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Shedding New Light on the Late Dutch Artist Karel Appel

By Nina Siegal

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Part of the Karel Appel retrospective at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague.
Martijn Beekman/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The Hague — “After the death of an artist, you can have a new look, a fresh look, and suddenly you can see things that you didn’t see before,” Franz Kaiser, the curator of a retrospective of work by the Dutch artist Karel Appel at the Gemeentemuseum here, said as he walked past Appel’s deceptively childlike early canvases and sculpture.

Appel, who died in 2006 at 85, seemed destined to have a respected but not transcendent career. His involvement with CoBrA, a short-lived postwar avant-garde movement in northern Europe, attracted a flurry of attention, and he made a splash in New York in the late 1950s. But later works were received more coolly as tastes shifted away from paint on canvas.

Now, thanks largely to the Karel Appel Foundation, established in Amsterdam in 1999 by Appel, Mr. Kaiser and others, Appel’s art has returned to the public eye and research supported by the foundation has introduced new ways of thinking about the artist. That research informs the Gemeentemuseum retrospective, part of a surprisingly fertile run of Appel exhibitions that started in New York in 2014 with a show at the gallery Blum & Poe.

“I’m tackling two clichés,” said Mr. Kaiser, the Gemeentemuseum’s director of exhibitions. “One is that Appel was always identified with CoBrA and the other one is that Karel was ‘just messing around’” — a reference to the artist’s own description of his work.

Appel has long been associated with childlike imagery — birds or animals and strange hybrid beasts painted in bold forms with vibrant colors — and the playful, anything-goes spirit of the CoBrA group (active from 1948 to 1951 and named for the cities of its adherents, Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam). But Mr. Kaiser said Appel’s work was rooted in a more classical artistic tradition.

To make that point, the Gemeentemuseum first presents visitors with large-scale nudes that Appel painted over the course his career. The thick brushwork gives them the look of abstract topographical body maps.

“This is probably the most classical theme you can think of, the thing that’s most identified with academicism,” Mr. Kaiser said, pointing to paintings made in 1953, 1962, 1990 and 2000. “You wouldn’t expect Karel Appel to do that, but he did it all the time.”

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Appel at work in 1993.
European Pressphoto Agency

Subsequent galleries are devoted to landscapes and portraits. The exhibition includes nearly 70 paintings, many of them surprisingly monumental for an artist associated with smaller canvases, and about 25 drawings, some of them preliminary sketches, which proves that Appel was often far from spontaneous.

There is also a surprising range of sculptural works, some reminiscent of Brancusi bronzes and others resembling Mike Kelley's contemporary assemblages.

"I'm a little bit surprised by all this, because for a while nothing happened to Appel," the artist's widow, Harriet Appel, said in a telephone interview. "I see that many people are getting interested in Appel again, and there's new research about Appel, there are younger artists now looking at Appel, and all these things shed a new light on that oeuvre."

The 2014 show at Blum & Poe was followed by a smaller solo exhibition at the Frieze Masters fair in London. In October, the Pompidou Center in Paris mounted an exhibition of Appel's drawings that is now at the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung in Munich until April 17. An exhibition of painting and sculpture is planned for this year at the Phillips Collection in Washington, and a retrospective is scheduled at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2017.

"Appel is a name that's peripherally known in the U.S. but there haven't been any significant exhibitions here in over 20 years," Matt Bangser, a partner at Blum & Poe, said in a telephone interview, adding that he had approached the foundation for work to sell.

"Our hope was that by doing these kinds of historical projects it would draw attention to the work, either for the first time for some people or introduce the later work to people who already knew the earlier work," he said.

After CoBrA disbanded in 1951, Appel worked almost continually until his death, always trying new styles.

He had moved to Paris in 1950, where Michel Tapié included him in his manifesto exhibition, "Un Art Autre." There, Appel met the New York art dealer Martha Jackson, who took him on in 1954.

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Karel Appel's portrait of Willem Sandberg from 1956.
Karel Appel Foundation/ARS, NY/c/o Pictoright Amsterdam

Appel then moved to New York in 1957. Jackson introduced him to the Abstract Expressionist painters there, including Willem de Kooning, who had an enormous impact on his work, and to jazz musicians like Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Count Basie.

A fallow period began at the end of the 1960s, when Appel suffered a series of tragedies. Within a period of two years, Jackson, Appel's mother and his second wife, Machteld, all died. At the same time, contemporary artists declared painting a dead art form, and Appel, like many painters of his generation, saw his work go out of fashion.

By the mid-1970s, however, when he met Harriet, who became his third and last wife, he was working again. Appel then attracted the attention of the influential New York dealer Annina Nosei, who also represented Jean-Michel Basquiat. He lived in the United States for much of the rest of his life, although his official residence was in Monaco.

The reappraisal of Appel is in a sense following two different directions on two different continents. When Blum & Poe was organizing its 2014 retrospective, Mr. Kaiser told Mr. Bangser, "You have to discover CoBrA for your clients; I have to get rid of it."

The Blum & Poe shows did not sell out, Mr. Bangser said, but a few key works sold for strong prices, including two works from Appel's CoBrA period, "Square Cat" (1951), which sold for \$730,000, and "Homme et Femme" (1952), which brought about \$770,000.

Similar prices have been achieved for Appel at auction. In December, Sotheby's in Paris sold a 1961 painting for €465,000, about \$510,000, more than doubling its presale estimate of €150,000 to €200,000.

"These exhibitions might consolidate the market rather than give it a big push," said Jetske Homan van der Heide, a specialist on Dutch and Belgian prewar art at Christie's in Amsterdam. "It convinces people that he's a serious artist, that he has his place in a sort of northern European artistic development. It's the CoBrA work that is still the top of his market."

For the exhibition at the Gemeentemuseum, however, the target audience is Dutch art lovers who feel that they already know Appel too well.

"There are magnificent paintings here," Mr. Kaiser said. "He was a great painter, and many people can't see it because of certain preconceptions and expectations they have. I want to change that."