

Spontaneous Surrealism

Sculptor Jerry Harris at the Jacobs.

Playfulness and humor — such is the first impression Jerry Harris' sculptures impart — an absurdist, surrealist, cerebral and often dark, playfulness and humor. Harris's exhibition of collage and sculpture at the Jacobs Gallery closes this Saturday, April 10.

Harris himself describes his work as surrealist. One should not think of Dali or Magritte's naturalistic surrealism, however, but rather of Miró and Jean Arp's abstract surrealism with its biomorphic shapes and its predominant concept of automatic or intuitive work mode. "I totally work from the subconscious," Harris said, "with no preconceived ideas about my sculpture."

The Jacobs Gallery's exhibition of Harris' recent work includes a dozen collages and some 15 sculptures. The latter are constructions assembled out of variously combined media: polished carved wood; sculpted clay encased in fiberglass and painted uniformly brown; manufactured objects such as string, wooden utensils and wooden knobs, dowels, rods, staffs, buttons, pins, spools in all sizes and shapes. Many of the sculptures stand on long thin legs like a new breed of tall wading birds.

Although Harris warns us to not take his titles too literally or read too much into them — they are often spontaneous in the tradition of the Surrealists — their connotations are nonetheless inescapable even when there is no obvious link with the

piece itself as in *Dogon Mother and Child*. On the other hand, *Tic-Tac-Toe* is more clearly derived from the piece itself with its three blocks of wood and knobs illustrating in the Surrealist tradition how the mind free-associates.

The Executioner's Song combines both carved wood and clay forms. A slim rod hangs from a beam surmounting two poles and ends with a clay shape that evokes a stylized cow-head (and Picasso's bike saddle of a bull). Two parallel strings stretched between knobs frame the central rod. This is a powerful piece and strikingly similar to Harris' earlier *Homage to the Muscogee Indians War Of 1812-13*.

Lady Sings the Blues: Homage to Billy Holliday includes a single stalk covered with rounded clay protuberances which are easy to anthropomorphize into tiny breasts or slight buttocks while wooden knobs evoke the keys of a wind instrument.

Because Harris' sculptures are conceived and created as constructions, the artist finds collage to be a similar process. "It's a building process," he explains, "using the same additive and subtractive sequence of sculpture."

Harris' collages are mostly triptychs with bold color schemes using one or two dominant colors beside black and white, often combining primary colors (red and yellow) or complementary ones (red and green). They combine abstract and figurative elements, organic

and geometric shapes into abstract compositions that sometimes acquire a cubic edge.

Repetition on a triple beat is used as a basic structural device for the triptychs. *Nausea* is an example of this general pattern. Harris created a first collage, which here includes a title-page fragment from Sartre's *Nausea* and cutouts from images of Francis Bacon's paintings. He scanned and printed this collage in triplicate then built over each print a second layer of mixed-media marks and collaged materials. This second layer adds similar but not identical elements to each "panel" of the triptych — here fragments of French poetry. The finished collages were then affixed to black and white paper frames placed over a black background. In *Dance Theater of Harlem*, another triptych, a single image repeated at different angles and enclosed in geometrical shapes succeeds in evoking ethereal bodies in movement.

Dizzy G Playin High Yellow follows a different format. Prints of a collage are placed side-by-side over an off-white background to create a single landscape format. The collage elements include fragments from music sheets and texts and are repeated in a series of panels of unequal width that function like measure bars. A face-and-wind-instrument cutout is altered in a Cubist manner and further transformed from measure to measure. The overall effect suggests high energy, rhythm and syncopation; it captures at once the repetition inherent to rhythm; the variations necessary to music

and the fantasy at the heart of improvisation.

Beyond literature and the arts, Harris' work also invokes a variety of socio-cultural issues, from the question of a future shaped by technology to cultural minorities and racial issues. *Windows of Old New York Ca. 1937* is a particularly successful example. Three prints of the same collage are juxtaposed landscape-wise over an off-white background. The dominant color is black with some with, red, orange and green accents. The prints appear to be based on a photograph of ads for the Dixie Theatre posted on a faceted cylindrical structure: "Strike in the Mines! Coal Police! Men, Women and Children Die of Hunger! The Greatest Show Ever Made About Miners: 'Black Fury.'"

The text allows Harris to refer to the plight of both miners and African-Americans through the connotations of the word "black." Harris has drawn a grid of window panes over the prints and added bits of color into some of the windows creating the illusion of a cityscape at night. We are looking into a series of visual and cultural frames; whatever social reality is hinted at has been transposed and transmuted through various media.

Harris thus succeeds in weaving an elaborate multicultural web that brings together America, Europe and Africa. Harris' artistic background is indeed international. He studied in London and the US and lived in Sweden until recently. His work is in the Swedish National Art Collection and he has exhibited throughout Europe and the US: "My work doesn't say 'African-American.' It's universal." If some of his sculptures show African influence, so does much of modern art. "I was influenced by Henry Moore, whom I met in the '70s in London, and he was himself influenced by African art."

In the end, though, there is one determining factor, deceptively simple, that fuels Harris' art: "I think," he says, "what I have kept in a certain way is my vision as a child — that sort of surprise in front of things." **EW**



Lady Sings the Blues: Homage to Billy Holliday, sculpture by Jerry Harris.



The Executioner's Song, sculpture by Jerry Harris.



New summer colors are here!



Take things in stride
Ask for the Zong

FOOTWISE
THE BIRKENSTOCK STORE

181 E Broadway • Downtown Eugene • 342-6107
301 SW Madison Ave • Downtown Corvallis • 757-0875
Mon-Sat 10-6 & Sun 11-5 • www.footwise.com

Indigo District

CAFÉ • BAR • MUSIC

Full Bar

Organic Café MAM
Coffee

Organic Menu
for
Lunch & Dinner

Wireless Internet

Locally Owned
& Operated

13th & Oak (formerly Field's) • 434-6553

