

'The Avant-Garde Won't Give Up' at Blum & Poe: Startling work of Cobra artists

by David Pagel

November 25, 2015 - Los Angeles Times

The L.A. version of “The Avant-Garde Won’t Give Up: Cobra and Its Legacy” is a wonderfully unwieldy sprawl that fills the six main spaces at Blum & Poe and spills out into two hallways. With more than 150 paintings, sculptures, collages and photographs by 44 artists made from 1948 to the present — as well as enough first-rate ephemera to fill a small library — the cornucopia lets you get lost in its abundant supply of startling works and head-spinning juxtapositions.

Organized by independent curator Alison M. Gingeras, the exhibition picks up where its New York version left off: bringing attention to a loose constellation of European artists whose rambunctiously irreverent works are not as well known as they should be, especially in the United States and particularly on the West Coast.

In New York, Gingeras zeroed in on works made in the mid-20th century, mostly in Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam (the first letters of which gave the movement its name), but also in other European cities. Her goal was twofold: to show that Cobra was not confined to three cities and to emphasize that its impact did not end when it was formally disbanded in 1951, three years after it was formed.

Rarely-seen paintings by Cobra founder Asger Jorn, compatriots Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Henry Heerup and Egill Jacobsen, as well as key protagonists Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, Corneille, Constant and Walasse Ting, swiftly sketch the diversity and verve of Cobra.

Most of their paintings, assemblages and ceramics are rugged and funny. Point-blank and loaded, their love of scrappy nastiness is accompanied by something like innocence.

Other standouts include works by such lesser-known participants as Ernest Mancoba (who immigrated to Denmark from South Africa) and Shinkichi Tajiri (who was born in Watts and immigrated to the Netherlands after being sent to a World War II internment camp in Arizona and, as a U.S. soldier, wounded in Italy).

Pieces by Enrico Baj, Jacqueline de Jong, Raoul Ubac and Jean Dubuffet round out the historical side of the show. Making a virtue of crudeness, its artists wrestle sophistication from otherwise blunt ways of applying paint and slapping ideas into shape. The combo is potent: an anarchistic mix of ambition and guilelessness, purpose and play.

That complexity is harder to find in the works by the 25 contemporary artists who have been selected to make a case for the lasting effect of Cobra.

Too many lack the awkward finesse of their forebears. Brittle, even shrill cynicism swamps any sense of goodwill in works by Richard Prince, Mark Flood, Friedrich Kunath and Julian Schnabel. Paintings by Joe Bradley and Rashid Johnson ape the gestures of their predecessors and come off as imitations.

This part of the show falters because it tries too hard to prove connections between artists by setting up one-to-one juxtapositions. The Appel-Flood, Jorn-Schnabel, Corneille-Bradley and Jorn-Johnson pairings fall flat, the more recent works paling in comparison to the old.

The installation is best when the contemporary works do not literally look like their precedents but instead channel their spirits. Such connections can't be proved, only sensed. They're illogical, weird and wondrous. They take shape between Jon Pylypchuk's forlorn figures and Reinhoud's metal monsters; Appel's whimsical mutants and Gelitin's comical paintings; and Mark Grotjahn's chubby beast and Ferlov Mancoba's slender figure.

The upstairs installation works better, its 22 paintings by 16 artists allowing for a loose network of interconnections. Solid works by A.R. Penck, Albert Oehlen, Dana Schutz, Derek Aylward and Don Van Vliet let visitors have some fun mixing and matching, comparing and contrasting and generally making a mess of the logical argumentation that sometimes constrains this magnificent exhibition. The folks of Cobra would be happy.

Blum & Poe, 2727 S. La Cienega Blvd., Los Angeles, (310) 836-2062, through Dec. 23. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.blumandpoe.com