

# Sculptor Tamed and Untamed

By Kenneth Baker  
Chronicle Art Critic

John Battenberg, who has taught at San Jose State University for many years, is an art maverick, a holdout against the main currents of contemporary sculpture, which run toward critical probing of our unconscious relations to objects.

Battenberg fares pretty well in California, which admires self-invention more than accommodation to the authority of other places, times or world views. But in any survey of American sculpture since 1945, his work would look both academic and unaccountably hung-up on the latent surrealism of three-dimensional imagery. The dates on his work might be set back 30 or 40 years and never arouse the suspicions of viewers who know the outlines of modern art but had never seen his work before.

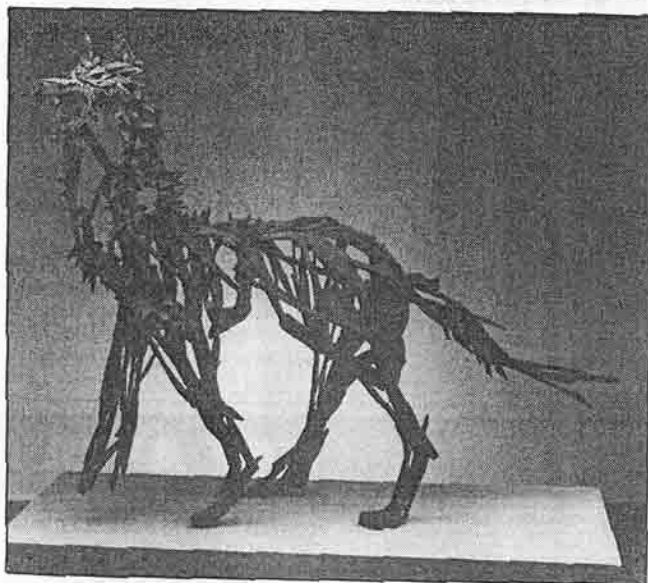
However, Battenberg's 30-year retrospective at the Bedford Gallery in the Regional Center of the Arts in Walnut Creek (through June 9) comes at what ought to be a favorable moment. (It will not travel.)

## Changing Focus

The tendency in criticism and curatorial practice now is toward recognition of individual artistic background and sensibility and away from defining a period's art history as the rigid succession of a handful of big ideas and personalities. In this changing climate, the obsessive oddities of Battenberg's art show to maximum advantage.

His most famous images, begun in the 1960s, are of World War I aviators. Rather, they are like aviator ghosts: figures defined by rigid, hollow ensembles of jackets and trousers, boots, leather flying helmets and goggles.

Battenberg's hollow men are both wry and elegiac. The three fragmentary cast aluminum figures of "Lafayette Escadrille" (1966) read as an ironic war memorial, stiffened uniforms — their wearers blasted out of them — posed to express backslapping ca-



John Battenberg's bronze 'Nataha' (1990), from a retrospective of his work at Bedford Gallery in Walnut Creek

maraderie.

I suspect Battenberg still takes heat for some sculptures of the 1970s, notably the marble "Queen Anne is Dead, I Think" (1975) and "Hindi" (1975) in bronze. They depict women caught in what we cannot but see as sexual bondage.

"Queen Anne is Dead, I Think" is the more disturbing because of the seductive elegance of its material and carving. It depicts a woman on her back, shrouded to the waist, naked above it, gagged, with a truss of ropes tightly binding her neck, arms and breasts.

It is hard to read this work as anything but a monument to the domination of women, and you may not even try until you see several other pieces here that make connections between Battenberg's imagery of war and women.

## Soldiers on a Woman

"Battle of Waterloo" (1973) describes the battlefield formations of a troop of tiny soldiers who appear oblivious that the terrain under them is the near-life-size torso of a woman.

"Double Your Pleasure" (1974) and "Monument to Mothers" (1974) also combine sexual and martial imagery, hinting at a vulgar equation of desire and brutality that I

gather is supposed to pass a psychosocial commentary.

Whether Battenberg likes it or not, the bound women are the most memorable works in this retrospective. Our willingness to view them as anything but cheap public flirtations with pathology depends on the credibility of the artist's subsequent work.

If there is one figurative cliché a male artist depicting bound women ought to avoid it is that of the "wolf." Yet wolves and coyotes predominate in his recent sculpture and prints.

## Inherent Motive

Can he really be so self-conscious or is he just trying to get people going?

Battenberg's recent sculptures are the sum of all his artistic weaknesses. They are open-work animal figures cast in bronze from maquettes of many fastened shards of wood.

In contemporary art, Deborah Butterfield's horses set a standard of representational economy and empathy in sculpture inspired by animals. From Battenberg's animal pieces, whose every detail is both stylized and generalized, you would never guess that sculpture of the caliber of Butterfield's was possible. To him, evidently, it is not.