Kenneth Evett on art

The Civilization of Llhuros

Norman Daly is the artist. The show is called “The Civilization of Llhuros.” It begins as a spoof of almost everything current in art and anthropology and it ends, possibly, as high art. “The Civilization of Llhuros” opened recently at Cornell’s Andrew Dickson White Art Museum in Ithaca, New York, where it occupies all the galleries of that Victorian mansion. The exhibition has been organized, fully catalogued and handsomely displayed by Marilyn Kawin, assistant to the director, and Thomas Leavitt, who leads a double life as director of the White Museum and director of Museum Programs of the National Endowment for the Arts. After the Cornell showing, “The Civilization of Llhuros” will move on to other eastern museums. Daly conceived his unique creation about six years ago after he attended an Elliott Carter concert and was impressed by the determined attention of the audience. The very difficulty and rigor of the music seemed to elicit involved response from the listeners. Daly decided to create a format that would allow him to make comparable demands on an audience of viewers. He recognized that he needed a spatial and temporal environment that would hold the viewer long enough to engage his attention, and that then the experience would have to be challenging and aesthetically gratifying. To achieve this end, he conceived the idea of a controlled exhibition using planned interferences, ambiguities and mental reconstructions.

The visitor to Daly’s exhibition is constantly kept off balance, teetering between acceptance and rejection, belief and disbelief. He rarely knows for sure what anything is made of, how it came to be there, what it means. He is treated as peer, dupe or participant, but he is not encouraged to drift through as a passive receiver of sensations. If he is willing to engage in the complexities of Daly’s conception, he may discover the beauties of one of the most fascinating creations of recent times.

Daly has invented a mythic civilization, complete with artifacts, remains of sculpture and painting, ritual, poetry, music, games, ornithology and a group of international scholars who are experts in the field of Llhurosian studies. Presented as a sophisticated archaeological display, the exhibition offers a great variety of sights and sounds, ranging from a deceptively conventional catalogue which contains an extrava- gant satire of scholarly lingo, erotic poetry, photographs of artifacts—to electronic tapes—a massive 9" × 37" ‘stone’ relief, a site plan, a menstrual chart, a sex stimulator and so on. (See the published samples of “a ritual container of the phallic type used by the priests of the Temple of Phallos at Draikum” and “a water clock [in which] the water was allowed to escape slowly from a small hole near the bottom of the vessel and the time was indicated by the level of the water within.”) These images and constructions are put together from various artifacts lifted from our own culture. Daly has approached his immediate surroundings with a wide-open and omnivorous eye. Picking up a 19th-century industrial contraption here, a dime-store toy there, plastic cartons, household appliances, marble, wood, styrofoam, paint and glue, he has put together found-object sculpture and collage on a grand scale. These disparate fragments of our shared environment are rearranged, aged, transformed into different materials, invested with new meanings, labeled, and suddenly, in a magical metamorphosis, they become mysterious images of a remote but somehow real society. As a one-man creation, “The Civilization of Llhuros” reflects the artist and his life and times. Daly has used his invention as a receptacle for all his personal and creative impulses. He has poured into it his Irish Catholic sensibility, his wit, sex fantasies, phobias, insights and imaginative flights, without holding back.

As an artist, Daly has always maintained a set of firm, even compulsive, convictions. He is addicted to the vertical direction and those rhythms that work with or against it. He is obsessed with oldness, patinas and fractures that reflect the effect of time on the works of man. He revels in antiquing and fakery (he would have made a great forger). He likes jokes and lewd puns. He rel-

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state of intellectuals in terms that are still true: "We hope vaguely, but dread precisely; our fears are infinitely clearer than our hopes." In America Mencken ridiculed the childish return to "normalcy," but he had no more sense than his leaders of the crises that lay ahead, the Great Depression and then World War II.

The prolonged depression brought out something worse in Mencken than shallowness—a want of compassion or simple humanity. "Do the poor suffer in the midst of plenty?" he had written. "Then let us thank God politely that we are not that poor." Now that they were suffering more because millions of them had been thrown out of work, he stopped thanking God, but for reasons that dismayed most of his admirers. He turned savagely against President Roosevelt and the New Dealers who were trying to help the poor. Whereas he had been content to write contemptuously of Harding, Coolidge, and "Lord Hoover," he now wrote venomously of Roosevelt, "a milch cow with 125,000,000 teats." The infant terrible who had shocked good Republicans, ended in the ranks of the reactionaries.

Except for the bitterness that made it impossible for him any longer to be "delicately and unceasingly amused," this was not actually a change in his basic position. An admirer of Nietzsche, Mencken had never been a democrat. Always pleased to say that he wrote for a "minority," he had contempt for the common people, the "booboisie." Often the contempt came out as a boorish kind of snobishness, associated with vulgar prejudices against Jews among others. In dwelling on another of his favorite themes, his aversion to right-thinkers, soul-savers, uplifters, do-gooders, he always tended to an indiscriminate attack on all humanitarian idealists. Socialists he lumped with Methodists, the lowest of the low. He was an "incurable Tory" in politics and economics. Far from being revolted by the flagrant corruption in business and government, he declared that he favored free competition "to the utmost limit" and admired "successful scoundrels." Indignation over dishonesty was foolish anyway; he pleaded only for "realism," a calm acceptance of the idiocies of American political life.

Mencken's last years were made tragic by a cerebral hemorrhage in 1948 that damaged his mind enough so that he could not read or write. "I'm out of it," he told James Farrell. I'm finished. I wish I were dead." The unfeeling might add that as an emancipator of the youth he was out of it, finished, dead, long before his stroke—a sad exhibit of the common failure of American writers to grow. The Great Depression that ended the '20s ended his usefulness, left him creaking in a house that was burned. But only the unfeeling would end on this note. There remains gratitude to Mencken. As one of the most influential critics of his period, he led the battle against the Puritan tradition, against the disproportionate influence of rural America, the "Bible Belt" that produced what Herbert Hoover would call the "nuisance experiment" of Prohibition. He attacked the censorship that then made it hard to treat sex at all honestly. He could write pleasantly of the prevailing fear of sex, noting that, in old Anthony Comstock's "came out of the hard, incontrovertible experience of a Puritan farm-boy, in executive session behind the barn"; but he also warned that comstockery was still alive, possibly more dangerous because less crude. The current pious denunciations of pornography by national leaders, in a nation preeminent for commercialized sexiness, give some point to his conclusion: "Man is inherently vile—but he is never so vile as when he is trying to disguise and deny his vileness."

Similarly Mencken beat the drum for the leading writers of the '20s. Like him, Dreiser, O'Neill, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and the rest are now generally patronized when not ignored, because they were overrated in their day; yet they helped to mark America's "coming of age," a maturity that our young people can take for granted. Although they were all writers to outgrow, they enabled us to outgrow them—and then too easily to grow ungrateful. I think nostalgically of the excitement they lent to my youth, the possible advantages of coming to age at a time when literary criticism was less querulous and fastidious than it is today in fashionable circles. Add that they are all dated, none more clearly than Mencken, and then be reminded that the literary idols of our feverish day are not for the ages either.

Finally, however, I would repeat that Mencken is more than a museum piece. He left some solid work, notably his thorough, loving study of the American language, but also in his contributions to literary criticism. He is still enjoyable reading because of the verve with which he attacked shams that are by no means extinct. His gusto can be more refreshing because his declared prejudices are easier to discount than the more fashionable prejudices of the '70s. In any case, we could do with more of it today. I wish I could read Mencken on, say, Richard Nixon and his spiritual mentor Billy Graham.

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ishes the conflict between random and order. He has a 20th-century love of paradox, yet he admires structures of classical formal clarity. In "The Civilization of Liliput," he has found the capacious format for all his creative needs.

Obviously his work derives from Duchamp's radical discovery of found-object sculpture in which, by the simple act of selection and relocation, the ordinary is made to seem remarkable. However, contrary to Duchamp's anti-art intention, Daly's aim is to use that process to create a new formal order. His work also derives from African sculpture and primitive art. He presumably does not believe in the magic power of his fetishes and ritual images, but in making them he seems to have attained something like the sophisticated state of innocence achieved by Paul Klee, in which the capacity for surprise, wonder and playfulness is regained. At some level, Daly is indebted to those writers from Swift to Borges who have invented imaginary societies in order to send messages back to the "real" world. However, as far as I know, he is the first artist to create a new culture and then flesh it with such a wealth of words, sounds, literature and tangible
artifacts. "The Civilization of Lihuros" has some kinship with the Watts Towers, Bomarzo, the painted signs of Jesse Howard and other 'gratuitous' constructions.

A concept as complicated as this one is bound to have lapses. I am sometimes put off by its artfulness. Certain fake cracks and nicks are simply too well placed. Occasionally the contours remind me of bland stylized shapes of the '40s. Also I am concerned about the vulnerability and transience of the substance used, even though I recognize that these properties are part of the show.

Yet there is plenty of room in this abundant conception for minor incongruities. At many levels, Daly's exhibition is an important occasion. It is fresh and entertaining, and opens up new possibilities. It is also impressive as a straight display of painting and sculpture. By the time the visitor has made his way through its many cunning traps and surprises, he slowly becomes aware that he has participated in a unique and haunting aesthetic experience.

The map of Lihuros was drawn by Lynda A. Thompson. The pictures and map are from the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, which is copyrighted by the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York (1971).

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