

## Europe's 1940s Cobra Movement Rears its Head in the Contemporary Art World

*The Avant Garde Won't Give Up: Cobra and its Legacy is on display at Blum & Poe through December 23*

November 20, 2015 Lyle Zimskind – Los Angeles Magazine

After learning that he'd been chosen to receive an award from the Guggenheim Foundation in 1964, Danish artist Asger Jorn sent Harry Guggenheim a telegram enjoining his would-be benefactor to "Go to hell with your money, Bastard. Refuse pri[z]e. Never asked for it....I want public confirmation not to have participated in your game." No wonder, perhaps, that Cobra, the mid-twentieth century artistic movement closely associated with Jorn, didn't get that much exposure in the United States.

Named after the northern European cities of Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam (where it initially flourished), the Cobra movement is recognized in the annals of art history as having arisen in 1948 and lasted until 1951. A fun and fascinating museum-caliber exhibition currently at the Blum & Poe gallery, though, makes a compelling case that the range of work we can identify with Cobra's conceptual playfulness has been more global than that moniker specifies and more enduring than its formally circumscribed life span would indicate.

[\*The Avant Garde Won't Give Up: Cobra and its Legacy\*](#), on display through December 23, features plenty of pieces by Cobra's principal figures, including Jorn, Karel Appel, Shinkichi Tajiri, Henry Heerup, Pierre Alechinsky, and Walasse Ting. Many of these are juxtaposed with works by other artists created over the subsequent six-and-a-half decades, several even from this year.

A recent untitled cartoon by Richard Prince, for example, sits among a series of 1960s painting collaborations by Jorn and Ting. Rashid Johnson's new "Untitled Anxious Men" shares a wall with three 1940s canvases by Jorn and Danish painter Eglil Jacobsen. A group of "Not Yet Titled" Joe Bradley drawings mingles with mid-century compositions by Appel, Jorn and Heerup. Eddie Martinez's 2015 "Alechinsky Sandwich" painting hangs sandwiched, of course, between two Alechinsky ink drawings. Additional contemporary artists represented include Julian Schnabel, Magdalena Suarez Frimkess and Michael Frimkess, Dana Schutz, Per Kirkeby, the Gelitin artists' group, and Victoria Burge.

One whole room in the Blum & Poe gallery presents Bjarne Melgaard's homage to the Appel "Psychopathological Notebook" inspired by a 1950 Paris exhibition of artwork by residents of the Sainte-Anne psychiatric hospital. Surrounding Melgaard's own new "Notebook," which rests open on a podium in the center of the room, are a half dozen paintings that resulted from the New York-based Norwegian artist's collaborative project with the Bellevue Survivors group of non-professional artists recovering from schizophrenia and other traumas, initiated in 2012.

Exhibition curator Alison M. Gingeras's catalog essay for a counterpart Cobra exhibition at Blum & Poe in New York attributes the long-standing "American amnesia or overt disinterest in Cobra" to a "lack of a uniform style" among the movement's "experimental artists" as well as an "insistence on the entwinement of art and [Marxist] politics." Now, in a moment of greater heterodoxy and

recrudescent political sensibility in the art world, Cobra's non-conforming ethos may be ripe for re-appreciation by an audience more willing to look itself in the face. One piece in this show that directly invites us to do so is Jacqueline de Jong's 1966 standing wood-framed triptych with an eye-level mirror in the central panel. It's called "Le Salau et les Salopards," or (roughly translated) "Bastard and Scumbags."