

ART

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by Jean Charlot



Gallery II on Alakea Street is a pioneer among our growing number of art galleries in that it exhibits and sells original prints exclusively.

The current display is a lively one: three Americans, Corita, Sven Lukin and Ben Shahn, and for good measure, the French master, Jean Dubuffet.

Corita—as she signs herself now that she has left the religious order wherein she was known as Sister Corita—shows poster-size silkscreen prints, gay with color splashes and swatches, garlanded with spiritual admonitions scribbled in a hand both bold and childish.

Her art is tuned to the post-council era that witnessed sea-changes in catholic rites up to then rooted

monolithically into the past.

TODAY, THE solemn altars of yesteryear, piled high with gingerbread gothic, are deserted. In their stead, low tables are brought forth, streamlined, portable and well nigh expendable. Where once were heard the thunderous peals of great pipe organs one prays today to the accompaniment of the miaows of electric guitars. Corita's art fits in well with the newly found informality.

Praising the Lord with esthetic frolics does not lack impressive precedents. King David dancing disheveled before the Ark with such frenzy as to reveal his dessous comes to mind and, as well, the gothic tale of the juggler. To beg a favor

of Our Lady he ascended the steps of her altar and turned somersaults to exhaustion before her statue.

In both cases, that of the king and that of the mountebank, it is implied that God was pleased, though grumbings were heard from some among the spectators, equally pious but less inventive.

Corita's controversial art—artless some say, others will say artful—may well lure to God souls that the awesomeness of pre-council rites kept away. As spice for so much sweetness I, for one, could wish to find therein an ever so gentle reminder of Hell, but hell's fires would appear out of place in Corita's own spiritual Disneyland!

SVEN LUKIN'S Portfolio No. 1 is a handsome set of hard-edged abstractions. Though not meant to hold a conscious religious content these exactly severe-prints, imbued with architectural dignity, could effortlessly play their role in the solemnities of ancient superseded rites. Their flat color areas set against the gleam of silver leaf bring to mind the ascetic esthetics of Byzantine icons.

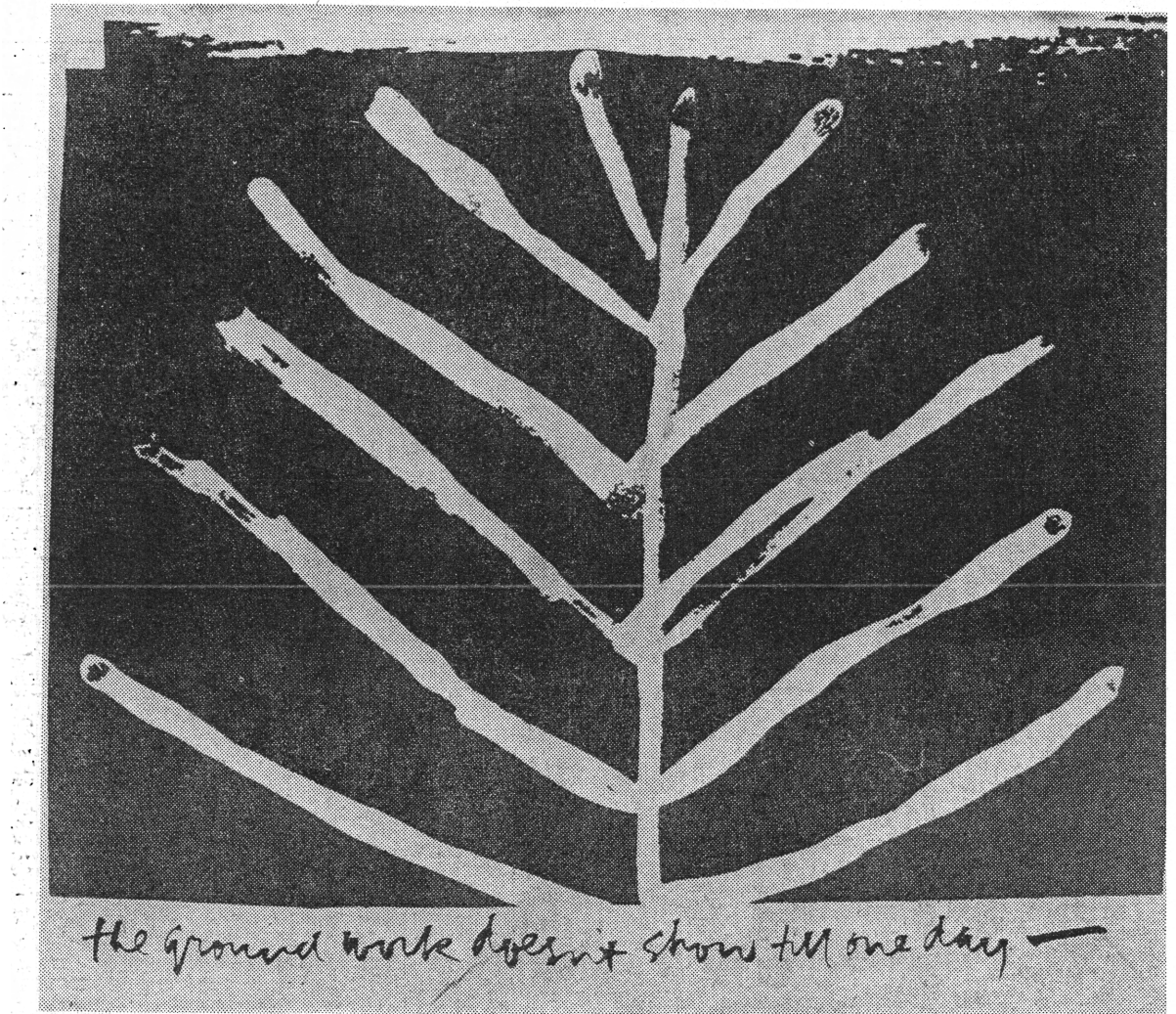
Ben Shahn's set of prints are a commentary on a text by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Their style is of late vintage, when the marxist sharpness of Shahn's early comments on the American scene had yielded to meditative spirituality. Rilke muses thus, "One must be able to think back to roads in unknown regions . . . to partings one had long seen coming . . . to days in rooms withdrawn and quiet . . ."

Shahn's images parallel the gentle sadness of the text. Dusk or twilight bathes the interiors. In their delicacy these mood pictures come close to the withdrawn art of the French intimistes and Nabis of the turn of the century, men like Edouard Vuillard and Maurice Denis.

Young Shahn, the Shahn who I knew, was different indeed. In the 1930's, his set of tempera paintings with the notorious Sacco-Vanzetti case as its theme had proved him a master of barbed political comments for which he had forged a language of his own. Rather than from the museum, his inspiration came from the New York streets.

HE LOVED the tense grimy atmosphere of the city. His source material consisted mainly of newspaper cuts and clippings, his inspiration came out of tabloid sheets. Instead of sketches, he took snapshots of street scenes and mob scenes. The camera eye taught him to see.

Before Shahn, masters like Degas had used photographs, but purified, stylized, uplifted to their concept of art. On the contrary, Shahn delighted in what was peculiarly accidental, cynical and ungentlemanly in-camera work. The gymnastics of inhibition by which most of us substitute for any given spectacle a



CORITA — "the Ground work doesn't show till one day —"

revised version in which hands and heads are given the leading role do not exist for the camera.

A man, however eminent or newsworthy, may be summed up in a snapshot mainly through the bunch of folds and creases at his pant legs, or by his grotesque shadow on a brick-wall, while mouth and eyes are summed up in three inconspicuous slits.

SHAHN WENT further than most in seeing things and people in the camera way, a very different thing from what people mean by photographic art.

Jean Dubuffet is represented by a boxed set of 52 playing cards, Banque de l'Hourloupe.

His early pictures on farm themes, of cows and asses and furrowed sod, were painted seemingly with mud and muck. Here he switches to designs of brilliant reds and blues, cleancut as flags.

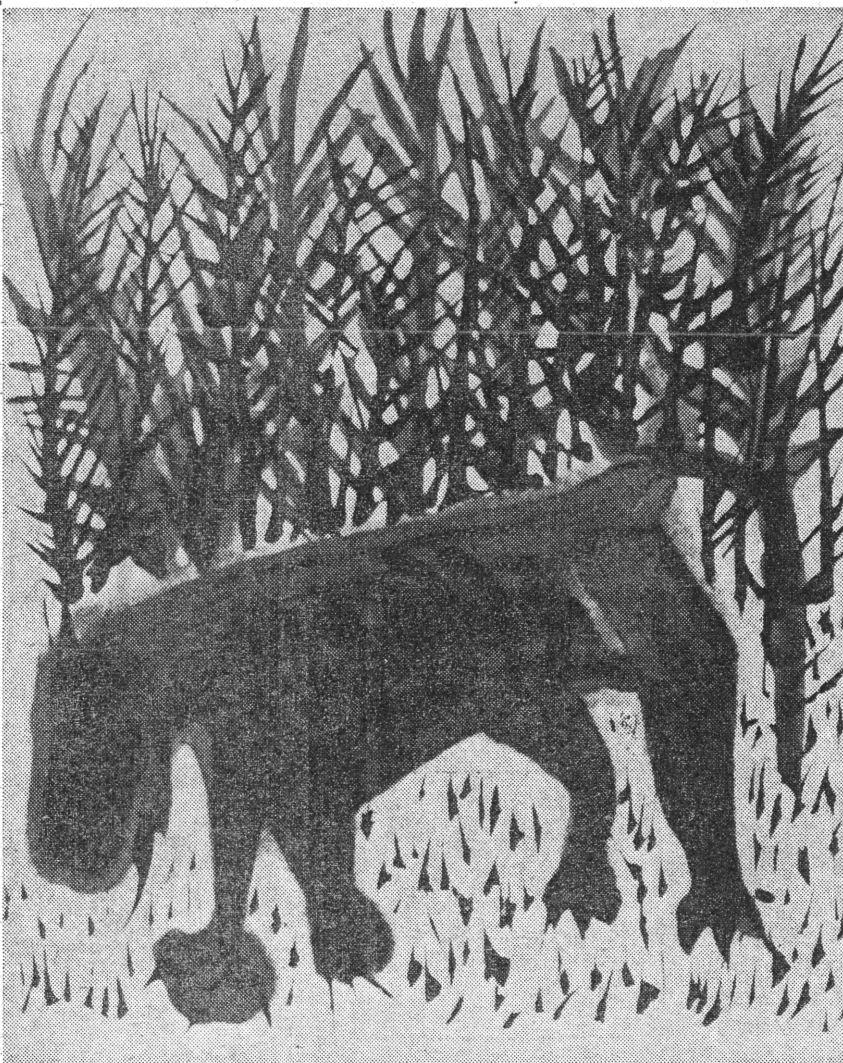
Despite its esthetic sophistication, Dubuffet's art is in direct line with that of the folk artists who created, in less machine-conscious times, the pennysheets sold at fairs and pilgrimages. Pinned to the wall, they enlivened the peasant abode with the bold black and white of the woodcut, embellished by hand-stencilled swatches of raw color.



SHAHN — To roads in a known region —



DUBUFFET — 52 playing cards.



SHAHN — One must know the animals —