A pair of critics on Karel Appel: Two ways of saying ‘meh’

The following exchange, between Washington Post art and architecture critic Philip Kennicott and classical music critic Anne Midgette, is part of a series of conversations about local musical and art events, seen from the perspective of two different writers.

Philip Kennicott: Karel Appel, born in 1921, was a Dutch artist who emerged after the Second World War determined to make art with expressive power commensurate to the pain, loss and destruction that shattered Europe when he was a young man. The Phillips Collection has acquired seven works by Appel, bold and often crudely figurative paintings that may remind some viewers of Jean Dubuffet. The new acquisitions join 15 other pieces in a small exhibition of highly charged paintings and sculpture.

I wish I could like it all better, but I am both exhausted by and impatient with art that derives its energies from the expressionist pool of angst, rage and aversion to formal tradition. Exhausted because expressionism too often takes artists not to some dark, uncharted place, but back to the same old wellsprings of violence and desire explored by artists for well over a century. In paintings such as the 1959 “Wounded Nude,” the buxom figure seems violently constrained by the edge of the canvas, which cuts her legs off at the knee. And in the 1964 “Big Head,” full of primary colors in a bright and garish ensemble, a primitive face is contorted in a Munchlike scream.

But mainly, I’m impatient with this kind of art. We live in a world that is full up on the emotions channeled here, which makes me crave more temperance and measured contemplation. Appel was capable of that on occasion, but those works seem, here, mainly peripheral.

Anne Midgette: I enjoyed the show on a didactic level: It was a nice cross-section of a deliberately uneven oeuvre. I say deliberately uneven because Appel embraced figuration on the one hand and made a point of prioritizing medium over content on the other, which leads to a kind of contradictory standoff in which figures on the canvas are consistently undermined by the goopy squiggles and sweeps of inch-thick paint, asserting itself as an almost sculptural entity. Compare Appel’s “Woman With Flowers No. 1” from 1963 or “Wounded Nude” from 1959 with one of De Kooning’s Women (from the 1950s), and Appel’s lack of sensuality jumps out at you: where a De Kooning woman is exuberantly fleshy, Appel’s is hacked apart and suffocated in a web of paint. In “Woman With Flowers,” the painting’s very surface is pierced with garish plastic flowers that pierce the figure and affix it to the canvas.

Appel also deliberately rejected the idea of a consistent style, leaping from one mode of expression to another, and the show does a great job of contextualizing the various phases of his output. It juxtaposes works in interesting ways (like the 1959 “Head as a Tree,” with its intriguing use of paint, and the “Owlman No. 1” from 1960, a large exuberantly painted chunk of an olive tree trunk). It also effectively documents the way that an artist preoccupied with the primacy of paint and the visceral expressions of children’s art becomes victim of a creeping tendency

toward prettifying his work. I think that Appel sells out with his 1979 and 1980 paintings “Still Life” and “Landscape With Wheel,” which are both executed in tasteful, pretty strokes of paint in candy colors. And by 1989 we get what I might term “restaurant art” with a white “Nude Figure” on a black ground, sullenly pushing against the edge of the canvas, or the “Magnolia of the Night,” black flowers on a black ground.

Kennicott: We were both drawn (and repelled) by the same works. But I feel slightly different about them. I think “Head as a Tree” is some of his strongest work precisely because it is entirely (as far as I can tell) abstract. I understand what you’re saying about the “standoff” between figuration and the pure love of paint, but I don’t find it as compelling as you do. I think the fundamental tension in Appel’s work is between the desire to say things within and the need to say things beyond the limits of painting. Which is one reason those turning-point works from around 1979 and 1980 are among the most satisfying in the show. The “restaurant” art, from 1989, left a sour taste in my mouth. The “Nude Figure” shows him not much advanced from the violently contained works made decades earlier, while “Magnolia of the Night” reminded me of the trajectory of a composer we both know: Krzysztof Penderecki, who composed one of the most violently expressionistic works of the middle 20th century, then gravitated to a mostly anodyne romanticism later in life. This is the danger of this kind of expressive language: It can only be amplified, or rejected, and the rejection often feels like, as you put it, a “sellout.”

Midgette: Oh, I don’t find the work particularly compelling, either. Appel’s basic stance is pretty facile — yes, he was deliberately avoiding the traditional profundity of the European past and embracing naivete, but that leaves you with a slender veneer over not much substance. Also, however much he tries to reject the traditional constructs of Western art history, his work is mired in traditional European values and references: You can’t have this work without Cezanne, Picasso, Braque, Bonnard, Miro and Klee. And when Appel does try to reject those values, it comes out as a facile quip, like his repeated “clever” attempts to mix up figure-painting and landscape. In “Landscape With Tree,” he rotates the traditional landscape horizon so that the green and blue, sky-ground, are vertically (figuratively) rather than horizontally oriented. Or take “Head as a Tree:” I don’t agree with you about it being totally abstract, since the title makes its subject pretty clear: It’s another portrait/landscape mash-up.

But, like him or not, and we seem not to, Appel, and the CoBrA group of which he was a founding member, are significant names in postwar European art. And as an introduction to his work, and a way of making a case for his inclusion in this collection, I think the show succeeds — from the moment you walk up the stairs to the second floor and see a Calder bird, a Mondrian canvas, and then Appel’s “Tree,” which is given context historically and literally, through these two other works in direct dialogue with it.

Kennicott: The stairwell at the Phillips is one of my favorite spaces and always seems to draw out some whimsy from the curators. I put this show in my “worth seeing” category: It’s useful, and it leaves you with a good, clear sense of an artist. And who knows, if the historical wheel turns, and we find ourselves living in a more buttoned-down and socially restrained age, perhaps Appel’s rejection of style and expressionist excess will seem necessary and powerful once again.