

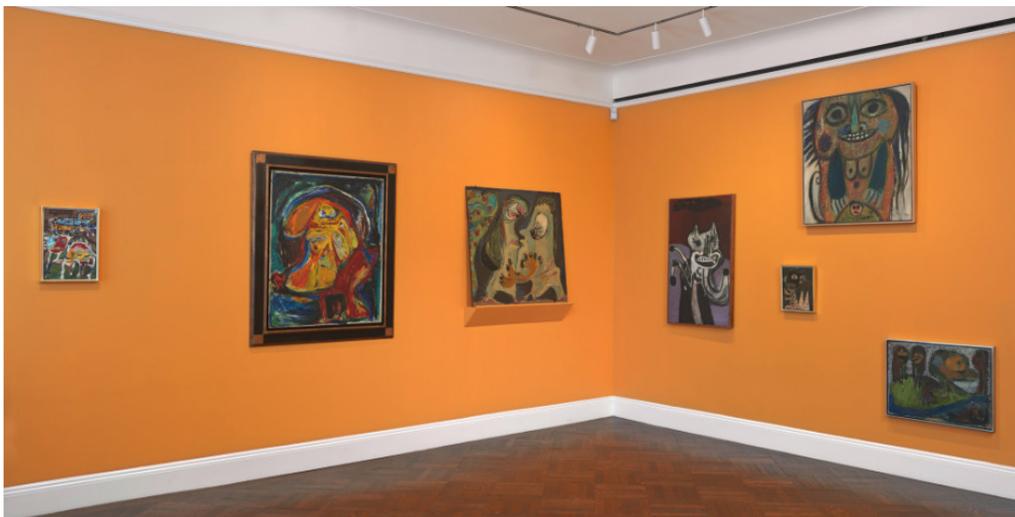
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ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

Cobra Artists Worked With a Passionate Style to Match Their Name

By Roberta Smith | Oct. 8, 2015

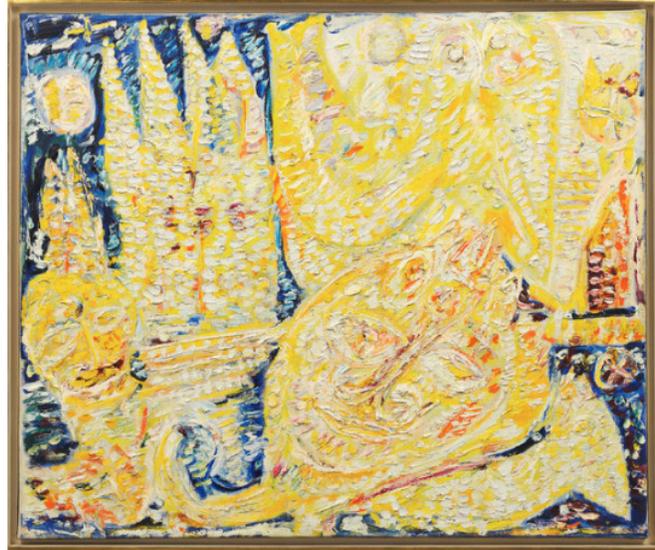


Cobra works by Asger Jorn and Constant. Credit 2015 Silkeborg/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, billedkunst.dk; 2015 Constant/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam; Asger Jorn/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, billedkunst.dk; 2015 Silkeborg/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, billedkunst.dk, Genevieve Hanson, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Cobra, one of the least-known of postwar Europe's avant-garde movements, came together in Denmark in 1948 and disbanded by 1951. Its prime movers included Asger Jorn, a brilliant, restless Dane; Pierre Alechinsky of Belgium; and three Dutch artists: Karel Appel, Corneille and Constant. They named themselves using the first letters of the cities where most members resided: Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. But Cobra also fits the vehemence and flexibility of the style, which, during its brief life, breathed fire and shape-shifted like crazy.

You sense this volatility in "The Avant-Garde Won't Give Up: Cobra and Its Legacy," a remarkable exhibition at Blum & Poe, organized by the independent curator Alison M. Gingeras. It's stylishly installed in five rooms painted in saturated hues perfectly keyed to the group's wildness. (Designers of museum exhibitions should visit for the wall colors alone.)

The exhibition reflects new research, but as the largest Cobra show in New York City in several decades, it is automatically a jolting re-evaluation. Its cache of around 80 works — painting, sculpture, drawing and photography — represents nearly 20 artists, many of them unknown in the United States. Despite the movement's official brevity, Cobra's reverberations continued in its members' work. Note Alechinsky's terrific painting on paper of a kissing couple on the diagonal, from 1959-62.



Carl-Henning Pedersen's *Flimerede Landskab* (Glittering Landscape) from 1949 Credit 2015 Carl-Henning Pedersen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via billedkunst.dk

It's easy to see why Cobra has been neglected. Unlike more studied postwar art movements here and abroad — Group Zero, Gutai, Art Informel — Cobra does not point ineluctably toward Minimal and Conceptual Art. It's an outlier: painting-centered, expressionistic and Northern European, in addition to being rather theory-averse. It looked to outsider, children's and non-Western art for inspiration, as had the German Expressionists, Picasso and Paul Klee. Today, it reaffirms the connection of psyche, hand and eye that a lot of today's artists — from Brian Belott to Josh Smith to Nicole Eisenman — seem to be searching out.

Paralleling the rise of American Abstract Expressionism, Cobra also offered a less austere version of action painting and allovercomposition, while melding figuration and abstraction, as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning did in the early 1950s.

The show even nods to Cobra's Danish precursor: the country's underground resistance artists, known as *Helhesten* or Hell-Horse, formed during the dark days of the war in opposition to the social realism imposed by the Nazis. Several *Helhesten* members segued into Cobra — not only Jorn, but also Henry Heerup, Egill Jacobsen, Else Alfelt and Carl-Henning Pedersen. Their efforts, ranging from 1936 to 1949, start the show with a bang, against red walls. Pedersen's "Glittering Landscape," from around 1949, is an allover slab of white and yellow paint incised with faces that seems to have been painted atop van Gogh's "Starry Night."

One of the lesser-known names is Eugene Brands, a Dutch artist whose exceptional masks are familiar only from handsome photographs, taken by Frits Lemaire, that sometimes show the artist wearing them (cue the Cindy Sherman reference). They are shown on a wall with small bronze heads by Sonja Ferlov Mancoba. Their robotic boxiness presages digital presences, starting with the video arcade phenomenon *Pac-Man*. Her husband, the South African artist Ernest Mancoba, who died in 2002 at the age of 96, contributes a delicate, allover work from 1963.

Jorn is ubiquitous, portraying the punch-like wanderer Melmoth in oil in 1955 and collaborating with other artists. He would go on to help found the conceptually inclined Situationist International and then his own Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism. Also here is his well-known example of such high jinks, from 1962: a found 19th-century thrift store painting of a little girl, accented with mustache and goatee, à la Duchamp's Mona Lisa, and seemingly defaced with the rallying cry that is this show's title.

It's a lot to absorb, and there's a second installment, opening at Blum & Poe's Los Angeles flagship on Nov. 5. It will emphasize Cobra's legacy, which would seem to begin with so-called Neo-Expressionism in the 1980s. It's also time for a thorough Jorn retrospective in New York. The last was in 1982 at the Guggenheim.

"The Avant-Garde Won't Give Up: Cobra and Its Legacy" runs through Oct. 17 at Blum & Poe, Manhattan; 212-249-2249, blumandpoe.com.