

ART

by Jean Charlot

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On display at the Contemporary Arts Center until June 19 is "Visions, an Environment", by Mike Cantrell and Hunt Johnsen. Already the show has received plentiful attention and no small amount of praise. Truly, it is tailored to delight the many who swim in the Age of Aquarius as in their very own goldfish bowl.

I too delighted in this uninhibited display but with a difference, unable as I was to escape a tinge of melancholy. Whereas this versatile performance dazzles most onlookers by its newness, it gave me the uneasy feeling that I had been there before, that I had seen these sights, that, in cinema parlance, that was where I came in.

What follows is inescapable: rise from your seat, shuffle towards the exit, brushing against the knees of your neighbors who remain under the spell of the story on the screen.

WHEN I was an adolescent, Art Nouveau in France, Jugendstil in Germany, bubbled and slithered as expressions of supreme freedom. The glassware of Galle and

Tiffany twisted and elongated itself in floral forms that mocked as it were the potty sedate vases in which a previous generation had stuck its orderly bouquets.

The jewels of Rene Lalique, molded to rest on the not inconspicuous bosoms of corseted ladies mimicked the writhings of snakes, the involutions of ivory octopuses, the armored beauty of scarabs and the ominousness of jewelled spiders.

In Mucha's posters, sirens swam undersea, their breath a spatter of silvery air bubbles, starry against the blue-green night of the watery depths. And maidens of pure profile gamely stood in the wind that dishevelled their coiffure, sniffing at an iris, against a fawn-colored tapestry of falling autumn leaves.

Thus, long ago, at a meeting point of centuries young 'moderns' laughed at their elders, shook all restraint and, chisel or paintbrush in hand, tackled the task of creating a brand new world for their own delight. In so doing they also indulged in the mild exercise of kicking their creaking elders in the

pants, an understandable reaction to memories of earlier contacts with the paddle in the toolshed.

Art Nouveau, as any professor of art will tell you, proved to be short-lived. The no-nonsense martial call of 1914 soon regimented the unregimented. On both sides of the trenches, death on the battlefield took drastic care of dampening the more ebullient among the young artists.

Chastised, art put on a cowl of asceticism. The hard shards of cubism, sadistic distortions, the puzzlements of abstractions, after 50 years still occupy the stage.

THIS OVERLONG soliloquy is not in any way meant to impugn Cantrell's originality or the validity of his painted statements. The stuff that oozes in ectoplasmic freedom over his cutout panels of fiberglass is all his own, sighted first in his dreams and patiently reported brush in hand, not as any esthetic feat but rather to unload from self an excess of inner richness.

Here is a valid opportunity for elders to assess the

young otherwise than through these obvious exterior traits that have snowballed into a negative image, a scarecrow to the aged, the hippy.

If we are to believe Cantrell, as well we may, the young artist and his peers are mostly made of sugar and spice and everything nice, however eccentric their manners. 'Boy meets girl' remains a favorite topic in Cantrell's dreams. His present day Romeos and Juliets may stage their meeting in a parking lot or on the planet Mars, in a spaceship or far-flung star, but the pitapat of the twin hearts is the same that once chose for its props a rope ladder and a balcony in Verona.

At The Foundry, on Waimanu Street, the current show is of paintings by Biff Elrod. Switching from the Technicolor dream world of Cantrell to this sober display is truly voyaging from one world to another.

The two worlds barely overlap. Elrod's art is firmly planted on our planet and aims to present an objective view of this, our objective world.

He is not the first painter to try such a stern and selfless discipline. Even before photography was invented, men like Vermeer of Delft, patiently observing the image of the world reflected in the camera obscura, would attempt to match it brush in hand, value for value, hue for hue.

Come photography, the new medium enthused masters such as Degas, who further refined his superb draftsmanship the better to match the foreshortenings he could study on the glass plate.

Today the cumbersome apparatus of the camera obscura, and that of the daguerreotype as well, are gone. In their place we have for our model the snapshot, so taken for granted as to be bypassed, at least as an art form.

In his paintings, Biff Elrod enlarges the snapshot to monumental size and, in so doing, comes close to creating a new style of art. The world of the snapshot, caught in all its details in a fraction of a second, is a world of arrested motion. Humans thus caught 'on the wing' seem as forcefully un-

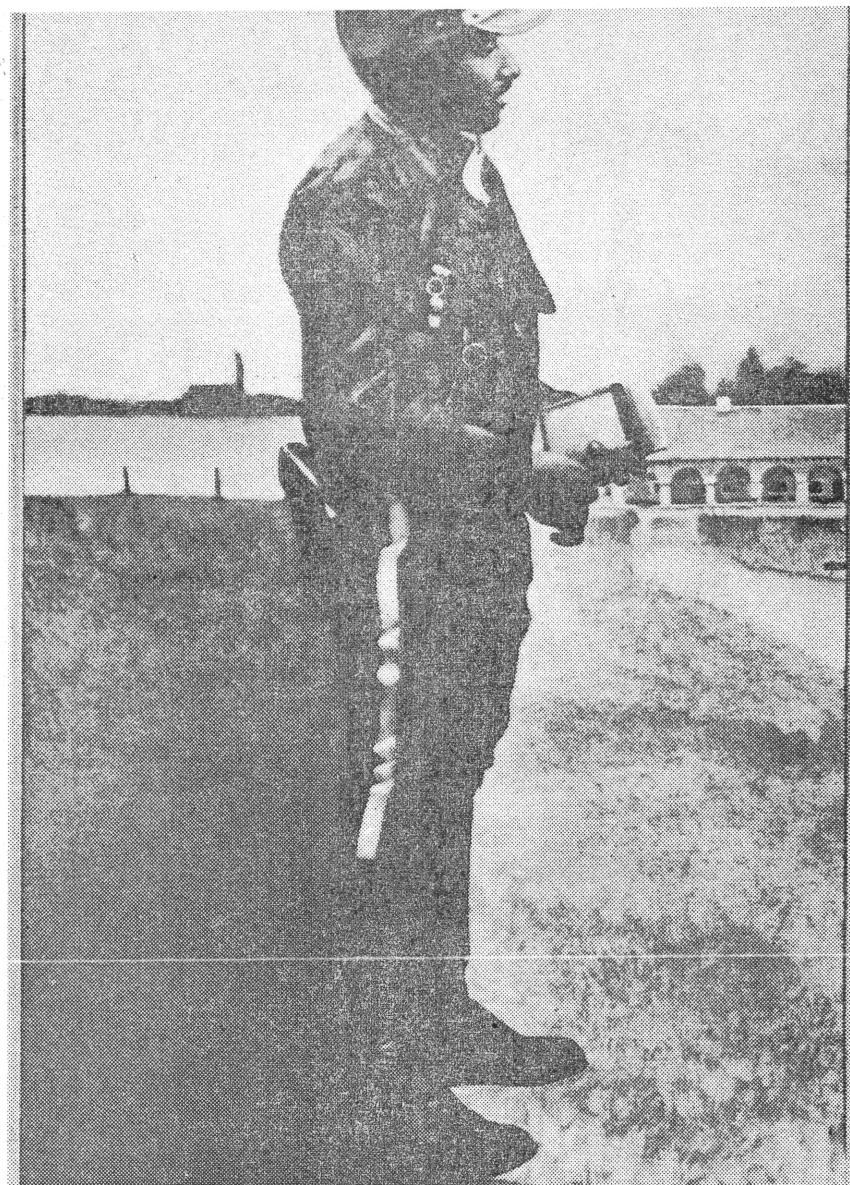
natural as the image of a humming bird arrested in flight.

ELROD'S OBJECTIVE aims, his respect of the sights of this world as they are, go against the grain of some of the most crucial concepts that gave shape to the orthodox modern art we know.

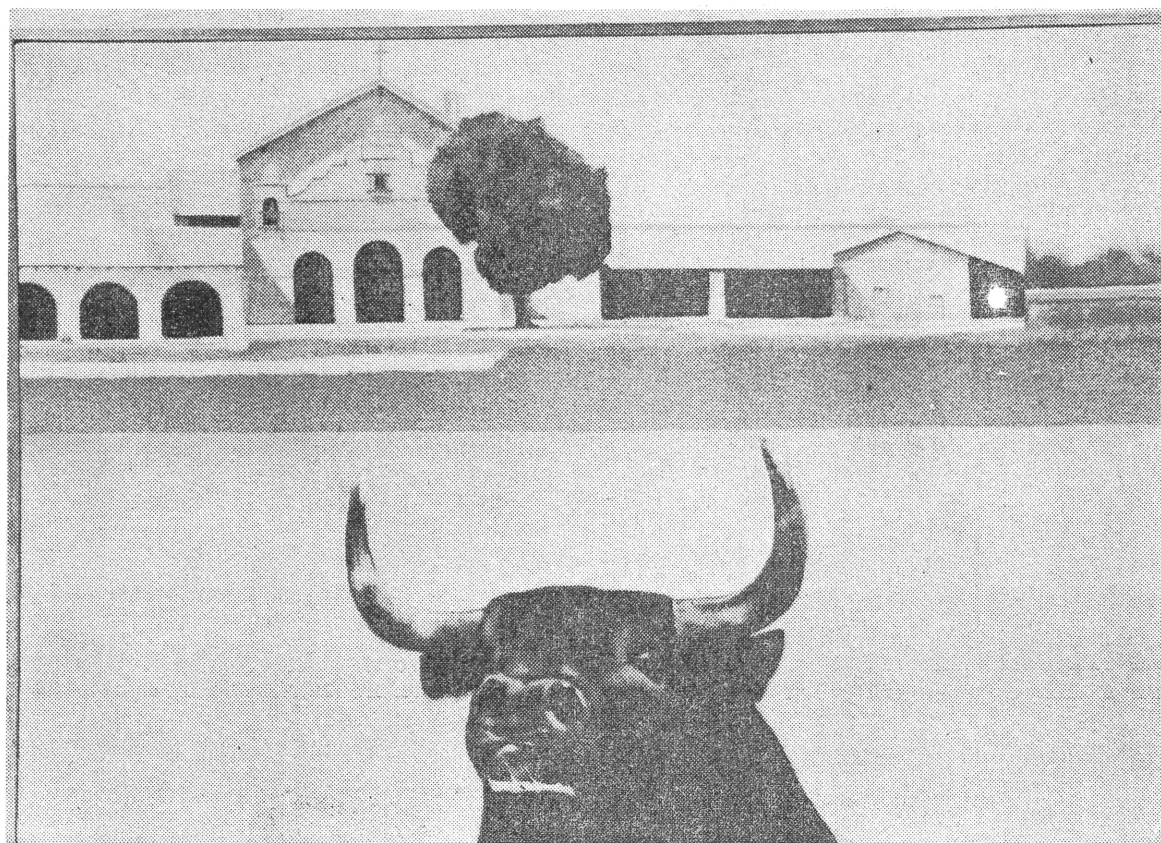
In the 19th century, Delacroix stated that, for the artist, nature was little more than a dictionary. This implied that, even though literature is ultimately made of the stuff found in the dictionary, untold manipulations are needed before the end result is in sight.

Zola rubbed the thought further in — "Art is nature seen through a temperament". Van Gogh illustrates the saying. He could tamper with a chair or a bed and transmute the carpenter's work into a pean of despair.

Throughout our century, a cult of self replaced the humility shown by so many old masters when attempting to duplicate nature. If art is to be renewed, it will be through the harsh questioning of premises our epoch has too easily taken for granted, one of them being the expandable status of objective sights.



"THE POLICEMAN . . . A world of arrested motion . . ."



"MISSION . . . the expandable status of object"



"MORNING SUN . . . A tinge of melancholy . . ."