

Volker Kühn (D)

Volker Kühn's object art avails itself of this tradition of boxed and framed in-the-round representation while drawing on the surrealist inventory of surprising juxtapositions, where relationships could be established between such disparate entities as skulls and grand pianos, where accepted reality was modified to make watches droop or locomotives come thundering silently out of the fireplace. With a lightness of touch not usually associated with German artists, Kühn makes compelling statements about the human predicament that are strangely free of irony and didacticism. His surrealist freeze-frames could be described as "visual pun" which, like the rebus, intrigue the viewers and reward them with the joy of solving a riddle. The etymology of the word "object" as "something thrown in front or put forward" is an invitation for us to register and address it intellectually. The act of recognition, the solving of the conundrum, manifests itself in liberating laughter, or at least a complicit smile.

The movie screen, the TV monitor and the LC displays of our insidious Nintendos and Tamagochis have done much to condition our sense of vision. Volker Kühn's metaphorical cabinets contain the paraphernalia of our cluttered society, but the process of selection he applies, allows our eyes to concentrate on the essentials, to sort out the message that we need to interpret our bewildered sensual impressions and make our moral and intuitive judgements. The objects are exhortations and reminders: the former bidding us to check our moral responsibilities to our fellow humans, to the environment, and not least to ourselves; the latter fulfilling the admonition, "To thine own self be true,...thou canst not then be false to any man": Polonius' reminder to his departing son epitomizes the categorical imperative by which we are, or should be, morally bound.

Volker Kuh is an acquisitive magpie. To visit his studio in Lilienthal, close by the picturesque Hanseatic city of Bremen in northern Germany, is to become immersed in a vast collection of objects of every conceivable shape and origin. Ever since his childhood, spent in and around the artist's colony of Worpswede, he has delved into junk heaps, plundered novelty shops and helped himself to the bountiful offerings of Nature in the shape of her more enduring left-overs, such as husks and shells, pebbles, roots and twigs. Products of civilization, from toothpicks to plastic grass, are just as much grist to his mill as more conventional artist's materials like paint and plaster. And then the less salubrious detritus of our "civilized" existence: cigarette butts, crumbs, spent teabags, crumpled cans. Nothing escapes Volker's eagle eye. But there's no chance of this acquisitive passion deteriorating into chaos.

The products of Kühn's peregrinations are caringly stored in wall-to-wall banks of drawers reaching from floor to ceiling and labeled: "ELEPHANTS", " DROMEDARIES", "SPIRIT LEVELS", "FEATHERS", "COWBOYS", "WOMEN, large", "TEDDYS", "TOOTHPICKS", etc., etc. The actual working area, where the objects take shape and are assembled-incidentally, with ultimate manual skill and masterly precision - is less well ordered; let's call it a "productive chaos", though Kühn himself would be the last to accept such a casual definition.

The handcraft comes a second nature to one who started his working life as a joiner apprenticed to a furnituremaker in the traditional rustic workshops of Worpswede, the German equivalent to the Barbizon and home of Paula Modersohn-Becker and the Worpswede School, one of the roots of German Expressionism at the turn of the century. From there he proceeded to the Bremen Academy of Arts to study sculpture, winning

the Promotion Prize of the Bremen Senate in 1974 and a commission to install mirror objects in the Nautical Academy. From then on, one exhibition followed another on almost all continents. Kühn was the promoter of not the inventor of "minigraphics", minute etchings hardly larger than postage stamps, which were avidly collected as far afield as Monte Carlo, Tokyo and Los Angeles and are now much sought after collector's items.

Although he had been making objects boxes from his earliest youth, skillfully fretsawing the casings out of plywood, he concentrated for a time on "Light Objects", miniature hall of mirrors offering the viewer the experience of being inside a kaleidoscope. These were followed by box-like environments filled with various types of material, from wood shavings to paper clippings, then open environments involving household fixtures such as faucets, showers or lights spouting coloured effluents. The object boxes led to one of Kühn's biggest commissions: decorating the facade of Wertheim's Department Store on Berlin's Kurfurstendamm boulevard, a task he resolved with a Herculean effort of creativity.

Of Herculean proportions is Volker Kühn himself. One would not be surprised to see him clothed in a lionskin and dragging a club. His laughter is certainly Olympian: breaking out like a stallion's neigh and shaking his whole frame to its foundations. Who is better qualified to sum up Volker Kühn's personality than his wife, Edda: "The nature of art is to draw the observer out of a state of reserve. Volker Kühn's Objects are an example of how this works. The spontaneous reaction - mostly a smile - is transformed into contemplation. The smile returns again later, sometimes broadening into a grin, provoking the question: How is it possible for a person to invent such grotesque situations? In doing so, he exploits the materials to their utmost potential. The painstaking accuracy with which he assembles millimetre fine details, shapes, paints and draws, brooks no comparison. Is there something pedantic in his make-up? Oh yes, and chaotic to boot! His very nature is contradictory. In his hands nonsense suddenly makes sense. And when Oscar Wilde remarked 'Only he is a realist who knows how to dream', then this is especially applicable to Volker Kühn. He would strongly deny that he was a dreamer. Rightly so. His visions are reality or are made to become so by him. And that's why he is firmly convinced that it is fruitless to surmise what Art is and where it comes from. 'Just get on with it', that's his motto. Right