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Cobra's heroic self-belief

Laura Gascoigne on the vibrant paintings showing at Gateshead's Centre for Contemporary Art

unlike the old Co-Op building on the Newcastle bank of the Tyne, which has rebranded itself the Hotel Malmaison, Gateshead's new Centre for Contemporary Art has kept the name of Baltic Flour Mills, The original 1950s tiles forming the giant black letters have been scrupulously cleaned of decades of kittiwake droppings and the culprits — a protected species — rehoused in a kittiwake tower downwind. The Baltic is proud of its industrial heritage. Clad in the dignity of past labour, it stares down its poncy new neighbours across the water in their ludicrously over-designed office blocks auditioning as stage sets for Aida. When the Romans came they settled first in Gateshead, and once again it's the smart side of the river.

The 'winking eye' may be a bridge too far for the critic Brian Sewell, but even he would find it hard to fault its elegance or the effortless way it takes rhythmically marching feet in its stride. As far as quayside regeneration goes, Gateshead could teach London a thing or two. The fact that the whole place is a vast building site only adds to the fun. Downstream from Baltic, enormous yellow cranes hover over Norman Foster's Sage music centre, a giant groundnut awaiting a glass shell; upstream, posh riverside flats are going up and, behind, a Hilton rises from the mud. From the viewing terrace on Baltic's Level 4 you can see beyond the construction sites to distant landmarks: St James's Park. Gazza's home ground, and, still more historic, the multistorey car park from Get Carter which the Get Carter Society is struggling to preserve.

It should be the perfect spot for the launch of the new national touring exhibition of the work of Cobra, the post-war group of radical Danish. Dutch and Belgian artists and poets who saw themselves less as a movement than as a train journey: You fall asleep, you wake up, you don't know whether you've just passed Copenhagen, Brussels or Amsterdam' (hence the name Co-Br-A). Yet something about this Arts Council-sponsored exhibition in a Lotteryfunded space doesn't fit. One look at the group photo outside the entrance of founder members Karl-Henning Pedersen, Asger Jorn, Constant, Corneille, Karel Appel and Christian Dotremont at their first meeting in Copenhagen, 1948, is enough to tell you that these artists were strangers not just to funding, but soap and food. If in the three short years of Cobra's life they managed to mount two major international exhibitions in public museums, at the Stedelijk, Amsterdam in 1949 and the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Liege in 1951, it was through a mixture of heroic self-belief and grit. (Jorn and Dotretnont spent the summer before the Liege show in a Danish sanatorium recuperating from

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malnutrition and TB.) Another thing the photo tells us is how young they were: at 35 and 34, the Danes Pedersen and Jorn were the elders of the group. But as Stedelijk's director Willem Sandberg noted, they were 'a group of young people who had something to say' and a way to say it: a hybrid language born of violent revulsion against all forms of formalism in art, be they classical or modernist. Surrealism, 'primitive' Oceanic and African art, children's art, Danish folk art, the art of the insane were all assimilated into the Cobra idiom, along with the art of Picasso, Miro and Klee. The keynote was 'spontaneity', Cobra's only weapon against the 'flags of formalism' under which the bourgeois marched. The war on Hitler's Germany was over, but the war on bourgeois culture had just begun. Another Cobra target was Nazi naturalism. Call that Degenerate Art, Mr Hitler? Well get a look at this.

Half-baked as some of their ideology now seems. Cobra's political naivety is refreshing in our own morbidly sensitive political culture where the word 'primitive' has been tarred with the brush of racism. The burst of graphic high spirits that greeted the Liberation of Denmark, Holland and Belgium from Nazi occupation — and the release of fresh paint supplies onto the market — seems to find its natural form of expression in the tribal masks, totemic figures, bogeymen and monsters that fight ferociously for space in these vibrant paintings. Entering the show, you feel a rush of blood to the head.

Today it's impossible to believe these pictures didn't sell, but that's a measure of how far we've come iconographically. We may even have come too far, to the point where Cobra's imagery has become too attractive and lost its power to `epater les bourgeois'. It's hard for us to take it seriously, perhaps because the language of children on the lips of adults is only good for saying `yah boo sucks', and the language of psychosis is disturbing only when spoken by the insane. Like the actor consciously trying to act drunk, the artist trying to draw psychotic is doomed to fail, because the truth is that the drunk is trying to act sober and the psychotic artist is trying to make sense. Compared to the ravings of psychiatric patients in the Prinzhorn Collection, Constant's delightful scrawls haven't so much escaped from the unconscious as bunked off from it, and Karel Appel's 'Animals' guarding the entrance to this show are less scary than the creatures of King Babar's nightmares dreamed up by Jean de Brunhoff a decade earlier.

Brian Sewell was right to complain that this, the first Cobra exhibition in Britain, won't be coming to London, but it's not for want of trying on the part of the organisers. Ironically, we can blame the Lottery, which has closed the Hayward until the autumn for a major facelift — in the world of Lottery funding never one door opens but another shuts. After Gateshead the exhibition tours to Manchester, then Dublin, where audiences will be able to compare its spontaneity with Outsider Art from the Musgrave Kinley Collection. At Gateshead the main point of comparison is with work in progress for Antony Gormley's 'Domain Field', opening in May. When I visited, Level 4 had been transformed into a moulding workshop turning out body casts of 250 local volunteers. From the viewing platform above, its vast airy light-filled space resembled a celestial torture chamber, with truncated plaster limbs and heads lying about and full body casts hanging from gallows, lying face down on trestles or being sawn in half vertically by assistants. Some of the children's casts were wonderfully expressive, with the supple vulnerability of little Degas dancers.

By now the space will have become a welding workshop for transforming these forms into bristling 'three-dimensional drawings in space' made of welded steel pins, one of which was already nestling amongst the casts lining the walls. When I confessed to Gormley's assistant that I preferred the casts, he admitted I was not alone. But the welded figures or 'domains', the pre-publicity assures us, 'by alluding to different biological, architectural and micro-physical structures' will ask 'the big questions about freedom and belonging . . . not resolvable by thought'. As we move among them, they'll become 'instruments to make us feel more alive'. Suddenly the art of children seems more appealing and their little body casts seem, well, more alive.

Cobra is at Baltic until 21 April; at Manchester City Art Gallery from 2 May to 15 June; and at Irish Museum of Modern Art Dublin from 3 July to 21 September. Antony Gormley opens at Baltic on 17 May.

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