Robert Arneson/MATRIX 110
From the Jackson Pollock Series
April 29 - June 24, 1990

Born to Raise Hell, 1987
Photo: Courtesy of Dorothy Goldeen Gallery
Santa Monica, California

MATRIX is supported by funds from
Aetna Life & Casualty, the Lannan Foundation,
and by a grant from the National Endowment
for the Arts, a federal agency.
Robert Arneson / MATRIX 110
From the Jackson Pollock Series

Robert Arneson’s sculpture over the past three decades has explored the expressive possibilities of clay in a way that is without precedent in the history of ceramics and the history of art. Arneson, who has lived and worked in the San Francisco Bay area most of his life, has produced some of the most powerful figurative sculpture made in recent times. His remarkable body of work—full of technical and aesthetic breakthroughs—has been a major influence in liberating clay from the confines of craft and positioning it in the mainstream of the contemporary visual arts. Though initially celebrated for his work in clay, over the years Arneson has achieved further distinction in a variety of mediums, including drawing and painting.

This MATRIX exhibition focuses on a representative selection of eleven objects by Arneson about the American abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock. In an ongoing series begun in 1982, Arneson has explored the complex and potent meanings of the life, the death, the art, and the myth of Jackson Pollock in numerous large-scale sculptures made of ceramic, bronze, and wood as well as in paintings and drawings. Arneson has made more than sixty works based on Pollock and has brought an energy and concentration to this subject that mirrors the intensity of Pollock’s own oeuvre.

In the 1960s Arneson translated banal everyday objects such as typewriters, toasters, and toilets into eccentric and sometimes surreal representations. Many of these pieces now seem comfortably related to simultaneous developments elsewhere in London, New York, and Los Angeles—developments which also focused on the icons and artifacts of popular culture. That Arneson’s early work in clay was actively engaged in dialogue with issues then current in the international art world was confirmation of his determination "to be an artist and not a potter."

In the early 1970s Arneson shifted his subject matter from objects to portraiture. His exploration began with self-portraits but soon expanded to include many of his artist colleagues from northern California. He also selected artists from history whom he admired, including Leonardo, van Gogh, Duchamp, and Picasso, as well as more recent figures like Francis Bacon, Philip Guston, and Pollock.

About the time Arneson turned to portraiture, the scale of his work began to approach the monumental. Intent upon
moving beyond the modest presentations associated with craft objects and outwitting the limits that the kiln might have imposed on the scale of his vision, Arneson began to construct very large sculptures built up of individually fired multiple units. (This technique was also used in the fifteenth century by Luca della Robbia with his glazed terra-cotta sculptures. Della Robbia, however, is not known to have made any freestanding works.)

Taking liberties with tradition to suit his own purposes, Arneson revitalized the recently dormant genre born in ancient Rome, the sculptured bust on a pedestal. He consistently transforms the once customarily neutral column and base into lively vehicles for artistic expression. Three excellent examples of Arneson’s creative variations on this convention can be seen in this installation: Cathedral Tower, Jackson’s Crash, and Born to Raise Hell, all made in 1987.

Cathedral Tower refers to a specific painting by Pollock, the tall, slender Cathedral (1947), now in the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. Here Arneson unifies the bust, column, and base into an elegant single image using Pollock’s familiar technique of an all-over, balanced surface pattern. The result is an elegiac portrait which conveys both the dignity and the pathos of his subject. Quite different in mood is Jackson’s Crash. Though an ardent admirer of the artist, Arneson refuses to romanticize Pollock’s angst. In Jackson’s Crash, Arneson rambunctiously assaults myth and sentiment by documenting Pollock’s premature death at the age of forty-four, insisting that we acknowledge the trivial details of this tragic alcohol-related accident that also took the life of young Edith Metzger, a reluctant passenger in his car that night. Arneson’s piece unceremoniously confronts the violent and awkward circumstances of Pollock’s death. The two unpretentious, stubby columns carry written texts, giving factual

_Cathedral Tower, 1987_

Photo: Courtesy of Dorothy Goldeen Gallery
Santa Monica, California
information with some editorializing ("Poor Edith"). This piece includes the passage of time, a before-and-after scenario. The idea of metamorphosis is strong here also, as it is in the imposing Born to Raise Hell. In this third work, the Olmec-like mask of Pollock set on a redwood base speaks of birth and life on one side and death on the other. Born to Raise Hell includes the zodiac sign of Aquarius, featuring a man pouring water. This commemorates Pollock’s birthdate. The sculpture seems to be leaking at its base, a puddle of water or, more likely given Pollock’s alcoholism, a libation. As in many of Arneson’s sculptures, secret details are sometimes placed where they are inaccessible to most viewers. A reference to Pollock’s wife, painter Lee Krasner, is on the back.

The artist in his studio
Photo: Kurt Flshbach
Courtesy of Dorothy Goldeen Gallery
Santa Monica, California
Arneson's profound admiration for Jackson Pollock informs his frequent return to the artist as a rich topic of inquiry. In Pollock, he has found the convergence of a broad range of significant issues. For Arneson, Pollock is a gifted genius of towering importance whose personality and life embodied the difficulty of being an artist. Alienated from conventional society, Pollock was alternately scorned and idealized. He proudly but painfully stood his ground as an outsider because he could not do otherwise. Often he was poised precariously on the edge of sanity. It is out of respect for Pollock that Arneson includes this turmoil in his portraits.

In critic Donald Kuspit's opinion, "Arneson's identification with Pollock recovers the sense of Pollock as victim, as disturbed, even deeply pathological—which is the only way to be 'authentic' in the modern world. For Arneson, Pollock represents the socially rejected, isolated individual in American life. . . . For Arneson, Pollock's life, like that of van Gogh, was in itself 'political'—both artists were, in Artaud's phrase, suicided by society."

Arneson has always been interested in the nature of process and materials. His alertness to these concerns is often cleverly included in the content of his art. Clay is an intriguing medium. It is highly malleable and forgiving in its natural state but, once fired, becomes rigid and vulnerable. Transformation and metamorphosis are embodied in this paradox. Arneson has often made playful use of the medium's essential characteristics. Even in as serious a topic as Jackson Pollock, viewers will find Arneson's mischievousness vested in, for instance, the trompe l'oeil effects of the Golden Stone (1986), made of clay. The same is true of Pollock #4 (1983), a ceramic piece which reads as bronze and, conversely, the powerful bronze Big Head of Jackson (1987), with its rough, craggy ceramic-like surface. Similarly, the sober mask in the center of the three-part Jackson's Crash is ceramic masquerading as stone or granite.

For Arneson, Pollock as a subject has also been a means to explore Arneson's long-standing interest in integrating painting and sculpture. He has always been inclined "to approach ceramics as a painting process." In addition to the technically expert and widely varied polychrome glazes that can be seen in these works—Jackson's Crash is almost a catalogue of such techniques—playful references to paintings by Pollock can be found in the lively surfaces of many of
these objects. Although Arneson's focus on Pollock seems to be winding down, work-in-progress now in Arneson's studio includes a very large and complex ceramic tableau, likely to be one of Arneson's most ambitious works. It is a full-scale sculptural interpretation of Pollock's painting The Guardians of the Secret (1943).

Pollock's eager embrace of chance combined with his highly developed control of the process was an essential component of his famous drip technique of applying paint from a standing position to the canvas tacked on the floor. Arneson has also welcomed chance and improvisation into his methodology. For instance, celebrating the fact that clay itself is an unpredictable medium, Arneson has said that he likes to "take the difficulties and exploit them. That's why . . . I prefer ceramics. Because there's always that chance. Potters always call the kiln the 'kiln god.' The element of chance takes over and you're no longer in control."

Inspired in part by the California sculptor Peter Voulkos, who applied the innovations of abstract expressionism to ceramics, Arneson was quick to reject the long-standing Western tradition of the ceramist as a producer of tasteful objects made for popular consumption, a tradition which by the mid-twentieth century had been largely debased into a world of kitsch and bric-a-brac. Yet even this once venerable tradition is not without its intriguing connections to Arneson's native iconoclasm. The refined court figurines made in Europe in the eighteenth century for the bourgeoisie did on occasion include sly mimicry of the manners and dress of the aristocracy. The bizarre self-portraits of the Austrian baroque sculptor F. X. Messerschmidt are, however, a more obvious antecedent to some of Arneson's highly unconventional portraits.

Arneson's sculpture, paintings and drawings have made a major and continuing contribution to the revitalization of figurative art. In particular, Arneson has rediscovered the expressive potential of portraiture. As was his frequent subject Jackson Pollock, Arneson is an assertively "American" artist, anxious to establish his distance from Eurocentric allegiances and justifiably proud of his West Coast point of view. While he has been known to assume a refreshingly breezy, anti-intellectual affect, this belies his strong erudition. He is a sophisticated, well-informed artist whose spirited, irreverent, and thoughtful innovations have had a widespread influence on American art.
Arneson was born in Benecia, California, in 1930. He received a B. A. from the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1954. He initially studied ceramics in order to teach it in high schools and junior colleges. He has taught art and design at the University of California at Davis since 1962. There he established one of the leading ceramics departments in the country. His colleagues in the art department have included Wayne Thiebaud, Roy deForest, William Wiley, Roland Petersen and Manuel Neri. He received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1971 and 1978 and an honorary degree from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1985. He has lived and worked in Benecia since 1975.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of Contemporary Art

PLEASE NOTE: Robert Arneson will give an informal MATRIX lecture at 2 p.m. on Sunday, April 29, 1990, in The Hartford Courant Room. A reception in his honor will follow the talk. This event, part of the Contemporary Artists Lecture Series, is free with museum admission.

Works in MATRIX:

Jackson, 1982, oil, pastel, collage on paper, 52" x 35". Courtesy of Frumkin Adams Gallery, New York City.
J. P. 4-83, 1983, oil and acrylic on paper, 41 1/2" x 30". Courtesy of Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, Los Angeles, California.
Jackson Pollock, 1983, glazed ceramic, 23 x 13 x 8". Collection of Paul and Stacy Polydoros, Des Moines, Iowa
Pollock #4 1983, glazed ceramic, 15" x 11" 7 1/2". Courtesy of Frumkin Adams Gallery, New York City.
Jasckson's Crash, 1987, glazed ceramic, 48" x 100" x 12". Courtesy of Frumkin Adams Gallery, New York City.
Jackson Pollock, 1983
Photo: Courtesy of Frumkin Adams Gallery
New York City


Born to Raise Hell, 1987, glazed ceramic on redwood base, 73" x 39" x 27". Courtesy of Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, Los Angeles, California.

Big Head of Jackson, 1987, bronze, 27 1/2" x 27 1/2" x 32". Lent by Robert Arneson and Sandra Shannonhouse, Benecia, California.

Saga of Jackson Pollock – Bookends, 1988, bronze, 9 1/4" x 8 1/2" x 4 1/2" each. Lent by Robert Arneson and Sandra Shannonhouse, Benecia, California.
Selected One-Person Exhibitions:

Oakland Art Museum, Oakland, CA '60; Hansen Fuller Gallery, San Francisco, CA '68,'69,'70,'71,'72,'73,
'74,'75,'76,'77 / Hansen Fuller Goldeen Gallery '80 / Fuller Goldeen Gallery '82,'84,'85 / Fuller Gross Gallery
'86,'88; Candy Store Gallery, Folsom, CA '69,'70,'71
'72,'74,'75; Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York City
'75,'77,'79,'81,'83,'84,'87 / Frumkin Adams Gallery '90;
Robert Arneson Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL '74 (also to San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA);
Robert Arneson: A Retrospective Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA (also to Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture
Garden, Washington, DC and Portland Art Museum, Portland, OR); Robert Arneson: Portrait Sculptures The
Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH '87; J. P.
Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA '88.

Selected Group Exhibitions:

Museum of Contemporary Crafts, NYC New Ceramic Forms
'65; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA Arts of San
Francisco '67; University Art Museum, University of
California at Berkeley Funk '67; Museum of Modern Art,
NYC Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage '68 (also to Los
Angeles County Museum of Art and The Art Institute of
Chicago); National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian
Institution, Washington, DC Objects U.S.A.- The Johnson
Collection of Contemporary Crafts '69 (travelled
extensively); Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC 1970
Annual Exhibition: Contemporary American Sculpture;
Museum of Contemporary Crafts, NYC Clayworks: 20
Americans '71; Whitney Museum of American Art Clay '74;
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Painting and Sculpture
in California: The Modern Era '76 (also to National
Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution); The
Everson Museum of American Art, Syracuse, NY A Century
of Ceramics in the United States, 1878-1978 '79 (also to
Renwick Gallery of the National Collection of Fine Arts,
Smithsonian Institution); Whitney Museum of American Art
1979 Biennial Exhibition; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam,
The Netherlands West Coast Ceramics '79; Whitney Museum
of American Art Ceramic Sculpture: Six Artists '81;
Milwaukee Art Center, WI Controversial Public Art '83; The Art Museum Association of America Disarming Images: Art for a Nuclear Disarmament '84-'86 (travelled extensively).

Selected Bibliography about Robert Arneson:


Thompson, Walter, "Robert Arneson at Frumkin," Art in America vol. 76 no. 2 (February '88), p. 149.


© Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut