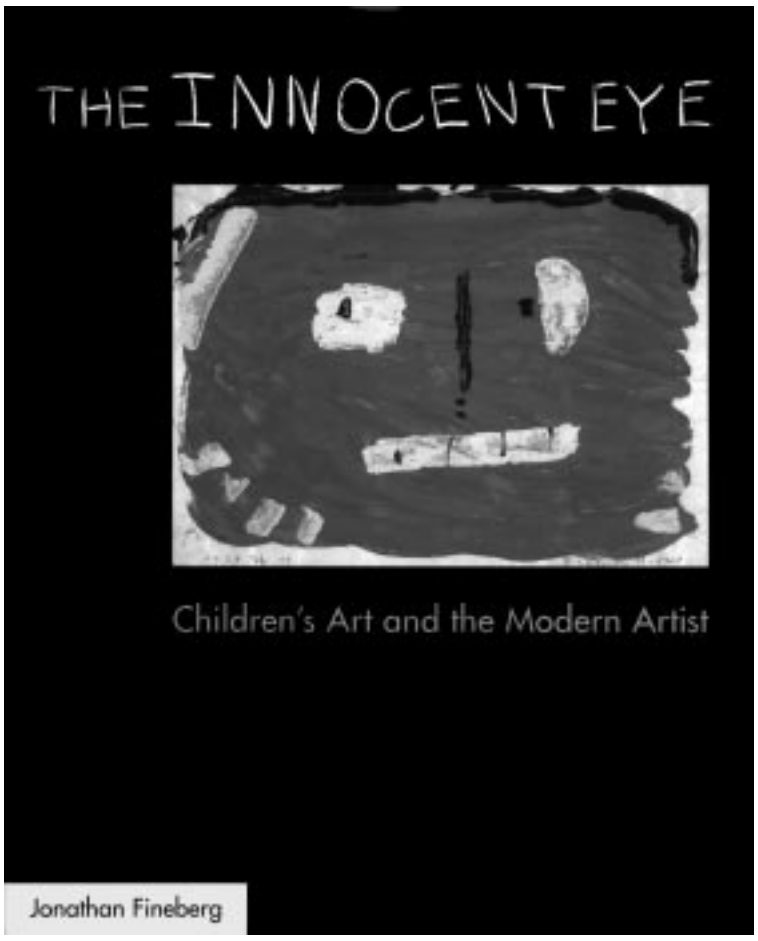
Marshall Anderson

Working with children and the snake

DUNDEE-BASED ARTIST Stephen French began painting collaboratively with his son Max in 1995. French was 42, Max 9. This project which has now attained a total of 73 small works began quite accidentally. French had embarked upon a series of local landscape studies intended as a commercial enterprise and while he was working in his kitchen from a photograph of a cottage in Glen Prosen, he gave Max the same photo to copy. He was immediately struck by his son's genuine naiveté; made all the more quirky by his use of a strong black line. At once French saw the possibility of creating an exciting image from a combination of Max's naiveté and his own art school trained painterly sophistication.

At first French was self-conscious about working with an untutored nine year old and invented a pseudonym which thinly disguised his own involvement. From Conor MacLeod, a name taken from Highlander (the movie) and Stephen's mother's maiden name, and his son's name, was born Max MacLeod. The resulting works had a distinctive style not unwholly detached from French's own easily recognisable hand. French draws with a black line and often employs a black ground in his paintings with the result that his strong colour is separated by bits of ground and/or line. Once his painting technique has been applied to Max's drawings the works become distinctively French but on second glance appear more off-beat and drunken; not quite right and a little inarticulate.



Stephen French has long been aware of the commercial potential of his own art. His strong aesthetic married to a choice of popular imagery makes his product readily marketable and successful. His paintings result from a concept rather than a series of haphazard experiments. In this respect he works like a designer and in fact had his own design business for some years. He saw immediately the commercial advantages of working with his son and moved from a rural subject matter to instantly recognisable architectural features in Dundee, thereby tapping into a bigger market and capitalising on people's affections for popular landmarks. The H. Samuel Clock on the corner of Reform Street being one such place where Dundonians habitually rendezvous.

Max never goes on location with Stephen, who prefers instead to take a snap-shot for his son to work from. Max works fluidly on the kitchen table, his concentration varying and not becoming over-concerned with details. He abstracts and invents within the framework of reference, imbuing his picture with a characteristic charm and personality. Max works on A5 pieces of card with a Staedtler pigment liner, preferring a point 07. Stephen then works on the drawings alone giving them a wash of base colour before filling in with acrylic.

Max MacLeod's originals are colour xeroxed and sold in editions of 100 for £5 each. Max receives 20% and appears to be driven by this financial incentive. He has no ambition to be an artist wanting instead to design computer games. To date three different publishing agencies in Dundee have reproduced Max MacLeods as postcards and there is now talk of a larger commissioned work featuring the university's new Welcome Building on the Hawkhill. For larger scale works Max will continue to work on A5 which Stephen will then blow-up on a photocopier and trace, using carbon paper, onto board. Now that Max MacLeod has become a commercial success and Stephen French has lost his initial reservation, the works are attributed to Stephen and Max French.

Stephen French believed his father and son creative collaboration was entirely unique. He was totally unaware of the vibrant history of artists working directly with children throughout the 20th century. Ironically, Stephen French's painting has always referred to Hockney's uniquely playful naiveté in the 60s which in turn invokes child art. French, however, claims that since art school he has relied upon creative instincts. These instincts, it would appear, can direct an artist without knowledge of history so that a short cut is taken. It is possible therefore for someone like French to emulate child art via Hockney without knowing why Hockney adopted that style in the first place and accordingly be oblivious of the whole tradition of child art inspiring artists of the modern movement. It would be interesting to pursue whether these instincts derive from culture or somewhere deeper.

To Stephen French it is coincidental that Keith Haring collaborated with kids during the '80s. Once with a 9 year old boy, Sean Kalish, in a suite of etchings and again with a teenager known as LA2. Another New Yorker, Jean-Michel Basquiat, also collaborated with children and actually paid 8 year old Jasper Lack $20 per drawing that he worked on. This information is taken from a thoroughly researched book, 'The Innocent Eye", by Jonathan Fineberg (Princeton University Press ISBN 0-691-01685-2) charting the history of the modern artists'relationship with child art from the 19th century to present day. In the final chapter, 'Mainstreaming Childhood', Fineberg relates how Basquiat introduced Jasper Lack to Andy Warhol in 1986 as "the best painter in New York", failing, unfortunately, to credit Basquiat with any sense of tongue-in-cheek humour or irony. Nor does he do so when recounting another Basquiat comment that he (Basquiat) would prefer the art of a 3 year old to that of any contemporary artist. One is aware of an intelligence that is not empathising with that of the artist whose is more intuitive, emotional, idealistic, and at times naive. Fineberg's approach throughout this lavishly illustrated volume is academic and linear in structure. He takes no risks either in his historical or logical construct but does offer us a work of importance that reproduces for the first time art by children from the collections of 20th century masters who were directly influenced by them often to the point of plagiarism.

Fineberg, Professor of Art History at the University of Illinois, commences in Chapter 1 with the romantics of the 19th century who espoused the idea that children, being less "civilised", were more a part of nature. This implied, to the romantics at least, that children were also closer to the meaning of nature. And it was through nature that the romantics attained a closeness to God. In the 18th century, Fineberg informs us, "The wish to return to nature through the child was new intellectual territory" and that "The romantics allied the child's naiveté with genius." There was then a nonsecular attitude towards child art and a sense that self-improvement might be attained through a study of it. Charles Baudelaire claimed that "the genius was someone who could regain childhood at will." It was Radolphe Topffer, a Swiss artist and educator, who was the first in 1848 to study children's drawings in any detail and to emphasize "the centrality of ideas in art over technical execution." Public awareness of child art was assisted by the new science of psychology and by the 1890s there was a growing body of studies and public exhibitions of it. In 1890 Alexander Koch began his publication 'Kind und Kunst', a journal of art for and by children, which in turn led Franz Cizek to offer juvenile art classes providing children with "creative liberty".

As one century gave way to the next, important collections of children's art were established and the Expressionists, Cubists, Futurists and Russian neo-primitives all hung the artworks of children alongside their own. This overwhelming interest in children's art was not confined to Europe and Russia. Alfred Stieglitz was the first New Yorker to organise exhibitions of children's art in his 291 Gallery in 1912 and in 1917; and in 1919 Roger Fry exhibited child art at the Omega Workshops in London. Fineberg concludes his first chapter by stating that "virtually every major artist in the first generation after the Second World War became involved with psychoanalysis and existentialism, which in turn led them back to childhood through personal introspection." The following chapters are devoted to Mikhail Larionov, Vasily Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter, Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Jean Dubuffet, Cobra, and finally a contemporary round up of the usual suspects given an American bias.

Professor Fineberg's failure to acknowledge humour and irony as a contributing factor is undoubtedly established in Chapter 2 when discussing the art of Larionov who, he tells us, "painted a number of compositions on the theme of soldiers in 1909 and 1910 (coincidental with his experience in the military reserves)". 'Soldier on a Horse, ca 1911' is reproduced and described graphically by the author, "the boxlike rendering of the muzzle of the horse and the oddly stuck-on look of the legs on the animal's far side." Added to this, its rich primary colour scheme and very

COBRA Group 1948

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(continued)

bold composition made up of three elements makes this a classic example of plagiarised child art but it is far more than that. It is a comic mockery of the cavalry. A satire that goes unnoticed by Fineberg whose analysis probes no further than the obvious childlike drawing. As an avant-garde neo-primitive who espoused the art of the people Larionov was non-conformist and a dissident with Bolshevik sympathies. His visual language, therefore, not only reflected his political stance but was also carefully chosen to have the maximum effect. Larionov was one of the first painters to use the child's visual vocabulary for political satire. Fineberg does say that Larionov influenced the Russian futurists but his only comment on their politics is summed up by saying: "the irretrievably dissident attitude of the futurists went out of favour after the revolution and they largely disappeared too." Larionov had left Russia in 1915 well before the October Revolution of 1917 (unmentioned by Fineberg) but we are not told why nor where he went.

Throughout this important work Fineberg adopts a noticeable non-political stance often failing to acknowledge any political influences on these major artists who he would have us believe were motivated only by philosophical, existential, and aesthetic concerns which challenged the perameters of acceptable traditional art. By focusing so narrowly upon his area of interest, he fails to acknowledge those other influences, such as political and social, which combine with artistic, aesthetic, and intellectual ones to form the artist's visual product. This approach is continued in Fineberg's treatment of Kandinsky in chapter three.

Without giving any background details, Fineberg introduces Kandinsky and his lover Gabriele Münter through a series of richly illustrated pages that show how the couple's collection of child art directly influenced their painting and the works of fellow artists in the Blaue Reiter circle. In his approach Fineberg implies that Kandinsky introduced Münter to child art but neglects to inform us that prior to the couple's meeting at the Phalanx School of art in Munich in 1903, Kandinsky was more specifically influenced by folk art, legend and Bavarian glass painting. I think it very possible that Professor Fineberg has given way to male chauvinism by failing to credit Münter (described as 'the amazon of abstract art'by Constance Naubert-Riser) who surely encouraged Kandinsky's appreciation of child art, something he had not considered prior to their relationship. It is clear from the evidence supplied by Fineberg that Münter was more directly influenced by child art than Kandinsky, who used it as "a source of vocabulary" and a way of freeing up his illustrative style. Ulrike Becks-Malorny in her book on Kandinsky (Taschen 1994) tells us that Kandinsky found displays of personal emotion embarrassing and had no time for German Expressionism and that his abstractionism was a way of hiding feelings. Fineberg says, "Kandinsky seems to have been more intent on analyzing and exploiting the general characteristics that made the children's renderings 'childlike'." Münter, he says, "approached the child art in a more visceral and less metaphysical way." What mattered most to Kandinsky about children's art "was that it offered an entrance to the deeper, spiritual meaning of things through which humankind as a whole might grow." Kandinsky, an independently wealthy son of a tea merchant, was an intellectual who placed emphasis upon the spiritual rather than the political. When he and Münter went their separate ways in 1914 Kandinsky ceased to have any interest in child art until his reacquaintance with Paul Klee at the Bauhaus in 1921.

Again in the following chapter on Paul Klee, Fineberg infers that it was Kandinsky who directly influenced Klee's reference to child art. But it was Klee himself who had kept his own childhood drawings and carefully documented his own son Felix's artworks from the age of four. Throughout his painting career Klee referred to child art, primitive art and the art of the insane in ways that Kandinsky never did and in ways that pre-empted Cobra. Klee began teaching at the Bauhaus in January 1921 giving Friday evening lectures on composition illustrated by child art. The radical teaching practice of the Bauhaus at Dessau under Walter Gropius was opposed by the Nazis who closed it in 1933. A politically and culturally monumental event that Fineberg casually and discretely alludes to - "1933 when the political conditions in Germany forced him (Klee) into the isolation of Bern," This convenient short-cut reveals nothing of the political machinations within the Bauhaus that led a disenchanted Klee to leave in April 1931 for a post in the School of Fine Art in Dusseldorf from which he was dismissed and from where he actually returned to Bern in December 1933.

Chapter 7 manages to deal in part with the century's greatest promoter of "Outsider Art", Jean Dubuffet, who coined and patented the term "Art Brut" which referred to his significant collection of art of the insane, visionary, primitive and child art now housed in the Château de Beaulieu in Lausanne. However none of that is mentioned here while Fineberg concentrates solely on the way children's art influenced Dubuffet's raw and visceral painting style. He studied at the Académie Julien in Paris from 1918 and continued painting until 1925 when he was forced to return to Le Harve and run the family wine business which he eventually leased out in 1942 to return to Paris and painting. He was 41 and the Nazis were occupying the French capital. A strange time to return perhaps but Fineberg doesn't seem to think so. Nor does he comment upon the coincidental return to a very anti-establishment mode of painting loaded with political criticism.

Dubuffet's, 'View of Paris: Life of Pleasure, February 1944', is a crudely painted street scene with a row of black stick figures across the bottom foreground. Fineberg describes them as being "like duckpins", an obscure reference to figures in a shooting gallery, but he misses the obvious caricature in the goose-stepping posture of the two mustachioed men exiting stage right, their out-stretched arms mimicking a Nazi salute. "Dubuffet's assault on accepted standards in art belong to a larger repudiation of traditional values in the context of the grim reality of World War Two (WWII);" says Fineberg. He continues by quoting Michel Tapié, a friend of Dubuffet who wrote, "One needed temperaments ready to break up everything, whose works were disturbing, stupefying, full of magic and violence to reroute the public." Presumably to reroute them from Nazism as well as from, "a misplaced geometric abstraction, and a limited Puritanism which above anything else blocks the way to any possible, authentically fertile future."

Between 1946 and '47 Dubuffet painted a series of 150 portraits which he described as "anti-psychological, anti-individualistic" but which are also very satirical. Dubuffet's infantile style permits mockery, derision and possibly loathing, revealing more than the artist was prepared to admit to. Dubuffet continued his vehement attack on bourgeoisie culture and in 1951 delivered a lecture in Chicago entitled 'Anti-Cultural Positions'during which he said, "the values celebrated by our culture do not strike me as corresponding to the true dynamics of our minds."

If Fineberg has deliberately ducked shy of political resonances in the first seven chapters, he is compelled to acknowledge them with reference to Cobra in his eighth. There is irrefutable evidence to support the thesis that the expressionistic style of the Danish avant-garde not only evolved from the existential visual language of European dissident art but also came about as a direct opposition to right-wing fascist values as promoted by the Nazis. I quote here from 'Danish Abstract Art'by Robert Dahlmann Olsen (1964): "The strange thing was that the tenseness of the situation (occupation of the country by the Wehrmacht, and sabotage activity in connection herewith, in which many artists took part), caused an increase in activities in the sphere of artistic development and made them rich and exciting." Surely there was a connection between the kind of visual language that artists of the resistance adopted and their political ideologies.

Cobra's lineage is radical, politicised, loaded with symbolism and charged with an anti-art/anti-bourgeoisie/anti-establishment rhetoric. Briefly, Cobra's growth began in the house of Elise Johansen in Copenhagen's red light district where, from 1932, painters, poets and sculptors of the Danish avant-garde met to discuss ideas. It is said that the head of the snake formed in this house. Four seminal magazines emerged from this background: Linien (The Line), Helhesten (Hell Horse), Spiralen (The Spiral published in Charlottenborg) which acted as a transition between Helhesten and Cobra (which ran to ten issues from 1948 to 1951), all of which were financed by subscription and which carried the ideas beyond Copenhagen. Of the band of young art hooligans who terrorised the Danish establishment of their day, Asger Jorn is the most prominent and visionary. His relentless energy charged from Copenhagen to Paris where along with Karel Appel, Constant Nieuwenhuys, Corneille Hannoset, Joseph Noiret, and Christian Dotremont he signed the original Cobra manifesto in the back café of the Notre Dame Hotel on November 8th 1948. It was the Belgian writer, Dotremont, who coined the acronym from the group's cities of residence: COpenhagen, BRussels, Amsterdam. WWII was over but the cultural war raged on with the suggestion that the snake would paralyse the bourgeoisie establishment with its venom.

Fineberg provides something of this essential political background information to Cobra but one has the distinct impression that a kind of historical sterilisation process operates when art is analysed academically. He mentions Linien (1933 to 1939) and Helhesten (1941) published by the Høst group "spearheaded" by Jorn which collided with Reflex (1948) founded by the Dutch avant-garde - Appel, Constant and Corneille. Their unifying characteristic, Fineberg tells us, "was their desire for a liberated expression of the self." He goes on to say that "Cobra artists'general rebellion against the strictures of convention were in part a reaction against the grim years of war and German occupation. He does not, however, mention that Cobra was opposed to the way cubism was stifling European art and that they were against the type of formal abstraction of artists like Kandinsky. In this context one must examine the avant-garde's agenda which is to confront the established culture's values and taste, whether abstract or naturalistic, and one does not achieve this through a genteel painting style. To paint like a child or a madman had a disturbing effect. An effect that shocked. And a shock tactic that is still employed by artists seeking recognition of their opposing views and a tactic that goes unacknowledged by Fineberg. It was probably this confrontational approach that led Jorn to refuse Andre Breton's call for "a pure psychic automatism" in his final break with surrealism. Jorn said that one could not express oneself in a purely psychic way - "The mere act of expression", he said, "is physical." Fineberg continues: "This intervention of imagination in the apprehension of events also had an explicit political implication to some of the Cobra artists," he proceeds by quoting Constant in Reflex (1948), "The general social impotence, the passivity of the masses are an indication of the brakes that cultural norms apply to the natural expression of the forces of life....Art recognizes only the norms of expressivity, spontaneously directed by its own intuition."

Cobra had a short tempestuous life from November 1948 to November 1951 when its death was marked by an exhibition in Liège organised by Pierre Alechinsky who had joined in March 1949 at the age of 21. 'The Innocent Eye'does not reproduce many paintings from the Cobra years but does illustrate how Cobra's manifesto continued to live through the art of Jorn, Appel and Alechinsky. Nowhere in his chapter on Cobra does Fineberg make reference to William Gear, so it is all the more surprising to find his name associated

with this explosive renegade art group in an exhibition originated by Aberdeen Art Gallery in collaboration with Edinburgh-based composer James Coxson.

William Gear was born in Methil, Fife, in 1915 into the hardships of a poor mining community, instilling in him a particular working-class ethic which may have been hostile to art. However, his father, a face-worker, was a creative man who experimented with photography and grew flowers where his peers cultivated vegetables. In his own contributing essay to the catalogue Gear's son, David, implies that fate and a lack of opportunities suppressed his grandfather's talents but that his father's generation was able, "through luck and greater opportunities," to blossom artistically. William Gear studied at Edinburgh College of Art where he won a traveling scholarship taking him to Paris in 1937 where he decided to enroll in the small academy run by Léger who was passionately opposed to surrealism. It was Léger's intolerant attitude to surrealism that drove away another of his students, Asger Jorn. It is most likely that Jorn and the young Scot met in Paris at this time. Whether Gear shared Jorn's communist convictions or not has never been recorded and it is unclear what ideological commonalities Gear actually shared with Cobra. His artistic background was certainly very different from that of the Danish avant garde whose education was charged with polemic and a sense of political purpose. One might imagine that Gear, having been brought up in a mining community, would have had communist sympathies but according to his life-long friend, Neil Russel, Gear was only "a bit left-wing". As art students together they had talked about joining the Spanish Civil War but never did. Russel went on to tell me that as far as he knew Gear was not politically inclined. Towards the end of his life, Russel said, Gear was a conservative with a small 'c'and wouldn't take the Guardian but preferred instead to read the Daily Telegraph or The Times. Gear, by all accounts was, like Kandinsky, an academic abstractionist rather than an expressionistic one.

When WWII broke out Gear was teaching art in Dumfries. He was conscripted and served as an officer in the Royal Corps of Signals. In 1946 he was transferred to the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Section of the Central Control Commission in Germany. Throughout this period he continued to exhibit and visit Amsterdam, Brussels and Paris during leaves. His rank afforded him the opportunity to discover artists, one being Karl Otto Götz who he later introduced to Cobra. During one of his leaves to Paris in 1947 he was introduced to Constant by a fellow Fifer, Stephen Gilbert, born in Wormit in 1910. At least socially Gear was in with the avant-garde prior to the formation of Cobra and when he demobbed he returned to Paris to enlist in their ranks.

Of the 39 works on paper on show in 'William Gear and Cobra'at Aberdeen Art Gallery, 22 are by Gear. These are hung chronologically commencing with 'Olive Grove, Italy September 1944', a watercolour in the style of William Gillies. Next to this hangs a poem which first appeared in Meta No 5, March 1951, a magazine published by Götz.

To the wretched square waiting to be born,
Foetus-like but having yet no heart.
At light speed to the card indexed archives
Of the visual memory where the answer lies,
Never before consulted, which will give life
To the foetus, animate the square.
The process is essentially psychological,
No one has a special pair of eyes,
As had a labourer a Sunday suit,
To put on when he looks at pictures.

Not only do these two stanzas recognise his Calvinistic roots but they also pay allegiance to Cobra who believed that anyone could make art. Any sympathies that Gear may have shared with Cobra are not transparently obvious in the works, only six of which were painted between November 1948 and '51. A striking gouache, 'Landscape, Yellow Feature November 1948', executed in vibrant primaries is very close in style to the work of Asger Jorn at this time. Both artists using a fractured black line to separate colour and break up space. In 'Winter Landscape 1949'Gear's fractured black line suggests a crazy gathering of gyrating sprites and spiky zoomorphs, the closest he comes here to emulating Cobra's potent mythical beasts.

In an accompanying video made at Emscote School, Warwick, in 1994 Gear speaks about his exhibition there of 20 paintings dating from 1947 to '73. It is difficult to associate this avuncular, bald man in a grey suit, white shirt and tie with one's image of a renegade band of art hooligans and when he is asked about his Cobra mates he refers to them as "they". "They got to know my work", he says, "which was similar." Nowhere does he mention having the same influences but instead speaks about being inspired by Fifeshire harbours, pit heads, naked trees and hedgerows reminding us that he is essentially a landscape artist whose use of solid, black lines refers to Léger, the Forth Railway Bridge, and medieval stained glass windows (a common reference among Cobra artists). It is most likely that Gear was dragooned into the ranks of Cobra to help boost numbers and to give the first Stedelijk exhibition in Amsterdam an enhanced international flavour. According to the thorough catalogue essay by Peter Shields, Gear exhibited with Cobra on three occasions but by the time Alechinsky organised the final show in Liege, Gear was already living in England having taken little of the snake's spirit with him.

Gear's later works retain the black line which becomes more structural referring to designs for sculptures that were never made. His abandonment of any Cobra principles he might have had is obvious but the other works in the exhibition clearly demonstrate that hard-core Cobras held on to their beliefs. The King Cobra, Asger Jorn, is represented by only three, fairly minor, works - two of which relate to the Cobra period. Of these 'Composition with Two Figures 1951', ink and watercolour, refers to his later more visceral, large scale paintings populated with metamorphic man-beasts. It provides an apposite accompaniment to Karel Appel's solitary contribution, 'Twee Figuren en een Vogel'which similarly marries humour to a naked savagery. This is the most distinctive Cobra trait, intended to disturb and shock. Both Constant's works demonstrate this tactic. His suite of eight lithos, 'Huit fois la Guerre 1951'succeeds in monochrome only while his coloured drawing pays homage to either the child's unconscious hand or the schizophrenic's, or both. Complementing the child-like gestural drawing style is the artist's use of his first name only reminding us how we tend to refer to children, informally and with fondness. His close associate, Corneille, likewise uses this method along with a child-like drawing style. In 'Compositie met Figuren 1949'Corneille employs an automatic schizophrenic hand but his other two works from 1965 and 1989 show that, like Constant, his most venomous imagery came from the heart and soul of the snake.

The youngest Cobra member, Pierre Alechinsky, is represented by three works of 1950 vintage but Carl-Henning Pederson, an old campaigner from the days of Linien and Helhesten is poorly represented by two later works from 1978 and '79. Stephen Gilbert, that other Fifer, shows two works, the smaller of which, a pen and ink drawing from 1945, most ably demonstrates his early influences which collide with those of the other snakes in a way that Gear's do not. Documentation shows that Gilbert collaborated in the painting of a mural during the first Cobra congress and was also included in the first Cobra journal (Spring 1949). Gear makes an appearance in the fifth journal but there is no documentary evidence to show that he participated in the collaborative mural events that were central to the two Cobra congresses - Bregnerød, August 1949, and Amsterdam, November 1949. These large scale collaborations also involved the participation of the Cobra's children and very likely any other 'innocent'bystanders.

William Gear and Cobra tours from Aberdeen Art Gallery to The Towner Gallery, Eastbourne (where Gear was the curator from 1958 to '64) January 24th to April 26th; The City Art Centre, Edinburgh, May 2nd to June 20th; The MacLaurin Gallery, Ayr, June 27th to July 26th 1998.