

The result is fascinating

Gerhard Gerkens*: Latest works of Win Labuda TOKYO ART EXPO 1990

He has made hundreds of drawings, in years of work, circling and circumscribing his subject; The Elemental Sign. Again and again he has placed line against line, testing in miniature how they react to each other. As lines they are quite un-individual; no thickening lends them character, ideally no break, no beginning, no end. Instead, ever returning, they coil round each other, circumscribing the empty surface with a single taut bow. The quick, hard pencil allows but hard traces. The geometric forms resulting prevent emotionality. But the combination nevertheless possesses a quiet form of life; looking steadily, one form seems to push itself in front of another, opening insights and vistas. The play of lines on the flat surface seems to acquire a third dimension. Or did these forms start in three dimensions, to be projected later on the flat?

It had to take so long to speak of it; when an artist works like that it becomes obvious that only in the final filtrate has he cut everything out that stands in the way of the unadulterated form - materiality, colour, the spontaneous and the welcome accidental. Purifying and repurifying the drawing of all dross finally leaves the Relief as the only adequate form. In it, what a question is left behind. Sculpture projected on the flat and thus abstracted? Or preparation for the three dimensional form? No, the Relief unites the two, belongs to both forms of notation. At one and the same time more than drawing and less than sculpture, taking an essential from both and transforming it.

The Reliefs are white. All modifications of colour are the result of light and shade. They underline the structures, dissolving them again however at the same time. The clear lines of the precisely arranged shapes in the flat wood Reliefs have a darkness darker in the shadows than their actual depth, at the same time retreating almost completely back into the surface in full light. The play of surfaces before and behind each other becomes ambiduous; only on looking closer is their secret pictorial language to be deciphered. It appears paradoxical: the works seem easy,

even simple, readable at a glance - and then again not. Just as the form, so too the content appears seemingly simple, Sign-like forms, reminding one of elemental signs, placed next to and interlocking with each other, so that one thinks at first they were discovered by accident and then put together. But in truth there are secret correspondences between the lines and shapes, and what at first sight seemed so straightforward is actually carefully weighed and balanced. The lines in the Relief "Yong" only appear to be parallel; millimeter for millimeter, almost imperceptibly they diverge, thus arriving at their tension.

Almost archly the eye is misled. The large vertical in the middle element of "Ada" is, when one looks carefully, not one continuous line but different edges of a surface, These elements have the magic of signs which, whilst we cannot decipher them, seem nevertheless familiar, as if we'd met with them before and they spoke in a language whose vocabulary we but needed to learn. But yet the art works have no message, and as far as we can make out, if we knew the vocabulary they would still say no more than we can already see, So; the readable and the secret together, the familiar and the strange.

So, again, we must look carefully if we want to understand these works and their intention. We must assess a line, or the break in a sweeping curve, just as carefully as we do the subtle instability of the whole structure caused by a shape which appears to float loose within it. One must be equally aware of the questioning as of the harmony and its real or apparent state of being in question, One must trace the intended abstraction, like the visual principle of repetition. Not the repetition of the same, but the repetition of variations. All the pieces of the Relief "Trine" are the same, but they are all slightly shifted in relation to each other, so that, each time, the figures creating the Relief are the same and yet not the same, but rather three individual combinations of the same elements. One might get the impression that this was all very clever - ingenious, constructed; but the artist prevents

that, and prevents sterility, too, by introducing an Irritation, an uncertainty whether what we are presented with is really quite as absolute as it seems.

When looking at this work the viewer will feel reminded of various artists who have done comparable things. Labuda does not deny it, and does not wish his works to deny it: that a maker of this kind of object stands on the shoulders of others. He and his works do not pretend - in 1990 - that one has to begin at Genesis if there have been others before us. So the fascination of these works does not reside alone in their newness and their resolve to go all the way, artistically, but also - and indeed not least - in that we see new things in them and through them. Both the new and the known unfold in these works. Drawing and Relief find their equivalent in the Print, where, on the one hand the principle is restated, on the other, however, it becomes correspondingly modified for the other medium. On pale, coloured ground the great form develops in black. No longer is it the lines which determine the composition, but the shapes themselves which in their hard definition create a conscious contrast to the intentionally empty background. A third colour, a subdued brownish red, finds its place. Decisively important in these compositions is their exactitude. The prints have this, as do all Labuda's works. The feel for an exact spacing of the forms being described within the rectangle against each other and, again, against the context of the whole sheet, creating a correspondence between positive and negative - that feel is stupendous. The technical control is absolute. This, though, is not reducing it to a matter of craft. Exactness, completeness, purity and balance are all integral parts of the works; they are elements of the statement itself.

It is the Sign that unites everything; the medium can differ. Drawing, Print or Relief can have it as their content, and the Photograph, too. Labuda's

Photographs - and indeed he is most widely known as a photographer - capture Signs. The depictions themselves are the result of a careful purifying which anything random or accidental has been rejected. In this he does not invent; he finds. With the camera he captures what originally had come, quite accidentally, to be on a wall: structures, scribblings, wires, the posted and the torn. Collage, De'collage, Scriptural or Constructive Art - it almost seems as if one had no need to have invented them at all; it is already there, made by others with another or with no intention at all. One only has to look at it and capture it. One only has to focus the camera, point it at the right subject at the right moment. The result is a picture full of excitement, secret messages and intense questioning of reality. There is no need for manipulation. The invention is unintentional; the artistic element is getting it right. Thus it would be wrong - as the Photographs suggest - to speak of Informal Art as the starting point, of Tapies, perhaps, or other Collagists, Dècollagists, etc, for Labuda is of course not creating these Art forms in his pictures, but tracking them down in what was originally fortuitous. His work is not left to artistic accident, however, and certainly not arbitrary. Doubtless, the Art forms mentioned have made his and our vision keener - for him in finding, for us in viewing - and certainly it may please an artist or a photographer to find, as it were, a Vostell, a Schumacher or a Tapies on the street and by his actions distill it from the range of optical impressions an offer. But he is still not the progenitor of the image.

That is the attraction of these works, but not that alone. One does not need to know the technical side of photography to comprehend their matchless precision, just as one need not be an engineer to do justice to the Prints and Reliefs. It is not analysing the efforts that went into this Art that gives the pleasure, but the result - and that is fascinating.

* Dr. Gerhard Gerkens (1937-1999) was a German Historian and Art-Historian. Until 1986 Dr. Gerkens was curator-in-chief of Kunsthalle Bremen. Thereafter he became director of the Museums in Lübeck, where he worked until his death in 1999.