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Anne Arnold's Peaceable Kingdom

By HILTON KRAMER

THERE are many artists nowadays whose principal appeal is to be found in the way their work brings us a kind of communiqué from the historical front. We don't expect to take much pleasure in such work and the work itself is decidedly not designed to give us any. It functions, for better or worse, as a signal—more often than not, as a danger signal. If nothing else, it alerts us to new strains in the pathology of our own culture.

Criticism, by its very nature, is particularly drawn to such work, and expends much of its energies in decoding (and perhaps even mistaking) the signals. Often, indeed, the work seems designed for criticism, and criticism returns the compliment by lavishing all of its attention upon it. The result is sometimes fascinating, but one consequence of this locked-in historical dialogue has been to place criticism at a greater and greater distance from the actualities of esthetic experience.

In the face of works of art that are not designed to emit these historical and philosophical signals, but are happily content to be what they are—imaginative objects of a certain kind, designed to communicate a certain emotion and dependent upon a certain mode of sensibility and a certain standard of craftsmanship for the realization of this now underrated ambition—in the face of such art, which is innocent of ulterior historical motives, criticism tends to be silent. Its vocabulary for responding to sheer esthetic delight is impoverished.

Take, as an example at hand, the new exhibition of sculpture by Anne Arnold at the Fischbach Gallery, 29 West 57th Street. It is quite unlike any other exhibition of sculpture you are likely to see at the present time. The visitor who wanders in, fully expecting to experience the latest esthetic frisson—an expectation that the Fischbach Gallery is usually in a position to service—may very well feel a little cheated. For here is an artist whose work is closer in feeling to Beatrix Potter than to L. Wittgenstein. We are suddenly delivered from the storms of history and the seminar room into something that resembles the peaceable kingdom—an odd turn, to say the least, in our experience of contemporary art.

Yet make no mistake about it: Miss Arnold is one of our best and most original sculptors. She is certainly too original for our museums, who consistently ignore her work when they organize their blockbuster surveys of new sculpture, and criticism—"serious" criticism, as we say—has proved helpless in accounting for her special quality. Despite this lack of critical and museological attention, however, her work enjoys a devoted following among artists and collectors who are sufficiently free of the pieties of the moment to appreciate what she is up to. And as we all know by now, freedom from the pieties of the moment is the last thing we can expect from the most active and articulate members of the art establishment.

Miss Arnold specializes in the making of animal sculpture, and just now she has this venerable field of creative endeavor—which has occupied some of the most exalted talents in the history of art—pretty much to herself. Contrary to received opinion, which can

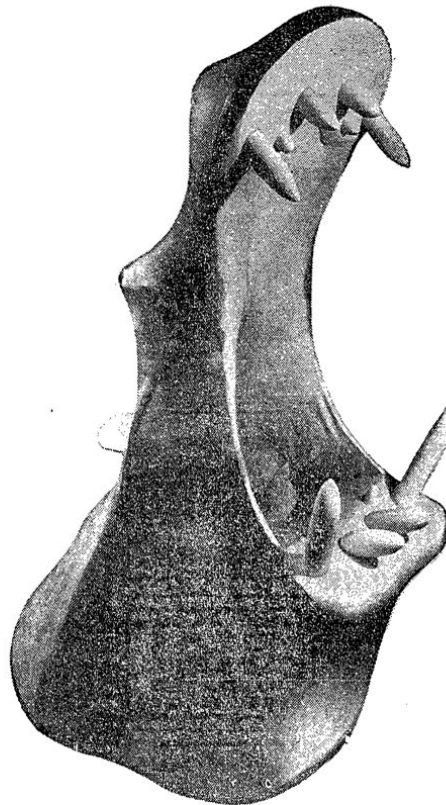
hardly ever acknowledge what an artist is doing if he is not doing what everyone else is doing, this is an enviable position for an artist who is equal to it—and Miss Arnold has proved more than equal to the task at hand. She has taken up a folk tradition that had been allowed to languish under the pressures of modern sophistication, and she has given it a new esthetic life by skillfully joining folkish and modernist elements into a sculptural style all her own. Her work miraculously retains what is most appealing to us in the artifacts of certain folk artists—especially the affectionate observation of and empathy with a familiar subject, and the direct expression of this observation and empathy in a medium that preserves their integrity and immediacy.

But this folk element, with its beguiling quotient of "innocent" observation, is only one aspect of the appeal that Miss Arnold's work holds out to the modern eye. The other is precisely its modern, tough-minded attitude toward form. There is a great deal of tender feeling in Miss Arnold's work, but there is nothing sentimental, nothing mawkish, in its conception. As sculptural "ideas," her animals have an authority that owes little or nothing to extra-artistic associations and almost everything to the way they are made. At first glance, they charm and delight us, but the charm is sustained in sculptural terms that are very fresh and very personal.

Much of the work Miss Arnold showed in the sixties consisted of wood-carvings that were painted. Sometimes the parts were carved and then joined together. But two years ago, in an exhibition devoted entirely to cats, she turned to a more complicated medium: canvas stretched over a wooden armature to form a "modeled" mass. The surfaces were painted, and the work became, in effect, an amalgam of painting and sculpture. In her new exhibition, she continues to work in this medium, only now the subjects are rabbits, an elephant head and a hippopotamus head, the latter with its mouth wide open.

The observation, as always, is highly realistic. But where Miss Arnold's work really triumphs is in the way the gesture—the specific animal tension in her given subject—is translated into sculptural terms. Whether the subject is "cropped" or given complete, she is a master at sustaining this biological gesture—a kind of animal choreography—in a large, decorative sculptural mass. Every detail contributes to sustaining this gesture—the way the eyes are painted no less than the complicated structure of ears or mouth. The hippo's tongue is a masterful detail in itself as are the elephant's ears and the ears of the wonderful rabbit called "Pee Wee." There is a feeling, not so much of life as of sculpture in touch with life.

A style of this sort, which never traffics in irony as a means of placing the subject at a distance and which never condescends to its subject, does not fit comfortably into the scenario of modern taste. It requires the most complete command of craftsmanship, and the kind of esthetic conviction that only those artists who have worked out their values for themselves are ever able to muster. Miss Arnold has, in other words, performed a miracle of sorts.



Anne Arnold's "Hippo," at the Fischbach Gallery
"Performing a miracle of sorts"

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