

Not So Innocent After All: Works With a Sweetly Nasty Streak

By KEN JOHNSON

WASHINGTON — Call it the “Applebroog effect”: a disquieting collision between something apparently innocent and something vaguely nasty.

“Now Then,” for example, one of a series of illustrated paper-bound volumes produced by Ida Applebroog in the late 1970’s, has the look of a children’s book. In a simple, rather sweet cartoon style, it depicts a portly man sitting alone at a window. This image repeats unchanged from page to page except for two snippets of speech: “Now then,” near the beginning, followed several pages later by the instructions, “Take off your panties.”

It is fitting that “Now Then” and a number of similar publications introduced the Corcoran Gallery of Art’s exhibition, “Ida Applebroog: Nothing Personal, Paintings 1987 to 1997,” for the recent paintings continue to explore the corruption of innocence through off-beat narrative imagery and in so doing to reflect with poetic

indirection on the shadowy side of modern American society.

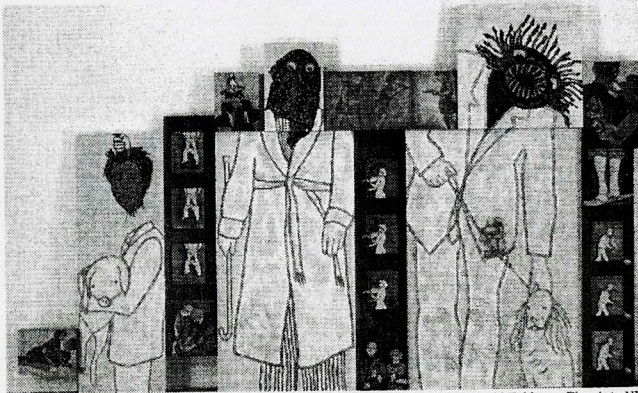
But Ms. Applebroog’s paintings of the last 10 years differ in some significant ways from her projects of the 1970’s and early 80’s. In the work that first made her visible, she took permission from the pluralistic, anti-macho tenor of the times to produce her slyly understated combinations of words and pictures. Ms. Applebroog, who was born in New York in 1929, was in her 40’s then and had been studying, making and teaching art for most of her life, in addition to bringing up four children. In her work from that time, you feel she reinvented her art and her self in personal terms, which feel fresh, light and sharp.

During the 80’s, when big-shouldered painting came back into fashion, more conventional painterly ambitions appear to have affected Ms. Applebroog’s enterprise. Quirky images derived from all kinds of sources, from Goya to Grimm’s fairy tales to yesterday’s newspaper, proliferate. And she began to produce physically imposing, multi-panel works in which you feel her desire to

make big statements and to compete with artists as diverse as David Salle, Elizabeth Murray and Leon Golub. She even invented a new form of presentation by arranging free-standing, two-sided pictures into

sculptural environments.

The strength of the newer painting is in the way formal complexity matches a distressed, dissociated psychology. Ms. Applebroog’s play with framing, layering and sequenc-



Courtesy Ronald Feldman, Fine Arts NY

Ida Applebroog’s “Shirley Temple Went to France” (1993) includes 13 canvases of varying sizes and thicknesses extending over 14 feet across.

ing of images, shifting of scale and changing of styles — from comic outlining to painterly expressionism — generates a feverish stream of consciousness in which some images flicker subliminally while others loom malevolently.

In “Shirley Temple Went to France” (1993), for example, one’s eye roams around a configuration of 13 canvases of varying sizes and thicknesses extending over 14 feet across. They depict small images of a man tying a child’s shoe, a naked woman playing a violin and children pointing toy guns at each other and large bizarre pictures of a man holding a pig and having his head yanked off or a man in a suit with the head of a yawning, bug-eyed monster. Painted in a muted, bilious palette of browns and pale yellow, this post-modern altarpiece exudes an enigmatic, darkly comic poetry in which ordinary things are infused with something sinister. It’s like the diary of a mad housewife.

Engrossing as such a sprawling, episodic work can be, it has some troublesome aspects, especially when seen along with numerous sim-

ilar pieces. Most conspicuously, the additive composition starts to seem both random and formulaic. Wandering through the show, you have the sense of the artist mechanically collecting, processing, mixing and matching images. And the prevailing earth-toned or grayed palette helps everything go together. Bringing paintings off the wall to stand freely on the floor adds to the feeling of restlessness and clutter. The overkill factor can make you long for the pointed economy of Ms. Applebroog’s earlier work.

Still, Ms. Applebroog’s art continues to exhibit a distinctively mordant satiric imagination and bittersweet style. It’s hard to think of many other artists (early Eric Fischl and fiction writers like Margaret Atwood and Mary Gaitskill come to mind) who get at the ennuï-veiled toxicity of everyday life so compellingly.

“Ida Applebroog: Nothing Personal, Paintings 1987 to 1997” remains on view through June 1 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500 17th Street N.W., Washington.

FRIDAY, MAY 8, 1998