64. Affandi. E.W. Center August 9 1967

ART

by Jean Charlot

The paintings of Affandi

An exhibition of paintings by the Indonesian artist, Affandi, opened Monday in Jefferson Hall at the East-West Center. It will close August 18.

The same show will be seen next in Washington at the Corcoran Galleries, before the artist's return to Jogjacarta, where he lives.

There is something about Affandi that suggests none of the laissez-faire that goes with the popular concept of what an artist should be.

Instead there is an air of decision, an aura of hard work.

The artist's muscular body is that of an artisan. One would guess that his tools are saw and hammer rather than brush and paint tube.

Affandi reminds me of some among my Mexican colleagues, who gloried more in a well-filled cartridge belt than in all the salon awards that came their way.

Affandi was brought to Hawaii by the East-West Center, as one of its senior specialists. On arrival, he was shown to his office, de luxe by American standards — swivel-chair, steel desk, file cabinet, bookshelves, table lamp, pearl gray telephone — the whole immaculately clean.

Something is missing

Affandi surveyed it all. "Don't you have anything else?" he said.

Confusion at the Center. Deans, ambassadors, college presidents, philosophers, all had been satisfied. What did Affandi expect?

He elucidated his thought in an English both hesitant and crisp, "I want a place I can be dirty in."

Since arrival, Affandi, in workclothes, has been busy stretching and framing the superb collection of paintings he brought unstretched and rolled.

He has also been mitering bamboos to put together the democratic frames that underline his intent more than would frames of gold.

The discreet tap-tap of the artist's hammer blends rather pleasantly with the incessant tap-tap of the many typewriters that hum in adjacent offices.

Affandi's "Indonesian Dancing Girl"

Even at home in Indonesia, Affandi does things somewhat differently. When he was U.S. ambassador there, Chancellor Howard Jones was a guest in the artist's home. He describes admiringly how Affandi built it in the shape of a banana, or so I inferred.

It's not a banana house

Affandi denies this: "I do not live in a banana, but in a banana leaf." And he proves his point by showing me, in one of his sketchbooks, delicately detailed architectural renderings.

The house — a cluster of houses — was conceived to blend with nature rather than to lord it over nature.

The walls are wood and glass. The thatched roofs curve and swell with a botanical sort of logic.

As also was the custom in ancient Hawaii, there is a house to sleep in, a house to cook in, a house to live in.

To this traditional triad Affandi has added a house to paint in. And close by, a long house that is to be a museum displaying works by contemporary Indonesian artists.

In an older and quieter order of things, an artist could be appointed painter to a king. To match a century rich in upheavals, Affandi has appointed himself painter to the people, to his people.

That he fights for them with paint instead of a gun makes things in no way easier for him.

And in a country where lines and colors are understood more readily than alphabets, it makes things in no way milder.

Affandi, himself an art teacher, is thoroughly informed as concerns modern art. But, while others flush with pride at the thought that art has become international, he wishes it to remain racial and regional.

He sees past and future

As a social progressive, Affandi looks to the future. As an artist, he has an intense awareness of the past. And a natural pride in the unbroken continuity, throughout the centuries, of all manifestations of Indonesian art.

True, there are differences. Ancient sculptors and painters were court artists, working to enhance the majesty of a ruler. Or religious artists, relaying visions seen on the threshold of another world.

Affandi's concerns are of this world. As happened before him with Peter Breughel in Flanders, rulers are of no concern to him, only the ruled.

The only hint at religion I saw in his work were shapes of godlings or daemons, erected in their fields by peasants to keep thieving birds away.

There is nothing oratorical, nothing conscious, in his choice of subject matter. Affandi is not a literary painter but a painterly one. Yet, some of his chosen subjects have a flavor of social apologues.

A wild hog, chained, is brought out of the bush alive, black, bristling, ugly. Its many tusks are now useless. One feels that Affandi sides with the brute against its tormentors.

The cockfight is over. The loser lies in a pool of blood, its scrawny neck still ruffled in death by the heat of the fight. The crowd of onlookers disperses. Brown feet walk away from the small corpse and out of the canvas.

Affandi's self-portrait

In the self-portrait here reproduced, Affandi suggests a latent fierceness, and scatters about mental images that complement the physical report: black hogs and scarecrows.

His technique in oil painting is unusual. His one tool is the tube of color itself. The pigment is squeezed directly onto the canvas in its ribbon shape, without benefit of brush or palette knife.

What could become a working mannerism is never flaunted as an end in itself. The bold formula remains subordinate to Affandi's goal — to be, in his art, a mouthpiece for his people.

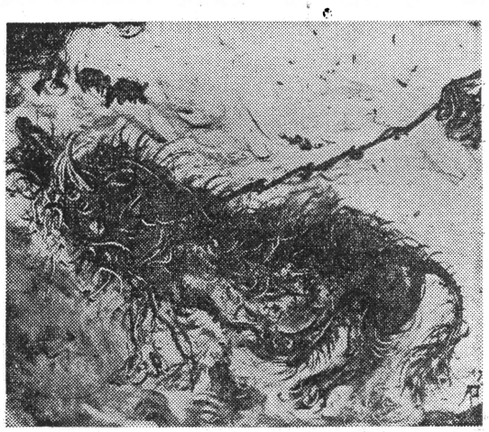
Affandi is now trying his hand at the mural technique.

On his return home, he hopes to cover immense surfaces in true fresco.

By his presence among us, Affandi affirms the concept of the artist as a socially responsible being, accepting his full share of tasks in a community.

And his work proves that, to achieve this goal, he has plunged as deeply into problems of pure esthetic as have other art-makers, hid in the privacy of their studios.

SPECIAL—This Affandi self-portrait was drawn specially for the Star-Bulletin's art page.



"Chained Wild Hog" by Affandi