

# The world seen through a sculptor's eye

By GAY WEAVER

John Battenberg's sculpture at Smith-Anderson Gallery in Palo Alto is getting a lot of attention, even from people who don't go inside to look at it.

They press their faces against the glass to see better, or go by on the sidewalk four or five times to stare in. Who knows why they don't walk through the door? Maybe they're not interested in art. But the figures and fragments of figures that make up Battenberg's show won't be denied. They shanghai the interest of the most inebriated passerby.

Among the larger pieces is a female nude in a g-string that cuts into her as if it were made of wire. There's also a life-size bronze of two lesbians making love, and until last week (when they were moved to Los Angeles for another show) there were two female figures in "bondage," both lying on their backs — one dead, her voluptuous body bulging against the cords and bandages wrapped hard around her, and the other, more fragile, spread eagled and arched backward.

The fragments are either taken directly from these works or are closely related to them.

The show left me with some strong feelings about what Battenberg was trying to do and I wanted to talk to him about it. The interview was set up at his studio, a large, light-filled space in a warehouse in San Francisco's Potrero district. The place is guarded by a very large Great Dane. When I got there, Battenberg was in the process of moving and had just broken his finger. The finger, he insisted would be OK in the splint he'd made for it until we were through talking. Then he'd go to the hospital.

He had decided to move to the East Bay, he said, because he was tired of tripping over drunks and seeing people get beat up outside the door and hearing trucks and trains go by all night. He'd keep the studio but he wasn't going to live there any more. He'd slept in the house in Montclair, the night before and the only sounds were made by crickets. He said that with satisfaction.

In order to give some perspective to the sculpture at Smith-Anderson, Battenberg talked about



John Battenberg, an internationally known artist, teaches at San Jose State University.

## Entertainment and the arts

his background and the development of his work.

He was born in Milwaukee, Wis., in 1931, grew up in the Midwest and was graduated from what he has called elsewhere, "a hick college." He then spent a year in Oxford, England, studying at the Ruskin School of Fine Art and Drawing. His education there was primarily academic and ultimately not too influential on his development, he said. But he loved the

country and returned for two years after receiving his master's degree in 1960 from Michigan State University. By this time he was painting in an abstract expressionist style but always using figures.

In 1962 he accepted a position at New Mexico Western College and stayed on the next year as artist in residence. He made his first serious forays into sculpture there, working with welded pieces.

Hoping to learn bronze casting techniques, he then signed up for post-graduate work at the California College of Arts and Crafts, in Oakland. However, he discovered after his arrival that there was no foundry at the school, so he and several other students built their own and taught themselves the techniques.

It was a long, hard job, Battenberg said, because they didn't really know what they were doing, but by 1964 he was considered good enough to be hired by Arts and Crafts as a casting instructor.

That same year he began to do a bronze series of what might be called three-dimensional reliefs in which small, World War I planes were set into landscapes. The example that Battenberg showed me in his studio hangs near a print he did at about the same time. "I see a connection, somehow, between the two," he said.

And, indeed, although the imagery is completely different (the print depicts a dog emerging out of an atmospheric ground) the two share a similar feeling in the free, expressionist style.

The bronze series shifted from planes to the men who flew them when Battenberg began to make a life-size group of works in which pilots' clothes were arranged in various, often jaunty, poses, but the human bodies were omitted.

Battenberg said that in his work he had always been involved with humanist elements, and at this point he was extremely anti-war. The haunting pilot series was the outcome of that anti-war feeling, he said.

After that group of works, he experimented for a while with large sculptured wing shapes painted in hard-edged colors, then he began to explore an entirely different avenue "to get out of World War I."

This culminated in a bronze series of partial figures in which armies emerged from women's vaginas, and others where birds and rodents appeared from the open flaps of blue jeans and from the mouths of human figures.

The next major works were those at Smith-Anderson, and, typically, social comment was a major element.

"In the '60s a lot of major events happened," Battenberg said, "there were all those assassinations and the hippie thing and a lot of other stuff. Now, in the '70s we seem to be into a sexual thing. I remember I went to a party at some lawyer's house in Palo Alto. I thought I was cool, but I couldn't believe what was going on there. It seems to me there's something really decadent about that."

*"I was trying to say something about the human condition."*

"A lot of people get hung up on the fact that they (the figures) are female," Battenberg said. "But they could just as easily be male. I just happen to like female bodies better. What I was trying to say was something about the 'human' condition. It sounds silly to put it this way, but it really is about being bound up mentally and emotionally."

The bondage works, he explained, were inspired by people he knows who are involved with this sort of sexual activity. The women who posed for the homosexual work are lovers.

Although all the recent figures appear at first to be life size, most of them are actually about 4 feet 8 inches tall. The exception is the standing figure, which is 6 feet 1 inch.

Battenberg said the height was important to him because it gives the works what he calls "remove," that is, it separates them slightly from the viewer psychologically.

Battenberg used to do all his own foundry work but now he has Don Rich of the Berkeley Foundry do it. The two met years ago at the College of Arts and Crafts and have a very close professional relationship. At first, Battenberg said, it was hard to give up doing the work himself. But eventually he found not doing it gave him much more freedom to concentrate on what he terms "the essentials."

He said, too, that he finds a kind of magic in giving a piece to the foundry and having it come back complete. Somehow, through the process, a piece of work is transformed into a work of art.

Battenberg's large bronzes are understandably expensive. Casting alone costs thousands of dollars. But some of the fragments at Smith-Anderson are done in dark colored paper through a process developed by Garner Tullis of the International Institute for Experimental Printmaking. These are done in small editions so that the result is like a sculpture print, and the cost is about the same as producing a print.

"I'm in favor of populist art," Battenberg said, "but because I work in bronze my sculpture is out of the price range of most people."

He was very pleased with the results of the paper pieces, he said, and hopes to do more in that medium.

As for future work, Battenberg said he hasn't had much time to think about it because of moving, setting up two major shows and the beginning of the academic year (he is an art professor at San Jose State University). But he has the feeling the present series of women isn't finished yet.