

Out Our Way: The Pivotal Sculpture of ROBERT ARNESON

*Manetti-Shrem Museum of Art,
University of California, Davis*

BY NANCY M. SERVIS

Provocative sculptures by American artist, Robert Arneson (1930–1992), were featured in the exhibition, *Out Our Way*, a group show displaying work by the founding members of the University of California, Davis art faculty. Ten large sculptures from Arneson's toilet and urinal series were displayed along with art by Wayne Thiebaud, Manuel Neri, and William T. Wiley. For our purposes, only the work of Robert Arneson is discussed, although the exhibition equally included selections by the ten other faculty members brought to the university by founding art department chairman, Richard L. Nelson. Once considered a backwater to other university campuses, UC Davis has become a respected academic research and fine arts institution.

Robert Arneson's "toilet-wares," begun when he was thirty-two years old, represent his pivotal breakout period during the early 1960s. Eight toilets and two urinals, along with an ink wash drawing titled *Paul's John* from 1964 were grouped in the main gallery, with the towering *Op Art Toilet*, 1965 singly nearby. Together Arneson's sculptures illustrate his artistic irreverence as he deliberately challenged societal mores through subject matter. Anatomical forms and scatological references were prevalent throughout

the displayed work. Male and female genitalia, like the penile flush handle and enlarged breasts in *His and Hers*, 1964 characterized many "johns." To the delight of the curators and surprise of the visitors, this was the first time the ten imposing sculptures were exhibited together, and their combined disarming impact had not lessened.

Two display islands featured related groups of three to five of Arneson's sculptures while select juxtapositions emphasized the team-of-rivals context amongst the faculty. *Herinal*, 1965-71 resided next to the construction *Random Remarks and Digs*, 1971 by colleague, William T. Wiley. The exhibition's premise of charged cross-dialogue among artists was further illustrated by Wayne Thiebaud's urbane painting of a solitary *Cup of Coffee*, 1961 and Manuel Neri's *Ceramic Loop IV*, c. 1961-65, a version of which was shown in the 1967 *Funk* exhibition at UC Berkeley. Arneson's *The Pisser*, 1963, established his capacity to strike a nerve in treating controversial subject matter with a visual ferocity fused with underlying humor. The artistic rawness he brought to contemporary sculpture by way of overt sexual and scatological portrayals was amplified by textural roughness and surface graffiti. Work in the show also successfully illustrated Arneson's shift away from Voulkos-inspired stoneware to the vibrant colorations to which we have become accustomed as with *John with Art*, 1964. Injecting commentary into such pieces distanced his sculpture from that of anything being done by his immediate contemporaries, establishing a practice that was foundational to the artists work for the rest of his life. Even fifty years hence, the sculptures' original intended crudeness retained their authenticity.

The inspiration for the toilet series, as recounted by Arneson, was his search for an original sculptural form as his contribution to the 1963 show, *Contemporary California Sculpture*, on view

Out Our Way – *Herinal*, 1965-1971





Out Our Way – (L – R) Throne, 1964, John with Art (1964) (mostly covering Untitled (Urinal), c. 1963 visible at top), The Pisser, 1963, Short Stop, 1964



Out Our Way – John Figure, 1965, His and Hers, 1964 Toilet: Life Size, 1964, Wall: Paul's John, 1964

at the Kaiser Center Roof Garden organized by the Oakland Museum.

"Suddenly I had to present myself with my colleagues, and how was I going to stand up amongst them? I knew John Mason and Peter Voukos were going to be in the show. I could see myself right now, Bob Arneson in between John Mason and Peter Voukos, and I would just be a junior version of those two guys and just a little pisser. That really put my mind into gear."

What better way to establish himself as an artist alongside some of California's most recognized sculptors than to feature the toilet as the universal symbol of contemporary ceramics in Western culture, exclaiming, "It is 100% ceramics, man!" He delivered and installed the Toilet/Funk John, 1963 (destroyed), though it was quickly removed due to the objections of the Kaiser Industries vice president, who perceived the piece to be an attack on American capitalism. Arneson later mused in a 1974 interview, "But making my toilet really jolted me. It jolted me because I'm doing something—well—doing something that you know is in bad taste. These are no-nos. And yet no one's ever done it." Then and as well as now, Arneson's irreverent sculptures were not sanitized for the public hence retaining their original affect.

In the exhibition brochure essay, Serendipity and a Secret Sauce, Peter Plagens acknowledged the profound yet imperfect realities of that time when women faculty members were underexposed while their male counterparts were more celebrated. This revision further ensures the art department of the University of California, Davis as a contributor to the societal and artistic ideas that defined the San Francisco Bay Area as rebellious, groundbreaking, and controversial. Robert Arneson was at the forefront of this raucous shift which ultimately redirected the course of pottery, sculpture, and clay in a way no one could have predicted.

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Op Art Toilet, 1965, Sculpt-metal over ceramic, glazed, ceramic vinyl mounted on wood, on rollers

