

A Jaded Glance at Shock Art

FOR SOME TIME now I've wondered whether the chief function of art is to shock. Where a lethargic public is concerned, no one denies the value of well-aimed jabs. Excessive trust in the status quo or disillusionment from major political debacles makes shock treatment almost mandatory. Art worth its name is never a passive experience; it always involves viewer and artist in some kind of active exchange. Occasionally, during periods of deep distress, painters and sculptors concentrate on jolting the public.

In the past, this was accomplished by satire, propaganda, and new methods specifically invented to communicate new ideas. When Goya made his devastating series on "The Disasters of War," when Daumier revealed the blights of Paris poverty, when Picasso created his own graphic technique of destruction, these men deliberately wanted to disturb their viewers. Though they were not averse to focusing attention on themselves, this was not their prime concern. They were more interested in getting their ideas across.

And the same was true of the dadaists, the surrealists, and such oblique, wayward figures as Schwitters, Duchamp, and even Dali during his earlier years. Disgusted with a world they considered intolerable, they used violent, often negative means to jar the public. They ruthlessly lampooned society, culture, religion, love—everything they found corrupt and shallow. Sometimes their methods were playful, sometimes brutal, but there was fury behind these men.

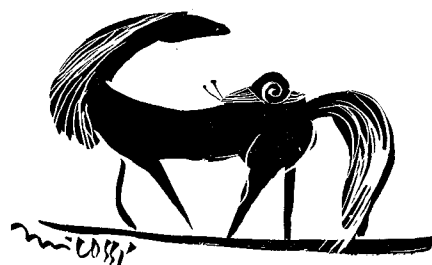
Today, alas, shocks are a dime a dozen, and as a rule are little more than attention-getting technical exercises. There is no anger left, nothing to fight against or for. These daily antics seem mainly products of modern publicity methods.

Rest assured; it is not "the good old days" I'm hankering after. It's the bad old days. I miss the passionate involvement that accompanies authentic emotions. I miss any real lustiness, any interesting vice, any vigorous antisocial behavior. I miss the ardor, the toughness we associate with art. Instead, what we find is a kind of demure eccentricity among the younger popular painters and sculptors, eccentricities often adopted only as distinguishing trademarks. An innocent, gamelike spirit pervades the group. One specializes in gluing his

breakfast to the top of a table and hanging the assemblage on the wall; another shoots at a plaster-encrusted collage with a .22 rifle. What happens, happens. Accidents become valuable because the light-hearted participants recognize art in everything—even in nothing. One highly publicized exhibition featured an absolutely empty room. There is no doubt that accidents do produce art, that voids can have meaning, but only an uninformed public is likely to react to such "shocks," for the dadaists and their followers investigated these ideas almost a half-century ago. In every period, certain artists have shocked the layman with both their work and behavior. But this is the first time that warmed-over messages have produced such electrifying reactions.

WE have spawned a café-society art that, despite considerable success, does not even justify hostility. The work is thin and often one-dimensional, like the patrons who shift their support with the seasons. As for the artists, during their brief sojourns in the limelight they are widely wine and dined. Their names appear regularly in the daily society columns, discreetly planted there by press agents. No chic dinner party is complete without at least one member of modern Bohemia.

I notice that more and more exhibition announcements are featuring photos of artists rather than illustrations of their work. Now the personality takes precedence over the product. Young faces stare out at us from every conceivable locale, from cluttered studios, from bare attics, from bathtubs, from cafés—solemn, sad, romantic, and not infrequently ridiculous. Only a few weeks ago an exhibit including artists of both sexes announced itself with a folder showing the five participants photographed together completely nude. What shocked one was not the shoddy sensationalism of the idea, but the seeming passivity of these slim, inert bodies. How such regimented indifference could produce



a spark of vitality was an interesting question.

Much of so-called op art is based on shock appeal. This is not to say that vibrating colors and optical illusions are without interest, but visual tricks lose intensity after their surprise value is exhausted. Because emotional content is often meager, technical proficiency becomes paramount.

It would seem that two older artists have been curiously misunderstood—Albers by the "opsters" and Duchamp by the "popsters." Superficially each man is connected with the movement that claims him, but the threads of contact are tenuously thin. True, Duchamp's aim was to shock—or at least this was one of his aims. He used precise, incredibly complicated methods to provoke an entire generation. It took more than a ready eye to understand his double and triple thrusts. Today his followers limp after him, his urbane controlled wit transformed by them into a somewhat fuzzy objectivity. As a rule, these young disciples borrow only one idea at a time. They see their surroundings with bland humor; they select their themes with factual naïveté. For them, there are rarely multiple overtones or lurking undertones. It is ironic that a "ready-made" audience gobbles up these oversimplifications while the true inventor of the "ready-made" watches from the sidelines.

Though Albers has been called the father of op art, I find this an unjust label. His delicately balanced paintings are not based on obvious optical rules, nor is he trying to shock our eyes merely by illusive tricks. With the utmost economy, he builds a world of luminous purity, a mysterious world that exists only through the magic of color relationships. Less important than these relationships, however, is the personal cosmos Albers creates.

I have no quarrel with artists who shock us on a grand scale. It is the piddling daily stunts that tire the spirit. Picasso's shredded figures in *Guernica*, Bosch's sadistic imagery, Malevich's *White on White*—these are shocks we never get over, for they have literally re-educated our vision. The art that finally reaches us, that infiltrates our thinking, is not *about* life but is an active part of life.

Though we may respond to an enlarged pouting Marilyn Monroe, to a mountainous plastic pie, to a bathroom set-up arranged à la Mondrian, our attention span is apt to be brief. These messages about our mass-produced milieu come through loud and clear, so loud and clear that only a simple mind finds them provocative for long. Today shock follows shock until the ultimate shock is a hand-painted painting.

—KATHARINE KUH.



Kid Stuff

IT IS a well-established fact that the most ardent moviegoers these days are in the teen-age brackets. They go to the drive-ins by the carload, or turn up at the hard-tops on weekend evenings with their dates. To woo them—and perhaps to help their wooing—the studios have evolved a whole new category of picture aimed specifically at this audience, films with titles like *Beach Blanket Bingo*, *Bikini Beach Party*, and the upcoming *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini*. As if the titles alone were not enough to discourage any reasonable adult from venturing inside the movie house, the pictures are cast with such teen-age delights as Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, and that senior citizen of the swing shift, Elvis Presley. Small wonder that parents are not too anxious to pre-sample the wares that Junior, and his junior misses, are buying these days.

To be perfectly frank, this unconscientious critic has not been too anxious, either. Writing for SR, one is privileged to assume that most readers would eagerly avoid any picture that smacked of beach blankets, beach parties, and possibly even bikinis, nor would their casts afford any considerable attraction. Nevertheless, driven by that insatiable curiosity that has been held responsible for the sudden demise of some of our feline friends, a few nights ago I caught the immortal, \$5,000,000-a-year Elvis in his latest effort (to use the word loosely), *Girl Happy*. I was appalled. The rock-'n'-roll contortions that brought him fame ten years ago have been modified a bit, to be sure; but the contortions of the plot supplied by Harvey Bullock and R. S. Allen are not to be believed. Nor is their "message," which seems to be that an exercising of parental responsibility constitutes an undue interference with their teen-age offspring's fun and games.

In *Girl Happy*, the father happens to be a rough, tough Chicago nightclub operator (well played by Harold J. Stone) who, in a monumental display of obtuseness, assigns Presley and his trio of accompanists, singers in his club, to look after his little girl during Easter week vacation at Fort Lauderdale. The daughter (Shelley Fabares) is promptly identified as a studious type who needs no looking after because she wears glasses. But immediately upon her arrival in Florida, while Elvis and his cohorts peep through the window, she doffs the spectacles, dons a bikini, and the wolves in sports clothing start to congregate. In-

terspersed among the Presley songs (he is entertaining at a Fort Lauderdale night spot) are his frantic attempts to save the girl from contamination, plus the more frantic attempts of Presley and his buddies to make out with the chicks of their choice.

It would be hypocritical to pretend that some of the goings-on depicted in *Girl Happy* are pure invention. Perhaps petting is not in progress behind every bush and beneath every beach blanket in Fort Lauderdale during Easter week, but enough has been noted in the public press to confirm its existence. What is so unsettling, however, is the film's "go-go-go" attitude, as if it were a kind of unofficial cheering section urging the kids on to new levels of promiscuity and self-indulgence. In its authors' view, all girls are eminently seducible, pantingly flinging themselves into the shrubbery at the mere whisper of a few endearments. In its authors' view, anything that comes between concupiscence and consummation is highly risible—and most of their jokes are based on the girls' reactions when, in the midst of their amatory pursuits, Presley summons his crew to

rescue Miss Fabares from yet another predator.

No less unsettling is the film's marshaling of clichés. Considerable fun is poked at a scholarly young man who reads books, respects girls with an intellect—and, of course, wears glasses. He remains a butt until, toward the end of the picture, he removes the glasses, ogles Miss Fabares, and joins the gyrating couples on the dance floor. Also bespectacled is the manager of the motel in which most of the action takes place. He is a mild little man, and his efforts to enforce the rule that guests shall not entertain members of the opposite sex in their rooms are constantly ridiculed. But most ridiculous of all, the film insists, are the nightly telephone calls from the apprehensive father. Of course, by the time he arrives in Fort Lauderdale his daughter is already in jail for attempting to strip-tease and resisting arrest. But, naturally, it was all his fault. He was being overprotective.

Teen-agers viewing *Girl Happy* might be tempted to agree. Parents, on the other hand, have reason to suspect that but for the father's long-range efforts at supervision, Miss Fabares would have boozily surrendered to a Latin type within her first twenty-four hours in Florida. Parents might suspect, too, that a little close-range supervision of their own teen-agers' film fare may well be in order.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.

Captives and Passengers

FOR A quarter of a century, the movies, long given to ransacking every potential source of screen material, have seen fit to neglect the near-classic Richard Hughes novel, *A High Wind in Jamaica* (known in England as *The Innocent Voyage*), with its appalling but also delightful tale of a family of Jamaican-English children who become the inadvertent captives of a band of pirates while bound for England to obtain a proper, civilizing education. Now, as a 20th Century-Fox film in color and CinemaScope, it is clear that the task of rendering the misadventurish tale to the screen should have been allowed to mature a bit longer. Some of the elements of the story are there, some are not, but what seems most lacking is the essential, sparkling quality of the book, its constant sense of irony, its imaginativeness and its subtlety. Too much to ask of 20th Century-Fox? Perhaps. But then why try at all to recreate something so very special?

Somewhere along the line the project got out of hand. Three screenwriters in all produced the screenplay, none known particularly for his literary gifts, and one is aware of their struggle to shape

a story line, hammer it into some kind of shape, and keep it moving. Important: show the children living in their private worlds, accepting but not comprehending the nature of the violence they encounter. This is done, but with hammer strokes. Show the children creating a new world for themselves aboard the pirate ship, befuddling the crew, mellowing the captain into an awareness of his human feelings. This is done to a degree, but the emphasis shifts to the captain (who is played by an important star, Anthony Quinn), and the revelations of the mingled innocence and savagery of the children fail to emerge.

The director, Alexander Mackendrick, has provided several colorful moments. Now and then the bite of humor breaks through, the children are made to perform acceptably, the backgrounds are very nice, the violence is not too bloody, but the net effect is a lackluster one. Even if we ignore the original source material and take it solely as a movie, it is never fully fascinating or stirring. What was needed was a strong, dominating hand, some over-all sense of conception, and they are simply not there.

The purpose behind *The Yellow Rolls*