Artist Creates ‘New Significance’

By BEAVER HOLEKAMP

Daniel Robbins, Director of the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design, commented upon the merits of the new wave of Pop Art. Mr. Robbins’ lecture, ‘Recent Developments in American Painting,’ was the final selection of the President’s Lecture Series on Fine Arts for this year.

Taking a representative sampling of Pop artists such as Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine, and Andy Warhol, and juxtaposing them with such conventional and well-loved European painters as Louis David, Jean Baptiste Chardin, Paul Cezanne, and Pablo Picasso, Mr. Robbins made three major observations.

He commented, There has always existed a philosophical question centering around the subject matter of art. The 18th century classical education created a hierarchy of subjects with such universal and heroic epics as David’s ‘Death ofocrates’ at the top, and such specific and personal statements as Chardin’s ‘Still Life’ at the bottom.

However, beginning in the 19th century, subject matter became increasingly bourgeois and less important, to the point that Cezanne could impose upon his subjects an aesthetic order at the cost of physical distortion. From this point, 20th century painting became subject to the “aesthetic of Pure Form,” which is epitomized by the subjectlessness of Constructivism.

Somehow, in the 1960’s, subject matter has worked its way back into “avant garde” painting. Even though Pop still-lifes conform beautifully to the well accepted and understood “Aesthetic of Pure Form,” modern American audiences, still enacting the classical system of values, reject them because the subject matter is not “fit” for art.

Take You On

From these statements, Mr. Robbins manufactured his conclusion, ‘Subject matter shouldn’t ‘put you off,’ but should provoke your imagination; it should ‘turn you on.’” For one final example of Pop Art he showed Jasper John’s prize-winning and one-time-revolutionary “Painted Bronze” of two Ballantine Ale cans, which, he said, “makes you see beer cans in an entirely different light,” by means of the change of context and the method of handling.

To this he added the critical support of Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 defense of a urinal which Duchamp had exhibited as Art under the title of “Fountain,” the artist in destroying the “useful significances” of an object by giving it a new title and point of view, “creates a new thought for the object.” This, therefore, is the role which the bizarrely banal subject matter plays in Pop Art.

Acceptable

Mr. Robbins implied that because it does have a role, it should be acceptable, a point which is basic to much of creative philosophy. Similarly, he pursued the thought that 50 years from now, people will look at the subject matter of Pop Art and find it as proper as we now find Cezanne’s peppermint bottles, and Picasso’s “Glass of Absinthe.” Time will remove the sting of association and Pop Art will be viewed as one mode day in the life of “still life” painting.

Yet, for all this settling of accounts and for Mr. Robbins’ competence and shoemakerishness, his lecture was not totally successful. It was designed to justify the “ways” of Pop to a general and extremely “lay” public, and in doing so it neglected any chance of explanation in which much of the audience was interested.

Misrepresentation

The analysis of Pop simply as a product of the “Aesthetic of Pure Form” mingled with the now-traditional artistic rebellion of DADA, at the expense of its social implications, was more than a slight misrepresentation, however well calculated to generate respectability.

To make Pop palatable to the most conservative taste, he took the pepper out of it, planted it already in historical perspective, and hung it on the walls with the other innocuous arts of the past. Sadly, by creating this artificial distance, he destroyed most of its vitality and reason for being, and removed much of its excitement.