



## Arts-Leisure

# Cobra rising: UMCA exhibit celebrates European artists who joined forces to start afresh after WWII



UMass Art History Assistant Professor Karen Kurczynski stands beside "Horsemen 1918" by Jacqueline de Jong, which is part of a show titled "Human Animals: The Art of Cobra and its Legacy" at University Museum of Contemporary Art. She is the curator of the show. —GAZETTE STAFF/JERREY ROBERTS



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By STEVE PFARRER

With large parts of Europe in ruins after World War II, and New York City emerging as the center of the newest art movement, abstract expressionism, a group of European artists looked to create its own response to the war. It was one designed to celebrate spontaneity, popular imagery and the innocence of childhood — something that had been lost during the horror of 1939-45.

Their avant-garde art played with the idea of the “human animal,” representing people’s animalistic instincts and desires, and the artists even adopted the snake as their totem. That choice seemed fitting, given that the new movement was called “Cobra,” a name that was an acronym for the three cities the main artists hailed from: Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam.

Cobra never got quite the attention that abstract expressionism and its biggest names, like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, received. But Karen Kurczynski, the curator of a new exhibit at the University Museum of Contemporary Art, at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, says the movement’s influence is still being felt today in a number of ways, particularly in its embrace of collective, interdisciplinary artmaking.

“Human Animals: The Art of Cobra ” brings together paintings, prints, sculpture and other works from the movement, which officially lasted from 1948 to 1951, though some of the roughly 30 artists eventually associated with it continued to work collaboratively, and also gained fame on their own. Most of the artwork is on loan from the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, which has the largest collect of Cobra art of any U.S. museum.

It’s a show that offers both vivid color and a variety of abstract images, as well as a sense of experimentation and playfulness: a large wooden barrel adorned with an abstract painting, papier-mâché masks, sculptures made partly from burned teddy bears.

The exhibit, which runs through Nov. 20, also includes numerous works by contemporary artists who were influenced by the Cobra movement. All told, there are about 85 pieces on view, according to Kurczynski, an assistant professor of art at UMass and a scholar of the Cobra movement.

Kurczynski, whose research has focused in particular on Danish artist Asper Jorn, one of Cobra’s founders and key contributors, says the group’s overall aesthetic has garnered renewed interest in the art world in the last several years.

Or, as UMCA director Loretta Yarlow puts it, Cobra “is in the air.”

Kurczynski says she’s long been attracted to the group’s mix of visual art, poetry and politics; many of the original Cobra artists were Marxists who believed that art should be for and of the people, and that it should take its cues from children’s and outsider art, among other things.

“One of their biggest beliefs was that all art was folk art,” she said.

## Coming together

As Kurczynski sees it, the spirit of collaboration central to Cobra was a product of the isolation and privations many European artists — especially those in German-occupied countries — dealt with during WWII, when travel was forbidden or extremely difficult. Some of the artists knew of each others’ work before the war and had also studied at some point in France, but they worked on their own during the fighting.

It was in Paris that six of them, including Jorn, met in 1948 to sign a “manifesto” that outlined their intent to create a new type of art — one that drew somewhat on Surrealism and past avant-garde styles, but also rejected Realism and other standards associated with the vanished world of pre-war Europe.

The UMCA exhibit examines that dynamic not just with art. There’s also a recreation of the “Poet’s Cage” — a grid structure designed by Dutch avant-garde architect Aldo van Eyck for a 1949 Cobra exhibition in Amsterdam. The UMCA version, in the center of the exhibit, and it will be used for a poetry reading Oct. 21.

Hung nearby is one the exhibit’s most eye-catching works, “Wafting in the Wind” by Dutch artist Karel Appel (1921-2006), an original Cobra member. The oil painting offers saturated primary and secondary colors, leaving the canvas surface highly textured; its two abstract figures suggest a face on one and perhaps a butterfly on the other, but much is open to interpretation.

“The Red Earth,” a 1953 lithograph by Jorn, the Danish artist, features a swirl of dark, ambiguous figures, some with eyes, beaks, talons and other bird-like features, all set against a deep-red backdrop. It has a common trademark of a number of works by Cobra artists: at over 3 feet by about 4½ feet, it’s a pretty good size.

In fact, Kurczynski says, Cobra artists collaborated on big mural projects. Other combined works melded words and images, like “Mémoires,” a book of offset lithography created by Jorn and French filmmaker Guy Debord that included comic strips, poetry, and texts taken from other books, all placed alongside Jorn’s abstract drawn and painted images.

## Breaking boundaries

Cobra artists “were trying to reshape the boundaries of art, even break them down,” Kurczynski said.

Part of her interest in the subject stems from her unexpected discovery of the Cobra artists when she was a college student. She had studied plenty of pre-WWII European art, she said, “but after that, all the focus is on American art,” as if art had ceased to be of interest in post-war Europe.

The UMCA exhibit includes work by two surviving Cobra artists: the Belgian-French Pierre Alechinsky, who’s 88, and Jacqueline de Jong, a Dutch painter and sculptor once romantically involved with Asper Jorn. De Jong was on campus in early September to offer suggestions on the installation of her paintings, Kurczynski said.

“It’s been wonderful to have her here,” she said, noting that de Jong is close to 80.

Kurczynski has also put together an eclectic collection of work from contemporary artists that looks back at the Cobra movement, from a mammoth (9 feet by 7½ feet) abstract painting by German artist Albert Oehlen, to a fanciful bronze sculpture by Axel Heil, also of Germany.

In “Cultural Congress of Havana,” Heil has fashioned a mini, headless “Michelin Man” (the famous symbol of the French tire company) atop two pigs; the whole structure rests on a painted body board. The sculpture’s title is a reference to a 1968 artists’ convention in Cuba at which Asper Jorn and many others discussed art’s role in addressing social problems.

“I think that sense of playfulness that was such a part of Cobra still speaks to people today,” Kurczynski said.

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“Human Animals: The Art of Cobra” is on display at UMCA through Nov. 20. For information on related events and visiting hours, visit [www.umass.edu/umca](http://www.umass.edu/umca).