

## Occult Lies Just Beyond the Ordinary

Juan Carlos Quintana/Michele Muennig, Icons through April 30

Their long, spindly shapes and irregular surfaces punctuate the air like so many cypress knees. Closer inspection reveals the humanistic aspect of Juan Carlos Quintana's sculptural forms, akin to the gnarly expressionism of Giacometti. Ultimately, however, these sculptures elucidate a legacy predating the ideological separation of man and nature.



BY D. ERIC BOOKHARDT

Comprised of refuse in regalia, this array of resurrected found objects is informed by the notion of hand tools. A legacy of the stone and bronze

ages, when their impact was epochal, such tools are essentially mechanical extensions of the hand.

As a sensing agent and a signal mechanism, the hand is a kind of prehensile extension of the mind. When coupled with tools the hand signifies the point of impact at which the human mechanism effects environmental change.

So Quintana's mostly bronze hand forms are iconic and totemic. *Hand Deity* is an amalgam of handles and cruciform crescents, topped by an supplicant upraised hand, as though gesturally attempting to banish evil. At its base, a plaintive hand extending from a hermetic sphere lies outstretched with an

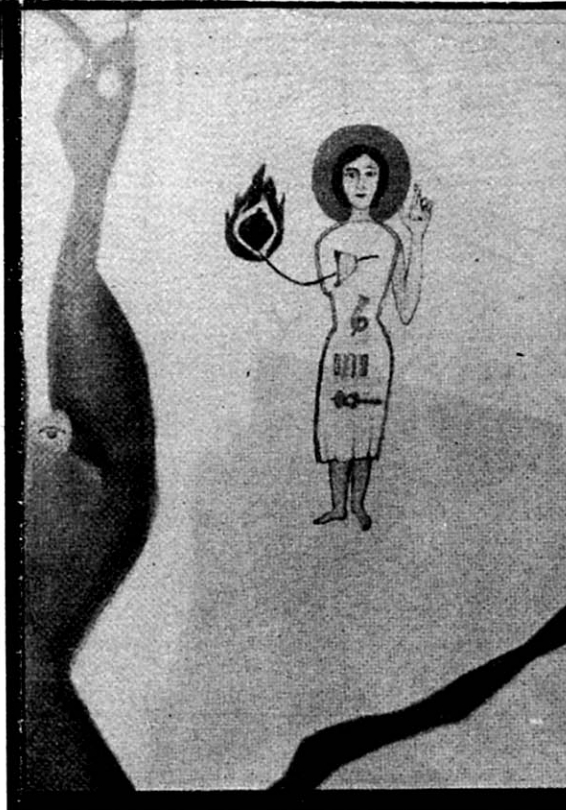
incised "X" across its palm like a martyr.

*Reverence for the Saint of Racial Harmony* is similarly invocational. Here St. Martin Porres, the mulatto martyr of Peru, stands atop a spindly column enshrined by four hands emerging from a sphere, an alchemical symbol of unity — the hands refer to the races, and the healing power of touch.

*Reverence for the Saint* is a totem, manifestation of spirit and memory. An adjacent work in clay, *Hand Totem*, is an icon of occult presence, emblematic in tonal evocation. Quintana is a Cuban-American sculptor and social worker. Influenced by Santeria, the folk metaphysic of the Caribbean, and by the forces of social stress he professionally encounters, his art is an invocation of ancient and timely spirits.

Michele Muennig's sculpture incorporates cast glass and castaway objects. The result is a visionary surrealism, a vitreous microcosm of dreams: little worlds of lost objects as temporal theater under glass. *Dada Bird* is emblematic. A stray wooden bird head long severed, lost in time, appears reborn as a fetish of foundling forms. Bits of copper tube and rusty perforated grid complete a miniature spectacle, a Max Ernstian avian reliquary, like an embryonic pterodactyl preserved in a cameo of Alpine glacier.

*The Secret World of Abraxas* elaborates similar themes. A human form with a rooster head heralds a manic futurist vista, a world foretold by the esoteric gnostics of ancient Alexandria. The paintings are quite different in visual effect, yet similar in psychic disposition. *Dreams of a Child* is a case in



Juan Carlos Quintana's *Hand Deity* is on view at Icons through April 30.

point, a classic surreal landscape in turquoise, azure and crimson featuring an orchestra conductor on a coil spring, a fish radiating light, a topsy acrobat on a trapeze, a bald ballerina and a severed sacred heart. The landscape features a formal geometry of Ernstian disposition, a non-Euclidian realm of disjointed forms linked by lines of not quite exponential perspective. Visually rather flat, this resonates with a depth of cryptic intrigue that transcends ordinary physicality.

*Rite of Passage* is similar in that it bor-

rows from the traditional lexicon of surrealism to evoke a lost world of dreams. Here a tiny cyclist spotlights a somnambulist acrobat flying through a hoop held by a muscle man with a multi-colored hood over his head, as a wizened baboon watches impassively from a fence. This vision of world as spectacle — a dream circus in which the playful antics of humans are discreetly observed by sage and circumspect apes — may be a metaphor for our obsession with spectacles. The wayward energies of the psyche, orphaned by a people too culturally inhibited to acknowledge them, increasingly assume an animated, anarchic golem-life of their own.

As experimental artists, Muennig and Quintana take chances. While some are more resolved than others, the show as a whole is an adroit exploration of the hidden worlds that lurk within the parameters of the prosaic, the occult shadow of the ordinary.

In a very different vein, John Bernard's photographs in his "New Orleans Jazz Parades, 1952-1964," are classic images of the storied patriarchs of jazz monarchs of the back streets in the halcyon '50s and '60s. These hauntingly evocative prints of jazz bands, strutting second-liners and dance halls are eloquent in the best tradition of the medium. On view at the Carol Robinson Gallery through April 30, Bernard's photographs are highly recommended for anyone interested in jazz and/or photography. ☞