



Robert Arneson:
Two-dimensional Works

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Nuclear War Head #1, 1983, acrylic and oil on paper, 44" x 55", courtesy private collection. Photo: M. Lee Fatherree

Robert Arneson's Postmodern Two-dimensional Works

You see, the thing about ceramics is that it fits that area between painting and sculpture. That's what I've always liked about it.

Robert Arneson¹

When Robert Arneson died in November 1992 at age 62, he left a tremendous legacy that is only now beginning to be re-evaluated and reconsidered.² Although he was generally considered a Bay Area Funk ceramicist and was only occasionally referred to as an "artist," it is increasingly apparent that Arneson was a major sculptor and draftsman who transformed a generalized Funk aesthetic into a postmodern

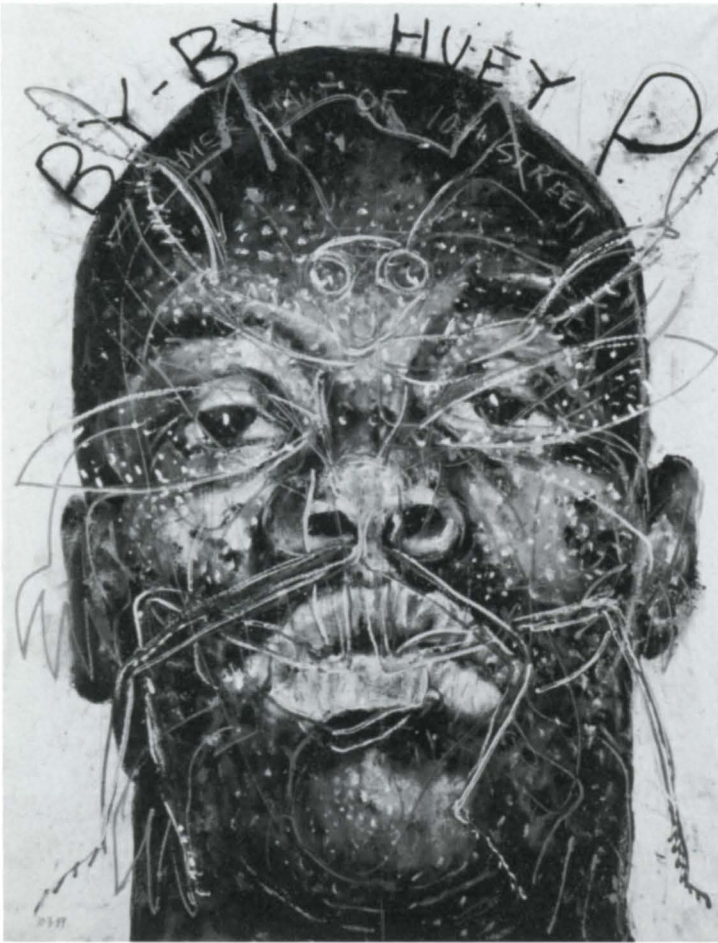
style that relied on the strategies of self-parody and humor to enable people to come to terms with new ways of thinking and feeling about individuality, the self and humanity's role on this planet.

While Peter Voulkos in the 1950s aggrandized contemporary ceramics into a monumental art form, Robert Arneson began in the 1960s to transform it into a highly critical art form that takes from both painting and sculpture. Using Jean-Francois Lyotard's term "paralogism" to characterize the type of postmodern invention that displaces the rules of the game and thus resists metanarratives associated with modernism,³ we might posit the idea that Arneson questions a number of metanarratives, including the artist's persona, the separation of art from social concerns and the belief that art's formal means can communicate

profound meanings directly.

Instead of allowing viewers the comfort of a clearly established vantage point, Arneson places them in a position of perpetual doubt, forcing them to question common assumptions without providing clear answers. One of his major accomplishments may have been the development of this uncompromising self-critical mode which often began with self-parody and self-analysis. Instead of merely expressing moral outrage in some pieces and great empathy with his subject in others, Arneson's works question even his own motives and conclusions.

As commemoration, Robert Arneson deserves a thorough analysis and an appreciation of the ways that he uses humor to debunk the threshold of expectations regarding the transcendent



By-By Huey P., 1989, acrylic, oil stick on canvas, 77" x 58", courtesy of the Frumkin/Adams Gallery, New York.

experience often associated with modernism and replaces them with unsettling images that make viewers hopefully question their assumptions as well as the act of looking at art. In works focusing on the effects of a nuclear holocaust, Arneson takes the horrific to the point of absurdity, thus debunking what he appears to be advocating. Because many of Arneson's critics are deeply concerned about the nuclear threat, they have not recognized the ways that the artist has exaggerated bad taste to the level of hyperbole in such pieces as *General Nuke Pricked* who sports a missile for a nose and gushes blood from his mouth. To comprehend the absurdity and transgressive nature of his art, we might consider how the drawings *Nuclear War Head #1* or *Nuclear Stockpile* would be regarded in Japan. In this country, Arneson's so-called morality might have the effect of a callous and deeply unsettling joke. Clearly, then, Arneson's images cast doubt not only on warmongering generals, making them repugnant comic-strip characters, but

also on soldiers and the traditional meaning of the spoils of war. At the same time, his works could be considered an indictment of the artist himself because he has treated mass destruction with all the seriousness of a preposterous and well-orchestrated spoof.

When I talked with Arneson shortly before his death, he commented that he was at long last almost cured of Jackson Pollock – a comment I took to refer to the grandiosity of Pollock's romantic ego that has affected so much post-World War II art. Considering Pollock as the equivalent of a disease is far different than regarding him as a soul mate, as many writers on Arneson have done. If one compares Pollock and Arneson, it is hard to find any parallels aside from the obvious fact that both spent their childhoods in California. One might say that Pollock was important to Arneson because of being his diametrical opposite. A member of the New York School, an alcoholic, a loner and an angst-ridden individual without a sense of humor, Pollock differed significantly from the



Colonel Nuke Pricked, 1984, oil stick, acrylic and collage on paper, 53" x 42", courtesy private collection, New York.

suburban college professor who worked alongside his students and brought up his four sons after his divorce. Instead of focusing on the mythic unconscious, Arneson dealt with absurdity and frequently referred to himself as a clown, who exemplified society's foibles and weaknesses. In his *Eye of the Beholder*, for example, the first assault that Arneson makes is on his own vision.

When Arneson made images of Pollock, he was far more involved with the myth than with the man. In a manner similar to the Pop artists, he was concerned with the ways that the media has transformed this individual and, in the process, elaborated on the artist's persona as romantic hero. Corroboration for this point of view can be found in the fact that Arneson's Pollock is consistent with the artist who was filmed by Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg in 1950-51. It is the existential heroic figure and not the bloated aging alcoholic that Arneson undertakes to represent in his art.

In the future, as curators, art historians and critics undertake the careful



Hairy Kiss, 1992, conte, charcoal on paper, 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 47 $\frac{1}{2}$ ", collection of Sandra Shannonhouse, Benicia, Calif.

examination of Robert Arneson's contributions to late 20th-century sculpture that his work so fully warrants, this writer hopes that they will consider the ways that he transformed California Funk from a localized and not clearly defined movement to postmodernism, using himself, Jackson Pollock and a series of political and social issues as the basis for his analyses.

In his desire to transform a craft medium into a full-fledged art form, Arneson has taken modernist sculpture to task. If Carl Andre concluded the modernist project of removing sculpture from the pedestal by erasing all hierarchical distinctions and making floor pieces, Arneson initiated one strand of postmodern sculpture by reinscribing the grand tradition of classical busts perched on prominent pedestals – not in order to celebrate them, but in order to play with them and debunk the afflatus of both the modernist and the classical traditions. Aspects of the parodic handling of the pedestal occur in *Julius and Ethel with Battery* and *Gulf Dip*. In these two works, the extreme seriousness of the electrocution of the Rosenbergs and the Gulf War are undermined but not canceled by references to a DieHard battery and a sea of Gulf oil.

Art functions as a critical tool for Arneson, and humor is a means for shocking viewers into reconsidering political situations. This artist appears to be memorializing Huey P. Newton, the one-time leader of the Black Panther movement who was killed in a recent drug-related shooting in Oakland, through his monumental and sympathetic portrait. But his drawing also trivializes Newton and his death through the use of graffiti and the title *By-By Huey P.* Although the praying mantis sprawled in a graffiti-style over the face of Newton might refer to the fact that the male insect is devoured by the female after fertilization, the super-imposed image is also a violation of the image and establishes a tension between a thoughtful tribute and an outright desecration.

Arneson may view the self as a societal construct, dependent on usage, understood in terms of puns, subject to absurd foibles and exaggerated to the point of caricature, but this self is still vulnerable and fragile in his art and still subject to strong feelings that can destroy itself as does the nuclear warhead appearing in *Nuclear War Head #1*, who is both the initiator of violence and also its target. In a series of works indirectly dealing with the AIDS virus, Arneson synecdochically pictures humanity's

ongoing efforts to co-exist with itself in terms of his tragic and hilarious efforts to live with himself, as *Tongue Catcher* and *Hairy Kiss* indicate. In these works, Arneson's favored bad taste provides still another way of casting doubt on the intent of his art and forcing viewers to consider homoeroticism as related to the initial fact of being inextricably wedded to oneself.

— Robert Hobbs

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- 1 John Natsoulas and Bruce Nixon, editors, *30 Years of TB-9: A Tribute to Robert Arneson* (John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, Calif., June 8 - July 8, 1991), p. 31.
- 2 The author wishes to express his great appreciation to Suzanne Ramljak, editor, *Sculpture*, for allowing him to cite several sections from his forthcoming essay "Robert Arneson's Postmodern Ceramic Sculpture" (November 1993) in this introduction.
- 3 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, translation Bennington and Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979.

Cover: *Nuclear Warhead*, 1984, mixed media and collage on paper, 59 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 42", collection of Dorothy Goldeen, Santa Monica, Calif.

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