

ART

By JEAN CHARLOT



Question: Should children draw or splash?

An artist against the tide

Franz Griessler is showing his work, mostly drawings, at the Contemporary Arts Center in the News Building. Tonight is the preview.

Here is a man who refuses to toe the line. Indeed, it takes immense faith and force to set up the course of one's work so directly against the swirling rapids of contemporary esthetics.

Griessler is a mature man. A motley procession of styles, from German expressionism all the way to American pop passed him by. It looks as if the artist was watching his portrait sitters with such fierce intensity that he could not take time out from his self-appointed task to relax at the sight of this esthetic Mardi gras.



Griessler's "Georgina No. II"

Pictures that look like people

It is easy, too easy, to point to the fact that, in today's art climate, such intense realism is out of line. To say that these drawings look like the model is not in any way to dismiss them. It only deepens the mystery.

In art, the relation of style to nature has fluctuated sharply throughout the centuries. As a rule, in our day, style has art pretty much all to itself. Nature, if at all present, is as subdued as a wallflower at the ball.

Contrariwise, Griessler believes in nature as the archetype of art. He attaches himself to each of his models with psychic intensity.

In his portraits we contact the sitter first. An awareness of the artist lags behind.

Unbelievably believable

So credible are the individuals he represents, so believable their features and their moods, that it is hard to realize that these beings of flesh and blood are made after all of charcoal and paper.

In its way, this is the reverse process from the one in fashion. Modern masters choose to transform the model into paint on canvas—or worst, into metaphysical statements.

Griessler's mastery of the charcoal technique is impressive. Texture and a sense of color are obtained by alternating the thick and the thin of his one charcoal stick.

The grain of the paper comes into play. Reserves of white between areas of gray create a three-dimensional form set as a rule against the immaculate whiteness of the paper.

A style with deep roots

His style has deep roots in past centuries. Drawing as Griessler understands it was an indispensable part of an artist's craft. Each nation brought to it a taste of its own. In his case, his ties are more Northern than Italian.

A rational clarity tinged with aloofness the portraits that French masters drew from life.

A Flemish painter would enumerate with undaunted patience the bumps and hollows that render each face unique.

The German clung to his model as tenaciously as did the Flemish, but added a Wagnerian sense of drama. So does Griessler.

A masterpiece in charcoal

"Juliette May Fraser" is perhaps his masterpiece. Even a single detail isolated out of its context reveals Griessler's Germanic background.

May's folded hands—shown on this page—bring to mind in the intensity of their delineation Albrecht Durer's "Hands Joined in Prayer," one of his better known and oft reproduced drawings.

Accustomed as we are to obvious distortions, it is easy to forget that in Griessler's art, not only nature but also style plays a part. The same model in the same pose,

with a slight turn of the head, a shuffling of her crossed forearms, inspires a new rhythm and a new composition (Georgina, I and II).

We should be grateful to Griessler for his single-minded stubbornness. One

could suggest caution to those tempted to airily dismiss his work as anachronistic.

A sense of history proves how suddenly and how thoroughly fashion suddenly comes out of fashion.

Already, in their blunt and

coarse ways, the pop artists forcefully affirm the same truth that Griessler suggests with dignified reserve.

As concerns the visual arts, objective nature is in no way a lesser inspiration than are the sights one sees with shut eyes.



Detail from Griessler's "Juliette May Fraser"

Q.—Should children receive the skill of drawing, be equipped to draw anything they wish with any media: pencil, brush, et cetera? Or should self-expressing color-splashing be all we give them on the road towards adult life?

Jean Charlot welcomes questions on art from readers and will answer selected questions each Wednesday on this page. Write to: Jean Charlot, Star-Bulletin, Box 3080, Honolulu 96802.

into a melancholic void. Progressive in this case was not synonymous with progress.

A one-boy show at the library

Soon after our arrival here my boy John, aged 8, had a one-man show at Honolulu's Central Library. Conscious of his uncertain status as a newcomer, he meant to show off before his school fellows.

Instead of toasting the opening in punch, friends arranged an orgy of cotton candy. The show was a success.

As a sequel I found myself cold-shouldered by educators. "Did I not know that a child should express himself? Of what use were these deeds of Robin Hood's or Civil War affrays? Obviously an adult had sharpened the boy's pencil to such a fine point. To spread on a small sheet of paper hordes of warriors, and horses, and corpses, this was not authentic self-expression!"

He said it was a dying whale

The following summer John went to art school. On his first day at school he returned home with an immense roll of paper. Unrolled, it proved to be an abstract mess of colored chalk. John assured me that a harpooned whale floundered through the foaming mess, spattering at random her dark blood.

I commended him. It was so different from the delicate Persian-like miniatures he had done the winter before that I chanced the question. "How come?"

Sheepishly John answered, "Papa, in school they don't want you to draw. They want you to splash!"

A. — It is easy to see where your inclination lies. By drawing you mean drawing from the model, along fairly realistic lines. In contrast, self-expression should be understood as near abstraction.

The components of children's art are no different from those of any other art. Elements of self-expression and elements of story-telling mingle. At times they may be at odds.

Self-expression may be compared to one engaged in talking to oneself. Storytelling implies an audience and may be summed up in adult terms as communication.

The old 'ism' trail

Contemporary pedagogues have emphasized expression over communication. In so doing they follow the way marked by a number of 'isms' descended from the granddaddy of them all, expressionism.

In teaching art to children, the expressionist slant is not all to the bad. It underlines for them the reality of this mysterious island that is the inner self. There is a kingdom all their own, where neither parent nor teacher is allowed to trespass.

Modern ways of teaching, however, have neglected one of the essential functions of art. Art is a means of investigating the outer world, a means for knowledge at least as powerful as words.

To draw is to know

To draw from life, be it a bird or a rabbit is, for the child, to learn about the bird and the rabbit at first hand. The child is conscious of this fact.

If need be, outside the classroom and in spite of their enlightened teachers, children will plumb the nature of form and color, give

substance to natural or epic images, follow the transformations of the hill and cloud, attempt, aits.

In so doing, they absorb some of the balance and some of the logic inherent in their subject matter. They learn what wisdom of forms and colors exists in the outside world.

Art as a means of investigation can be an important stabilizer.

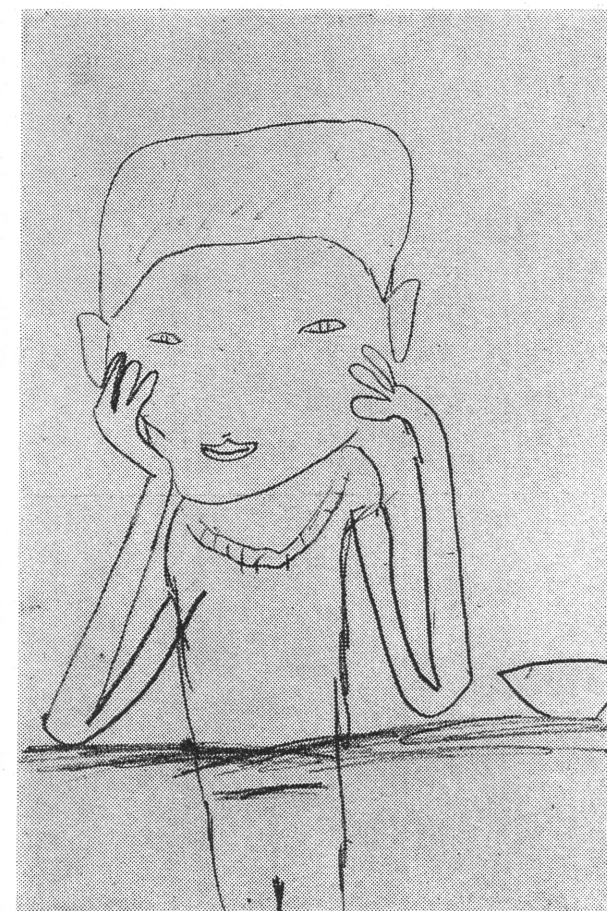
Simple girl, lovely work

For a while long ago I taught art in a private school. One of my students

was a mentally retarded girl in her teens. I put her to copy simple objects. Her concentration on something else than self bore fruit. Her simplicity stood her in good stead. She did some lovely work and achieved in so doing a modicum of happiness.

Alas, this was a progressive school. Its director overruled me. The girl was forbidden to copy the model. From now on her inspiration was to come strictly from inside.

Her insides were empty. My poor student relapsed



"Peter, Age 5" drawn by Martin, age 7