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The Lively Arts



Adaline Kent Show: A Feeling for Nature

Alfred Frankenstein

THE LATE Adaline Kent, a memorial exhibition of whose work is now to be seen at the San Francisco Museum of Art, had a way of jotting observations of various kinds on the pages of her sketchbooks, and a collection of these is scheduled for publication in the fall. A few of them are posted on the wall of the gallery in which the exhibition may be found, and they serve as the best possible criticism of it.

"Sculpture is concerned with verbs: what water does, how fire moves, how rock shatters, how minerals crystallize, how an animal looks out."

"The virtue in realistic sculpture is the vision of the abstract. Why not drop the trappings?"

"I want the power of Stonehenge and the magic of the South Pacific in language of the wide present . . . To fuse the spiritual

with the animal instinct in forms coherent with nature . . . The mystery comes from the strength of form-and-space, not from amorphousness."

Abstraction in forms coherent with nature, strong in form, with a touch of the primitive and the mysterious—this is exactly what one sees at the Kent exhibition, at least in the later and more important works. One also sees a remarkable mastery of sculptor's materials, especially terra cotta and the hard composite stones known as hydrocal and magnesite. The latter Miss Kent handled in large, epical pieces, with powerful, organic rhythms and a big architectural thrust. She used terra cotta most often for small things, wayward and strange in design, with something gently wistful about them like Morris Graves' blind birds in the moonlight.

No one knew more about color in sculpture than Adaline Kent. Usually it is an integral color that comes from the earths and the firing in her terra cottas, and the range of hue in these pieces has much to do with their appeal. She also liked layered and striated effects, as if she were cooperating with geology, or geology with her, in the creation of these works, and her way of embedding them at times with pebbles and bits of shell underlines this relationship. For some time past a feeling for the drifts, tides, and forces of nature, translated into form rather than imitated from appearance, has been manifesting itself in the abstract art of the Bay Region and the country at large. Miss Kent was one of the first to reach out in that direction, and her work remains one of its most eloquent, subtle, and monumental expressions.