

Other Ideas

Bob Fleck

1969

Back in the late '50s or so, when Brubeck was just beginning, complacency wasn't quite dead yet and beatniks were still in bloom, the walls of galleries, stately homes, and civic auditoriums displayed a new art—abstract expressionism.

Style and idealization carried out to cool jazz endsville, chilled out of time and mind. Jimmy Stewart and Doris Day strained to understand it: Time magazine was pedantically vague.

At last, something an art critic could bury his dentures in, finally satisfied after suffering to watch the rise and heyday of Ivy League Scholastics who romped through reality, reforging it into something that could be properly footnoted, abridged, annotated, and hyphenated instead of felt, heard, loved, or snared.

So they moved in, lame and halting apologists from a decayed and ruinous kulture, dispensing their golden touch of favor, here modest fame, there starving misery. Keep your work outside of experience, son, and things'll go O.K. for ya, cuz the media gots connekshuns.

It was a 1960 Nixon vision encircling vast tracts of neatly trimmed lawns and manicured manners.

Church on Sundays, sock hops on a Friday night, crewcuts and college. Keep everybody a foot apart and everything was gonna be all right.

And it was all mirrored in the museum with polite comments, teacup tempests that raged with all the fury of a caged gnat.

But out there in the manic West and the depressive East, senses were awakening. Heads were joining as bodies began coming together.

Awakened once more from centuries of restraint's cold sleep, the communal spirit that raised cathedrals in medieval Europe, the overwhelming passion to share in creation that breaks down petty distance between us all began to appear.

And it was mirrored in the streets of the Haight and Lower East Side, starting with dayglo fire hydrants, garbage frolics and 37 stoned freeks crawling around under a blacklit parachute.

So the kulture vultures moved in, snuffling and sniffing for the prevailing winds of vogue, stepping up the tempo of change until at last people began to open their eyes, ears, nose and throats to sense what was going on.

The shuck was up. In the last 3 years, "peoples" art has been enjoying a renaissance of sorts, from totems, to a muddy ex-parking lot in Berkeley, Cal.

True, a fur covered squawking box isn't exactly Notre Dame, but remember, a lot of crucifixes were carved before the cathedrals' cornerstones were laid.

The "Other Ideas" show currently running at the Detroit Art Institute is for experiencing from your nose to toes. It's environmental art that plays with you playing with it.

Robert Stalkhouse's "Blades," a collection of fur trimmed aluminum struts and boards left out for the visitors to construct their own ideas and visions requires at least two people to build a three dimensional structure (if you use all the pieces).

In fact, opening night of the show, when all the paunchy patrons came to get experienced, two acquaintances of ours liberated “Blades,” forming a cheery FUCK YOU on the floor to the dismay of the fat cats and cheers from the younger people.

Up against the wall, *Art Quarterly*.

Or Jean Dupuy’s “Heart Beats Dust,” a tall box with a red window disclosing a pool of dust rhythmically surging in time to a thumping heartbeat.

Off in another room a large square of blue gossamer over an up-ended fan billows upwards, anchored at each corner by fishline and sinkers. Stand under it for an airy Arabian Nights trip as it balloons and floats overhead.

Back in the mezzanine, Royce Dendler’s large plywood boxes creep back and forth over the floor (they’re for sitting) and what appears to be a cross between a porch glider and a Jacob’s ladder constructed out of 2x4’s grinds up a 6-foot incline when one button is pushed, and crawls back down when’ another button is punched.

Open the pod door, Hal.

Elsewhere, a color TV set showing random blotches of blue, red and green freeks out into distorted geometric grids when someone picks up the attached horseshoe magnet and moves it across the screen. Nearby, two Angelfish stare placidly at the TV behind their tank in submarine soap opera contentment.

Things that buzz, go thump, crawl into your hand, and most important, feed back another’s feeling for the world around us in both a physical and intellectual manner. The pieces may be experienced alone or with friends and strangers.

The show runs until October 19. Come and help us get it together.

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