Big Idea: The Maquettes of Robert Arneson

by Signe Mayfield

"The grace of spontaneity, a new kind of attention to process and becoming, innocence at the beginning of things -- reason after reason can be thought of to account for our delight in the preliminary. We might note that once Darwin and the atomic theory shaped our ideas, the encompassing idea of evolution changed the way we think about anything. The great question of our times is, 'How did it come to be!'"[1] Guy Davenport

Robert Arneson created over 100 maquettes[2] in terra cotta and glazed ceramics between 1964 and 1992, which were kept in the privacy of his studio. *Big Idea: The Maquettes of Robert Arneson* is the first exhibition to present the artist's own collection of his three-dimensional sketches. They are peppered with his great wit and, when seen together, they form a tangible, intimate journal that chronicles concepts for monumental works, ideas-on-hold, thematic shifts, visual dialogue with imaginative models of the past, and signposts of a life. As ideas in the round, his maquettes were crucial in anticipating problems and setting proportions in large-scale works.

Arneson created his maquettes in tandem with sketches and studies, as preliminary concepts for large-scale sculptures that are, in Susan Hiller's definition of an art object, "events extended over time."[3] As Ivan Gaskell wrote of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sketches in clay, Arneson's maquettes have a dual life, "One concerns its place in the process of the project of which it is a part; the other concerns its independent existence as an object in its own right. Both intersect at the extended moment of making."[4] While his maquettes exist as part of a whole imaginative process, they have a primacy and intimate appeal of their own.

An understanding of Arneson's intentions, including his use of the maquette, benefits from a review of his early career. Drawing was his great childhood interest. Years later, when he spoke of the allure of ceramics, he connected it to drawing in three dimensions, a process through which he could add and subtract, and leave his unique fingerprint for posterity. As a young boy he copied the antic sequences in the comics. To Arneson, "A good continuous story which kept you involved,"[5] was as important as graphic expression. His early memories reveal a surprising visual thinking needed to translate scale from maquette to sculpture:

"[In grammar school] you see yourself as a hero in various forms. I used to draw comic books and in [those drawings] I'm sure I was projecting myself in various heroic characterizations . . . I can recall being fifteen years old and actually cutting out a strip that [was] rendered and relaying it myself. In reading the history of these guys I could figure out the original scale to which they drew. I'd lay it out, pencil it in and develop my India ink technique . . . I developed my own fountain pen ... to get a split line."[6]

By age 17, he had serious aspirations to be a professional cartoonist. Moreover, in high school and in junior college, his cartoons were published in the *Benicia Herald*. In 1951, he enrolled in a commercial art program at the California College of Arts and Crafts [CCAC], later graduating with a degree in art education.

He earned a D- in his only preparation for ceramics, a one-unit junior college course. Consequently, when he was hired to teach art, including ceramics, at Mcnlo-Atherton High School on the San Francisco Peninsula, he launched into another form of self-education, throwing pots and experimenting with projects conceived by F. Carleton Ball in *Ceramics Monthly*. Without the "critical eye" of a hovering instructor, he was free to explore, "ceramics in all the innocence of a hobby, with no art, absolutely no art involved."[7] In 1955 Arneson married his first wife Jeannette Jensen. His first son, one of four, was born one year later. By his second year in teaching, he had "triumphed over his initial dislike of clay.
In 1957-58 Arneson studied in the MFA program at Mills College in Oakland, CA. Anthony Prieto, who had trained at Alfred University and oversaw the program, expected students to follow a traditional regimen so Arneson began by "doing classic bottles, cups -- the atmosphere forced you into working in a discipline. The Chinese have a way of saying that:'Bound child grow tall.'"[9]

During Arneson's second year of teaching after graduation in 1959, the charismatic Peter Voulkos became head of the ceramics department at the University of California at Berkeley. His sculptures were a radical blend of Abstract Expressionism and traditional pottery influenced by Japanese ceramics. They combined stacked thrown pots with cantilevered, hand built forms. Arneson taught in a nearby high school and, although considered too conservative to work in the Berkeley "pot shop", he observed first hand how Voulkos challenged the preciousness of pottery by using the wheel to throw elements of larger works. Arneson soon increased his scale in sculptures that were protean, organic, and charged with gitty expressionism. Working directly with clay, he used the Voulkos building system, "a columnar structure, like a backbone, on which one then could hang or suspend slab elements. That pretty well revolutionized ceramic sculpture. One could actually construct very large forms very quickly. And that show I had at the Oakland Art Museum in 1960, I did a number of works that were monolithic in size. They were about forty inches in height, and they were rock-like slab forms constructed in a Voulkos manner."[10]

Arneson spent the next two years teaching design and craft at Mills. While demonstrating how-to-throw-a-pot in 1961 at the California State Fair in Sacramento, he offhandedly topped a traditionally thrown bottle with a bottle cap and added the text "No Deposit, No Return." Its Pop-like implications augured future directions and one year later, the expressionistic forms in his exhibition at the M.H. De Young Museum in San Francisco would reveal a true break from functional pottery.

In 1962, he became Assistant Professor of Art and Design at the University of California at Davis and initiated the ceramics department. He thought it was, "like the Medicis deciding that they were going to sponsor me as an artist."[11] He used TB9 -- the building where he taught ceramics initially under the aegis of the Home Economics Department -- as a studio until his retirement. In the Davis foundry he made small bronzes from wax models, which often incorporated burnable objects, as in the strung out bra I dreamed I was Giacometti, 1964. Small, ceramic trophies followed that were tongue-in-cheek celebrations of parts of his body, laced with firebrand humor, physicality, and blatant sexual reference.

The catalyst for his conceptual shift was the invitation to exhibit in the 1963 exhibition California Sculpture on the rooftop garden of Kaiser Hospital in Oakland by Curator Paul Mills, Oakland Museum, and John Coplans, editor of Artforum. Fearful that his work would appear secondary next to his mentor Voulkos and bristling from experiences at Mills where a ceramicist was not considered an artist, he created an original work. Reflecting on the "ultimate ceramics in Western civilization," while sitting on a TB9 toilet, he realized that, "This little pot has no heritage. You can't reflect on art in any way on this thing. And it is 100% ceramic, man."[12] He made Funk John, complete with ceramic turds and scatological notations, in a direct Voulkos manner, "using a lot of organic pinch and pushing with the clay, piercing the clay and letting my fingers leave a trail across the clay wherever they meandered. This produced a presence of the artist, both in the toilet bowl and in the tank. I had finally made a Bob Arneson."[13] Funk John, his first controversial work, was removed from the exhibition by order of a Kaiser executive. Arneson -- flush from the role of artist provocateur and the watershed represented in this work -- was annoyed and pleased.

The work signaled a preoccupation with, and passion for the ideas that can be seen in his maquettes, 1964 - 1992. In the transgressively humorous Model for 'John', 1964, content overruns the form. Its clumping turds crawling up to shape the John, its male member handle, and its interior bowl are the worst nightmare of any backwater gas station. But curiously, like his other remaining maquettes, it is quite endearing in its small scale as well as being succinct as a big idea. In contrast to Marcel Duchamp's deadpan urinal from 1917, Fountain -- the seminal Dada piece that transformed a found object into art -- or Claes Oldenberg's flaccidly soft toilets, Arneson's "Johns" have a live, bodily substance, an anthropomorphic presence. Furthermore, as Jonathan Fineberg has observed, "Arneson aimed a biting satire at the abstract expressionist aspiration of letting everything within the artist spill out freely in the work."[14]

With its baked bone-white and bleak staining, Model for 'Sink with Mirror', 1965, acts as a memory device for Sink, 1966, for which there is no existing maquette.[15] Arneson changed the sink's interior inscription from "all new Stain" in a sketchbook entry to "hard to get out stain" in the sculpture. The simple revision, using language as a formal resource, made a banal reference to the Holocaust. In the process, it changed Sink into a statement about the way we objectify unconvincable, human horror. Arneson showed slides of the work, along with his more overt Toaster, 1965, to beginning students to illuminate potentials of the medium. With its burnt fingers crawling out of the appliance's interior, Toaster generally elicits laughter, until we notice the Swastika near the dial, which is, "in shockingly bad taste. Yet that startling
Arneson's works of the 1960s made wry comments on the secondary place of ceramics in the hierarchies of the art world. By playing with the foremost concern in painting -- the creation of depth -- in an "ultimate ceramic," he professed the restoration of the lost dignity of ceramics as an ancient art. Untitled (Sinking Toilet), 1966, glistens like an Asian celadon and plays with two-dimensional illusion in a three-dimensional space. The wide optical angle of its vitreous seat creates a forced perspective. In the relief Model for 'Tile Puddle', 1973, the artist struggles out of a tiled picture plane. Its nutrient source was The Gate of Ishtar, whose figures emerge from its Neo-Babylonian glazed brick. Arneson cited the ancient Near East sculpture as an example of a monumental work created from small units in his slide presentations for students at Davis.

In 1966, he began an eight year series on his, "ticky-tacky house," on the corner of "L" and Alice Street in Davis, California. To Arneson, "Alice was terrific, Alice in Wonderland," and he endowed her with a live persona in his Work. He rendered three-dimensional sketches on site, like a plein air painter, and later glazed them in his studio. The subject of Clay Sketch of Alice Street, 1966-67, may be banal -- a diorama of a middle-American domain -- but its painterly rendering, including a surprising abstraction in the backdrop, has remarkable chromatic variation in its low fire glazes on white earthenware. The clay sketch was one of three maquettes leading to an 8 x 8 foot replica of "Alice": Arneson fired the work in sixty pieces and became the first ceramic sculptor to utilize such a modular system since Della Robbia in 15th century Italy.

During a fellowship in New York, he devoted an entire year to painting, including a life-scale "Alice" that was sixty-five feet long on seven panels. When Arneson's Typewriter, 1965, with its nail-polished fingers as keys, was featured in Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage at the Museum of Modern Art, he saw Alberto Giacometti's The Palace at 4 a.m., 1932-33, in the collection. He later made Model of 'The Palace at 9 a.m.', 1974, in preparation for a piece to replace his "Big Alice" in the San Francisco venue of his 1974 retrospective exhibition, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Arneson's ironic parodying of Giacometti's title is a critique in difference beyond time zone. In Giacometti's piece, a delicate scaffolding with attenuated, Surrealist symbols, is elegant and foreboding. But Arneson's final work -- installed as a looming architectural model with compressed space, enlarged foreground forms, and sunny roof -- is far more menacing in its clotted, airless, and generic forms.

A sketch in his first notebook shows "Alice" inscribed in a squat object, which is a dead weight on Arneson's head. It reveals the influence of the comics with the object's strong resemblance to a deflated, petrified, cartoon balloon for text. Other images on the sheet depict boulders balancing on Arneson's head and anticipate motifs, such as bricks balanced precariously on his head -- which led to the exquisite, small bronze maquette Fifteen Heads Balancing in 1991. Above the notebook sheet are titles, "Man with Heavy Burden" and "Man with H. Load on his mind." Although the sketch is undated, we can say that in the eight years between Clay Sketch of Alice Street and Model of 'The Palace at 9 a.m.', the house on Alice Street had suffered a fire, Arneson had divorced and gained custody of his four sons, moved back to Benicia, and married sculptor Sandra Shannonhouse.

The poetic, cast shadows in Clay Sketch of Alice Street have a true painterly dimension. It is interesting to note that Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler first published Picasso's ceramics in 1957 as significant works for their achievement in the long-pursued connection between painting and sculpture. Picasso relished making ceramics appear flat through his strokes of glaze, while Voulkos, under his influence, spoke of violating the form with color. In the early 1970s, Arneson was developing a contemporary, painterly illusion through glazes integral to the form that expanded the use of local color in sculpture. The dazzling maquettes in his water series reveal his fascination with the way glazes transform clay into a wet surface. Glazes are basically silica with colorants that form a glass during the firing of the kiln. Their true color is difficult to ascertain when applied in dry or in liquid form, while their flow over form and the firing process can both be chance operations. He occasionally mined students' new formulas in his experimental glaze courses at Davis for his own work. As sculptor Scott Donahue has observed, Arneson created a "kind of ferment at TB9 for brewing new stuff."

Arneson perfected such luminescence in his glazes in the water series that The Model for 'Stream-A-Head', 1974, is its own reflecting pool for its sculpted self-portrait. The idea of its pooled transparencies came from ceramic ashtrays of the 1960s made from 'frits', a dried silica that forms a runny or melted, clear glass. The series reached an apogee in Current Event, 1973 (Collection of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam). Two hundred modular pieces fit seamlessly together,
There are extraordinary preparatory sketches but no maquettes for Arneson's series of portrait busts of artist friends and "Casualty in the Art Realm," the importance of the artist being completely immersed in his work. Another body print seen in an artist's palette in Arneson's student's work pushed him face forward into the clay in the full-scale piece, creating a physical analog for the evolved into Diameter of a Plate (Classical Measure #1).

In Arneson's free-wheeling process ideas flowed in all directions. The motif in the self-portrait plate Memorial for Bob, 1971 (Collection of the Hirschhorn Sculpture Garden and Museum, Smithsonian Institution), and to the brick ziggurat brick kiln as the cornerstone of all sculpture, which led to a portrait of the artist firing himself in the extraordinary center column is lost in favor of the aesthetic impact of scale. On the back of was significant in maintaining a correct height relationship of his sculpture to the viewer. In the maquette, one foot proportion. Although Arneson has said it was, "A portrait of the artist exhibiting himself,"[20] this move to the column motif was significant in maintaining a correct height relationship of his sculpture to the viewer. In the maquette, one foot protrudes beneath the base, while in Classical Exposure, 1972, two feet project out beneath its coiled tori, transforming ornament to garment. Changes in the final work added greater structural strength. But the expressiveness of the off-centered column is lost in favor of the aesthetic impact of scale. On the back of Classical Exposure, Arneson placed a brick kiln as the cornerstone of all sculpture, which led to a portrait of the artist firing himself in the extraordinary Kiln Man, 1971 (Collection of the Hirschhorn Sculpture Garden and Museum, Smithsonian Institution), and to the brick ziggurat Memorial for Bob, 1972, a possible maquette.

In Arneson's free-wheeling process ideas flowed in all directions. The motif in the self-portrait plate Describing the Diameter of a Plate (Classical Measure #1), 1973, mocking Leonardo da Vinci's notion of man as the perfect measure, evolved into Model of 'Impression of the Artist as an Incorporeal Witness to the Center of the Universe', 1979. When Arneson's students pushed him face forward into the clay in the full-scale piece, it created a physical analog for the importance of the artist being completely immersed in his work. Another body print seen in an artist's palette in Model for 'Casualty in the Art Realm,' 1979, humorously addressed the occupational hazards in using art materials. The diagnosis of his cancer in 1975 increased concerns of health issues.

Arneson's unglazed terra cotta suggests the influence of Haniwa and Etruscan sculptures. In a series of self-portraits from the early 1970s, expressive content derives from "the artist's own physicality treated like clay."[20] The tiny, gestural Model for 'Self-Made Man', 1973, is a consummate example with its hand forming Arneson from shapeless clay. Model for 'Funny Vase', 1974, re-invents the hand-built face cups of Gauguin in Arneson's likeness, while Model for 'Blown', 1976, exemplifies Arneson's notion of the "drawing-ness" of clay and, in its fresh contingency, the lightness of being. In the spontaneous Model for 'Huddle', 1973, flesh sprouts a strange crown of primitive heads, which are articulated as contrary, small, sentinel selves, arguing over an Arneson in the form of a penis in the full-scale work.

His choice of the brick to represent the legacy of ceramics is another form of self-defense and critique. To him, the brick was the foundation of Western civilization happily bereft of any art. As the longest standing motif in his work, it varied from the preciously painted Painted Brick, 1976, a possible maquette, to plain bricks with hidden natural elements -- a comeuppance to Carl Andre's site-specific piece of 137 bricks purporting to separate matter from depiction. When Arneson saw an intriguing rubble of bricks, he made the historic tableaux, Model for 'Fragment of Western Civilization', 1972. With its sculptural fragments that include Arneson's face, like a "shattered visage," the final sculpture has frequently been connected to Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, Ozymandias, and its invocation "Look on my works, ye Mighty and despair!" Fragment of Western Civilization, 1972 (Collection of the Australian National Gallery in Canberra), is true to the maquette's forms and measures 41 x 120 x 120". It anticipates installations of the next decade and bears bricks with Arneson's imprint.

Model for 'Classical Exposure', 1972, is a deliciously irreverent bust of the artist as a Roman dignitary on a herm, an ornament in classical Greek architecture. He chomps a cigar and a penis hangs on its supporting column, true to human proportion. Although Arneson has said it was, "A portrait of the artist exhibiting himself,"[21] this move to the column motif was significant in maintaining a correct height relationship of his sculpture to the viewer. In the maquette, one foot protrudes beneath the base, while in Classical Exposure, 1972, two feet project out beneath its coiled tori, transforming ornament to garment. Changes in the final work added greater structural strength. But the expressiveness of the off-centered column is lost in favor of the aesthetic impact of scale. On the back of Classical Exposure, Arneson placed a brick kiln as the cornerstone of all sculpture, which led to a portrait of the artist firing himself in the extraordinary Kiln Man, 1971 (Collection of the Hirschhorn Sculpture Garden and Museum, Smithsonian Institution), and to the brick ziggurat Memorial for Bob, 1972, a possible maquette.

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He pursued his investigation of figures in the art world through visual dialogues with their work. Arneson's sculptures go beyond pastiche because he internalized his mentors' paintings within the text of his own life and sculpture. In *Model for 'George and Mona,'* 1976, George Washington, in high collar, has Arneson-like facial proportions and hair. He is shouldered next to Mona Lisa "like a version of Grant Wood's American Gothic." Arneson changed their relationship and added laborious, technical refinements in *George and Mona in the Baths of Coloma,* 1976 (Collection of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam). Mona, smiling with her "I am the most wanted," look, is demurely stripped in the waters of the gold country in Coloma, CA. Despite her scale, she is rendered in china paint usually reserved for small, precious figurines. George is glazed in green, bared, and beautifully engraved, like a dollar bill.

*Pablo Ruiz with Itch,* 1980 (Collection of the Nelson Atkins Museum in Kansas City), makes a broadly humorous reference to one of art history's darlings, Pablo Picasso's seminal painting *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon* by linking its expressive distortion to a contagious itch from Picasso's prostitute models. The drawing *Study for Pablo Ruiz with Itch* (Collection of the Nelson Atkins Museum), is fascinating as a transparent working-out of sources, including Picasso's youthful, realist self-portrait, his proto-Cubist rendition, different treatments for columns, and a Polaroid of Arneson scratching his back. Arneson completed another study on paper on George Grant's hand and his extended back reach before making the expressive, muscular back scratch in *Model for 'Pablo Ruiz with Itch,'* 1980. The shrimp pink of the maquette's Picasso blanched in the final bust that was made in a new, architectural high fire clay with which Arneson could further increase scale.

In a poignant contemplation on mortality, *Model for 'Philip Gaston,'* 1980, displays the painter's clubby shoes upside down, like those in the stirrup of a deceased rodeo cowboy. *Model for 'a Likeness of Francis B,'* 1981, wittily condenses Bacon's foreshortened, windowless rooms into a base detail. A shadow dissects his face, mirroring the distorted, enraged facial expressions in Bacon's paintings. It obscures a grotesque and animalized, grimacing figure at the back of the sculpture. The British painter's dominant orange is flecked on the face in *Model for 'a Likeness of Francis B,'* as it is for *Model for Francis Bacon,* 1981 -- an extraordinary piece never made in large scale. Judiciously spattered color reflects a change of approach for Arneson. When he saw color separations from a single drawing in multiple printing plates for lithographs at Landfall Press, he came to understand how representational color might expressively extend outside contour lines. Color soon broke free as a primary pictorial element in his drawings, followed, as Sandra Shannonhouse has observed, in the glazes that later led to his 1990s Jackson Pollock series.

In 1981, Scott Donahue constructed a large head mold to facilitate direct modeling of clay from a generic matrix, and to save time for further creativity of elaboration. Because of this advance, subsequent sculptures did not have preliminary three-dimensional sketches, but Arneson did turn to maquettes for complex concepts or unique expressions, as in the pancake-thin *Model for 'Flat Face,'* 1981, a visual pun on flat as shape and as a spiritless, forlorn Arneson. Snapshots of Arneson pressing his face against glass provided other preliminary ideas, as the maquette further addressed the sculptor's "joke" of confronting the picture plane that exists only for the painter. It is an imaginary plane, or a conceptual dilemma, whereby the painter creates three-dimensional illusion. As Dennis Adrian has observed, "A good deal of Arneson's work is funny as well as seriously polymodal. . . As any scholar of Joyce or translator of Japanese poetry will wearyly insist, the primary function of any kind of pun is the expansion of meaning, within a discrete form, into at least simultaneous modes of thought."

In *Squint: study for lithograph,* 1981, and in two maquettes, a cast shadow appears as a flat painting on Arneson's neck. In the grip of this illusion, the maquettes experiment with different column treatments, and diagrammatic angles to reference the word "squint" as an external, oblique angle in architecture. Proportion changes from the more delicate maquettes into a monumental, broader-faced Arneson in *Squint,* 1981. He squints, as the viewer squints through its oblique angles to view its glazed interior and dazzling reflections from colored chunks of mirror sprinkled randomly. To Scott Donahue, its voyeuristic aspect is a reference to Duchamp's final statement, *Étant Donné,* 1946-66 (Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art), that Jasper Johns once called the strangest work in any art museum. Duchamp's tableau has two peepholes in a large wooden door surrounded with an arch of bricks. Peeking in, the viewer struggles to see a strange nude with her illuminating glass lamp. In the background a luminous waterfall shimmers, backlit by a flickering light painted on glass.

Only a few adventurous collectors commissioned portraits and they, too, surpass simple acts of portrayal. In 1986, the year Arneson's and Shannonhouse's daughter Tenaya was born, he made the sharply playful *Model for 'Byron Meyer in
Given Arneson's irreverent humor, the San Francisco Art Commission's invitation to submit a proposal for a piece commemorating the slain mayor, George Moscone, was surprising. On November 17, 1978, Dan White, who lost his bid for reelection as San Francisco Supervisor to the openly gay politician Harvey Milk, had a heated argument with and shot Mayor George Moscone four times. He reloaded his Smith and Wesson revolver, went down the hall to the office of his former colleague Milk, and shot him five times. White's lawyers pleaded a "twinkie" defense, arguing that a hypoglycemic reaction to junk food caused temporary insanity. The jury convicted White of voluntary manslaughter for the deaths of Moscone and Milk instead of first-degree murder. Public outrage ensued, initiating the "White Night" riot at City Hall.

Mayor Diane Feinstein invited Arneson to submit a proposal for the commemorative work for the new Moscone Convention Center in a letter dated March 6, 1981, "We request that you prepare a sketch (maquette or model if appropriate) sufficiently detailed so that a judgment can be made." In his notebook, a "proposed sculpture for the George R. Moscone Convention Center" is written above a gestural, smiling Moscone on a pedestal with "loaf-French bread." Since neither a presentation model, nor final drawing, was requested, he rendered a large sketch dated April 23, 1981, with a concept for a glazed Moscone on a pedestal and site-specific diagrams. In the proposal, Study for Portrait of George, 1981 (Collection of the San Francisco Arts Commission), Moscone's head looms disproportionately larger on its unadorned pedestal than in the previous notebook sketch.

When Arneson was awarded the commission for the sculpture, he called the widow, Gina Moscone, and asked her for some of her husband's favorite phrases in order to embellish the pedestal with text. Jeremy Stone further researched biographical details. Arneson rendered Model for Portrait of George, 1981, with increased verve and the inscriptions, "George, Hastings Law School, Twinkies, and Gay." Flat risers beneath three cylindrical base forms in the proposal increase overall height so that visitors experience the first view on site close to body level. Portrait of George, 1981, personifies the impenetrable political mask, while its inscriptions point to the mayor's humanity and rivet events of his demise for future generations to question. Thomas Albright rightly observed that details like the print of a plastic gun, labeled Smith and Wesson are, "a disconcerting reminder of the way unalterable acts of real-life horror can at any moment rip through the bland, polyester fabric that envelops so much of contemporary life, public and private."

When Gina Moscone approved the sculpture in the studio, the pedestal was covered. Mrs. Moscone was very pleased with Arneson's likeness of the Mayor. Later, the only commissioner to attend a preview of the sculpture circulated photographs of its base to other commissioners. Given permission to install the piece, Arneson instructed George Grant to epoxy the bust to its base. When Arneson learned that the widow was slated to attend the opening reception, he warned her about the inscriptions. She requested that he drape the pedestal. Arneson agreed, although he correctly anticipated that it would generate an intense, overriding curiosity. It built to a fever pitch so Feinstein unveiled the piece for city officials in the presence of photographers. The local and national press coverage fueled a huge controversy. The artist, who thought "an Arneson" was wanted, with all that it implied, did not anticipate the invective against him, or the depth of scandal. On December 4th, Feinstein requested that he remove the base. When Arneson did not yield to the request, she made public her letter to the commissioners two days later, "The pedestal in its present form simply is not appropriate as the hallmark of a great center that monthly will attract thousands of persons from throughout the nation and, indeed, the world. On memorials to Lincoln or the Kennedys or Martin Luther King or other fallen leaders it has never been expected or thought necessary to make reference to their killers." With two of its appointed commissioners absent during a final vote, the sculpture was rejected. Arneson returned the commission fee of $37,000 and took possession of the sculpture that, ironically, drew crowds when it was included in the San Francisco venue of the pivotal exhibition on the clay movement, Ceramic Sculpture. Six Artists.

Arneson went to New York for the opening of this exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. His exhibitions at Frumkin Adams Gallery in New York had garnered positive reviews in the New York Times by critic Hilton Kramer in 1977, as well as in 1975 with the kudos, "unashamedly amusing and brilliant," and, a "stunning mastery of characterization." On December 20, 1981, Kramer aimed a scathingly hostile review at Arneson's work at the Whitney deploring "the spiritual impoverishment," of the cultural life in California. He said Arneson had a "spirit best defined as defiant provincialism," and "the mark of a mind too easily pleased with its own jokes." Although he praised Arneson's technical talents, Kramer concluded, "We are left, in short, with some dark thoughts about the fate of high art in the California sun."

Arneson was an artist who never fully gave the game away and he knew that the true role of his humor was to expose human fallacies, including his own. In a notebook entry, he quoted Aristophanes (448 BC-380); "Comedy requires a greater degree of objectivity than does serious drama, for it depends upon the ability to see deviations from norms as
Arneson countered Kramer’s biased critique with a marvelous send-up, a self-portrait as merry prankster with exposed navel. Unlike other satirical responses to topical events in the history of art, California Artist, 1982 (Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Art), remains highly resonant, an icon of the vitality and originality of West Coast art. The extraordinary drawing, California Artist, 1982, preceded Model for ‘California Artist,’ 1982, which is the epitome of crusty defiance. In his notebook sketches Arneson considered a base shaped like a California map with “faults”, but later opted for a simple pedestal to highlight its exposed bricks and marijuana. Study for California Artist, 1982 (Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Art), outlined the mechanics of its jean jacket on top of the portrait and instructed George Grant to cut the sunglasses lenses for a view into the artist's hollow head that was glazed Catalina blue inside. Arneson changed the penis on the side of the maquette to a delicate inscription on the center pedestal, à la Classical Exposure, in California Artist. In bronze variants of the sculpture, the artist gilded his self-portrait and widened and varied its bases.

According to Shannonhouse, a trade with the vet was the genesis for an appealing kennel of expressive maquettes in the series "self-portrait as an old dog." Modeled after his dog Ace, they are slumped and baleful as if in reprimand for Arneson's multitudinous transgressions against convention. In the drawing Portrait of the Artist as an Old Dog, 1981, Arneson added his "art turd" emblems, and experimented with different profiles in two, despondent-looking dogs. In later large-scale ceramic pieces, he glazed the art turds in Mondrian-like, primary colors. The bronze Bawee Wowee, 1982, has a greater complexity of expression that is baleful, impudent, self-assured, and full of dogged intent.

In the early 1980s, after all the controversies and criticism, his long-standing bouts with cancer, and an increasing concern far potential nuclear holocaust, Arneson made an abrupt change to more generalized images of the human condition and more covert satire. When a news report on KPFA, a radio station in Berkeley, announced the September 16, 1982 atrocities and massacre of 2000 unarmed Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut, the artist came into his studio with a baseball bat, and bludgeoned a head from the large ceramic mold. Fired clay was an exceedingly appropriate material for his nuclear series in which he both deplored and deployed the aesthetics of violence. In Model for ‘Ground Zero’, 1983, glazed like leached earth, and Ground Zero, 1984 (Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art), desiccated heads are centered on a cross, the symbol of Christian hope, and the ironic target for detonation of a nuclear weapon. Model for ‘Minuteman’, 1983, with its charred cross, evokes hairless, tortured refugees from concentration camps, World War 11 graves marked with soldier's helmets, and nuclear missiles. An obsidian-black blood with lurid, red roots flows under its deformed head that is wounded with the brand of a target. Arneson rejected the blazing yellow fire for the base seen in the source snapshot in the study on paper. In its place, he inserted a missile into the cross, as seen in the bronze Minuteman, 1983 (Rene & Veronica di Rosa Foundation), to create a complex metaphor of target and perpetrator.

There are four preliminary maquettes for Sarcophagus, 1984-85 (Collection of the Shiragaraki Museum, Shiga Perfecture, Japan). The generals who sit in power over a cadaver, as if holding court over human annihilation, are some of Arneson’s most vehemently distorted caricatures. While the larger maquettes work out the proportions and scale of the metal coffin for Sarcophagus, it is the first, miniature maquette that solicits and concentrates the greatest emotional response. Among other bitter caricatures in the series is Model for ‘General Nuke’, 1984, with its Pinocchio length, phallic missile nose. General Nuke, 1985 (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution), is more horrific with its clearer depiction and the scale of its charred black bodies. Both maquettes and sculptures in the series have a physicality and surface allure that is subversive. Gut recognition of their resonant symbols enter consciousness where no political rhetoric may pass.

Among Arneson's most moving pieces are his maquettes that address the face of illness. Swallowed-up pain is palpable in Untitled Model, 1986, with its gray, pocked skin and inhuman markings that resemble a forensic excavation. Model for ‘Chemo 2’, 1992, is wrenching in its raw emotion and contorted gesture. In the maquette and in Chamo I and Chemo 2 (Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), the physical trail of torn, pulled, and pinched forms in clay function as a psychological portrait of the battering Arneson endured for years and years. In Chemo 1 and Chemo 2, 1992, the repulsion of the color in its glazes is a compelling representation of irradiated decay in process. Arneson further scarred its surfaces with a veritable outpouring of text listing names and side effects of drugs more horrific than the disease.

The outward angst of Jackson Pollock's face was the focus of Arneson's next inquiry. He first investigated likeness -- as seen in Model for ‘Head of Jackson’, 1987, and Model for ‘Dead Pollock’, 1988. He then progressed to the narrative of the painter's life and investigated Pollock's paintings. There are 80 pieces in homage to the Abstract Expressionist that were created over a ten-year period. Arneson's remarkable notebook sketch Jackson's shoes 9-18-82, preceded the endearing Model for 'Boots with Echo,’ 1987. The Hans Namuth photograph of Pollock's splattered boots in the studio is seen as a source in Study for Boots of JP, 1987. Arneson painted a reproduction of Echo: No. 25, 1951 (Collection of the Museum
Arneson's *Model for 'The Last of the Buffalo Hunters*', 1988, reinterprets in three dimensions an image from Pollock's painting, *The She-Wolf*, 1943 (Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, NY). Ellen Landau identified Pollock's source in an Etruscan sculpture of Lupa, the she-wolf who suckled the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus.[29] On the rump of the maquette, Pollock's face relates to Landau's identification of the cloudy form in the painting as a tusked mammoth, reminiscent of the bison in prehistoric cave paintings. Landau further cited Picasso's influence in which, "un-heard of creatures protrude themselves."[30] Arneson's "buffalo hunters" refers to the self-generated myth of Pollock as the cowboy from Cody, the Wyoming town founded by Buffalo Bill, as well as to Pollock's search for archetypal symbols relating to those in magical cave paintings done during hunting rituals. Landau connects the arrow in *The She-Wolf* to Jung's designation for the libido, while Arneson, with his comic roots, aims it directly at Pollock in the maquette. Arneson's maquette has a surface character similar to that of *The She-Wolf* in which Pollock added plaster and paint to approximate Paleolithic cave paintings.[31] The maquette's inscribed pedestal further suggests Pollock's black paintings.

Arneson's *Guardians of the Secret 11*, 1989-90, his most conceptually complex work, measuring 7 x 10 x 2 feet, is based on Pollock's *Guardians of the Secret*, 1943 (Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art). His study of Jackson Pollock included excerpted notebooks of the painter's experience with Jungian analysis. By identifying the figures in written statements, Arneson reinterpreted aspects of Pollock's life and themes that related to his own life. A small head of Arneson is included on the back of *Guardians of the Secret II*, wedged between a canvas with Pollock's writings and a small cross stamped with the date July, 1990, similar to that of *Model for 'Minuteman'*. Arneson's first maquette for *Guardians of the Secret II* animated some of Pollock's figurative references. The maquette was later fixed to the top of a Pollock mask during one of Arneson's "glue days" when he experimented with assembling random bits around the studio for further ideas. The larger *Model for 'Guardians of the Secret 11',* 1988, made more extensive allusion to Pollock's brush strokes in three dimensions, and, in the process, revealed Pollock's debt to Picasso. Arneson added, as well, the she-wolf beneath the two totemic figures separated by a shelf supporting "personages of deliverance."

Although Arneson made additional maquettes, it is in his studies on paper that he tackled his own iconographic meaning, as well as references to Pollock's central panel with its pure abstraction, the key to the painting's secret. Arneson developed personal hieroglyphics on a canvas for the panel in the final sculpture and simplified a fish in Pollock's work to represent the mythic quest of both painters. The fish is a reference to the cryptic painting that Melville's character Ishmael sees before joining the quest for the great white whale in *Moby Dick*. Arneson reveals the "secret" on the back of the panel: Pollock is in his painting. Inside a sarcophagus are three objects: Pollock's green boots, identifying his Western origins; a phallus on an Arneson-like trophy, symbolizing the power of creation and Pollock as American hero; and Pollock's head, reticulated like his drip paintings, symbolizing eternal peace. The head was the model for Arneson's bronze *Dead Pollock*, 1988.

Among his last works are bronze monuments on the campus of the University of California at Davis where he was a revered teacher. *Book Head*, 1991, a giant egg-head plopped face forward in a book, is appropriately sited in front of the library. In exchange for the aesthetic impact of scale, its refined patina differs from the artist's marvelously free, creamy, marble glazing of the maquette. Like his other maquettes, it is intimate and under close scrutiny or in reproduction, monumental. It pulses with the immediacy of the idea and physical touch of the artist -- its subject is as much about its genesis in the artist's mind, as its original theme. Arneson's concept for a monument, *Model for 'Temple of Fatal Laughs'*, 1988, is a marvelous progenitor to the theme of taking-the-head-off-the-pedestal seen in *Model for 'Book Head'*. It irreverently combines classical art and comic traditions, as does his bronze *Offering*, 1992, which was intended as a model for a large scale work and one of his last pieces. In the maquette, the artist offers his own sculpted head truncated from the physical body. It bears the imprint of his hand, as if pressed into clay: Robert Arneson is in his work.

**NOTES**


2. Although Arneson used the term "model," this essay refers to his preliminary, three-dimensional sculptures as "maquettes." Sculptures not preceded by "model of" connote full-scale works and may be followed by a parentheses with a public collection.


6. Ibid.


10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.


15. Sink was destroyed in the 1969 traveling exhibition Objects USA.


17. Jones.

18. Benezra, Neal. Robert Arneson: A Retrospective (Des Moines, Iowa: Des Moines Art Center, 1986). Benezra observed that, "Arneson employed a system of modular building blocks, a device that rarely had been used by ceramic sculptors since the Della Robbias in the fifteenth century."


22. Scott Donahue, interview with the artist, November 2000.


27. Barbara J. Hill and John S. Nelson made this observation about Arneson's Minuteman, Collection of the University of Iowa Museum, in Human Rights/Human Wrongs, Art & Social Change (University of Iowa).


31. Ibid.

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