

ART

by Jean Charlot

B-16 Honolulu Star-Bulletin

Wed., March 3, 1971



The Contemporary Art Center, in the Press Building, has been handsomely refurbished under the guidance of its new director, John Lee Newton. Its first one-man show is given to a woman, Mira Cantor, still in her twenties and a newcomer to our State.

A graphic artist of strength, she is also an art instructor at the University of Hawaii. As one surveys her drawings and her prints, it is not beside the point to ponder what kind of guidance she will provide for those even younger than she.

I have seen quite a procession of art fashions bloom and fade. Each amounted, at its zenith, to a dictatorship of taste. While the style reigned no other form seemed possible, either as an art to be practiced, or to be taught, or to be loved.

MY OWN FIRST steps were under the guidance of the aged professors of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. These academic masters had by then reached ages that, to my youth, seemed apocalyptic, and their beards, white turning to yellow, reached lengths that advertised their age.

They taught us an absolute respect for the sights of the objective world even though, in the Hall of Casts where I industriously drew in charcoal, this objective world was mostly represented by flyspecked plastercasts. One treasure such august remarks as, "Move this line to the left . . ." and pinpointing with a withered hand thrust out of a frayed cuff, ". . . about the width of the black under my nail."

These were the same men who had given the best of their teaching years to Bonnard, Lautrec, Rouault, Matisse. Even though art historians prefer to ridicule the

strict and demanding discipline, without it these masters would not have been what we know them to be.

Such instruction taught the student total humility. In the process of art it was not the artist that was to be featured, but his chosen subject matter. From still life one would graduate to the copy of plastercasts, and from these to the live model.

As body structure and art anatomy came into play one did not labor ever alone, the shades of Old Masters, from Michelangelo to Poussin, being imposingly, demandingly present. And into one's ear was piped the acidulous voice of Ingres stating the law, "Copier betement la nature"—"Copy nature just as it is."

Throughout the rest of our century such stiff standards, having been swept under the rug, gave way to more elastic ones. Inasmuch as the objective world was bypassed, it became a somewhat hazardous sport to teach an art without norms.

FOR MOST OF my academic years I taught life class, an obsolete survival perhaps from bygone days, or so it seemed to most. While the nude model held heroic poses, offering fore-shortenings worthy of a Degas, caressed by modulations of light reminiscent of Corregio, the bulk of my students remained blind to so much beauty.

Rather than putting their faith in what they saw with their own eyes, they chanced to trust the elusive inner eye. States of the mind were favorite subjects, projected by a subconscious of which (in those days when abstract expressionism was the thing) each and every artist was most conscious.

I remember with what surge of gratefulness, while

looking at an exceptional student drawing, I could disentangle head from torso, count five fingers to a hand and, to a foot, five toes.

Since I retired from teaching, already a while ago, a change in the wind of fashion, another turn of the wheel of taste, must have come to pass.

MIRA CANTOR looks squarely at the model, and does so with unflinching attention. Every one of her drawings and intaglio prints is based on the science of anatomy.

Bless her, Mira Cantor gives to each foot exactly five toes, and there are in her show many feet. Making the rounds of the exhibition hall, I felt that the shades of my academic teachers could be well pleased.

Feet are her obvious favorites. Heads are quite absent from the many bodies she depicts. The artist probably gets irked at clothes, that encase a body and only leave the head as an index to the individual.

And one may surmise that, within the head, the eyes would incur her special distaste. They are the one maudlin organ, dubbed by genteel people windows open upon the soul—a label that Mira Cantor, neither sheepish nor prissy, would vomit as being neither hot nor cold.

IT IS PERHAPS an index to the level achieved by her esthetics that Old Masters come to mind as parallels to her "own things." Her dependence on feet, not feet solidly planted but showing helplessly their soles, inevitably reminds one of past parallels:

Albrecht Durer's drawing of the feet of a kneeling apostle, only a shade less famous than his corresponding drawing of hands joined in

prayer.

And in Italy, Caravaggio's peasant pilgrims praying to the Madonna. They turn their back on the viewer so that the sole of their praying feet face him, incrustated as they are with the dust of the road.

This is not realism as some understand it, but rather reality, underlining that animal weight, and warmth, and smell that pilgrims, and pigs, and all, share alike.

Mira Cantor's addiction to fragmented bodies rather than to whole ones should come as no surprise to the art lover. A fragment of a Greek marble is in as good a health as the whole statue.

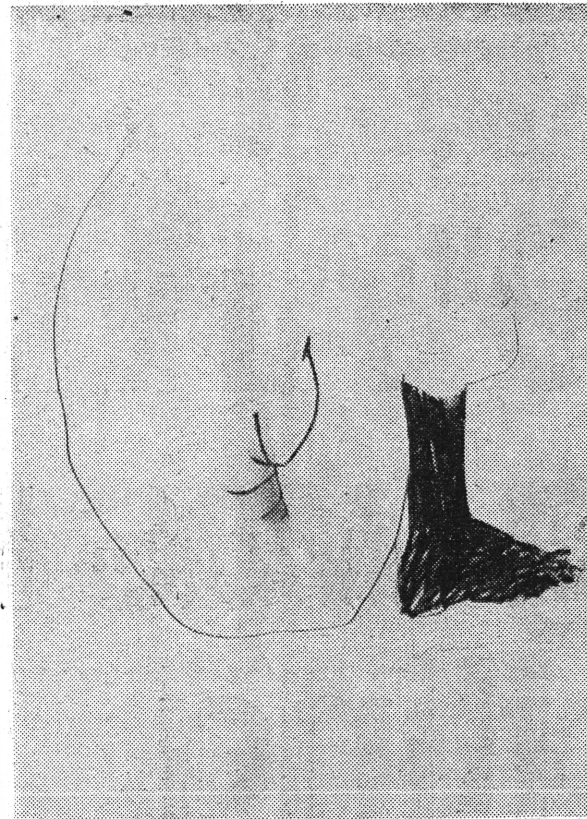
CLASSICAL aloofness, though, is far from being the artist's climate. Closer to the emotional gist of the bodies she etches are the paeans to love and death that romantic painters fashioned in the early 1800's. Gericault, hard at work on his vast canvas of a shipwreck, angered his landlady, who also was his charlady, by leaving her the task of

sweeping off the studio floor the human fragments he borrowed daily from the morgue for an inspiration.

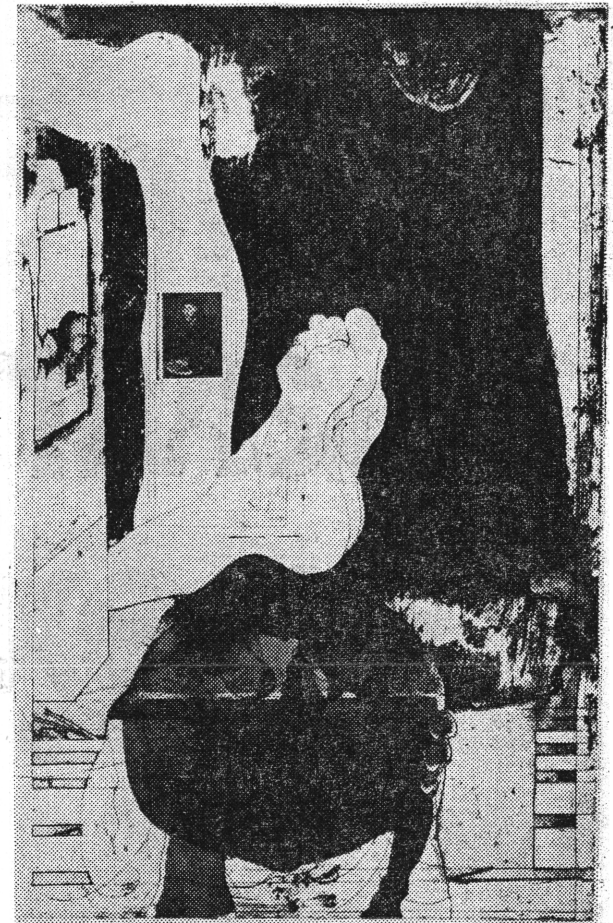
Strong as her work is, unflinching as may be her anatomical renderings, the spirit that informs Mira Cantor's work is surprisingly delicate and even hesitant in its emotional statements. Bodies meet, or melt, or pull apart, always with a shyness

that one cannot exactly dub as purely human, as even cats in heat go through similar mimics.

The spirit that informs the bodies, however, adds something closer to sadness than to joy, a melancholy tint that spreads over those humans who stress body supremacy just as often as it does over those addicted to metaphysical pursuits.



Woman Crouching (drawing)



Where the Spoon? (color intaglio)