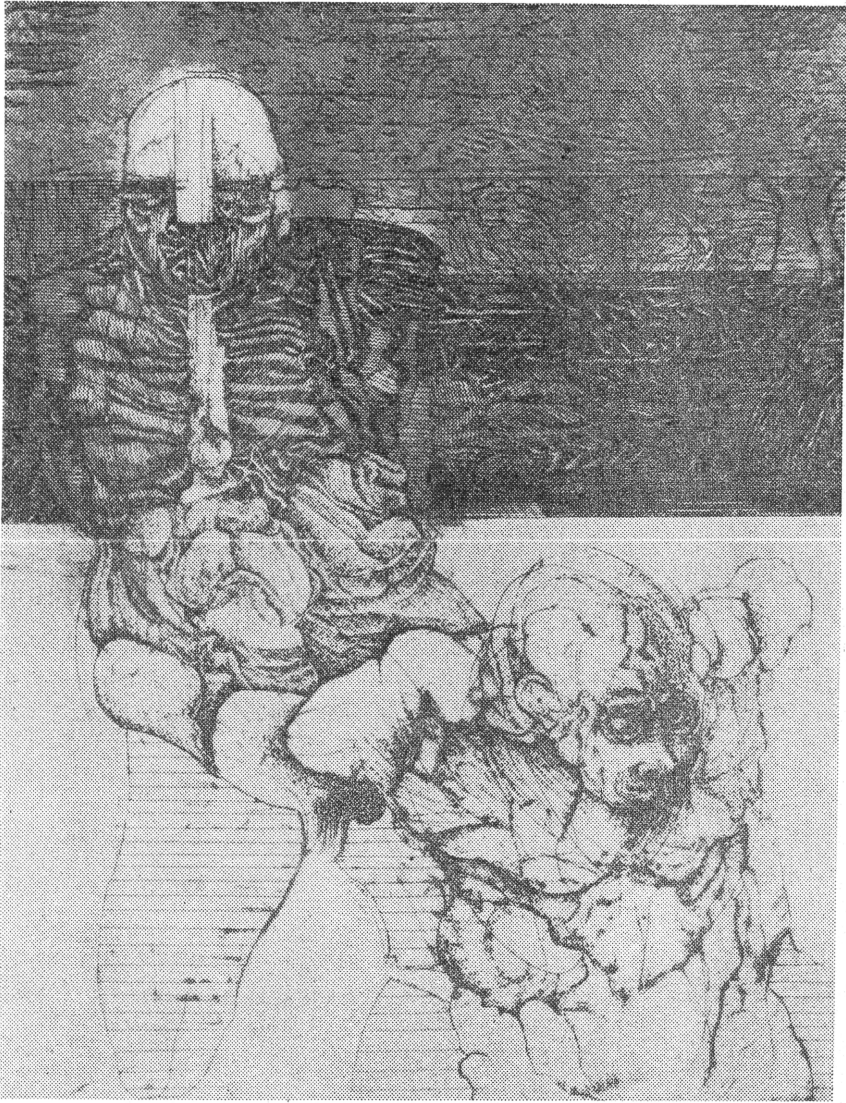


ART

by Jean Charlot



VISUAL COMMENTARIES — The Kowalke etchings, "of large format and heroic in scope . . ." on the theme of Dante's "Inferno." This is "Canto XXIX — Spirit."

A one-man show of etchings and drawings by Ronald Kowalke is at the Honolulu Academy of Arts through Sunday.

The etchings, of large format and heroic in scope, are visual commentaries on the theme of Dante's "Inferno." It is praise indeed to state that, despite their undoubted technical excellence, what strikes one forcefully is first of all an unabated intensity of mood, as one goes from plate to plate, from Canto to Canto.

Now a days one rarely comes upon a work of such sustained endeavor. Contemporary art lacks, as a whole, the wish for complex themes and clear enunciation. Much of the best has been rather in the nature of an isolated exclamation point, or of a question mark, or of a deep intake of breath under stress.

DIDACTIC in intent and epic in its breadth, Kowalke's "Inferno" would have found more easily its place in some last century. Then it was an accepted fact that the painter of histories, describing dramatic or heroic deeds, took precedence over the portrait painter who, in turn, rated a higher niche than the painter of still life.

As to the abstract painter, who knows how he would have fared in this rating of genres. Luckily he had yet to be born.

Our century has witnessed a radical reversal of such time-hallowed values. In the early 1900's a scruple overcame the painters in regard to subject matter. They shied away from the great themes of love and death. An apple, a glass, a bottle, were preferred models. By facetting, hacking, distorting, cubism managed soon after to dispense altogether with these already expendable accessories.

Today abstraction reigns nearly unchallenged. At this moment, it would be soothing for the many practitioners of the art to believe that the history of styles has come to a stop. Precedents suggest otherwise.

THE NINETEENTH century was ushered in by a didactic masterpiece, Louis David's "Coronation of Napoleon." Yet this same century that started with David outlasted Van Gogh.

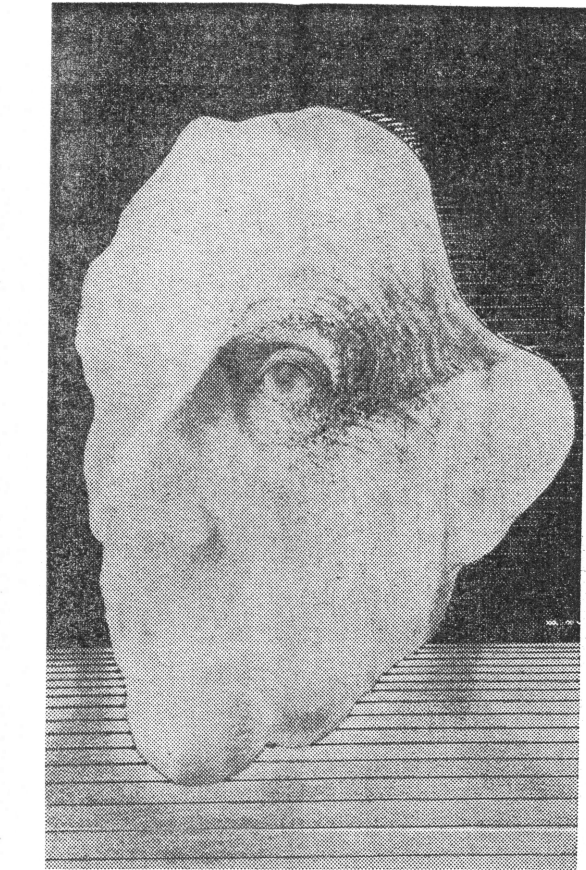
By a sort of reverse motion, our own century, beginning with the fireworks of the Fauves, may still witness a rebirth of the didactic and of the heroic in art before its end.

Kowalke's etchings point impressively to such a renaissance. Dante's aim when he wrote was not to align verses to prove himself a poet. He rated far over poesie the urgency of a message beamed at sin and sinners. Kowalke's art is equally for him a means to prophesy, to fulminate and to exhort.

Though nude, the bodies that Kowalke etches are thoroughly unclassical. They are stripped of vestments and shrouds, burnt to cinders eons ago. Most are even stripped of their skin, the cage of the ribs spilling hazardly its soft load of innards. Dante meant to relate hell and the Florence of his time. Alas, hell is still with us here and now and these etchings illustrate as well the massacres and body counts that are our daily newspaper fare.

A MAJOR series of drawings, "Lovers," deals also with bodies. Paired two by two, their habitat is the zone of purgatorial twilight that is our world rather than any sizzling netherworld. These gymnasts, however uncertainly and gropingly, partake of the spiritual. Playboy's bunnies and playmates have no place in their games. Neither have the giants that a Titian or a Rubens convulse in titanic embrace.

Closer to Kowalke's approach to the theme are the



NO EGO BOOSTER — The Kowalke drawing of Bertrand Russell.

lean lovers that Hieronimus Bosch pairs in fantastic landscapes, so pitifully confident that the soap bubble that bears them high may not burst yet for a while.

Man's ambivalent attitude towards sex has afforded employment to many. Vine-leaves cast in bronze adorn antique statues. Marble vine-leaves are indispensable accessories of all neo-classical art. To this day, the Sistine Chapel "Last Judgment" remains defaced by drapes that a wretch, known to his contemporaries as pants-maker to Michelangelo, was commissioned to daub.

YET ARTISTS will go on sculpting, painting, drawing, etching nudes. Why? When two 'naked apes', male and female, were thrown out of the Earthly Paradise, clothes became a must. The nude in art is the artist's attempt, however ineffectual, to regain entry to this lost paradise.

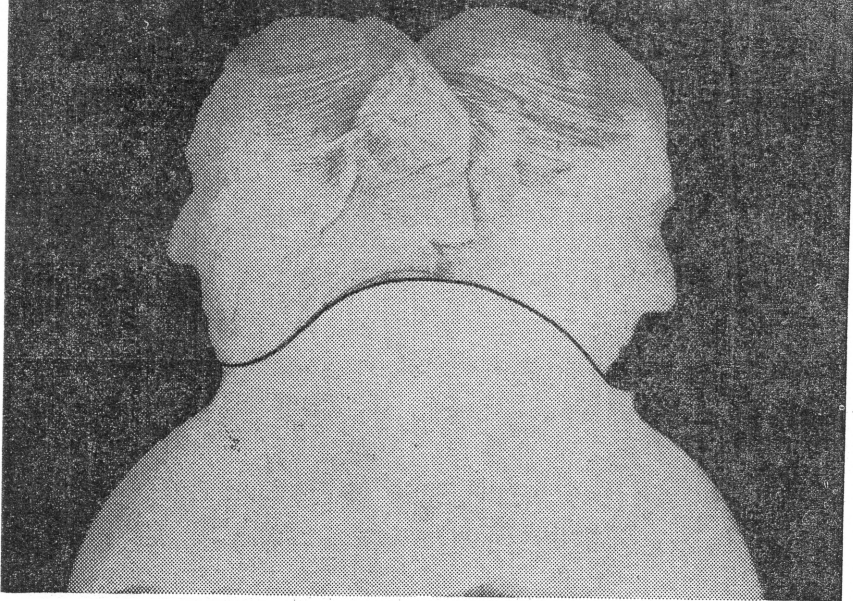
Another series of drawings are portraits. Here the generalized statements of "Inferno" and of "Lovers" give way to the individual. These portraits are not the expect-

ed status symbol or ego booster that portraits often are. The choice of sitters is one of personal aloha. The artist's sympathetic affinity with the portrayed opens a range of moods, from grave to tender, that were perforce absent from his version of Hell.

Technically, this series is an occasion for the most delicate draftsmanship, so delicate in fact that any reproduction will fall short of illustrating the point.

EACH HEAD is embedded in a decorative device with art nouveau flavor. Metal cut-outs suggest the mana of auras and halos. Thus served isolated in disco the sitter's head ascends to a sort of esthetic nirvana.

In his University classes, Kowalke helps his students discover in their turn the magic of a didactic art, a genre so long discarded that to contact it is, for the young, an exhilarating adventure. An exhibition of class etchings, now current at the Sinclair Library, presents subjects that range unafraid from poetic to epic.



A RANGE OF MOODS — Ron Kowalke's portrait of Juliette May Fraser. — Photos Courtesy of Honolulu Academy of Arts.