THE TIMES

Revolution in the nursery

The Danish painter Asger Jorn, the Dutch Constant, and the Belgians Joseph Noiret and Christian Dotremont, all shared a disapproval of Surrealism and passion for strong, vibrant colours and expressionistic free forms
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Our critic looks back at the childlike - or childish - exuberance of the short-lived postwar Cobra movement

COBRA
Baltic, Gateshead

ONE OF THE pictures in this exhibition used to belong to a pair of dentists. It shows a bright, mask-like face split by big toothy grins. And the dentists, understandably impressed by such fine orthodontics, reproduced it in the brochure that they sent out to clients.

At the moment you can see this painting (*Red Object II*, by Egill Jacobsen) at the Baltic in Gateshead. It is part of the first survey of the postwar art movement Cobra to be staged in Britain. But you don't have to be a gallerygoer to encounter Cobra images. You are still likely to find them in dental surgeries today.

Cobra — its title is an acronym for Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, making three faintly bland cities sound suddenly rather thrilling — was founded in 1948. Its members were rebels. Anti pretty much everything considered Establishment, they aimed to tap into the mainspring of the creative impulse instead, into the spontaneity of children, the expressiveness of primitives, the primal inspirations of folklore and myth.

But Cobra was disbanded in 1951. And in the subsequent years we have grown accustomed to the anarchy of its childlike aesthetic. What once appeared challenging now seems charming. The exuberance that once offended now looks rather jolly — ideal decoration for a dentist's waiting room or a faceless office foyer.

To get the point of Cobra you have to cast your mind back to the immediate postwar era, put yourself into the mindset of the quarrelsome young men who, having grown up to the sound of SS boots stamping occupied streets, felt an urgent need to respond to their new freedom. They came together in a huge, squabbling, haphazard collaboration of some 60 painters and poets — some members of Cobra for three years, some for only three days. Several never met each other. Others — hitchhiking across Europe, cardboard suitcases in hand, staying in seedy hotels, sharing dinners (and occasionally marital partners) —

became close friends.

Together they created a volatile mixture, a heady cocktail of nations and generations and disciplines and languages which, swirled over the fierce heat of ambition and debate, produced an explosive outburst of culture. Their ideas were disseminated through the *Cobra* periodical. Anything from the Great Wall of China to the psychoanalysis of the comic strip could be written about.

“Our art is the art of a revolutionary period,” declared the Dutch painter Constant. “It is the expression of a life force that is all the stronger for being resisted.”

Constant, along with his fellow countryman Karel Appel, the Danes Asger Jorn and Carl-Henning Pedersen, and the Belgian Pierre Alechinsky, formed the core of the Cobra group. They defined themselves in aggressive opposition to the art that they vilified as “outmoded naturalism” and “sterile abstraction”. “Mondrian! We are sick of him!” they cried. “Sick of his manically ordered paintings! Let us fill his virgin canvases — if only with our own misfortunes.”

The first Cobra exhibition, held in 1949 in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, stuck up two fingers to the staid expectations of Dutch burghers. The public entered to the pulsating beat of jungle drums. But what began in a mood of effervescent fervour was to end in a fracas. A recitation of experimental poetry led to fisticuffs. The audience poured out of the gallery, a few singing the *Marseillaise*, to continue their fighting out on the streets. And though the riot was pretty sedate by most standards, the fuss made by several newspapers satisfyingly ensured that the Cobra show earned the Stedelijk the highest number of visitors in its history.

This is what the Baltic must now be hoping. Though the converted flour mill in Gateshead has already attracted more than double the estimated visitor numbers, *Cobra* is its first potential crowd-puller. It puts into historical context the contemporary pieces upon which the Baltic has so far tended to focus.

It explains how Cobra arose from a cross-fertilisation between three little known avant-garde groups: the Danish Harvest Group, the Dutch Experimental Group and the Belgian Revolutionary Surrealist Group. It traces its cultural lineage: shows how its artists looked to Matisse and Kandinsky for colour, to Miró for spontaneity and Klee for his lessons. Neither Dada nor Dubuffet, however, is overtly acknowledged, though the influences of both are unmistakeable. And Picasso, it seems, set an overpowering precedent: Constant’s prints in response to the outbreak of war in Korea are little more than second-rate *Guernica* rip-offs. The two British members of Cobra have also been given short shrift. A scattering of unimpressive pieces has been tagged on to the end of the exhibition.

The real purpose of this show is to recapture the initial impact and energy of Cobra. Many of its members are still living, still working. But curators have concentrated (with a few exceptions, such as the inclusion of 1952 works by Lucebert, the poet who, though a founding member, only started to paint after the movement had been disbanded) on works produced during the 1,001 days that Cobra officially existed.

Almost a quarter of the pieces (if you count the sketchbooks and illustrated poems that have been included to indicate the interdisciplinary nature of the movement) were actually exhibited in the two important Cobra shows at Amsterdam and Liège. This is a rare opportunity to see them. Not only do they come from some far-flung collections but many are in an extremely fragile state. The Cobra artists were impecunious. They made do with poor materials, painted on both sides of a canvas or on top of previous pictures.

Walking into this show feels a bit like walking into a primary school on parents’ day, into a bold, bright world of splashes and scribbles, of fantastical creatures and funny floating phantoms, of big grinning faces and goggling stares.

Appel’s *Hip, Hip, Hoorah!* captures all the vibrancy of the movement. Hoorah is a word that has a birthday every day, he observed. His peculiar coloured creatures evoke its excitable spirit. They jump into sudden life against the background of black.

Other pictures are less celebratory. Jorn’s *Return to the Detested City* depicts a mass of jumbled faces in blood and mucous tones, rising and tumbling about a central vacuum. It dramatises his frustration at finding himself stuck, a patient in a TB sanatorium, back in the home town that he hated. Angst-ridden and overstated, it seems the painterly equivalent of a teenage tantrum.

Cobra could never have lasted for long. It would have been a contradiction in terms to have founded a school of subversion. Its values were never meant to be those that it now finds on the art market. And besides, Cobra’s optimism for ideals of free expression was soon put paid to by the onset of the Cold War. The heroic individualism of American Abstract Expression soon supplanted its utopian ideals.

Cobra was a moment rather than a movement. All that can remain is a record of a lost youthful revolt. At its weakest, it seems as awkward and embarrassing as adolescent angst. At its best it plunges you back into a world of primary-school enthusiasms, into a time of rolled sleeves and splashed pinnies and big pots of poster paint.

Cobra, *a Hayward National Touring Exhibition, is at Baltic, Gateshead, until April 21. It will then travel to Manchester Art Gallery and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin*

BEST IN SHOW

JORN’S *INFERIORITY COMPLEX*

“ONLY PRIMITIVE PEOPLE, children and psychopaths could reckon on our sympathy,” declared Dotrement, the spokesman

of the Cobra artists. Asger Jorn's unsophisticated little 1951 painting, Inferiority Complex, would appeal to all three groups.

For Cobra poets and painters, art served a radical political purpose, but it was also a form of play. The paintings are at their most immediate, their most vibrant, when they are at their most humorous.

Jorn was fascinated by psychology — and later developed some rather implausible theories about it. But this is a charmingly mischievous portrait of a psychosis. Which of Jorn's bizarre creatures is actually the one with the complex?

At first it might seem to be the timid owl-like thing, crouching shyly at the bottom, goggling out at the spectator. But after a few minutes you begin to wonder if it's not actually the balloon-like monster, the big floating windbag with the inflated pink face.

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