

The Complexity of Simple Kate

Sometimes she called herself Simple Kate. If there was anything simple about Kate Trauman Steinitz it was the simple clarity that comes from knowing who you are and what you want to do.

She was an art person for most of her 85 years. Friend and supporter of the avant-garde in pre-Hitler Germany, biographer of Dada Maste, Kurt Schwitters. She came to the United States in 1935. When she moved to California she became a central energy source in establishing the Elmer Belt Library of Vinciana at UCLA, preserving the Watts Towers . . .

She once used the pseudonym Annette Nobody. It takes an almost oriental sense of paradox to understand that. Kate Trauman Steinitz was only Nobody in the happy self-effacement involved in giving your life to ceaselessly doing what you believe in. She was scholar, archivist, writer, conservator, collector. She was so busy giving that everybody almost forgot Nobody was an artist, poet, set designer, critic and philosopher.

Now there is a labor-of-love exhibition of the art she made when she wasn't doing everything else. It has been assembled by the young L.A. Louver Gallery as a memorial tribute a year after her death and consists of 90 paintings, prints, comic drawings and photographs plus selections of her scholarly papers and memorabilia.

It is like a diary of celebrations. The work unabashedly celebrates German Expressionist styles while remaining almost completely innocent of their characteristic worry and haunted obsessiveness.

Kate Steinitz liked to depict animals, circuses and pretty ladies. One of the best works on view is a photo of the clear eyed sensuality of two young women swimming.

The exhibition traces her life beginning with a comic woodcut from 1902. It shows an unforced giftedness that never flags. Most of all it shows a twinkling wit that never lets sentiment become mawkishness, an appreciation that never lets wit become sarcasm.

A Harlem series done shortly after her arrival in the States depicts blacks without a shade of prejudice. The people just knocked her out and she makes no bones about it.

At times her good spirits seem almost superhuman. A drawing of a camel is titled, "When Hitler came I went to the Zoo." A series of comic panels deals with a kidney-stone operation with a puckish bravery that would shame a kamikazi pilot.

It's a singular exhibition and that's appropriate to the unique spirit of its subject, that simply complex nobody somebody, Kate Steinitz.

The L.A. Louver Gallery is at 55 N. Venice Blvd. The exhibition remains on view, Wednesdays 11 a.m.-9 p.m. and Thursday through Sunday 11 a.m.-5 p.m. until May 2.

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