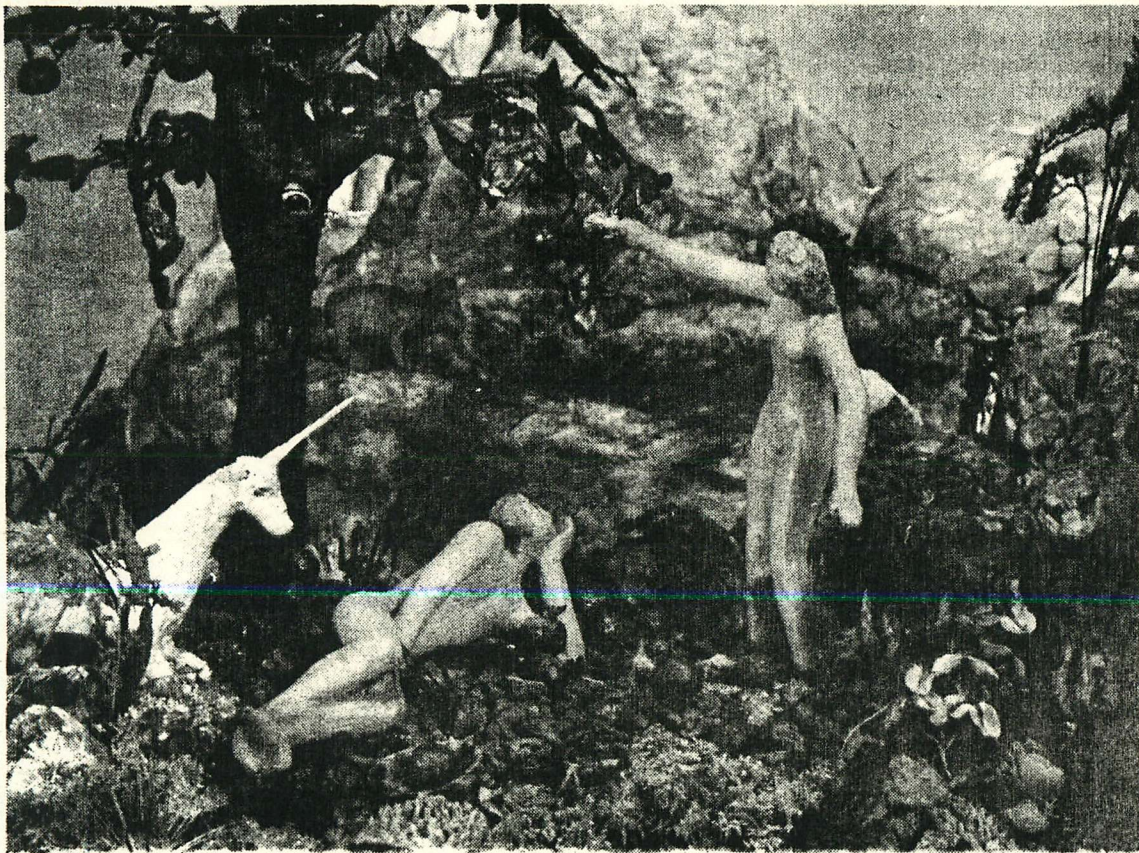


# Fall Collection



Photo/Lew Alquist

Detail from "Garden of Eden #2" by Iris Adler

## IRIS ADLER at Artemisia Gallery

By Kyle Gann

In her recent *Has Modernism Failed?*, an insightful if rather unfocused book, Suzi Gablik proposes an interesting characterization of the polarity of present Western and Eastern art, one that forces us to reassess Soviet "social realism" vis-a-vis our own traditions. Marxist art, she argues, pays attention only to content and ignores aesthetic criteria—which is why it is so often bad art. Western, or capitalist, art

serves an aesthetic formalism; it is assumed to be autonomous and irrelevant to social conditions, which is why so much Western art is empty of significance and lacking in public resonance. Gablik argues, correctly I think, that exclusive fixture at either end of this dichotomy is self-defeating, and that we have gradually lost view of the dialectical interaction of these extremes.

Gablik's view has been borne out by my art teacher friends, who often mention to me their students' inability to discuss their work in

terms of content. The present-day artist seems to feel that he owes nothing to society. How refreshing, then, to find in Chicago an artist who strikes a balance far away from the Western attitude of aesthetic autonomy, and whose work shows a potential for resonance with virtually every member of society. Pregnant with religious, political, sexual, and moral overtones, the electric kinetic sculptures of Iris Adler deal with the roots of our cultural distinction between good and evil—roots that, regardless of one's religious affiliation,

eventually lead back to the Bible. Adler lays the self-antagonistic basis of our culture before us naked, and I doubt that any Euro-American can be immune to a twinge of identification, however subconscious.

Her work falls into three series: the *Reliquaries*, quasi-Catholic icons each based on a different part of the body; the *Electronic Last Judgments*, bizarre, Gothic representations of heaven and hell; and the *Garden of Eden* series, seven of which constitute the present exhibition. Wired with blinking lights and little sound makers, Adler's sculptures are exquisitely made and delightful to explore, but not at all what one would call polished or slick. Those who look for a sculptor's virtuosic control over his materials will be disappointed; the message is too urgent for that. The homespun quality of many of Adler's materials—seashells, feathers, pressed flowers—may lead some to classify her as a naive artist, which she is manifestly not (as attest, among other things, the complex references to Gothic architecture in the *Electronic Last Judgment* series). This is shrewdness masquerading as naive for a purpose.

"Showing the best and dividing it from the worst age vexes age," wrote Whitman. The subtly ironic commentary Adler's work makes on the biblical myth seems to show she agrees. With exaggerated simplicity the *Garden of Eden* series lends nuances to its morality play by endlessly permutating the relationships of five elements: Adam, Eve, the Serpent, an apple, and a skull, skeleton, or death's-head. The opening piece, *Garden of Eden #6*, makes the grimmest statement of the show: two grin-

ning skeletons watch with eyeless glee as an hourglass, containing sand, the Serpent, an apple, and the fated couple, turns slowly over, casting their fate randomly and repeatedly. The other six pieces are more fantasylike and less meta-

## ART

physical, and display a lushness I had not previously seen in Adler's work.

One theme that runs uniformly throughout the exhibition is the inevitability of Adam and Eve's fall. This is most obvious in the least subtle piece, *Garden of Eden #3*, which has the pair peering excitedly at a large apple rising toward them from a skull concealed underground. The Serpent, enormous in this instance, towers just above the unsuspecting couple threatening to crush them; its tail runs down into the ground to just underneath the skull. Nothing points out the good/evil dichotomy here more than the sounds, primitive but intuitively effective, that emanate from these sculptures. As the apple rises, it is surrounded by a soft green glowing light, and the innocent, tinkling sounds of a music box are heard. But as the Serpent begins to move into action, a harsh yellow light replaces the green, and the music box gives way to more ominous, ugly electronic tones.

*Garden of Eden #2* is the most



complex, well-integrated, and fantastical of the series, and it takes the theme even farther. Not only is the fall inevitable; evil is inseparable from Paradise. In this paradise, heaps of apples lie about the ground. A mountain in the background is topped with seashells, from the largest of which a waterfall springs that turns into a river behind Eve. Mythical animals abound: a unicorn, tiny elephants, undifferentiated doglike figures. Adam, on the ground, stares dreamily at the apple Eve is holding with the naive look of a sheltered college freshman. But Paradise is rife with ominous signs; one of the apples has an eye, as does the tree, which blinks slowly to stare at the couple. The Serpent is in the tree, somewhat camouflaged, and when its eyes light up so does the apple in Eve's hand, after which the very ground behind her begins to move. The universe is unthinkable without its malicious aspect, and original sin predates man's fall.

Constant also is the feminist and revisionist theme of Adam's indisputable complicity. The first biblical differentiation of good and evil is also the first sexual differentiation, and the friction between Adler's world and the familiar version gives the work a good deal of psychological power. In *Garden of Eden #1*, a bearded Adam actually reclines on the apple as Eve turns back and forth to look at him questioningly about the snake with a skull head that squirms out from the apple like a gargantuan worm. In #8, Eve reaches the apple only by sitting on Adam's shoulders. In this fairy-tale setting inhabited by goats and chimpanzees, the apple tree turns out upon closer inspection to be a hunchbacked skeleton with branches instead of arms.

*Garden of Eden #7*, the most striking piece conceptually and aurally if not visually, expresses Eve's reach for the apple as a wild ride on the back of the Serpent's neck over a large death's-head with lights blinking like a video game. The carnival atmosphere of this nightmarish ride is made clear by a music box playing a sprightly but inane little ditty over and over. Adam stands on a sort of trapeze dependent from the tree, also trying to reach the apple as a host of birds—owls, pheasants, birds of paradise, but mainly vultures—watch in anticipation. In *Garden of Eden #4*, Adam watches passively as the Serpent, its coils surrounding Eve, tries to force the apple into her mouth. Among the apples on the tree are tiny red skulls.

Seeing any of these sculptures in isolation, one might get the idea that Adler finds a high moral seriousness in the biblical account of Adam and Eve, and perhaps even

that she is a religious fanatic. But the poker-faced simplicity with which the idea is repeated makes the irony apparent, as does the fact that all the Adams and Eves are blond-haired, pink-skinned, and conspicuously Anglo-Saxon. Western man's problems began by determining good and distinguishing it from evil, and the reflexive nature of that distinction plagues us today. We admire "the right stuff," we avoid "the primrose path," and we "civilize primitive savages" by replacing their evil with our good; and the fact that we have just reelected a president for the sake of his antagonism toward "the evil empire" shows that these value judgments are not diminishing in relevance. The events that some fundamentalists think happened in October of 4004 BC echo in our behavior today: age vexes age.

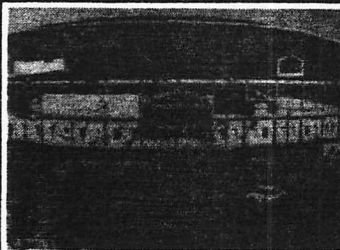
Adler's method of rebellion is simple and nonviolent; her works are psycho-historical mirrors, and show us the internal source of the antagonisms that we have so long externalized. Personally, I like her message best when it is most starkly expressed, and the gloomy frankness of *Garden of Eden #6* makes it perhaps my favorite piece in the show. But the ideas derive much of their force from the repetition and variation, and this force plus the work's clarity of content make this one of the most refreshing exhibitions I've seen recently.

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