: 1960, Berlin-Wittenau
The female figure in the collage-drawing makes another appearance in Zürn’s drawings in another image from Oracle and Spectacle. In this representation she is shown with only one face in profile, and she is a full figure, rather than a bust [Image 17]. Again in this portrayal, she holds the same flower, perhaps plucked from the garden outside of Grünewald. A giant, winged insect points its stinger towards her face, and two creatures crouch at her feet. One creature resembles a dog and the other appears to be a frog with numerous claws. The woman reaches to pet these monsters, apparently intimate with them and unafraid of the insect’s stinger. The patterning of these four figures is incredibly ornate and exotic. In the background, there is another palace like Grünewald. The stairs of this palace lead up to an arched doorway in which a man stands. He is wearing a headdress, holding a guard’s staff or spear. This exotic guard represents the magician, or “wild, murderous…Indian”, she “longs for” in Dark Spring. The palace once again symbolizes her lost childhood wonderland of exoticism, Grünewald.

This image brings together all the good aspects of Grünewald. This is the house to which Zürn desperately wishes to return, filled with the “furniture her father brought back from his trips to Asia and the east”. However, the house is not always desirable in Zürn’s work. It also represents Zürn’s entrapment inside her own desires. These desires, for Lacan, as well as Zürn are always unachievable. We see this in Dark Spring, as Unica realizes that the only way to discover the mystery between the sexes, as symbolized by Grünewald’s window, is to jump through the window and destroy herself.

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67 Unica Zürn, Dark Spring, 37 & 62.
68 Homer, Lacan, 70.
The House of Illnesses

In the work of Unica Zürn, the Grünewald house is not always a magical cavern. In *The House of Illnesses*, the house becomes her prison and perpetuator of her mental illness. Throughout Zürn’s works houses become synonymous with people and the human body. As Grünewald is a metaphor for her father, the House of Illnesses represents Zürn. A literal connection between houses and people can be drawn: “Some of Zürn’s most amazing drawings conflate the image of the asylum with that of the body, as in her publication *The House of Illnesses*. Each room is the part of a body: breast, heart, stomach…” This quasi-memoir, written shortly after moving to Paris during a bout of fever induced by jaundice, combines text and images describing Zürn’s journeys inside an asylum-turned-body.

*The House of Illnesses* begins with a Lacanian dilemma. Someone has stolen the hearts of Zürn’s eyes, and she will not be able to leave the house until the ‘heart-thief’ returns them. In the book the Nazi general/doctor, who resembles her father, states: “The truth is…the sharp-shooter is now in possession of the two hearts from your eyes, and it is quite likely that the hearts are still alive and unscathed. That is the complete and bitter truth.” The eyes and gaze, according to Lacan, are the seat of desire. In his explanation of Lacan’s theories, Sean Homer describes the importance of the gaze: “To exist one has to be recognized by an-other.” In other words, the eye creates the “I” and the ability to look and be looked at makes us real. If someone has stolen Zürn’s eye-hearts, this means she has no control over her desire or her own existence. This is the reality of her blind search for her father or male counterpart. In her search for her

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70 Mary Ann Caws, “Unica Zürn: Beyond Bizarre,” 53.
71 See image 5.
74 Ibid., 26.
of her father, and is trapped inside the labyrinth of the house-turned-hospital.\textsuperscript{75}

While in the ‘House of Illnesses’, she sleeps in the ‘Cabinet of the Solar Plexus’ [Image 18]. For Zürn, the solar plexus is special; it is the location of her inner-self and the place to which she retreats, similarly to the way she escapes with her imagined walks through Grünewald. In \textit{The Man of Jasmine} Zürn explains the significance of the solar plexus:

Ah- the solar plexus. It has always been the one thing she likes about all this is the mentioning of this lovely word. She herself lives in great harmony with her solar plexus. It has always been the one part of her body which reacted when she encountered those things which were important to her, and she has always been able to rely on this reaction. It always grew warm and radiant whenever she encountered that music, those people, those books, those art objects, indeed all those things which were necessary for establishing her inner kingdom over the course of her life.\textsuperscript{76}

For Zürn, the solar plexus is similar to Grünewald: It is a part of her inner kingdom and it is the place to which she goes to retreat from reality. The illustration in \textit{The House of Illnesses} that accompanies her description of the solar plexus is a face made of “veins of pearl and silver.”\textsuperscript{77}

These ornate materials reflect the luxurious interior of Grünewald that Zürn describes in her lucid daydream and seen in the photograph of Ralph Zürn in the house’s study. The intricate lines surrounding the face are ‘veins’ that overlap in an unnavigable, labyrinthine pattern. The maze of the house is now mimicked by the maze of the body, from which she cannot escape. Zürn is trapped in the center of the illustration, in her solar plexus room with its eyes that are beds and its forehead that is a window. Or, there is the possibility that, Zürn drew the veins to serve as a barrier to keep herself contained, as a way to prevent her own escape. In this reading,

\textsuperscript{75} Zürn describes the nature of her ecstatic psychotic episodes, which include hallucinatory flights, followed by months of depression as one continuous cycle of return and departure. This fits with the posthumous diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder with psychotic features attributed to Zürn. In \textit{The Man of Jasmine} Zürn describes the cycle: “A few unusual days, a few nights filled with the shattering experiences of hallucinations, a short upward momentum, a feeling of being extraordinary – and afterwards the fall, reality, the realization that it had all been an illusion.” p. 113.


\textsuperscript{77} Zürn, \textit{The House of Illnesses}, 13.
the intricate veins protect Zürn’s psyche. If Zürn were to escape from the maze she would lose her own body and existence. In *The House of Illnesses* there is a quote that supports this claim. Zürn states: “Since yesterday I know why I am making this book: in order to remain ill for longer than is correct… My better half, which is clever and wise, wants me to remain ill for some time, for it knows that one can gain from an illness like mine.”78 The *House of Illnesses* is Zürn’s illness with her body, and brings her closer to the imagined land of her childhood.

However, there are forces fighting to get her out of her haven. Later in *The House of Illnesses*, the doctor asks her to decide whether she will stay or leave. “You must decide,” he said brutally, “…Either you stay here or you leave. I wont tolerate doing anything by halves.”79 In order to find her the hearts of her eyes and unite with her desire, Zürn must sacrifice her life, and her grip on reality. In the last scene of *The House of Illnesses*, Zürn burns an effigy of herself, like the destruction of her body in *Dark Spring*, and she is finally able to leave the “House of Illnesses.”

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78 Ibid., 45.
79 Ibid., 47.
Zürn prefers the inner world, represented by the solar plexus, to the outer world of the body. Lacan refers to these as ‘innenwelt’ and ‘umwelt’. The opposite of the solar plexus in the *House of Illnesses* is the outer self or ‘umwelt’, represented by the ‘hall of bellies’. Once again, this duality is connected to the difference between male and female. The hall of bellies reflects the gross fleshy form of Zürn’s mother, as previously described in *Dark Spring*, and it is a place she ardently avoids. “From the hall of bellies one can hear the noise of indecent flatulence and soft, slapping, sucking, and puffing sounds. One can imagine what’s going on in there

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81 Zürn, *Dark Spring*, 40. “Suddenly she finds herself startled by a large, heavy body, which has already lost its beauty. This frustrated woman attacks the little girl with her wet, open mouth. It is similar to the thing hidden in her brothers pants.” A similar scene occurs in *The Man of Jasmine* in which Zürn crawls into her mothers bed to find a “mountain of tepid flesh which encloses this woman’s impure spirit.” Zürn, *The Man of Jasmine*, 25.
without looking. Wild horses wouldn’t drag me to open that door.”82 The mystery behind the door of the ‘hall of bellies’ is nowhere near as enticing as the mysterious meeting point of the cross bars in the window. Zürn is mostly interested in the aspects of the body that connect a person to the outside, such as are eyes, ears, and hands. The symbol of the eye appears everywhere in Zürn’s drawings.

Eyes appear in the patterns which make up figures and landscapes in Zürn’s China Ink works. An example includes her drawing of her father in which the eyes make up the skin of her father’s image [Image 3], as though he is looking out at her from every pore in his face. Eyes, according to Lacan, signify desire, and desire is driven by what is absent. Zürn, displaying an immense understanding of Lacan’s theories, visually depicts Lacan’s theory that: “while ‘I’ see from only one point, I am looked at by all sides.”83 Zürn places eyes all over her drawings; they are especially prominent in her drawings which refer to her childhood home and lost father, or her ‘object petit á.’ In The Man of Jasmine Zürn describes her drawing practice, which begins with the eye:

The pen “floats” tentatively above the white paper, until she discovers the spot for the first eye. Only once she is “being looked at” from the paper does she start to find her bearings and effortlessly add one motif to the next. In this way she draws the “family” she had never had and allows them to adopt her. 84

In each of her drawings Zürn constructs her desire, beginning with eyes, and creates for herself a new family. This family was never real, but that also means it can never leave her, unlike her actual family. This new family looks, or gazes, out of the paper at Zürn, and they make her existence the most important and the most real. Her drawings resolve her lost eyes hearts dilemma, and they allow Zürn to harbor the illusion that she can create her own reality within her

82 Zurn, The Man of Jasmine, 37.
83 Homer, Jaques Lacan, 124.
84 Ibid., 115.
drawings and within her life In a way, her internal reality, ‘innenwelt’, begins to replace her external reality, ‘umwelt’.

Within the ‘House of Illnesses’ the ‘best rooms’ are forbidden to Zürn. Zürn writes, “one is not allowed to enter all the rooms. Either they are too beautiful, so that one longs to return to them all one’s life after having been forced to leave them – or they are so revolting that their memory sticks to one like dirt. I was in a very beautiful room before I came to the House of Illnesses. And when I had to leave it, I would have liked to have clung to the chair so as not to go. It was the room in which I truly belonged. I knew that my best energies would be liberated there, and only there. But nobody seemed to respect that.”85 Once again, she is at odds with her desires, creating an internal conflict that ultimately results in her self-sacrifice. All of Zürn’s work can be seen as her attempt to build that ‘best room’ for herself, after having been forced to leave. However, in her drawings, she is blocked from the entrances to the palaces, which reflect this ‘best room’. In one of her drawings from St. Anne’s Hospital, we find the door literally blocked by the man wearing a headdress [Image 17]. Zürn is trapped inside the house of her own creation and desires in many of her works. Next, I will analyze a painting that conflates exoticism, masculinity, the house, desire, and escape into one image.

Desire and Entrapment

Zürn created very few paintings, however, a painting from 1956 connects the enchanted palace of Grünewald to Zürn’s exotic masculine figures [Image 18]. In the painting, evil spider women lurk inside the labyrinthine house, while the marvelous men flee from them into unknown lands. A thin upward-sloping line at the center is a tightrope, dividing the female from the masculine realms. The image is divided in half horizontally as well as vertically by the tightropes. The right half is the realm of men, while the left half is the realm of women.

85 Zürn, The House of Illnesses, 33.
Instruments of magic and creation sit on the right, including top hats, musical instruments, and boats or saddles. As examined in accordance with *Dark Spring*, Zürn believed men to be creators and initiators and women to be passive and waiting. The image is also divided into an upper realm and a lower realm. The left sits the labyrinthine palace with a huge eye window; it is an ominous place of no escape. The creature at the center of the painting is half red, half blue, and hangs on a wire from the top of the image, dividing the sides. The upper realm contains two symbolic figures: the top hat, the top hat and the eye located in a spiders web. The top hat relates to Zürn’s image of the ‘magical man’; and the eye seated in a spiders web relates to Zürn’s fear of women, and her view of them as spiders that control the only point from which she can escape the house.

The ‘magical man’ top hat floats at the top of the male side of the painting. Yellow and purple patterns burst from the hat into the sky; a magical scene recalling flowers being pulled from a magician’s hat. Connecting to Zürn’s declaration in *Dark Spring* that her father is: “a great magician, a creature able to accomplish anything, no matter how impossible.” A fantastic automobile, constructed of peacock feathers, lattices, and ship-wheels, sits on the tightrope below the top hat; another top hat sits on the tip of the automobile. At the bottom of the painting, there is a blue construction of forms. This blue construction may be a saddle, a ship, a harp, or a violin. It has a sphinx-like head and several eyes. This construction is the manifestation of Unica Zürn’s ideal male-oriented exoticism in her art; because it is capable of traveling and creating music, and it is distinctly oriental in its aesthetic.

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86 Examples of this kind of dualistic thinking are found throughout Zürn’s writings. In *Dark Spring* she loathes the fleshy and passive women and adores the robbers in the Ruben’s painting. She also states: “She is sorry she has to be a girl. She wants to be a man, in his prime, with a black beard and flaming black eyes.” Zürn, *Dark Spring*, 51.  
87 Zürn, *Dark Spring*, 37.
On the left, female side, there is a huge spider web. At the center of the web, a patterned eye is cradled. This eye resembles a cathedral window in appearance. The eye could also be interpreted as a spider, a creature Zürn most often associates with women. Beneath the eye/spider is a much less fantastic automobile. It resembles two tiny cells rolling down the tightrope hoping to attach itself to the larger machine. A complicated castle structure sits below, simultaneously wondrous and cage-like, like a fusion of Grünewald and the ‘House of Illnesses’. The top hats on the bottom left of the painting flee from this structure on stilts. The palace’s huge eye-window is similar to the larger window/spider at the top of the image.

This playful painting mimics *Dark Spring*, because both written work and artwork investigate the division between male and female through their depictions of the house and the concepts of magic and traveling. The castle is a cage ruled by the spider, like Zürn’s repulsive mother in *Dark Spring*, who lurks around Grünewald attacking Zürn’s childhood self. The top hat is a magican’s tool that represents her father; this hat escapes from the castle/cage on the back of a exotic vehicle, so as to go travel the world, and collect exotic art.
The Grünewald house symbolizes a lost ideal. The house is a figure in her works that is just as important as the male and female figures. This is because the house is both male and female. Its cross-bar window holds the answer to the secret between the sexes. In the *House of Illnesses*, the house becomes Zürn’s body, inside of which she is trapped with her mysterious ‘other’. By transforming the labyrinth into her own body, Zürn’s psyche, body, art, and illness, all collapse into one impossible to escape house.
In the next section we will explore a new manifestation of the father. He directly links Zürn’s artistic present and connection to Surrealism to her childhood, like *Dark Spring*. This is the ‘Man of Jasmine,’ a figure who appears in many of her China Ink works and after whom Zürn titled her most ambitious book.
3
The Man of Jasmine

Zürn’s ‘Man of Jasmine,’ is her imaginary ‘other’, as well as the namesake of her self-proclaimed masterpiece, *The Man of Jasmine*. The Man of Jasmine is the most important figure, aside from the figure of her father, to introduce. Paralysis is the Man of Jasmine’s most essential characteristic, in the book Zürn states: “He’s paralyzed! What good fortune.”\(^{88}\) He lives in the garden outside Grünewald, in Zürn’s inner-kingdom, ‘where the jasmine blooms [even] in winter’.\(^{89}\)

The Man of Jasmine is first introduced to Zürn’s readers in a deliberately Lacanian scene, in *The Man of Jasmine*. This scene begins when Zürn’s childhood-self steps into the mirror in her bedroom at Grünewald, symbolizing the “mirror stage.”\(^{90}\) As Zürn walks deeper into the world of the mirror she encounters her childhood house, Grünewald. She enters into the house, ascends the staircase, and stops in front of a small table that has a note card on its surface. A quote from *The Man of Jasmine* describes this moment of encountering the card: “As she picks up the card to read the name on it, she awakens. The impression of this dream is so strong that she gets up in order to push the mirror to one side. She finds no wall and no door.”\(^{91}\) The name on the card is the name of her lost ‘object,’ the Lacanian ‘object of desire’ for which every person is searching, yet it is the one thing that she will never find. When Zürn awakens from the dream she awakens from the inner world of dreams, inhabited by her lost father, into the outer world of reality, populated by her detested mother.

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\(^{89}\) Ibid.

\(^{90}\) For an explanation of Lacan’s “Mirror Stage” see pg. 24. This scene also bears a strong resemblance to “Alice in Wonderland” & “Through the Looking Glass” by Lewis Carroll.

\(^{91}\) Zürn, *The Man of Jasmine*, 25. Incidentally, the only other note cards seen in Zürn’s art are the two note cards in her collage about Africa and her father [Images 8 – 11].
The Man of Jasmine’s introductory scene continues with Zürn seeking out her mother for comfort. More precisely, she goes to her mother in order to “get into her bed, and return, if possible, to whence she came as to see nothing more.” The loss of the name on the note card is so impactful on her psyche that Zürn wishes to escape from existence by crawling back into the void from which she came. However, there is no escape; instead, her mother becomes a similar monster to the repulsive creature in Dark Spring. Zürn writes: “The mountain of tepid flesh which encloses this woman’s impure spirit rolls over onto the horrified child, and she flees… from the mother, the woman, the spider!” After retreating from her mother’s bed, she sees for the first time, “The Man of Jasmine! Boundless consolation! Sighing with relief, she sits down opposite him and studies him. He is paralyzed! What good fortune. He will never leave his seat in the garden where the jasmine blossoms in winter.” This Man of Jasmine is an even more magical, altered version of her father. The Man of Jasmine in paralyzed, but his immobilizing wound of paralysis makes him absolutely perfect to Zürn. Her new ideal male figure can never escape the house, and therefore he will never abandon her or leave her alone with her monster mother. This new, extra-magnificent, father figure is seen throughout Zürn’s China Ink works. Two examples I will analyze are the drawings Meeting and Touching.

Meeting

To fully understand Zürn’s fascination with her Man of Jasmine, we must acknowledge that he is an idealized version of her father. Unlike her real father, however, the Man of Jasmine is bound to a wheelchair and cannot move. Nevertheless, he still gives Zürn souvenirs, but, because he is paralyzed these souvenirs take the form of hallucinations. As art critic Rike Felka explains:

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92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
For [Zürn], there remains the saving clause of a distant father, who travels a great deal. The adoration of an inscrutable face remains in her imagination, like the body bound to a wheelchair, unchangeably situated in the same place, in white jasmine. A delegate of the father without a body, someone whose face counts for her – who cannot leave her, dependent as he is, like herself, on assistance…

Zürn projects the traits of her father onto her imaginary ‘others’ in search of the ‘object’ that would most complete her father’s absence; such as the Man of Jasmine and her exotic men from *Dark Spring*. These men are all Zürn creations. They reside inside her mind this is made clear in Zürn’s drawing *Meeting*. Zürn recreates her father in the two diptychs *Meeting* and *Touching*. Two figures fill *Meeting*: the Man of Jasmine and Zürn herself [Image 19]. Zürn sits on the bottom edge of the page, facing away from the viewer and reality; instead she chooses to face the fantasy world of her drawing. The book *The Man of Jasmine* charts Zürn’s slow transition from reality into her private imaginary world. A large masculine figure, the Man of Jasmine, billows from the crown of her head. Zürn and the monstrous man are connected by a red dotted line. This line snakes up her spine, swirls around inside her head, and then bursts from her head, to divide the body of the man in half. The man has horns akin to the ones Bataille’s minotaur possesses. He also has clawed and blackened hands; these hands are the ones Zürn always draws on the Man of Jasmine. The man balefully stares at the viewers of the drawing, his expression made even more striking by the absence of his nose and mouth.

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96 Here, Zürn is reversing the myth of Athena’s (the Greek version of the Roman goddess Minerva) birth. Athena had no mother, she was born directly from her father’s, Zeus’, head. Zürn, as already discussed, hated her mother, and would love the idea of being born directly from her beloved fathers head. Interestingly, Zürn was staying at the Hotel Minerva in Paris when she created *Meeting*, which is more akin to a birth scene rather than a “Meeting”. Rupprecht, *Subject to Delusions*, 155.
Zürn explains this “Meeting” drawing with an anagram: “When I was a child, I dreamt / about the marriage with a white-hair man, paralyzed, / tied to a wheelchair forever…/…since my / childhood wedding, in a white dress - / I feel that I gradually become white… / To swim into the White, and perceive finally / the white Image?” 97 The Man of Jasmine and the ‘White Man” are the same character in Zürn’s writings. The whiteness refers to nothingness, or Lacanian lack. The Man of Jasmine is the product of Zürn’s lack, and desire for a male figure who will never leave her. The fact that he emerges from her head in this drawing indicates that the Man of Jasmine does not exist externally from her person; he is irrevocably in her imagination and lives only in the world of her artworks and writings. Like a statue, he is paralyzed and frozen in the enchanted garden of Zürn’s mind. 98

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Aside from *Meeting*, Zürn created another diptych, *Touching*, that also portrays Zürn’s Man of Jasmine. The same two figures from *Meeting* are present in *Touching*, but one more figure is added in the latter [Image 20]. This additional figure is another woman, who also represents Zürn. In this drawing, this new woman melts into the body of the Man of Jasmine. At the bottom of the page, the previous version of Zürn is still present. However, now the Man of Jasmine’s horns protrude from her head. The characteristics of the previous Zürn and previous Man of Jasmine morph together. In the process, the first Zürn loses her body. Her body dissolves into the background, becoming a pattern of recurring ‘9’s’. This image indicates her desire to gain a higher form of life by disintegrating her physical form and merging with the Man of Jasmine. As art critic Jean-Louis Lanoux aptly observes, the Man of Jasmine begins as a surrogate father for her transcendence into a higher form of existence; but later, he becomes the director of her descendence into mania. Lanoux notes:

> Alternately protective and disturbing, this figure consoled her for her father’s inconstancy, served as her interlocutor, tuned her radio, misled her, hypnotized her by remote control, played jokes on her, impersonated her friends, gave her orders: “Climb up that ladder to the sky!”

The Man of Jasmine is the symbol of Zürn’s hearts desire, yet he is also the figure who spurred the onslaught of her madness. This is made clear in a simultaneously astonishing and horrifying scene from *The Man of Jasmine*. The scene begins with Zürn lying awake in bed waiting for the Man of Jasmine’s arrival. The moment he arrives, coming through the window of her room inside a vivid green light, Zürn’s body splits in two. The first Zürn remains in bed, to watch, while the second Zürn ascends onto a glowing stage. The Man of Jasmine orders the performing Zürn to dance. Her beautiful and strange dance involves portraying every animal in existence. Her body twists and begins to rise until she is a blazing star. This being formed from the

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countless faces and appendages of humans and animals. This image recalls many of Zürn’s drawings; in which bodies multiply and merge. This astounding dance climaxes in a scene of mad violence. As Zürn becomes a scorpion, the Man of Jasmine directs her to stab herself, with her own sting. Zürn writes:

> [W]hat she is now “being ordered” to do is not a dance but the relatively short action which constitutes suicide: she is the scorpion which kills itself. She sees herself lying on ever-faster spinning disk, and the way her feet and legs grow together to form a dangerously long sting like a sharp pointed dagger, then curl slowly upwards in an elegant curve until its point hangs just above the centre of her solar plexus.¹⁰⁰

The Man of Jasmine is a creation who comes directly from Zürn’s beloved solar plexus and who, in the end, prompts her to destroy his origin, which inevitably obliterates Zürn herself.

In the book *The Man of Jasmine*, Zürn meets an artist named Henri Michaux, whom she instantly believes is the real life version of the Man of Jasmine. Zürn describes meeting Michaux in a room in Paris in 1957, and is struck by his resemblance to her childhood vision: “The image of her childhood vision is identical with this man’s appearance. With the sole difference that he is not paralysed and there is no garden with jasmine blossoms surrounding him.”¹⁰¹ Zürn notes that this meeting with Michaux is the beginning of her downward spiral into confusion and mania:

> In a room in Paris she finds herself standing before the Man of Jasmine. The shock of this encounter is so great that she is unable to get over it. From this day on she begins, very very slowly, to lose her reason.

After meeting a real life version of the Man of Jasmine, the line separating reality and fantasy in Zürn’s life is irrevocably destroyed. Because of this, she experiences a rush of mania that leads her to believe that she can reclaim the lost perfection of her childhood by pursuing Michaux. After Zürn is introduced to the ‘real’ Man of Jasmine, Michaux, she begins a new project, to merge with this man. By merging with him Zürn will finally be able to exist inside the mystery

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¹⁰¹ Ibid., 27.
point between male and female as well as reality and fantasy. In the image her figure and his are literally connected through the same red dotted spine. The red dotted spine contains the black buttons found on the jackets in Zürn’s drawings of the Nazi general [Image 5] and the exotic men [Images 6 & 7]. Zürn perfects the idea of merging in her character The Man of Jasmine, who comes from her and makes her simultaneously a magical male and a female.

Images of united males and a females appear throughout Zürn’s drawings and texts. In most, there is a male and female who are interlocked inside one another. One example is a short text completed by Zürn in 1967 titled *Les Jeux á Deux,*102. The story in this text is a game for two players: one male and one female. One stage of the game is called “The Game of Harmony,” during which the male player sleeps inside the female player, similarly to a mummy lying in a sarcophagus. Another example of male and female merging in Zürn’s written works can be found in her reference in *The Man of Jasmine* to the *Manuscript of an Anaemic.* Zürn writes: “Someone traveled inside me, crossing from one side to the other. I have become his home…Transversed by him inwardly, encircled by him from without – this is my new situation. And I like it.”103 A third example is in *The House of Illnesses,* when Zürn’s body is transformed into a hospital. Inside her hospital-body, there is a male doctor who controls her; incidentally this doctor also resembles Zürn’s father. After having finally resolved the mystery between the sexes, and the solution to her Lacanian lack, Zürn enters a euphoric state and is ready to sacrifice herself in order to permanently reside in this ideal androgynous state.

Zürn’s sense of self relies on this destruction of form. According to Zürn, her life has been a waiting period; in the *Whiteness with the red spot* Zürn states that her life has never been

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hers. She will start to truly live when she becomes something that is more than just male or female. Her illness deceives her into believing she has achieved this divine androgynous state, but, in the end this transition to formlessness\textsuperscript{104} will only occur through death:

> How good I would feel if I could be something which was neither man nor woman...And that is my salvation: my illness, which is my rescue and rebirth...only once the events stop repeating will it be my life...and that will never occur, until death.\textsuperscript{105}

\textbf{A “Real” Man of Jasmine}

For Zürn, her experience with meeting Henri Michaux epitomizes the Lacanian encounter with the ‘real’. For Lacan, the ‘object of desire’, or ‘other’, is always unattainable. When we approach the object we get dangerously close to the ‘real’; this point is marked by the experience of pleasure or extreme pleasure or extreme pain, which he terms ‘jouissance’. This is the realization that our ‘desire’ is nothing but our ‘lack’.\textsuperscript{106} In Zürn’s case, Michaux does not turn out to be the manifestation of her childhood ideal.

Zürn’s drawings chart this encounter, beginning with \textit{Meeting} and \textit{Touching}, and then moving into drawings of exotic landscapes, such as the ones seen in her earlier China Ink works that recall her childhood home. Once again, these drawings feature her two characters: the magical male and the manipulated female. One of Zürn’s untitled drawings continues with the themes present in the compositions \textit{Meeting} and \textit{Touching} [Image 22]. In this drawing the two figures, Zürn and the Man of Jasmine, are to the right and behind the central figures in the

\textsuperscript{104} Zürn’s work depicts the ultimate battle between irrationality and reason, which is the ideal of late surrealism, as defined by Georges Bataille. Bataille published a dictionary entry dedicated to the word \textit{formless} in \textit{Documents} in 1929. He says that the job of \textit{formless} is to “déclasser,” or to simultaneously lower or debase objects while stripping them of their pretensions to meaning and attacking the very condition on which meaning depends. Bataille argues that art originates in the Minotaur, “a raging beast paroling the dark, vertiginous space of the Labyrinth,” not Narcissus gazing into the pool. Children begin to draw out of the desire to destroy and dirty the human form, this is formlessness. Bataille asserts that the universe is formless and is “something like a spider or spit.” Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, “Bataille’s dissident Surrealism, in \textit{Art Since 1900} (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 245.


foreground. The woman, the symbol of Zürn, reverently bows before the figure of the man; here again she faces away from the viewer towards the man and her ideal fantasy. Again, Zürn uses the Man of Jasmine, to confront reality, something she feels incapable of doing herself. Zürn’s characteristic curvilinear, calligraphic lines, blend the figures of the man and the woman into one another, marking them again as an inextricably bound, complete being.

In the foreground of the drawing, new depictions of a man and a woman gently brush hands. These two figures are once again Zürn and her Man of Jasmine. The woman tentatively reaches for the man’s clawed hand. Her eye gazes toward the viewer, while her lips curve into a shy, enigmatic smile. The woman’s ‘reaching’ gesture is fraught with anxiety and fear of rejection. Similar to Henri Michaux, the man has slightly downturned eyes, drawn with what
appears to be an epicanthic fold, and a wide set mouth [Image 23]. Both figures have three faces, none of which looks directly at their partner. The man’s gaze turns down as his head turns right, acknowledging the woman’s touch. However, as his face moves right, his form begins to break down. His clearly defined shoulder, arm, hand, and legs begin to shift into a blur of lines as he faces toward the woman. As he gets closer to her he becomes less ‘real’, as outlined in Lacan’s description of the encounter of the ‘real’. This is again shown with his hand; the hand touching the woman’s hand, yet is not connected to his body. This drawing conveys the impossibility of truly merging two individuals, and thus shows how Zürn’s desire for completeness is doomed to failure. In Meeting and Touching, Zürn’s ideal male comes from inside her and they eventually merge. However, in the untitled drawing described above the ‘real’ male figure resists Zürn’s ideal conjoined form. Henri Michaux and the Man of Jasmine never become one, and therefore Zürn can never achieve her state of desired completion. Once again Grünewald sits on the horizon, serving as a symbol of the many ‘lacks’ that frustrate Zürn’s desire.

In the end Zürn’s ‘object of desire’ is entirely unattainable. In *The Man of Jasmine* Michaux eventually discovers who she believes he is and refuses to see her anymore: “A rumor starts up – no one knows how or why – in certain circles, that he is the cause of her illness, such that he refuses to visit her from now on, and in the end that’s the best thing that could happen.” As he departs from her life the yearning for her lost childhood still remains. Ultimately, she gets close to recovering her childhood past, but fails. The Man of Jasmine fails to return Zürn’s lost childhood, and refuses to let her reach completion.

In the last line of the *Man of Jasmine* Zürn acknowledges the hopeless cycle she has created: “I am trapped in a never-ending circle.” Zürn asks herself: “Will her enormous thirst for wondrous manifestations never end? And if something were really to appear, if everything

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109 Ibid., 125
were slowly to change – appear incredible – what would be the consequence? She would immediately come into conflict with society and be locked away.”

The never-ending cycle of manic episodes and depressions which filled the last twenty years of Zürn’s life mirror the cycle of her father’s returns and departures. Stuck inside the maze of her childhood home and illness, everything begins to group together. Every man is her father, and every house is Grünewald.

For Zürn, the only way out of the endless rotation that she can see is through suicide. She decides to end her life by crossing through the window bars, symbolically freeing herself from the confines of her singular sex. For Zürn suicide was a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the ultimate culmination of her artistic oeuvre. On April 7, 1970, Bellmer, paralyzed from a stroke in 1969, wrote Zürn a letter saying he could not take care of her any more. She no longer wished to stay in hospitals, and had nowhere else to go. On October 18, 1970, Zürn was discharged from La Chesnaie de Chailles. That night she spent the evening in quiet conversation with Bellmer at the apartment they had shared. The following morning, she jumped from a sixth-story window while Bellmer slept downstairs. Before the end Zürn created one final China Ink Drawing it is a self-made eulogy, and perhaps the most uplifting drawing ever fashioned by Zürn.

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110 Ibid., 71.
111 Zürn, Dark Spring, 37: “In her bedroom, when she is supposed to fall asleep, she studies the panes in the window. Looking at how the two lines intersect in the shape of a cross, she thinks about man and woman: The vertical line is man and the horizontal line is woman. The point where they meet is a secret.”
112 According to Zürn her belief that Michaux was the real Man of Jasmine began the horrible cycles in the 1960’s of hallucinatory highs and months in mental hospitals. In 1957 she took the drug mescaline with him, initiating her first mental collapse. That year, she left Paris for Berlin, in order to escape Bellmer. The full account of this period can be found in her book The Man of Jasmine. During this time she sought help from multiple clinics, was administered a variety of psychotropic drugs, and survived two suicide attempts; In the end, she returned to Paris and to Bellmer. Later that year, after destroying many of her works she was taken to the Saint-Anne Psychiatric Clinic in La Rochelle where she remained for three years. During her stay, Henri Michaux brought her paper and China Ink so that she could continue her work. In the following years she was interned in several other psychiatric clinics, including “La Fond” in La Rochelle (1966) and Maison Blanch at Neuilly-sur-Marne (1969 and 1970). For more information see: Felka and Brinkmann, “Unica Zürn: Biographical Background,” 101-103.
Eulogy

Zürn finally escapes from the house in the final lines of both *Dark Spring* and *The House of Illnesses*. At the end of *The House of Illnesses*, she finally locates her lost eye-hearts, and ritualistically destroys a small doll that resembles her. These last acts show how her desire, as signified by the eyes, can only be achieved through her own self-destruction. At this point she is finally able to leave the house, stating: “I was comforted and left the house at dawn.”¹¹³ This statement refers to her death, rather than her freedom, because she only gains freedom by destroying herself in the process. This statement also captures the essence of one of Zürn’s final drawings.

This drawing is Zürn’s own apotheosis [Image 24]. In the drawing, trees and flowers sprout from the faces of Zürn’s favorite creatures, giving birth to spring. In the background a man and a woman grasp hands, symbolizing the final uniting of the father, the Man of Jasmine

and Zürn. Together, the couple follows a priest climbing toward a palace, an idealized, heavenly Grünewald. The man drops seeds onto the earth, promising the eventual growth of trees and flowers in the future. An amorphous bubble floats in the sky above the scene, containing a strange creature riding a flying kangaroo. This creature belts an unknown song while playing a guitar. Zürn signature also rests inside this mysterious bubble. By placing her signature inside the bubble, she joins herself with this small singing creature. Together, they blissfully ascend into the heavens, leaving behind Zürn’s lost dreams that are embodied in the figures of the man and woman. As the bubble floats away, the man and woman finally touch hands. Together, they dance and celebrate their unity, forever just a step away from the unreachable palace.
Works Cited


—. *The Man of Jasmine*.


