

Alan Newberg (Ed.)
BEN STEELE: PRISONER OF WAR

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Alan Newberg has put together an exhibition of eighty drawings and three paintings which showed at the Northcutt Gallery at Eastern Montana College in 1986. The entire collection is the property of Eastern Montana College as the result of a gift from Mr. Steele who is a professor emeritus at that institution. The accompanying catalog features thirty black and white reproductions of the work, an introduction by Newberg and an essay by James Todd, an art history professor at the University of Montana. Also included is a chronology and list of works in the exhibition. The catalog and exhibition chronicle Ben Steele's experience as a prisoner of the Japanese during World War Two.

Newberg's description of the exhibition as representing "...the dark and inhuman things that people do to one another under the cold and tolerant eye of war" (p.1) is a pretty accurate description of the thematic content of the visuals contained in this catalog. These works were not done in Japanese prison camps, since Steele's work done in the camps was destroyed. Rather, these works were done under the auspices of rehabilitation once he was free. Many are reproductions of work done in the camps. Newberg feels that Mr. Steele, whom he sees as a stable and balanced individual, used art to stay sane during internment. Thus we have art in this case not only as social comment but as therapy.

James Todd, in his essay, relates that Steele developed his interest in art in the internment camps, after surviving the Bataan

Death March. There are basically two types of drawings in the show, according to Todd, those done as therapy during Steele's recovery, and those done after Steele had received formal training. Todd accurately portrays the former as awkward technically but with the redeeming sense of honesty in reporting. They portray not objectively, but subjectively from Steele's position as a victim, the life experience of being there. The original drawings made in the camps represented a great risk to Steele. If he was caught he would have been punished severely.

The drawings themselves fall into categorical types, the first being the drawings from the therapeutic period which are naturalistic in character, report oriented, and a bit clumsy as one might expect. They are charged, however, with a sort of direct, raw energy. In the second type, done after some professional training, this rawness becomes channelled into expressivist images which have elements of German woodcuts, Daumier, and political cartooning all rolled into one.

The catalog is available from the Eastern Montana College Bookstore, 1500 N. 30th St., Billings, Montana, 59101. The exhibition is available for \$500.00. Inquiries should be directed to Alan Newberg, Art Department, Eastern Montana College.

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