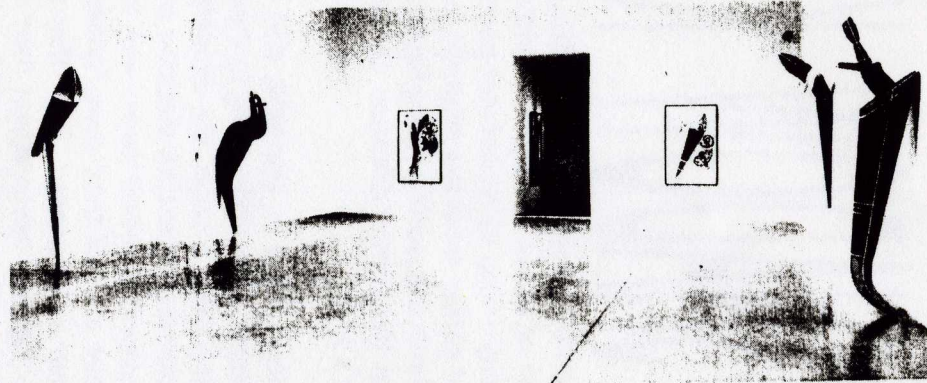


MOONS, ELANDS AND OBOES

While many of the pictures may have had a religious or ceremonial significance, others look like apparitions out of bad dreams . . . semihuman and superhuman beings with horned heads, immensely broad shoulders, short limbs and massive bodies that taper down to attenuated legs . . . demonic shapes that might have meant protection and benevolence to their creators.

—Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*



John Monti, installation view, 1987, at Pence Gallery, Santa Monica.

and by the quality of its finish.

Many of the forms used in Monti's work are reminiscent of those found in tribal art; this raises the issue of referential context. In tribal art communication is not problematic. The art expresses values in a language that artist and viewer have in common by virtue of their membership in the same community. For example, in the rock art of the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, the eland is associated with women and the moon. Shown with stunted legs, it symbolizes the waxing moon. Anthropologists can piece together some of the puzzle of the motivation and meaning of Bushmen art by examining the Bushmen culture, in which the moon plays a significant role. Here, there is a unity of art and belief.

But what do we, in our culture, know of moons and elands? Monti refers to the curl at the tip of *Homage to Laocoon II* as symbolic of a ram's horn, and *Snit II*, viewed from the side, resembles a large antlered animal. What meaning does this vocabulary of animal forms have outside of the spiritual and cultural framework of its origin? For most of us, rams do not function significantly in shaping our experience as we provide ourselves with food, clothing or shelter. Our knowledge of rams is acquired from books and from pictures or other art in which they are represented.

It is in this sense that Monti's pieces reflect the context of the culture in which they were produced—the context of our tendency to appropriate and consume. We

live in an age of consumerism, for the artist as well as the entrepreneur. Whatever is out there is up for grabs, to be seized upon and consumed. Art looks anywhere for its inspiration, treating tribal art as a compendium of artistic possibilities to be drawn upon like a clipbook. We have enlarged our horizons until they are all-embracing.

Although in tribal art meaning is pre-established, once the relationship between art and belief is severed, ambiguity results. For those viewers who have music in their background, the curl of the clef springs to mind sooner than the twist of the ram's horn, and the narrow end of *After Laocoon* suggests a wind instrument, such as an oboe. The massive black form in *Making Points No. 9* seems to intersect with a mandolin.

As the distance to the referential object increases, a multiplicity of interpretations becomes valid. Thus it is no longer an object but rather a representation of an object that we see reflected in the work. Given our realm of experience, it is a musical instrument that is represented here, not a ram's horn.

Showing concurrently at Pence Gallery is a series of lithographs, monotypes and etchings by Ed Moses. These complement the selection of his works on view in the Museum of Contemporary Art's inaugural show and an upcoming exhibition of his paintings at L. A. Louver Gallery. □