

During the brief lifespan of the Cobra movement, members shared the aim of giving spontaneous expression to fundamental images of nature rooted in the collective unconscious of humanity, the myths and folklore. Inspired by children's drawing, art of the insane, and primitive art, they hoped to create and simplify images intuitively rather than intellectually. Rejecting the pre-World War II movements of Surrealism, abstraction, and Social Realism, the artists identified Cobra as an experimental group in the process of establishing a "new art". Yet three years after Cobra was founded in 1948, the group disbanded despite the fact that their art had gained a dedicated following.

Despite the initial rejection of Cobra by a critical society, by 1951 the principles and techniques of Cobra had been assimilated. Cobra followers and imitators debased the raw impact of Cobra's language into a less abrasive form; the group's goal of adventure in experimentation became an established aesthetic. The reduced impact of their art discouraged many of Cobra's members. In addition to these pressures to disband, Cobra, by its very nature, was destined to be short-lived. Central to Cobra's orientation was the emphasis on spontaneity and artistic freedom--their rejection of established rules and boundaries pointed to their own demise. In 1951, the hospitalization of Asger Jorn and Christian Dotremont signaled the end of Cobra.

After the movement had ended, the principal artists of Cobra remained in contact, often re-uniting for joint enterprises. In 1952, Alechinsky and Corneille studied printmaking at Atelier 17 under the direction of Stanley William Hayter who stressed that technique must function as an aid and not an impediment to the artist. From 1953 to 1955, Appel, Jorn, Corneille, and others traveled to Albisola, Italy to study pottery. Dotremont frequently collaborated with Alechinsky; in 1960 they produced a series of lithographs and in 1963 Alechinsky illustrated Dotremont's book Abstrate. Appel and Alechinsky worked with Walasse Ting on Encre, a film about lithography, released in the mid-1960's. In 1970, three years before Jorn's death, he collaborated with Alechinsky on a selection of paintings. Though the movement Cobra died in 1951 with their final exhibition in Liege, a spirit of collaboration and experimentation remained.

The University Art Gallery exhibition focusses on three ex-Cobra artists: Appel, Corneille, and Alechinsky. On exhibit are a selection of their post-Cobra works dating from the late 1950s to more recent pieces of the 1970s. The serigraphs, lithographs, and etchings serve to indicate the extent of Cobra's influence in addition to documenting the later modifications of each artist.

During his first two years in Cobra, Appel created mythic figures

and animals in compositions influenced by children's drawings. However, Appel's optimism soon faded. Angered by the rebuffs and insults directed at Cobra by the Parisian art world, Appel's art altered its emphasis culminating in his "tragic period" beginning in 1953: Appel consistently avoided allusions, symbols, and abstractions, preferring instead to work from personal myths. He created violent compositions intensified by color and texture. In the lithograph Childbeast (1958) on red ground, Appel's use of line in angular shapes with patches of various ink modulations results in a haunting image summoned up from his unconscious. Appel's untitled color lithograph of 1960 is in stark contrast to Childbeast in that it emphasizes color rather than a distinct linear quality. The shapes of the creatures (notice the eye in the left figure) coupled with the random splashes of vibrant color contribute to the aggressive nature of the piece. This work prefigures Appel's paintings of the early 1960s; his spontaneously-created figures of densely caked pigments resembled the technique used in Tachisme. After the mid-1960s Appel gained more control in his work by a re-emphasis on linearity in his treatment of expressive creatures. He replaced the violent crowded pieces of previous years with works of greater clarity, recalling the strong influence of children's art in both form and content of his earlier work from the Cobra years. The silkscreens of 1978 reflect Appel's calmer attitude. The simple linear definition of a couple, the woman with flowers and the man with guitar, is activated by the relationship of pure colors.

Corneille's works during Cobra focused on aerial urban scenes of houses and districts in crowded, cell-like compositions. His motivation was to express the order by which and in which men live. In the late 1950s Corneille traveled to the Sahara where he was profoundly inspired by a nature in which man has no part. He modified his compacted landscapes to illustrate the random, accidental organization of nature, excluding anthropocentric references. From this period, his 1960 color lithograph Jeux d'été emerges: the jumble of forms, some resembling flowers, are set against a background of tan earth tones and a blood red. In this work, Corneille expressed the sensuous vitality of summer in a freemoving composition based on organic forms.

In the late 1960s Corneille relied more heavily on the human image in his works. Over the years he developed a vocabulary of recurring symbolic forms expressing fundamental relationships in nature; his stylized configurations reveal the influence of children's drawings as well as primitive and folk art. Corneille's portfolio Enchantments de l'été, is a fine example of this particular phase in his art. These six lithographs combine birds and female figures in landscapes. The bird imagery, a vestige of the Cobra storehouse of images, symbolizes escape and freedom; the female figures are used to convey Corneille's vision of woman's fundamental ties with the natural elements of her environment. The resemblance to primitive art, in particular the techniques of batik and woodcut, coupled with overpowering color reflect Corneille's commitment to the relationship between nature and art.

Though he considers Cobra as his school, Alechinsky exhibited his

affinity to its principles well before he actually joined the association in 1949. In his simplistic works of the late 1940s, Alechinsky strove for the vitality and instinctive appeal evident in children's drawings and primitive art. His involvement with Cobra's experiments provided Alechinsky with the surroundings conducive to spontaneity and genuine artistic freedom. In 1955, when he went to Japan where he made the film Calligraphie japonaise, Alechinsky was attracted to the improvisation of the calligrapher in his physical expression of the mental image of an ideogram. His experiments with this medium led to the predominance of a dark linear component based on free associations in his compositions. Alechinsky's drawing became, in effect, storytelling, in his shorthand of nature's forms. In the 1960s Alechinsky started using calligraphic images in cartoon borders around his works as elaborations of the central theme. He expanded this motif in the following years, changing the scale of these border cartoons to independent images, as illustrated by his Windows (1977) series. Organized in two sections, the lower portion depicts the many faces of the physical environment: weather, life, land, and water. The upper portion contains a large sphere against backgrounds either patterned, solid, or both. The images in these orbs, as in those of the lower compartment, relate to natural forms: the suns, cloud-like configurations, figures, and plant details. The windows in the center frame ideogrammatic etchings, symbols that include spiral forms, representations of the sun, and deliberate abstractions of such imagery. The enigmatic meaning of these inter-related images is underscored by the title: is the "window" the etching inset of the print's border? Are there any real borders, edges, boundaries beyond which art becomes a different kind of reality?

The recent acquisition of prints by Appel, Corneille, and Alechinsky, in addition to previous holdings by the University Art Gallery of works by Appel and Corneille, offers the opportunity to explore formally their common source of image and technique in the Cobra movement. The strong representation of these artists in the Gallery's expanding Permanent Collection provides a series of important historical links in the development of modern European graphic art and serves to strengthen that part of the collection which has been growing most rapidly during the past few years.