

ART

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by Jean Charlot



At the Honolulu Academy of Arts, Louis Pohl exhibits mixed media prints until Sept. 19. Within the enlarged scope of today's art vocabulary, they are all on a single theme, volcanic landscapes that weave their way between observation and introspection.

"Taking in" this beautiful show, one feels grateful to what modern attitudes may have helped Pohl find a solution to an up-to-now insoluble problem, that of forcefully summing up the uniqueness of the sights of our Hawaii.

Given the hallucinatory nature of these sights, there were no true precedents in the past. The landscapist faced two immensities, both formless and limitless, the ocean and the volcanoes.

In Europe the task was easier. Constable in the 19th Century could mirror an English countryside whittled down to scale, ready to be put on canvas. French masters also met nature at its most unassuming.

Corot was content to filter the skies of dusk or dawn through a light gauze of foliage. Monet needed even less to spark a masterpiece; a single haystack or a few waterlily pads floating over reflected inverted clouds.

THOUGH IN some ways less trained than their European confreres, in the 19th century American painters were the only ones who dared tackle an untamed nature. The sudden opening of the West had caught landscapists unaware. They found themselves faced by superhuman vastnesses, Niagara Falls, the Rockies, limitless prairies peopled with Indians and buffaloes.

Undaunted, the painters did their best. They reported with the fidelity of a daguerreotype, this novel invention,

what vast sights they saw. Every detail was inventoried on large canvases confusing in their complexity.

When Bierstadt opened in the East his show of Western scenes, each onlooker was handed a cardboard tube minus a lens, the better to scan inch by inch each painting, and thus help the eye voyage over mule tracks and climb deathly slopes, and sight bison herds down below in the valleys.

IN HAWAII the problems faced by 19th Century landscapists were even more

unique than those faced by the painter of the American West. Tavernier and his school made it a specialty to present lava pits glowing red in the blue of a moonlit night. His style was patterned after a dubious precedent, the views of Vesuvius that tourists would buy in Italy before the advent of postcards.

Nowadays it is only too easy to smile when comparing these panels with the epic sights they purport to comment upon. Yet, faced with the problem of transforming live lava into art,

vertical gashes. Pohl opens the entrails of the earth and bids us follow him on a vertical safari as frightening, if less circumstantial, than the similar plunge of Dante.

AMONG GALLERY goers there are a few who, enjoying the play as staged, wish to know what goes on behind the scenes. For them it may be stated that the catalogue mention of a mixed media technique summarizes a very complex series of steps, probably unique in the history of printmaking.

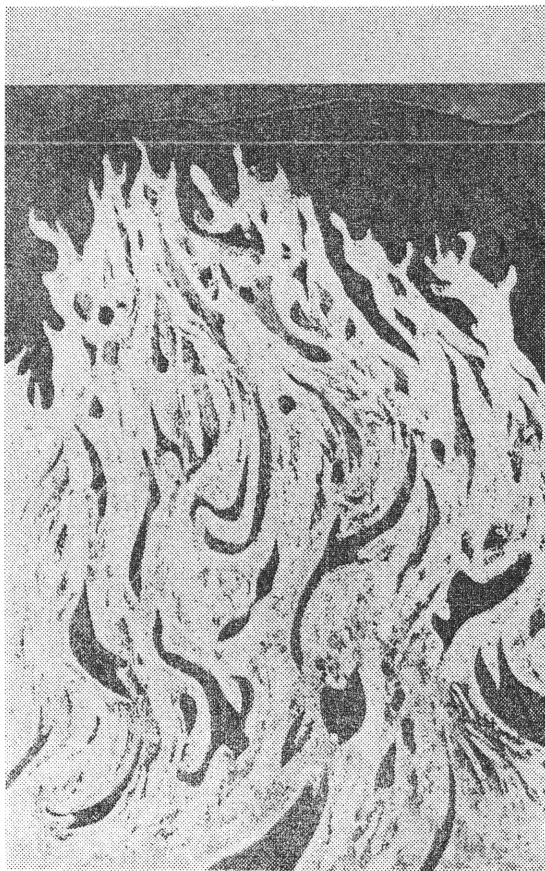
Pohl's visual mastery of form and color may be taken for granted. But his search takes him further, into a census of the world based on the sense of touch. With deft fingers he probes objects about him as if they were laid in Braille.

Textures that in his prints acquire tragic or cosmic overtones were first discovered as he laid his fingers over a piece of driftwood or a pebble picked on the beach. As any alchemist, Pohl engages in mysterious manipulations, as when he achieves delicate mottlings in a sunset sky by dripping, drop by drop, India ink on freshly laid enamel paint.

PICASSO HAS his blue period, and his pink one. Pohl has veered from blue to red or, more accurately, from cool to hot. This painter of fire was already known as a painter of the sea. In days past Pohl, in face mask and snorkel, minus a spear, would glide at leisure over and into the submarine landscape. From such meditative lonely sports, he returned with a crop of art, en lieu of fish.

Pohl brought back from the deep the sight of coral forests, blue against the deeper blue, and of prairies of seaweeds curving along unseen currents in many more ways than grass bends to the wind.

Throughout his work, be it prints or paintings, ocean or lava, Pohl preserves a sense of timelessness. His Hawaii is the very same one that Cook met, the very same one seen by these other discoverers who beached their canoes on these shores a thousand years before Cook.

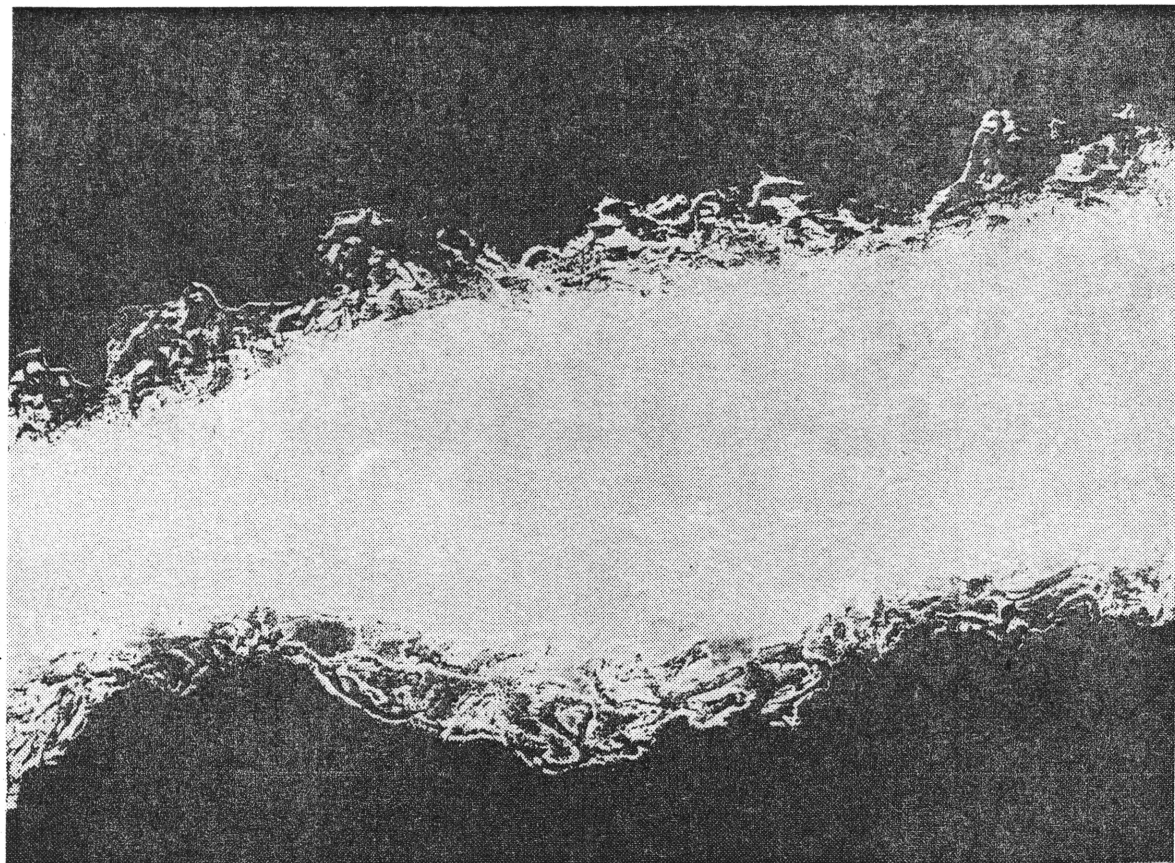


... "on a vertical safari ..."

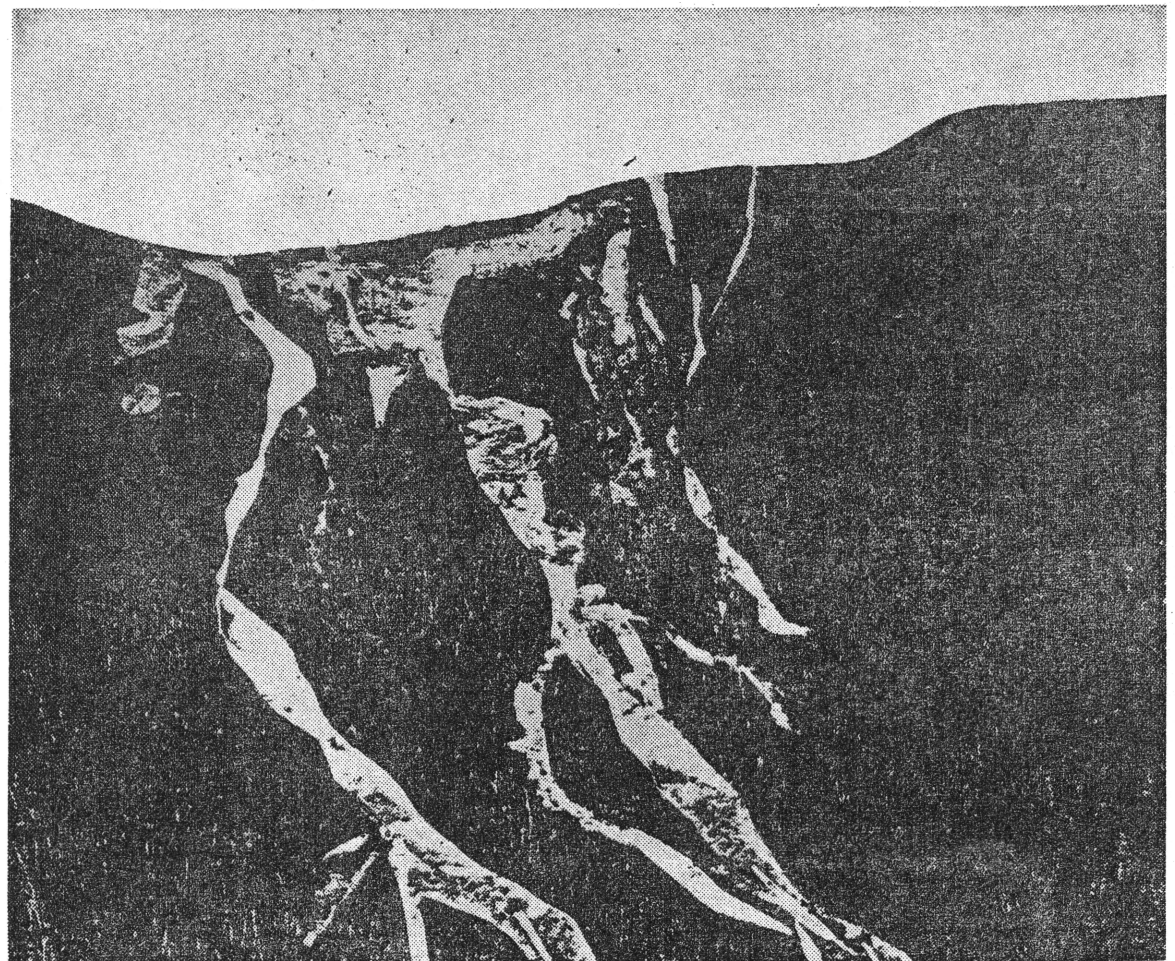
would a Constable or a Corot, would a Monet even, have succeeded where Tavernier partially failed?

Pohl has undoubtedly succeeded. Entering the gallery, one is overpowered by sights and textures so convincing that a smell of sulphur hangs latent in the air.

The skin of the parched landscape is burnt, pocked, wrinkled, slashed by deep



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