Art world redisCOVERS figurative work

Local sculptors review once-taboo art of Milles

By Paige Ross
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An art deco figure of a dancing Greek goddess looked on as two artists, animal sculptor Kent Ullberg and multimedia sculptor Danny O'Dowdy, strolled through an exhibit of more than 40 works of the late Swedish sculptor Carl Milles, currently on display at the Art Center of Corpus Christi. From widely varying viewpoints they each Australia and several cities in the northern United States.

"He mastered his medium," Ullberg said of Milles. "He was a consummate craftsman, a great draftsman in clay."

'The Hand of God'

In the center of the gallery, a freshly-formed Adam stands atop the large, richly textured hand of his creator, looking up, perhaps expectantly, his face somewhat blank. "The Hand of God" is one of Milles' best-known works, executed on a monumental scale in four cities around the world.
Something of antiquity is evoked in the works of Milles, an influential artist almost lost in a wash of modernism in mid-century, when figurative work and classical allusions went out of fashion.

But art depicting people, animals and nature in nontraditional ways has been appearing in galleries, leading some in the art community to call for a reassessment of an older generation of figurative works once considered taboo in mainstream art circles.

"Milles is just now gaining the recognition he deserves as an international artist who made significant contributions to the history of sculpture," George Gurney, curator of sculpture at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art, wrote for the catalog of the touring exhibition.

The exhibit was mounted in Rome and has toured Tokyo, Mexico City, and designed to be seen as a silhouette against the sky.

"This is a really, really strange piece," O'Dowd said, walking around the large maquette. "I'm not taken by it.

"It doesn't have any character," he said, looking at the figure. "The hand has character."

Both O'Dowd and Ullberg noted the whimsy inherent in the blank look of the figure.

Ullberg also addressed the connection to a late piece by Milles' teacher Rodin, who did a large "Hand of God" in which the fingers are shaping a mass of clay.

"In Milles, man is completed," Ullberg said. "And he seems to be looking up with bewilderment, like, 'What now?'

"A spindly, fragile man looking up toward the heavens. Just like Milles, a seeker right to the end."

Making his mark

After apprenticing as a commercial wood carver, Milles began his art education in Sweden, then studied in Paris with Auguste Rodin. He also studied with Ammanuel Fremiet, a famous animal sculptor who took him to the Paris zoo for models.

Milles, who died in 1955, later spent time in Italy and 20 years in the United States, teaching at the prestigious private Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., influencing several contemporary sculptors.

Part of Milles' legacy is the impact he had on his students, who included Caroll Barnes, Robert McKnight and William McVey. Duane Hanson, his best-known student, startled gallery goers with realistic contemporary figures, including a bag lady pushing a shopping cart and an American tourist strolling with cameras.

Milles impacted art in Corpus Christi through his influence on Ullberg, although the younger sculptor did not study directly with Milles.

"If you want to blame somebody for why you ended up with a large fish on your bayfront, it was Carl Milles," Ullberg said, referring to his

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