Erotic Politics: Toyen, Surrealism, and Gender Nonconformity

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The interwar years were a unique period of progress for East Central Europe and its citizens. With the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in October 1918, many nations, including former Czechoslovakia, regained independence for the first time in almost six-hundred years.[1] It was during this momentary, sweeping liberalization across the Czech lands that the artist known as Toyen (né: Marie Čermínová, 1902-1980) rose to prominence in the Czech avant-garde alongside their[2] artistic partner Jindřich Štyrský (1899-1942), whom she met in 1922, as founding members of the interdisciplinary art group Devětsil. However, this brief period of nationwide artistic flourishing was forcibly halted upon Nazi invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia. But it was under the watchful eye of the Third Reich that Toyen would set out on a defiant mission through every medium they had at her disposal, with a distinct focus on painting and drawing, that would follow them throughout their life. Toyen's imagery sought to intertwine the political with the erotic, indicating a belief that political and sexual liberation were not two separate entities, but rather two that must coexist towards the same goal: the right to express oneself and the intellectual freedom it required.

In order to understand what exactly made Toyen's surrealist eroticisms political in nature a careful analysis of their personal experience within the Czech avant-garde is needed. As was noted by Whitney Chadwick, Toyen was the only biological woman "to participate fully in the theoretical and political aspects of surrealism and one of the very few artists active in the Paris group both before and after the war,"[3] which immediately breaks Toyen out of the prescribed ideals of heteronormative society. In popular Czech thought during the First Republic, women's

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[1] Karla Huebner, "The Czech 1930s Through Toyen," in *Czech Feminisms: Perspectives on Gender in East-Central Europe*, ed. Iveta Jusová and Jiřina Šiklová (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), __

[2] Although it is unknown what pronoun Toyen preferred, I will utilize the modern term of 'they' in order to underscore Toyen's perceived feelings of gender ambiguity

[3] Whitney Chadwick, "Toyen: Toward a Revolutionary Art in Prague and Paris," *Symposium: A Quaterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 42 (1988): *277*

liberation was seen as secondary to the ideas of nation and these national ideas were very much tied to ideals of feminine domesticity.[4] However, it was not only Toyen's leadership in the avant-garde movement that struck their artistic cohort as odd, but their gender presentation as well. Toyen was known for wearing both masculine and feminine clothing, although it wasn't just an alter ego as was the case with Marcel Duchamp's Rrose Sélavy (pronounced as Eros/Sex, That's Life), but rather their entire embodied self.[5] Even the name Toyen reflects this gender non-conformity, as it is taken from the French word *citoyen*, itself the masculine form of the noun 'citizen.'[6] With their direct renunciation of femininity, Toyen immediately became an anomaly and was certainly not received with open arms and open minds outside of their Czech avant-garde companions.

While Toyen offers a unique insight into the particularities of gender-nonconformity within an Eastern European context, they are perhaps not as isolated in their gender presentation as it appears. Consider, for example, the Francophone surrealist Claude Cahun (né: Lucy Schwob, 1894-1954) who utilized a similar ambiguity to proclaim "a gender indeterminacy that further adjustments to her physical appearance and self-presentation would reinforce."[7] Indeed, she was known to shave her head, wear masculine and feminine clothing, and then perform it both to the camera and in the streets of Paris (figures 1). In photos such as this, the performative nature of gender is underscored, revealing that "Cahun dissolves herself into a never-ending series of masks that have no 'real' underneath."[8] Toyen's figurative work, interestingly, also

[4] Huebner, "The Czech 1930s Through Toyen," 63.
[5] Dawn Ades "Surrealism, Male-Female," in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Mundy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 183.
[6] Chadwick "Towards a Revolutionary Art," 278.
[7] Rosalind Krauss, "Claude Cahun and Dora Maar: By Way of Introduction," in *Bachelors* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 29.
[8] Ades, "Surrealism, Male-Female," 194

avoided factual depiction and relied on the suggestion of an impenetrable mask “suggest[ing the] protectiveness of the woman [depicted]’s true identity in the process.”[9] Perhaps without knowledge of each other’s work, both Toyen and Cahun actively destabilize gender and, in the process, tackle the patriarchal superstructure with it.

Unfortunately for Toyen, the notion of them as an alluring outsider plagued the life and work of the artist and their partner Štyrský. Unlike artists in other Central European countries, the pair was “personally threatened and persecuted in Czechoslovakia,”[10] and often unable to exhibit their work. One early work that hints towards Toyen’s personal and political leanings is 1937’s *The Abandoned Den* (*Opuštěné doupé*), also known as *The Abandoned Corset* (figure 3). Just off center, an eerie blue, tightly cinched corset floats freely in space, but it contains no physical body. The curves of the form indicate an ideal feminine body, comprised of a large bust, narrow waist, and wide hips. It is seen accented with a background of cavernous spaces composed in varying shades of brown and black, as well as a deep blue background that appears to mimic the sky or a sea. Toyen offers no true sense of space, almost as if the viewer is floating away along with the corset itself.

Although hidden within a surrealist dreamscape, the political and erotic nature of this spectral corset is two-fold: The first is through the universal signifier of corset in a feminist context, and the second is tied to the particular connotations of it within an avant-garde milieu. In relation to the first, across the European continent, corsets were seen as a physical symbol for the

[9] Karla Huebner, “Fire Smoulders in the Veins: Toyen’s Queer Desire and Its Roots in Prague Surrealism,” *Papers of Surrealism* 8 (2010): 15.
[10] Renaë Riese Hubert “Clandestine Collaborations: Toyen, Strysky, and Heisler,” in *Magnifying Mirrors: Women Surrealism & Partnership* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 309.

entrapping nature of prescribed femininity, with the growing popularity of the brassiere allowing for significantly more comfort and ease of movement than its predecessor.[11] In tandem with the

[11] Valerie Steele, "The Corset Controversy," *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 169.

Figure 1: Claude Cahun, *Self-Portrait*, 1928. Silver print. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

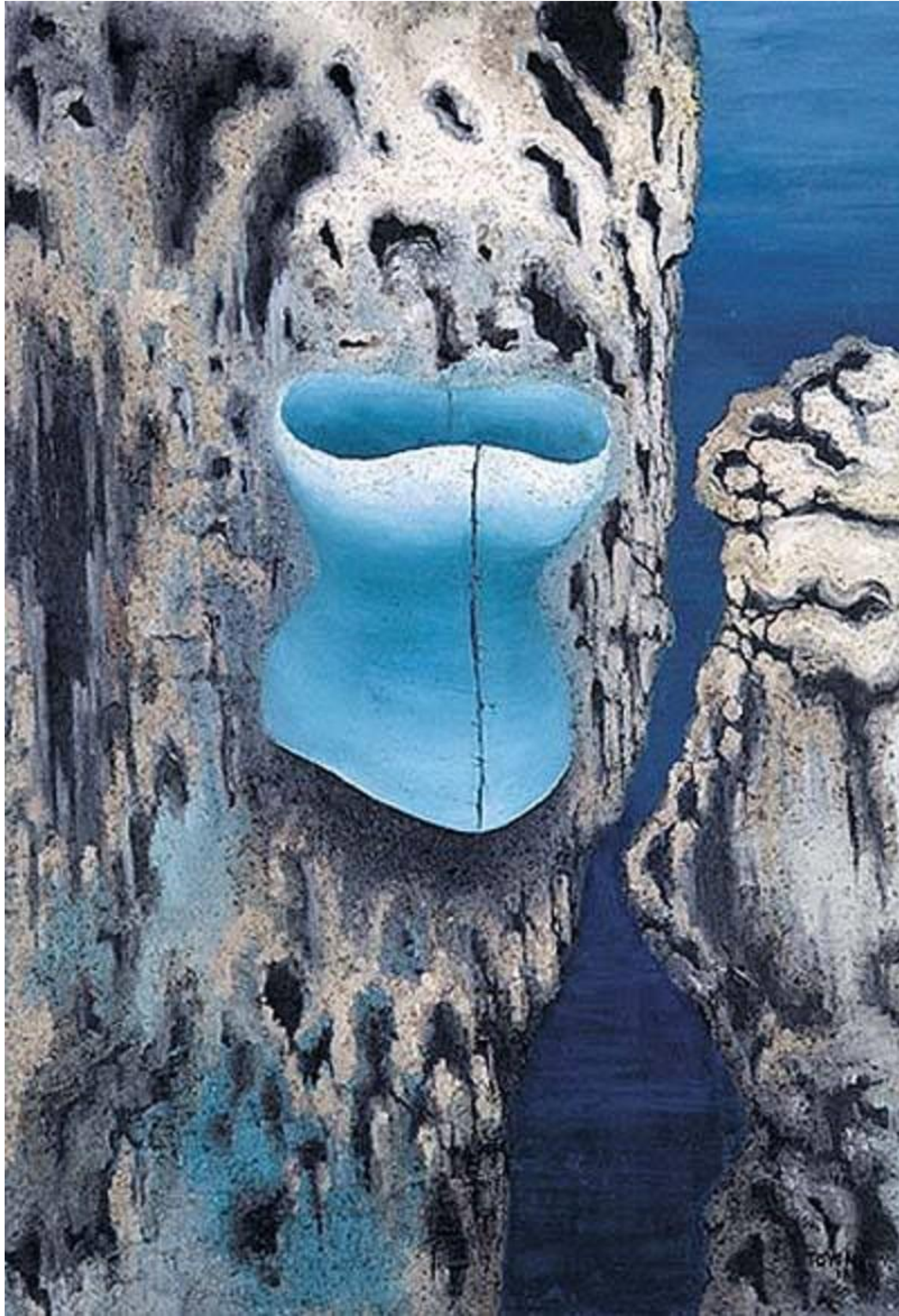

Figure 3: Toyen, *The Abandoned Den*, 1937. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

physical aspects of changing undergarments was a psychological shift, one in which the abandonment of the corset would allow greater independence and psychological willpower. Indeed, by casting away all signifiers of femininity one could, in the eyes of feminists in the early 20th-century, achieve the liberation that has been fought for since the late 19th-century. Although Toyen never specifically stated they were a feminist, the artist would have inherited some of these liberal inclinations growing up in a liberalizing Prague. As is noted by Karla Huebner, "Toyen herself was something of a New Woman—she worked, wore pants, and smoked…,"[12] indicating Toyen's break with the traditional gender norms of First Republic Czechoslovakia. The abandoned corset in the painting could very well be Toyen's own personal disdain for the undergarment and all the prescribed womanliness that was attached to it.

The second symbolic quality of the corset, which lies within a surrealist context, is latent with eroticism. While the physical body is absent, the corset acts as the torso aligning itself with Czech psychoanalyst Bohuslav Brouk's theory of partialism, in which "the torso and head [can] substitute for female genitalia."[13] Thus, the female sex organ is rendered present, but only through its absence. This sensual allusion is coupled with the sense of touch, a primary sense utilized during a sex act, activated via the texture of the painted canvas. The cavernous spaces that frame the corset in the visual field, for example, leave clear traces of the artist's touch. The loose brushstrokes, the obvious blending of blue into beige, and the painting-drip stalactites, while not explicit erotica, not only work to signify the subject and artist's presence, but also draws the viewer into the sensuous quality of the painting itself.

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[12] Huebner, "The Czech 1930s," p. 63
[13] Huebner, "Fire Smoulders in the Veins," 12

Rather than being erotic solely for eroticism's sake, Toyen and their surrealist cohort viewed sex as a liberatory force that acted against bourgeoise culture. The key aspects were two psychological theories that informed Czechoslovak surrealism: The Freudian uncanny and Broukian pornophilia. The first, while not explicitly political, with its emphasis on "an indistinction between the real and the imagined," as well as "a confusion between the animate and inanimate,"[14] was mobilized by Toyen and her cohort to produce anxiety in the hearts of their viewers, à la the Brechtian Alienation Effect. Pornophilia, in contrast, in 1930s Czechoslovakia was explicitly tied to surrealist understanding of Marxist ideology. It was believed that "Forcing them [the bourgeoise] to be aware of excremental and sexual acts," through visual and literary erotica, "destroys their fantasies of being superior to the corporeal."[15] Put simply, the international surrealist collective saw in sex and its veiled symbols a means of psychic emancipation that would allow for mass consciousness-raising that would inevitably lead towards a socialist revolution, unshackling the proletariat in the process.

It is in this notion of sex as revolutionary, however, that the surrealists found themselves at odds with the (pre-state socialism) Communist Party. In traditional communist thought, dealings with sexual problems were seen as far removed from the egalitarian cause. It was viewed, in other words, as bourgeois in and of itself. Despite this, willful artists that they were, they stood by theorist Andre Breton's philosophy that "reciprocal love," one goal of the movement, "could only be realized…through radical social change."[16] Sexual impulses, from this vantage point at least, were a necessary part of the communist cause, as this 'true' version of

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[14] Hal Foster, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle?," in *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 7.
[15] Huebner, "Fire Smoulders in the Veins," 7.
[16] Ades, "Surrealism, Male-Female," 172.

love could only sustain itself in a world without commodified distractions, particularly the commodification of sex itself.

This period of artistic and ideological flourishing was not to last, however. The political tides shifted just a few short years later, as the prospect of World War II loomed on the horizon. While the political and sexual subversion of many Czech surrealists could be tolerated under the presidency of Masaryk until 1938, the new defensive government would not tolerate such insubordination. Toyen, Štyrský, and many other East-European surrealists were not allowed to show their work publicly, with only foreign press agents able to see them behind the locked doors they were barred behind.[17] Things for the partners only went from bad to worse. The Nazis successfully invaded in March 1939, forcibly stamping out any sense of liberty that once held sway over the First Republic; Toyen and Štyrský were officially blacklisted and barred from circulating or displaying any of their publications, artworks, and ideologies. The seemingly all-encompassing darkness grew even further with the death of Štyrský in 1942, leaving Toyen at the helm of the Prague surrealist collective.

Although officially blacklisted by the Third Reich, Toyen refused to stop being a working artist. Together with their new partner Jindřich Heisler (1914-1953), a young Jewish poet the artist hid from the Nazis, the pair worked clandestinely on two publications, *The Shooting Gallery* (*Tir*) in 1946 and *Hide! War!* (*Chache-toi! Guerre!*) in 1947 (figure 3). In both of these works, Toyen's gives up erotic compositions and turns their focus towards the horrors of the second World War. Here, with the visual language of the dreamscape, Toyen renders the world a barren landscape with no vitality and no possibility of habitation. In this horrific wasteland there are no survivors, not even forms of cultural production. Nearly all of the figurative imagery

[17] Chadwick, "Toward a Revolutionary Art," 289.

exists solely in fragments; skeletal remains, gnarled and broken tree trunks, and the loose-leaf papers that blow in the wind all work to both produce and replicate alienation. The only element left from modern society is its technological inovations, the very inventions that made the war possible and as destructive as it had become, symbolized through the captivity of the birdcage.[18]

The end of the war did not make Toyen and Heisler any safer in their native land. While the nation of Czechoslovakia was reinstated as a political entity, it quickly fell sway to the influence of the Soviet Union. The pair went to Paris in 1947 to prepare for a one-person show of Toyen's oeuvre but would never return. In fact, a year later when socialism was officially instated, the artist "renounced their Czechoslovak citizenship and became a political refugee,"[19] residing in Paris until her death, perhaps recognizing the bastardization of the Marxist philosophy that drove her early works. Heisler died only eight years later in 1953, once again leaving Toyen without a longstanding collaborator. Toyen made up for this loss through partnership with a handful of Paris surrealists, including Annie Le Brun and her husband Radovan Ivsic.[20]

The city of Paris played an important background to works from Toyen's mature period. For a queer, gender nonconforming person, it must have felt like a liberal paradise. A powerhouse of the sexual liberation movement, Toyen could, at least in theory, fully express their sexual identity and ideologies in the open without fear of public and political backlash. In fact, various scholarship has found that in 1950s Paris queer desire was not just accepted, it was perhaps even fashionable.[21] But there are other reasons for this coupling of person and place as

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[18] Hubert, "Clandestine Collaborations," 324-326.
[19] Chadwick, "Toward a Revolutionary Art," 292.
[20] Hubert, "Clandestine Collaborations," 342.
[21] Huebner, "Fire Smoulders in the Veins," 3

well. Both Paris and Prague were epicenters of the surrealist movement throughout the interwar period with a vast cross-pollination of ideas and aesthetics. In fact, the leader of the Paris surrealist movement, André Breton, gave multiple lectures in Prague in 1935, attended by none other than Toyen, Štyrský, Heisler, and countless other visual and literary artists.[22] This led to a unique collaboration rarely acknowledged throughout European history, with 'representatives' of both Eastern and Western Europe discussing, creating, and writing towards similar interests. It was because of this, along with their passionate artistic drive, that Toyen could become a major player not only in the Czech lands, but alongside native Parisians as well.

Late in their life, Toyen combined everything they knew from both Czech and Parisian surrealist ideologies to create new dream-like sequences through their art. Taking up painting once again, in 1966 they created *The Screen* (*Le paravent*, figure 4). Dead center in the composition stands an anthropomorphic woman specter, her face and neck rendered in an airy white to give the illusion of a ghost. She is seen slipping on a pair of green silk gloves, drawing the viewer's attention towards her pubic triangle which has been replaced with a lipstick-clad face of a leopard. The rest of the leopard's body spirals away from this vaginal face creating the silhouette of a fine evening gown. The primary subject is flanked on both sides by two other specters, one rendered in black, the other in a dark grey. The straight rigidity of their bodies is juxtaposed with the posturing of the fluid woman at center, indicating that these other presences are men. The left-most figure is taking a step towards the female ghost, triggering the leopard's face to gape open, baring its teeth.

This painting is one of many that marks an interesting shift in Toyen's utilization of the surrealist pictorial language, and that leans into a philosophy set up by the French surrealist

[22] Derek Sayer, "The Starry Castle Opens," in *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 13.

Andre Breton. The ideology that Toyen invests themselves in on the canvas is best expressed as a "shift from haunted self (Breton's 'who am I?') to haunting self (Breton's 'whom do I haunt?')," perhaps indicating a major shift in the artist's pictorial language. Toyen's use of a

Figure 3: Toyen, *Hide Yourself! War!*, 1944. Pen and black ink on cream wove paper. Art Institute of Chicago.

Figure 4: Toyen, *The Screen*, 1966. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

fragmented woman's body is usurped by that of a controlled spectral entity; they now understand their place in a patriarchal worldview as a non-binary person and have come to realize its implications. Rather than continuing on their path of introspection, Toyen turns their attention directly towards male-identified society. In this case, Toyen is playing on the dualism between sexuality and wild – 'primitive' as the artist would have understood it – bestiality.[23] In this way, *The Screen* begins to ask questions that would have been uncomfortable to its original viewers, growing out of her assigned sex: Do women have sexuality? What is so frightening about a woman asserting her sexual interests?

To put it in perspective, the artist appears to be directly probing the – to use the particularly loaded term – castration anxiety triggered by the loss of masculine sexual dominance. Put differently, it can be viewed as an abstracted alliance with the fear-inducing figure Medusa "who, acting against the armoring of the male psyche, works to shatter it."[24] The invocation of the leopardess, then, is a means to achieve liberation through the presentation of the feminine body as an alluring Other, but potentially deadly if crossed or cornered.

Toyen was not the first assigned-female surrealist to utilize this pictorial language. Think of, for example, Dora Maar's 1936 altered print *Untitled* (figure 5), in which a woman, seen from the rear, appears to be bending over at the waist, most likely within a sexual context. All that remains intact, however, is the subject's long, muscular legs and loose strands of hair in the emptiness between them. While both aspects are potentially linked to fetish, the true nature of the composition lies elsewhere. The fragmented body invokes, to utilize Rosalind Krauss' hypothesis, "The presence of the praying mantis," petrifying male viewers "since the female of

[23] Hubert, "Clandestine Collaborations," 324.
[24] Krauss. "By Way of Introduction," 19.

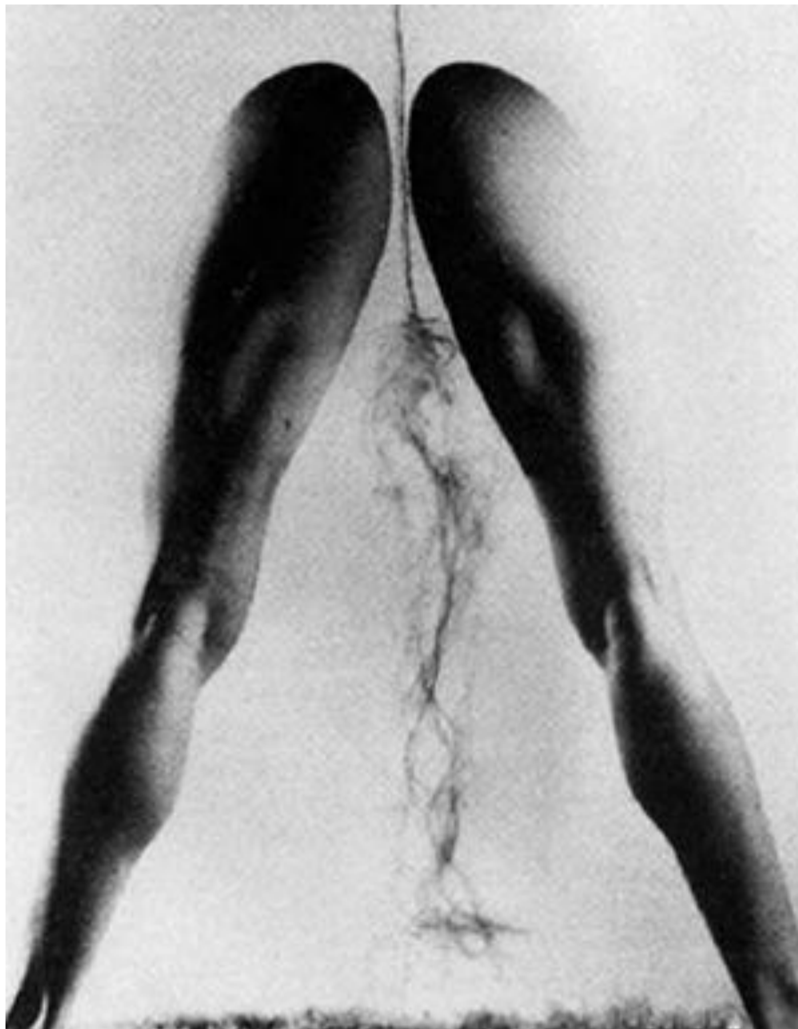

Figure 5: Dora Maar, *Untitled*, 1936. Silver print. Private collection, Paris.

the species is known to cannibalize her male partner."[25] In both instances, a wild animal is invoked, manifested, and unleashed to wreak havoc on the fragile masculinity of its presumed spectators. Female sexuality, then, becomes simultaneously aggressive and defensive, but in either sense purposefully alienates their male viewers.

Just as when they were partnered with Štyrský, the artist carries an intense focus on the erotic, but it is again politicized and mobilized to express the contradictions of heteronormative lifestyles. As has been indicated by Renäe Riese Hubert, *The Screen* invites a reading of the painting as "a sorry tale of repression."[26] In concert with the consciousness raising occurring in the 1960s-70s, Toyen is resisting the notion that women are not and cannot have a sexuality.[27] Here, the feminist discourse that the artist inherited during their coming-of-age period in Prague becomes apparent, but in its most inclusive, leftist sense. Rising in tandem with other questioning women and queer individual's voices, Toyen is tapping into the injustices dispensed by a patriarchal society, one that was shared throughout both Western and Eastern European ideologies. Rather than remaining in the particular, Toyen makes the leap towards universal appeal through sexuality, attempting to rationalize both feminine and queer sexualities as something naturally occurring, rather than the idea of them being unnatural in the eyes of heteronormative Freudian psychology, which was still the predominant mode of the field at the time.[28]

[25] Krauss, "By Way of Introduction," 19.
[26] Hubert, "Clandestine Collaborations," 324.
[27] This reading is informed by Germaine Greer's seminal 1970 book *The Female Eunuch*, which shares a similar viewpoint, published only four years after Toyen's *The Screen* was completed
[28] The quest to undo the potential damage caused by Freud was begun in 1949 in Simone de Beauvoir's publication *The Second Sex* (*Le deuxième sexe*), a landmark book in both in France and abroad.

The life and works of Toyen have always been staunchly political since the beginning of their artistic career. Influenced by their own queer identity, Toyen challenged the prescribed notions of woman not only through their personal gender-bending, but also through the content of their paintings and drawings. *The Abandoned Corset* and *The Screen* are just two examples from Toyen's large portfolio, although only a handful of the artist's works remain in the public domain. After their death in 1980, all of Toyen's belongings were shipped back to Prague and were given to the secret police to be examined.[29] This not only played into the elusiveness of Toyen's artwork, but still bars most of it from being exhibited except on rare occasion, if at all. The ideological questioning of the artist was largely lost to history, but a resilient flame still burns on. It would seem that with their openness of queer identity and feminist leanings, Toyen almost predicted the largely more liberal state of the Euro-American world. It is this unique perspective that allows Toyen's work to still speak to viewers today, just as intensely as it did ninety years ago.

[29] Hubert, "Clandestine Collaborations," 309.

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