

ART

by Jean Charlot

D-22 Honolulu Star-Bulletin

Thurs., Sept. 17, 1970



IN MATTERS esthetic, the policies of the Unitarian Church of Honolulu are as broadminded as once were those of the Church of the Crossroads in matters of individual conscience.

The current show of drawings, paintings, sculptures and prints by Philip Bonham, to be seen there until Sept. 30, underlines this boldness.

There are puzzling features to Bonham's art. Matters of tastefulness and tastelessness can be justly brought to bear in regard to the decorative arts. They should hardly intrude in the realm of the fine arts.

Many a masterpiece — Michelangelo's Last Judgment for one — has been castigated for a lack of good taste.

Bonham's offerings, being obviously those of a true artist, one can only wonder why the invitation to the show came to feature a drawing reminiscent of the more outspoken graffiti scribbled on the walls of public washrooms.

BONHAM FINDS his major inspiration in genitalia. The ingenuity with which he paints and models and engraves variations on the theme reminds one of the awe and gusto that seizes an infant in the process of discovering its toes. Both moments of extasis are bound to be short-lived.

Soon the infant will learn to stand erect, thus severing forever his easy chumming with his feet. Only too soon will the young adult reach a next stage of life, when problems of diaper service and of PTA attendance douse with care his sexual franchise.

It would be disingenuous to object to Bonham's art in terms of its subject matter.

All of our communication media are brimming with stories of success that parlayed sex of the crudest kind into fortunes of good bourgeois dollars.

Compared with the money-making power of X rated plays and movies and books, the delicate musings of Bonham can only be understood as gentle soliloquies untainted by any crass considerations that some would call practical.

IN THE 19TH CENTURY the romantic artist specialized in pinpointing light into the dusty shelves of the soul. Specialist of the genre, Theodore Gericault represented himself as a melancholy artist starving in a garret. Its only piece of furniture was the kitchen chair he sat upon and its unique object d'art a skull, grinning from a shelf.

Early in our century, Marcel Duchamps set the tone for a new romanticism that switched from the state of the soul to the recesses of the body. Ca. 1920, in his "Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors", in his "Passage from the Virgin to the Bride", he embarked on visceral voyages.

For him, and for those painters and sculptors who followed his lead, these safaris inside the body held little more joy than had, for the old-fashioned romantic, death-tinted psychological forays.

Contemporary forms of art allow the present-day romantic a freedom in his choice of expression unmatched in other centuries.

Abstraction and surrealism, kitsch and photographic realism, and, last but not least, forms of storytelling borrowed from the newspaper funnies, gather side by side in his show.

MOST TELLING are the perspective schemata engraved on mirrors, their geometries gone awry by the fact that each onlooker, reflected in the picture, adds an element of discord to the strict web of ruled lines.

Of the tableaux and charades acted by plastercasts of cucumbers, gourds and such, the keyword is never too difficult to guess.

The young artist bold enough to choose for inspiration, fallopian tubes and spermatozoons cannot but strike an overtone of melancholy.

This soft mass of innards that each one of us, artist or not, carries as his earthly burden, tucked between ribs and pelvis, stands for our physical blandness and fragility.

The flower, the favorite image of Bonham when he deals in comparisons rather than in anatomical facts, is, in his paintings, a harbinger of death.

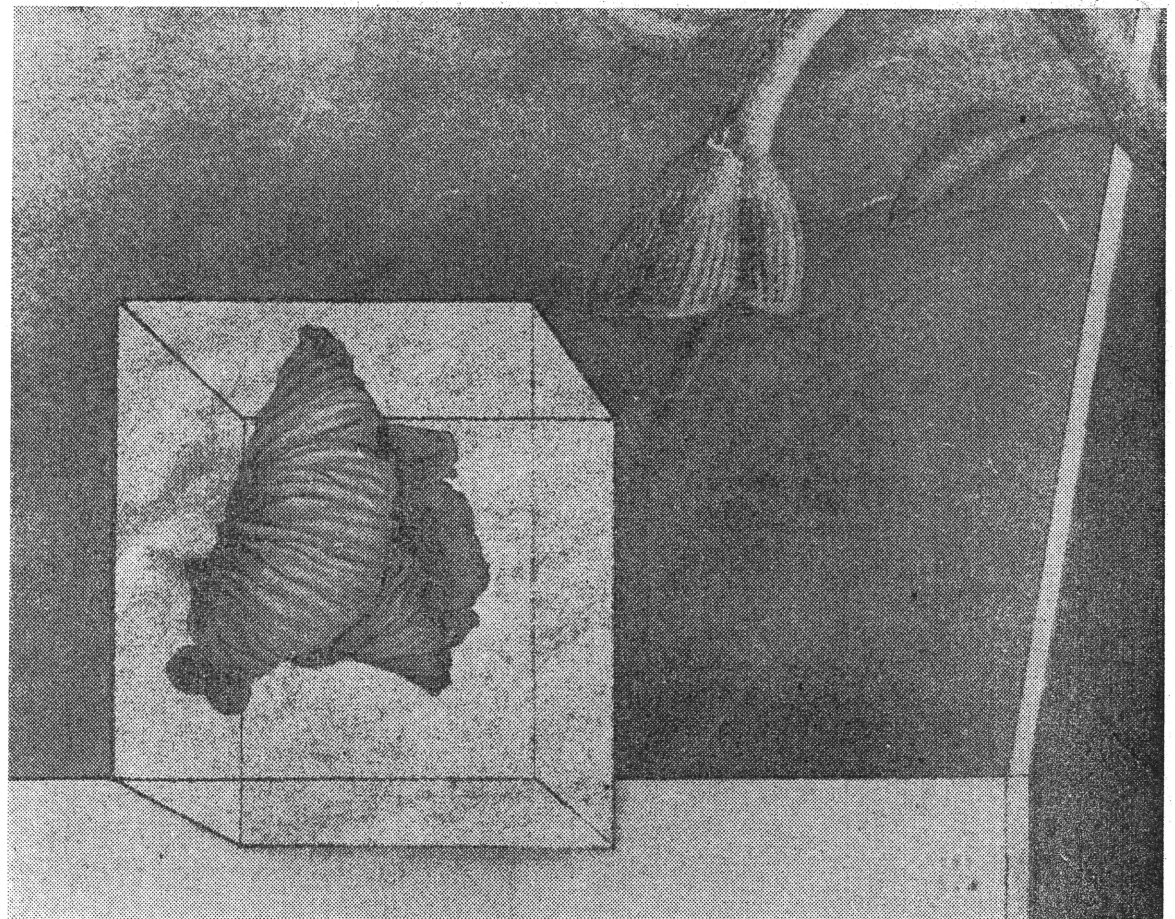
The publicity that attends such plays as "Oh! Calcutta!", "Hair", "Skin", boosts up bodies as if they were the keys to an earthly paradise. Searching along these same paths, a true artist eventually will reach the end of the road, with a terminal masterpiece called "Bones".



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The flower ... harbinger of death.