

Gert and Uwe Tobias

Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53rd Street
Through Feb. 25

The collaborative work of Gert and Uwe Tobias, twin brothers born in Romania in 1973, looked a lot peppier this past September in a sprawling group show of ceramic art at the Gladstone Gallery than it does sequestered in a large gallery at the Museum of Modern Art.

At Gladstone the Tobias brothers, who now live in Germany, contributed several quirky, slightly disheveled works that combined their glazed-clay sculptures with found ceramic and glass vases. There are only three such works in this show, clustered together on pedestals and looking overly polite. Small deft gouaches and large colorful woodcuts are in the majority, mounted on walls often painted dark blue and divided this way and that by straight white lines.

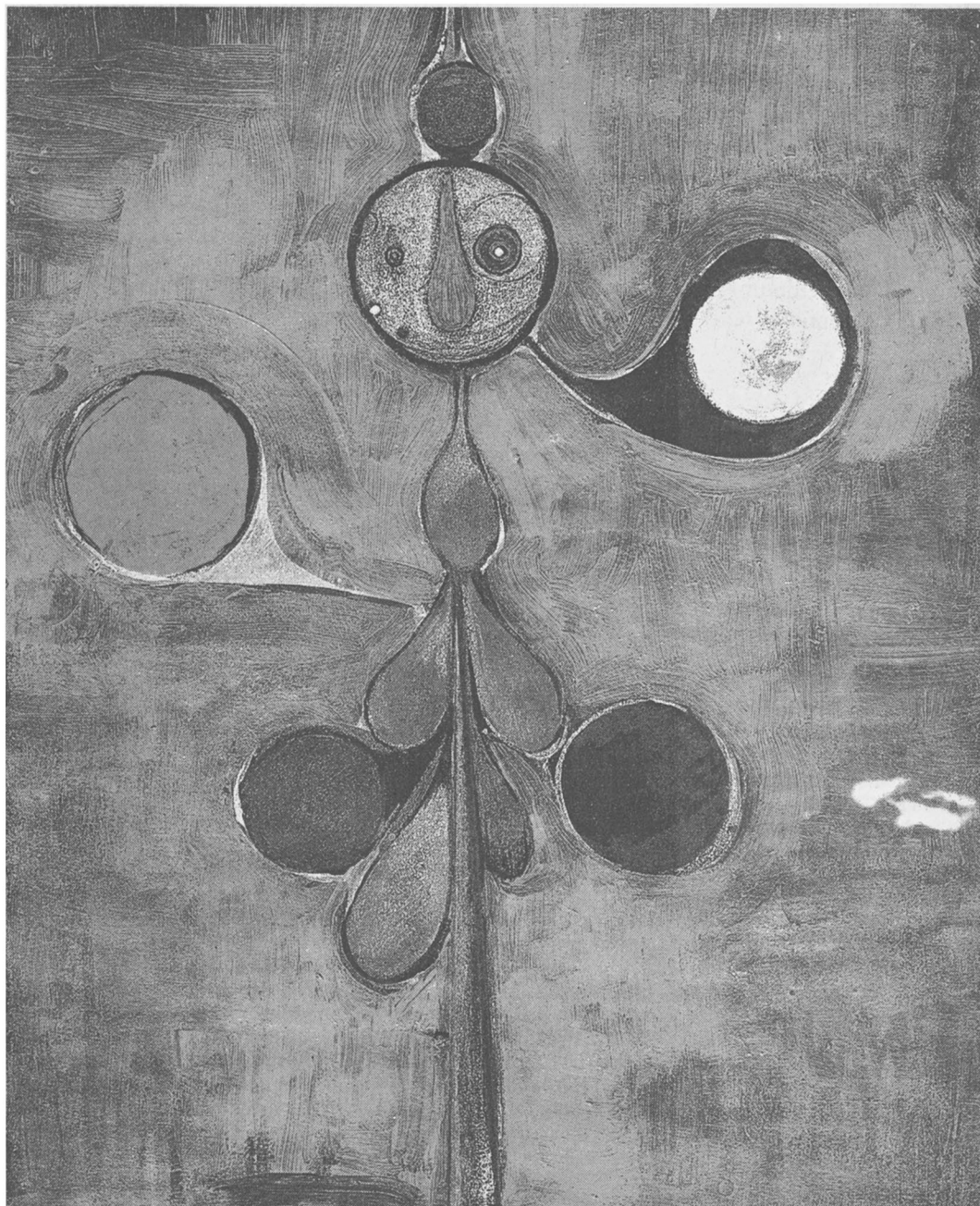
The effect is attractive, at times witty and even beautiful. The brothers have mastered a form of geometric figuration — a stack of cylinders, cones and spheres seemingly made of building blocks — that lands somewhere between Olive Oyl and a balletic Oskar Schlemmer figure. This automaton is sometimes paired with more human creatures, especially in the dark, wistful mixed-media works that seem to be mostly gouache.

In the largest woodcut (13 feet across), two automatons appear with a figure that has the head of a Punch-like jester; the stagelike space of the image suggests a circus side-show. Their faces seem echoed by the three ceramic figures in the center of the room.

A theme starts to emerge. One woodcut is an announcement for the MoMA show, with the wall around it painted so that it looks as though it is being held up on a sign. A tall pole-like sculpture reaching to the ceiling brings to mind a tent pole; the black diagonals and black and white patterns of a nearby woodcut also evoke a tent.

In two dimensions, the Tobias pictorial language has too much in common with the bolder compositions of Tal R, the thick-surfaced paintings of Philip Allen and the more cerebral ones of Thomas Scheibitz, all of whom attempt to revive Modernist geometry with bright color and knowing hints of popular culture. The brothers could learn from their own work in three dimensions, which looks a lot less tame.

Art in Review



GALERIE MICHAEL JANSSEN, BERLIN AND COLOGNE

A large detail of a work by Gert and Uwe Tobias, twin brothers, at the Museum of Modern Art.

On the other hand, they could be victims of context. It may be all but impossible for the work of young artists to escape stultification when placed within the architecture and atmosphere of the Modern. Things should be clearer this spring, when the Tobias brothers make their New York commercial gallery solo debut at Team in SoHo.

ROBERTA SMITH