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Bruises, blobs and bug-eyed dogs

The Cobra artists wanted to change the world - but they just ended up making a horrible mess, says Adrian Searle



Adrian Searle

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Detail from Carl-Henning Pedersen, *Pink Sun (Lyserod sol)*, 1942. Image courtesy of Carl-Henning Pedersen and Else Alfelts Museum, Herning, Denmark

There was a time when artists habitually wore berets, smoked and drank incessantly, lived the bohemian life and painted like there was no tomorrow - and no yesterday either. They rejected their immediate predecessors, invented movements, wrote splenetic manifestos and believed in such a thing as the avant-garde, a phrase that today sounds almost quaint. They thought art had a primary social function, even if they were not entirely sure what it was or how exactly their art would change the world.

Such a time, by and large, seems to have passed (though the beret has lately made of a bit of a comeback). It is, then, perhaps timely and surprising that the first proper British survey of the Cobra group, a movement founded in a Left Bank cafe in 1948 and disbanded in 1951, should take place now at the Baltic in Gateshead.

As a movement, Cobra fulfilled pretty much all the stereotypes of the 20th-century art movement - in fact, it could be the model for most of them. Cliche has it that, while postwar Paris was in the throes of existentialism, New York was roaring with abstract expressionism and British art was filling up the kitchen sink, examining the forms of the teasel and doing spiky, angular things for the Festival of Britain, the Cobra artists were

colluding to overthrow Mondrian, churn up the landscape, embrace the Outsider and reject social realism. The movement was founded in Paris, but its name (properly CoBrA, though rendered otherwise in all the material relating to this exhibition) derives from three other European cities, Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam - cities of occupation in which the artists involved had lived throughout the war years.

Cobra was, in part, an amalgamation of artists disaffected from various national groupings, particularly the Surrealist-Revolutionary Centre in Belgium, the Danish Harvest Group and the Dutch Experimental Group. So many factions. It is hard to imagine such tight-knit, ideologically motivated artist groups today, when movements tend to be little more than journalistic labels (the School of London, the YBAs) or self-promotional packages (the Stuckists, heaven forbid). There was a time when such things mattered and were more than cabals of art-world career lobbyists.

The movement's founder and organiser, the Belgian poet Christian Dotremont, famously described Cobra as: "Like going on a train journey. You fall asleep, you wake up, you don't know whether you've just passed Copenhagen, Brussels or Amsterdam." If Cobra was an art in transit, it was also a transitional movement, its protagonists somehow moving between a self-conscious, individualist "primitivism" (if that is not a paradox) and a sense of a universal art that transcended language. In part, Cobra anticipated the truly revolutionary ideals of the Situationist International and the 1970s "return to painting" of the neo-expressionists. It was also an art in transit from the most appalling war to a world in which things, so the artists believed, had to be done differently.

Cobra celebrated the irrational (as had surrealism); it was wild, colourful and filled with imaginary symbols. It was an art that, as Roger Malpert says in the current catalogue, represented an antidote to melancholy. Cobra also attracted some terribly mediocre artists, whose toe-curling works hang alongside the more significant figures - Asger Jorn, Karel Appel, Constant, Corneille and Pierre Alechinsky - in the Baltic exhibition.

Visitor, brace yourself: prepare to see some utter dreck in the Cobra show. Malpert writes that Cobra works "are among the most popular and accessible of 20th-century works in the museums that house them, and reproductions serve to brighten up the corridors of hotels and office buildings". A dreadful apotheosis, this, for an art that aimed for a rather different kind of universality. I would also argue with the idea that Cobra art is "popular" in any meaningful way.

Faced with this stuff on the hotel wall or office partition, I have the feeling that people probably just feel stuck with it and soon stop noticing it at all. When you do notice it, you probably wish it were a Paul Klee or a Joan Miro, whose work Cobra often

resembles in a low-rent way. Cobra's lack of class is, I suppose, meant to be democratic. Its feeble imagism - the bug-eyed dogs (Dogs? Sheep? Badly drawn bovines? It is often hard to tell), the festering suns, the blob people - are meant as utterances in a universal language that has its roots in the art of children, of the mentally unwell, in the "primitive", in tribal art or prehistoric artifacts. All of the above one now views with suspicion, whether or not one is sensitised by the more overt and occasionally ludicrous pieties of political correctness.

This is often the kind of art that leads to the invariable, but not always philistine, complaint that a child of six could do it. In fact, one spends much of one's time thrashing about in front of Cobra paintings searching for redeeming features and looking for parallels: this one is a bit like Arshile Gorky, that painting is like a Matta or a late-1940s De Kooning, there is a ghost of Dubuffet here, an early Alan Davie there, a presentiment of Georg Baselitz or AR Penke somewhere else.

What we are trying to do, perhaps, is dignify this art, when one of the good things about it is its lack of dignity, its crudeness, irreverence and rawness. Even the speed with which so much of this work was made can be seen as an antidote, if not to melancholy, then to good manners, as a way of bypassing the deliberations and niceties of style. Constant's bruise-faced woman, open-mouthed and flailing wildly, her face spookily lit, may well be a kind of revenge painting against a spurning lover.

But mostly the show is just horrible. The borrowings from Guernica-period Picasso, from Bernard Buffet or Miro (straight line, curved branch, blob - hey presto, there's a stick-man waving at you) show up the imaginative paucity of much of it. None of the Cobra artists seen here extended the language of the artists from whom they borrowed. Some of the artists shown - Corneille and Alechinsky, for example - are much milder, more careful designers than their Cobra affiliation might suggest.

Where Cobra's influence has always lingered is in the soppiest, more naive regions of art-school painting (as has Wassily Kandinsky's work: both influences are equally pernicious). But it is worth reminding ourselves that the artists associated with Cobra were intelligent, often intellectual artists. Constant, for example, was a co-founder of the Situationist International (of which Jorn was also a member), and devoted much of his time, post-Cobra, to developing radical architectural ideas, before returning to painting in the 1970s.

We must be careful, too, about fashion, what it dismisses and rediscovers. What is strong and enduring in the Cobra show (apart from its idealism, which is always refreshing) are the drawings and prints. There are great drawings here - Constant's lithographs of La Guerre (Picasso-like though some of them are), Alechinsky's hilarious

etchings, Jorn's scratchy, inked Burning Cities, and Pedersen's beautiful ink drawings of phantasmagorical heads and birds. Drawing always has a timeless aspect, an ability to go beyond style. It is, at best, intimate and direct. It is democratic (everyone does it, if only to doodle) and seems to tap something approaching the universal. The show is worth it, to be reminded of that alone.

• Cobra is at Baltic, Gateshead, until April 21. Details: 0191-478 1810.

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