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# Ellen Lanyon: The Objects of Her Obsession

By Christina Weyl

“It all began with a small majolica humidior in the form of a toad in a red westcott [sic], smoking a pipe.”<sup>1</sup> Thus Ellen Lanyon (1926–2013) opened her autobiography with a Victorian earthenware vessel that rested on the mantel of her childhood home in Englewood, IL. Over the course of Lanyon’s life, hundreds of objects—from antique pipes and taxidermy animals to measurement devices and dental molds—joined the smoking toad in her curio cabinets and in her paintings, prints and drawings. In her last decade, Lanyon embarked on two ambitious, multipart projects: in the drawings and prints of *Index*, she catalogued and classified her wondrous collection, while the paintings and prints called *Curiosities* brought together the indexed objects alongside the mass-produced images Lanyon collected in dense accumulations. Together they look back over almost every aspect of her career. This article surveys the permutations of these two important bodies of work, tracing their structure and linear quality back to her collecting habits and her longstanding fascination with the wood engraver Louis Poyet (1846–1913). In doing so, it reveals Lanyon’s debt to the visual language of the 19th century, particularly its way of systematizing and presenting information descriptively.

Lanyon grew to artistic maturity in mid-century Chicago, dubbed “The Second City” behind New York’s cultural dominance, though it is now recognized as having been a distinctive center of postwar modernism. As part of the “Monster Roster”—a term coined retroactively by critic Franz Schulze—she belonged to a diverse set of artists in the city working with abrasive figurative and surrealist styles in the immediate postwar years.<sup>2</sup> (This group was somewhat older than Chicago Imagist painters such as Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Karl Wirsum, Suellen Roca, Ed Paschke and others who constituted the Hairy Who, Nonplussed Some and False Image.) Lanyon helped found the short-lived but influential Graphic Arts Workshop (1953–1956) and was a leader of Exhibition Momentum—a juried venue started in 1948 as an



Ellen Lanyon, *Curiosities, Toad* (2014), screenprint, 47 x 46 cm. Edition of 30. Printed by Kip Gresham, The Print Studio, Cambridge, UK. Co-published by the artist and The Print Studio. ©Estate of Ellen Lanyon. Courtesy of Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago and New York.

alternative to the Art Institute of Chicago’s annual “Chicago and Vicinity” exhibitions. In the ’70s she became the primary organizer of the Chicago chapter of the feminist art organization West East Bag (WEB). Although she moved to New York City in 1979, her association with Chicago never faded.

Lanyon’s subject matter changed over time from city views and images of her ancestors to magic tricks and wildlife, but she maintained a consistent interest in nostalgia, transformation and metamorphosis. In the painting *Strange Games at the Lagoon, The West* (1980), for example, the toad humidior sits on a floral picnic blanket next to the tree-lined banks of Chicago’s Lincoln Park lagoon. A postcard of the fern room at the Lincoln

Park conservatory and Japanese *hanafuda* playing cards float in the air beside the toad and interject fantasy into the scene, merging the imaginary with a strong sense of specific place in her hometown.

Often described as a Magical Realist, Lanyon preserved a sense of wonder about both the past and the present and sought to animate the quotidian through the unexpected. In a 1976 artist’s statement she observed:

*My life is full with observation and mental record keeping . . . everything adds to a resource bank from which ideas are drawn as a work develops. Always mindful of the phenomena of transformation, substitution, camouflage, dual imagery, and the*

behavior of beings, I take the liberty of inventing with these as singular or multi-symbolic forms. I always hope to communicate to others my own feelings of astonishment, amusement, and/or concern for the marvels of the natural and man-made world.<sup>3</sup>

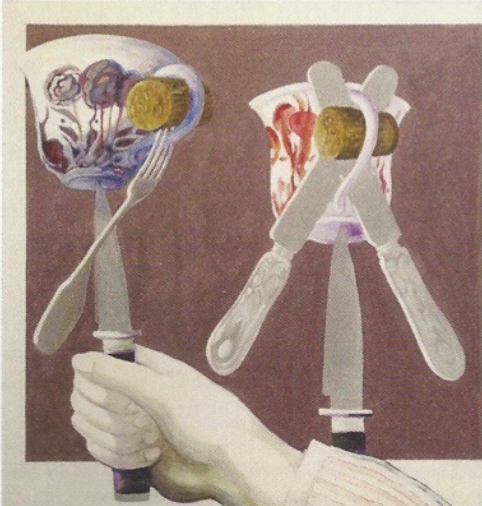
Working from her cabinets of keepsakes and her collection of 19th-century postcards, books and magazine illustrations, she created fantastical still lifes and situations that plunge viewers into her personal world.

From her earliest days as a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), Lanyon had a strong, sentimental attachment to the past. She considered herself a “nostalgist,” a quality manifest in both the egg tempera works she made while a student, and in her 1960s paintings derived from vintage family photographs and early-20th-century magazine illustrations of bathing beauties and sports heroes.<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s her subject matter shifted to pictures of magic and prestidigitation, but nostalgia for an older time remained; the vintage objects that eventually made up *Index* were major protagonists in her magic paintings and most of her subsequent series.

Lanyon’s family home during the Depression included her immediate family as well as her grandfather and spinster aunts whose bric-a-brac and “wonderful treasures” filled the house and inspired young Ellen’s imagination.<sup>5</sup> She inherited many of these peculiar items—the toad humidor, a ceramic elephant, two bronze dogs fighting over a bone—and added to them through her own self-professed “obsessive” collecting. Friends took to giving her oddities. In a 2012 interview with art historian Robert Storr that took place in Lanyon’s studio, she talked about the influence of these things on her working process:

*Every object that you see in this room or in the cabinets has managed to “speak” to me and trigger an idea for a painting . . . Beginning with one object and via a stream of consciousness, the scenario develops. In a sense I am appropriating another’s invention but putting it into an altered context while creating a narrative, a theatric.<sup>6</sup>*

In the late 1960s, Lanyon’s son Andrew brought home an 1892 manual of magic tricks, which transformed her practice and later inspired the linear precision



Clockwise from top left: Toad humidor, courtesy Estate of Ellen Lanyon; Ellen Lanyon, *Strange Games at the Lagoon, The West* (1981), acrylic on canvas, 86.4 x 111.8 cm. Collection of Angela and Marc Levenstein. ©Estate of Ellen Lanyon. Courtesy of Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago and New York.; Louis Poyet, illustration for *The Housekeeper's Terror* (1892). Reproduced from Arthur Good, *Magical Experimentation or Science in Play* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), 2; Ellen Lanyon, *The Housekeeper's Terror* (1969), acrylic on canvas, 102.9 x 102.9 cm. Collection of DePaul Art Museum, 2014.54. Gift of the Ellen Lanyon Estate. ©Estate of Ellen Lanyon. Courtesy of Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago and New York.

and design of *Index*. Written by Arthur Good, *Magical Experimentation, or, Science in Play* introduced her to the wood engravings of Louis Poyet.<sup>7</sup> Enraptured, she made paintings after Poyet’s illustrations, such as *The Housekeeper’s Terror* (1969), which depicts the feat of balancing a coffee cup on the tip of a knife with the aid of a cork and a fork. Not unlike her Pop art peers, Lanyon was appropriating mass-produced images, but from a bygone era rather than from the contemporary advertising that occupied Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, James Rosenquist and others.<sup>8</sup>

Lanyon adapted and altered the original wood engraving through the introduction of color, the improvisation of the coffee cups’ floral motifs and the changed proportions from rectangular to square. The most significant difference, however,

is the diminished level of graphic detail, particularly in the simplified decoration on the handles of the butter knives. Poyet’s illustrations drew Lanyon into the world of magical illusion, and his example encouraged Lanyon to make her imagery crisper and sharper than it had been in her 1960s paintings. She felt the change enhanced the fantastical quality of her subjects.<sup>9</sup> In a later conversation with art historian and critic Irving Sandler, she said, “the way that [Poyet] dealt with a graphic line . . . suited my way of detailing.”<sup>10</sup>

At around the same time she was introduced to Poyet, Lanyon developed an allergy to the solvents used in oil painting (*The Housekeeper’s Terror* and later paintings were executed in acrylic), and began to refocus her energies on drawing and printmaking, which better matched the

character of wood engraving and her own incisive observational drawing.

Lanyon's involvement in printmaking dates back to her student days. In addition to her activities with Chicago's Graphic Arts Workshop, she worked as a secretary for Mauricio Lasansky at the University of Iowa when she was a graduate student there with her husband, Roland Ginzel, and as a professional artist she made many editions with Landfall Press—including the impressive *Wonder Book* (1971)—as well as with Anchor Graphics, Stone Roller Press, Pondsider Press and others.<sup>11</sup>

These three elements—her familiarity with the graphic language of print, her fascination with the power of elderly objects, and her love of Poyet's didactic wood engraving style—would come together in her magnum opus, *Index*. At the turn of the millennium, she decided to catalogue the objects in her *Wunderkammer*, to preserve each one's story and its meaning in her life and career. Between 2001 and 2003 she filled 60 sheets of paper with careful pen and ink drawings of a total of 292 artifacts (each sheet contains anywhere from 2 to 25 objects, each numbered in the format of didactic illustration).<sup>12</sup> These sheets

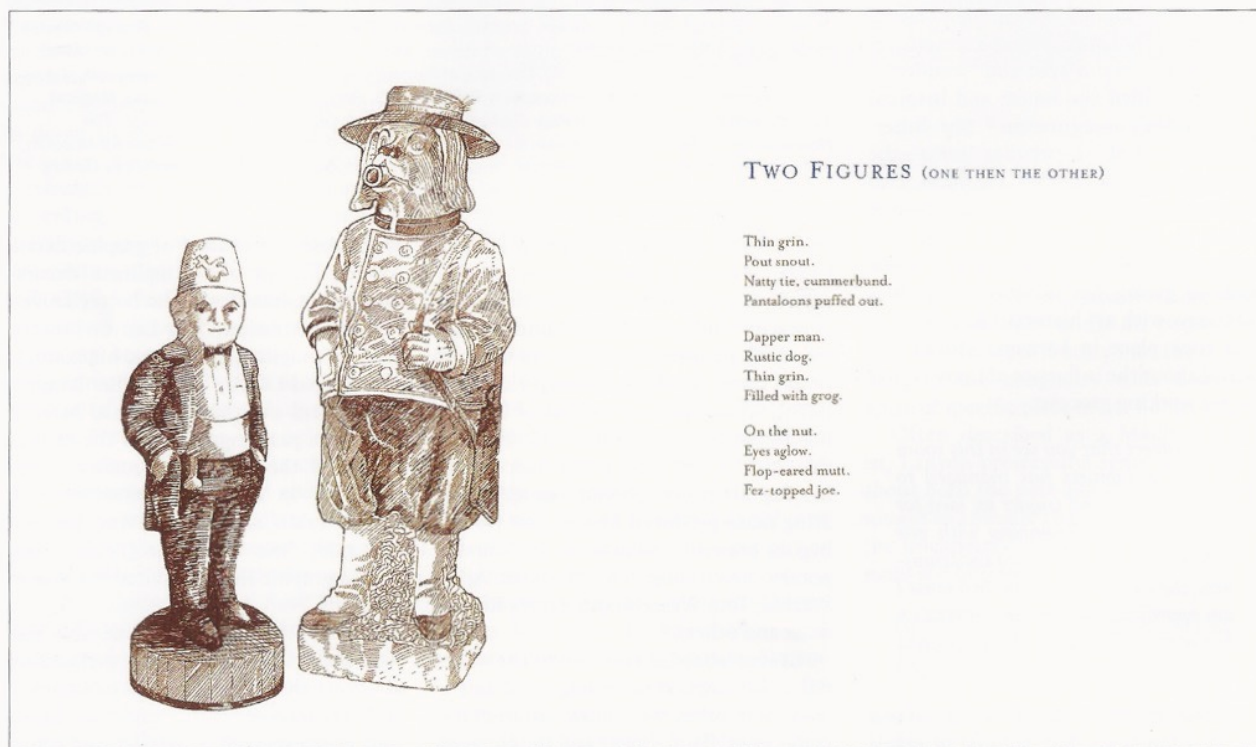
were organized into 5 unbound "books" of 12 pages each according to her own quixotic taxonomy: "I. Personae" (dolls, figurines, objects relating to the human body and some anthropomorphized animals); "II. Folly Animale" (animal-related tchotchkes); "III. O. J. Darr" (a play on "objet d'art," comprising ceramic vessels, letter openers and decorative souvenirs); "IV. Mechanique" (scales, metronomes and antiquated instruments of measurement); and "V. Smoking Guns" (firearms and play guns, pipes and cigarette lighters).

At the same time she structured *Index* to suggest an encyclopedic objectivity, Lanyon also sought to illuminate personal, irrational conversations among these familiar fixtures of her studio and artwork. She manipulated scale and family resemblances to elicit new relationships: four elephant knickknacks appear alongside an elephant-shaped rock specimen. Her attentive line animated inert materials, some well past their prime: a wind-up metal elephant, whose outer shell is broken and who no longer stands independently, marches happily with his head held high. The first sheet of Book I features a bowling trophy, a plastic toy and a bronze statuette of a diver; in real

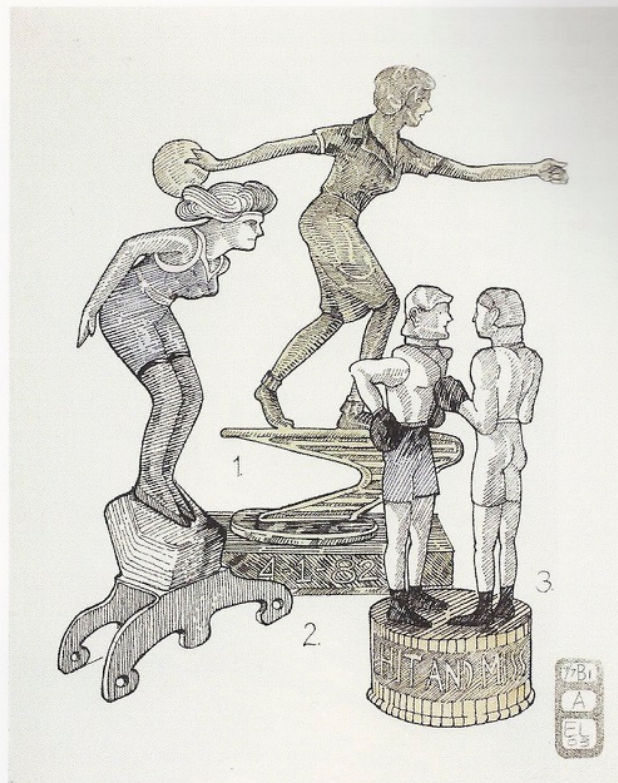
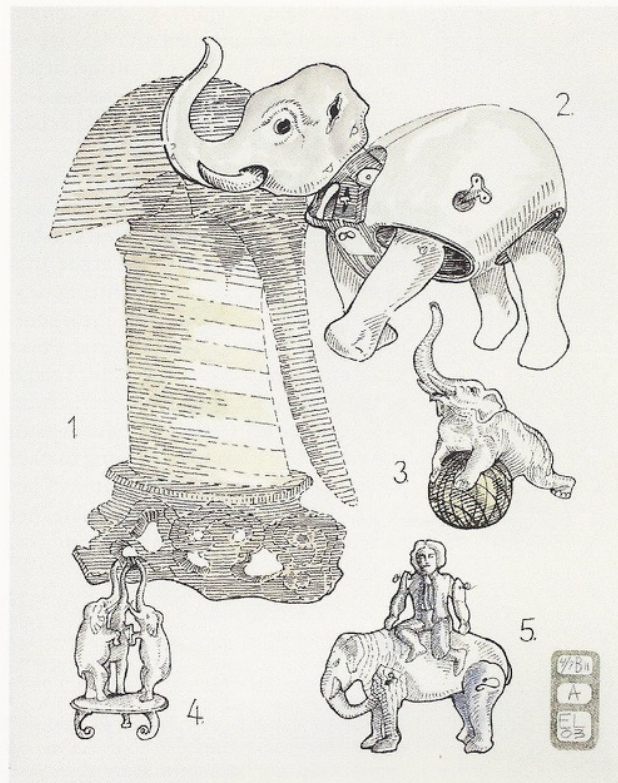
life their surfaces and sizes are radically different, but Lanyon equalized their scale to make them appear to belong together seamlessly as a group.

She received unexpected help in this endeavor from her friend Lynne Warren, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Warren, who often stayed in the guest bedroom at Lanyon's studio in New York, had written a series of 11 poems—without Lanyon's knowledge—in response to the contents of her curio cabinets, which she observed both during the day and in the middle of the night when light from nearby apartments hit them at unexpected angles. The poems envisioned relationships that had not occurred to Lanyon. When the poems were published under the title *Ballary Marvels* (2009) through Index Press (Lanyon's tie-in idea), they were accompanied by a selection of Lanyon's drawings. The arrangements in the book are sometimes reflected in *Index*. Warren's poem "Two Figures (One Then the Other)," for example, alerted Lanyon to the similar stances, hands in their pockets, of the "flop-eared mutt" and "fez-topped joe" that she would place together in a drawing, angled as if they were pausing in conversation.

She subtitled the project "the objects



Ellen Lanyon and Lynne Warren, *Two Figures (One Then the Other)* (2009). Reproduced from *Ballary Marvels* (Chicago: Index Press, 2009). Poem by Lynne Warren and illustration by Ellen Lanyon. Art ©Estate of Ellen Lanyon. Image courtesy of Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago and New York.



Ellen Lanyon, *Plate A, Volume I, Book II, Folly Animale* (left) and *Plate A, Volume I, Book I, Personae* (right) from *Index: The Objects of My Obsession* (2003), hand-watercolored screenprints in brown on ivory wove paper, 35.7 x 28 cm each. Edition of 7 each. Printed by Kip Gresham, The Print Studio, Cambridge, UK. Art Institute of Chicago, restricted gifts of Fred Novy; Helen Davis Bailey Endowment; Herbert Molner Discretionary Fund, 2005.14.18 and 2005.14.2 ©Estate of Ellen Lanyon. Courtesy of Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago and New York.

of my obsession” and grew increasingly reluctant to part with it. In late 2002, she contacted Kip Gresham, master printer and owner of The Print Studio in Cambridge, England, about making screenprints based on *Index* drawings.<sup>13</sup> So began a rich, long-distance collaboration, executed by email, phone and transatlantic packages. The 60 pen-and-ink sheets were scanned in New York and the files sent to Gresham to create the screens, which Lanyon insisted should retain the illustrative precision of the drawings: “all line and no tone,” she wrote Gresham.<sup>14</sup> The screens were used to produce two different editions. The first consists of 60 unbound 12- x 8-inch sheets, grouped in 5 sets of 12 with a colophon. In the second, each set of 12 is assembled into an (unbound) accordion-fold book that artist and printer affectionately called the “concertina” (both versions were printed in editions of 7). The relationship of parts in the concertinas is enforced by physical connection; in the loose sheets Lanyon emphasized the taxonomic structure of the project with cartouches on each print that identify the “book” (from I to V)

and page (from A to L) as well as the edition number. Lanyon had plans to write a verse about each *Index* ensemble and to include an itemized key noting how, where, and from whom she acquired each item, but she only completed this work for Book 1.<sup>15</sup> She also hand-colored some sets of *Index*, though most are black and white.<sup>16</sup>

Seventy feet long when laid out end to end, *Index* has an encyclopedic quality; the exactitude of Lanyon’s lines, conveying essential facets of her beloved things, mimic the look of historical scientific illustrations published in the journal *La Nature*, for which Poyet’s atelier produced thousands of wood engravings of mechanical devices and scientific instruments between 1880 and 1914.<sup>17</sup> (As a teenager, Lanyon had practiced this kind of “exacting realism” in drawings she made for a catalogue of foundry equipment for the Beardsley & Piper company.)<sup>18</sup> *Index* is in many ways an homage to Poyet, whose work Lanyon continued to collect after her first encounter with *Magical Experiments*.<sup>19</sup>

The extraordinariness of *Index*,

Gresham believes, arises from the fact that Lanyon ostensibly drew descriptively, to convey essential information about her treasures, but achieved something beautiful and vibrant. In the colophon to *Index*, she explained that her subjects “have been assembled with no particular definition but with an eye to their use as characters in a narrative or as a source of inspiration for an inexplicable juxtaposition.”

In 2009 Lanyon revisited *Index* as she began working on her *Curiosities* series, mashups that combine *Index* drawings



Objects from *Plate A, Volume I, Book I, Personae* (2003). Courtesy Estate of Ellen Lanyon.



Ellen Lanyon, *Ivory Metrolog* (2012), screenprint, 65.5 x 63.5 cm. Edition of 70. Printed and published by Kip Gresham, The Print Studio, Cambridge, UK. Co-published by the artist and The Print Studio. ©Estate of Ellen Lanyon. Courtesy of Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago and New York.

with Poyet wood engravings, 19th-century patent diagrams, botanical illustrations and wallpaper samples.<sup>20</sup> *Ivory Metrolog* (2012) was created as a commission for The Print Studio's Daedalus Print Club and incorporates figures from *Index*—the diver, a bathing beauty, an eyeless bust, a pen nib sharpener and an egg grading scale—along with new additions including a Luna moth, a metronome, dice and the 1859 patent diagram of A. C. Gallahue's "Pegging Machine" for assembling boots and shoes (patent no. 23,361). As was her common practice, Lanyon resized each element with a Xerox machine to prepare the collage from which Gresham made color separations.<sup>21</sup>

Shortly after completing *Ivory Metrolog*, Lanyon began work on four more *Curiosities* prints with Gresham, also based on multi-layer collages of her own drawings and acquired ephemera. In *Curiosities*, *Toad*, her familiar humidior amphibian smokes his pipe surrounded by tulips and a deck of trick cards (hark-

ing back to *Strange Games at the Lagoon*, *The West*), while an alligator-foot coin purse dangles above from an antique scale. A wood engraving from *Magical Experiments* at the upper right shows "How to Make a Lamp Chimney Smoke a Cigarette" with a cylindrical device that echoes the tulip-filled hourglass below it. Between these things, the background is filled with collaged flat pattern. The other three *Curiosities* prints (*Trout*, *Monkey* and *Cockatoo*) are similarly crowded with the strange but real—things that once captivated audiences with the delight of illusion or the power of technological precision. The nostalgia they evoke is that of the sweet promise of mastery.

In the fall of 2013, Lanyon went to Cambridge to work on developing the color component for the series. Over the course of a week, she experimented with applying pencil and watercolor washes so transparent that they blend seamlessly with the line (captured in a studio video available on YouTube).<sup>22</sup> As with the hand-colored *Index* prints, Lanyon aimed

to apply pale, "slightly grubby colors" that would "complement the vintage of the objects."<sup>23</sup> The three beautiful hand-colored sets she produced were used to make separations for the editions of color screenprints.<sup>24</sup>

These prints were her last works. Returning from the U.K., Lanyon suffered a fatal heart attack at Newark Airport. She was 86. One could argue that the *Curiosities* prints form a fitting capstone to her career, with their incorporation of her beloved oddities and Poyet wood engravings and her signature blend of the magical and the real. But Lanyon did not see either *Index* or *Curiosities* as an end point. She had been planning further projects with Gresham at the time of her death. We will never know where her imagination might have taken us. ■

Christina Weyl is an independent scholar based in New York.

#### Notes:

1. Thank you to Lisa and Andrew Ginzler, who opened their mother's studio to me and let me dig through *Index* and her papers. Many others generously spoke with me, including Kip Gresham, Janet Ruttenberg, Arthur Levine, Lynne Warren, Gregg Hertzlieb and Angie Levenstein. Thanks also to Gale Rawson and Jennifer Johns at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts for letting me review the *Index* objects.

Lanyon's autobiography, "The Toad Humidor," was unfinished at the time of her unexpected death and remains unpublished. Lisa Ginzler generously provided access to a copy.

2. For more on the postwar Chicago art scene, see Charles A. Lewis and Cynthia Yao, eds., *Chicago: The City and Its Artists, 1945–1978* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1978); Lynne Warren, ed., *Art in Chicago, 1945–1995* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996); *Chicago Imagists* (Madison, WI: Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011). Though Lanyon was not included, see also the *Smart Museum of Art's* recent exhibition, *Monster Roster: Existentialist Art in Postwar Chicago*, 11 February–12 June 2016.

3. "Ellen Lanyon: Paintings, Drawings and Prints," Urbana, IL: Festival Gallery at Krannert Center, 27 April–16 May 1976.

4. Nancy Carroll, "Talking with Ellen Lanyon," *North Shore Art League* 19, no. 4 (December 1971): 5.

5. Quoted in Debra Bricker Balken, *Ellen Lanyon: Transformations, Selected Works from 1971–1999* (Washington, DC: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1999), 36.

6. Robert Storr, interview with Ellen Lanyon, in *Ellen Lanyon: The Persistence of Invention* (Chicago: DePaul Art Museum, 2012), 9.

7. Though prolific in output, Poyet is a somewhat unknown figure. He is listed, briefly, in Henri Beraldi's *Les Graveurs du XIXe Siècle* as a "dessinateur contemporain" of various commercial



Ellen Lanyon, *Curiosities, Trout* (2014), screenprint, 47 x 46 cm. Edition of 30. Printed by Kip Gresham, The Print Studio, Cambridge, UK. Co-published by the artist and The Print Studio. ©Estate of Ellen Lanyon. Courtesy of Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago and New York.

products. The most comprehensive account of his career as an illustrator can be found in Manuel Chemineau, *Fortunes De "La Nature," 1873–1914* (Münster, Germany: Lit Verlag, 2012), 122–23.

8. Much of Lanyon's work from the 1960s was appropriated from Italian illustrated magazine, *Il Mattino Illustrato*, which she collected when her husband Roland Ginzler was on a Fulbright fellowship in Rome in 1962. Franz Schulze, *Ellen Lanyon: Paintings from the 1960s* (Chicago: Valerie Carberry Gallery, 2005), 4–5.

9. Franz Schulze, "Conversations with Vera Berdich and Ellen Lanyon," *Art News* 73, no. 3 (March 1974): 66. For more on her 1960s paintings, see Schulze, *Ellen Lanyon: Paintings from the 1960s*.

10. Irving Sandler, *Ellen Lanyon & Philip Pearlstein: Objects / Objectivity* (Chicago: Valerie Carberry Gallery, 2011), 6.

11. For more information on Lanyon's printmaking career, see Mark Pascale, "Ellen Lanyon," in *Paths to the Press: Printmaking and American Women Artists, 1910–1960*, ed. Elizabeth G. Seaton (Manhattan, KS: Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Kansas State University, 2006); Esther Sparks, *Ellen Lanyon: A Wonder Production* (Valparaiso, IN: Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso University, 2007).

12. The drawings are now at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) as a promised gift. In *Book I*, Page I, the dice are counted as 18 objects even though they are only numbered

once.

13. Lanyon met Gresham in 1997–1998 when she made a screenprint called *Naumkeag* (1988) for a tenth anniversary portfolio for the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

14. Ellen Lanyon fax to Kip Gresham, 24 February 2003, emphasis original.

15. Lanyon's notes about object groupings, provenance, and her original typeset poems are included in the artist's papers recently donated to the Archives of American Art.

16. Hand-colored sets are at the Art Institute of Chicago and PAFA.

17. Lanyon had many issues of *La Nature* in her studio at the time of her death.

18. Artist's statement in *Curiosities* (New York: Pavel Zoubok Gallery, 2010).

19. Interestingly, Poyet also inspired other 20th-century artists. Lawrence Jordan (b. 1934), the experimental filmmaker, used Poyet's illustrations in *Duo Concertantes* (1961–64), which can be seen on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/pJlnb13atnA>. For more on the film, see Bruce Elder, *Dada, Surrealism, and the Cinematic Effect* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 494–506.

20. Lanyon had wallpaper samples in her studio at the time of her death. Between 1996 and 2007, she made a series of collaged drawings titled *Beyond the Borders*, inspired by a 1915 sample book published by Alfred Peats Wallpaper Company.

21. Per Lanyon, ivory refers to the dice and "metrolog" is a treatise dealing with the science of weights and measures. See Lanyon fax to Gresham, 14 February 2011. The collage for *Ivory Metrolog* is in PAFA's collection.

22. Ellen Lanyon in the Print Studio. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXmcEMWJzgl>.

23. Lanyon emails to Gresham, 22 September and 30 October 2003.

24. There are three versions of the *Curiosities* prints: hand-colored prints (edition of 3), monochrome screenprints (edition of 4), and four-color screenprints (edition of 30).