

Robert Arneson
Astonishing Possibilities for Self-Expression

May 19 – June 29

The George Adams Gallery is pleased to present *Robert Arneson: Astonishing Possibilities for Self-Expression*, the most comprehensive survey of the late artist's use of the self as subject matter in over twenty-five years. Encompassing works on paper and sculptures in both ceramic and bronze, the exhibition includes work dating from the mid-1960s through his death in 1992. For an artist who is perhaps best known for his self-portraits, the exhibition shows how Arneson's approach evolved through the decades and the range of expressive potential he found within his self.

The most substantial and varied portion of Robert Arneson's prodigious output are those works in which he made use of himself as the subject. While Arneson's self-portraits are of outsized significance when considering his oeuvre as a whole, it is insufficient to say that the self-portrait was Arneson's primary concern as an artist, or even that he saw himself as the most important of his many and varied subjects. In fact, it wasn't until the mid '60s, already established in his career, that he even attempted a subject as "serious" as himself – and then not until the early '70s that self-portraits became a recognizable aspect of his art making. These portraits were a natural extension of his ongoing exploration of ceramic forms that he defined as the kind of ubiquitous, quotidian objects that surround us. What more ubiquitous, for an artist in the studio, than oneself? As he pointed out to an interviewer in 1974, "the person you know best, [is] the person you've been dealing with all your life." Looking at images of Arneson in the studio around this time, you see him working on these busts while surrounded by a set of mirrors that allowed him to study a gesture or expression from multiple angles. That his subject was so often his self was almost beside the point – just as clay was his preferred medium, so was the expressive potential of the body and face.

Arneson's first self-portrait is broadly recognized to be *Portrait of an Artist Losing His Marbles* from 1965 (currently on view at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York). The sculpture was an attempt to make a "serious work of art in clay," however repeated firings eventually caused it to crack; to salvage the piece, he epoxied marbles into the crack, resulting in a tongue-in-cheek visual pun in line with the pop-funk objects he was making at the time. He was evidently thinking about self-portraits before '65 though, a number of drawings from the mid-60s either obliquely include his own image or are direct studies of himself, as are the pair from 1964 on view in this exhibition. It would not be until 1971 that Arneson returned to the kind of life-sized portrait bust that he struggled with in *Portrait of an Artist* – yet the subject remained on his mind. The quasi-conceptual (and often experimental) sculptures, paintings and drawings he made between '65-'71 often allude to the self, or the artist and his process. Body parts such as fingers, feet, noses and so forth, show up disembodied or as vestiges, in marks like foot- or finger-prints. By the time he embarked on his next self-portrait bust (*Smorgi Bob, the Cook* in 1971 – now in the collection of SFMoMA), he was prepared to tackle the complexity and range the subject could afford him.

The first of the new busts were sophisticated in their technique and irreverent in their content, featuring the artist in turn sticking out his tongue, being brutally murdered, screaming, or picking his nose. *Delta Bob* (1972), done in milky white porcelain, is supremely cool with his dark glasses and disembodied hand casually holding a cigar. Arneson had been gaining national attention since the early '60s and was already recognized as a major figure in American ceramics – he would have his first museum retrospective in 1974. In self-portraits he found a mode through which he could distill the humor, technical prowess, artistic know-how and ne'er-do-well attitude he had cultivated into one, singular expression. He later suggested that he was "attempting to get beyond likeness to a state of psychological presence in these portrait busts." Certainly, despite the realism they express, Arneson's portraits, particularly of himself, do not attempt to provide a likeness so much as capture a psychological state of being, an approach which certainly was impacted by his participation in the 1969 Whitney exhibition, *Human*

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Concern / Personal Torment. As Ameson's busts grew in size and ambition through the 1970s, we see his head crushed, masked, split, distorted and multiplied, each physical transformation illustrating an equivalent mental state. The portraits are unusually active, with Ameson's preferred mode of representation showing him as licking, poking, biting, smoking, kissing, grinning or otherwise caught mid-action. Clay, in this case, was a fitting material for Ameson to work in as it lent itself well to the kinds of manipulations he subjected his image to, going so far as grotesquely stretching his face like a hunting trophy, as in *Head Skinned and Bleached* (1986). Though it was the "psychological presence" of the self that Ameson sought to explore, the means through which he did so went beyond the physical limitations of the body to an almost grammatical understanding of the self.

This preoccupation carries over into other media as well, in particular works on paper where Ameson seemed most comfortable in addressing his audience. While drawing was a continual (and vital) part of his practice, it wasn't until around 1980 that he began to make large, complex works on paper that stood distinct from his sculptures. In the case of the self-portrait drawings, Ameson confronts the viewer with the same intensity and directness one can imagine he gave to his own reflection, the audience becoming an interloper within this private moment. Yet in these drawings he moves beyond the observed into hyperbole, skillfully imagining his own head as mutable as its sculptural doppelgangers. This suggests a synergy between the two mediums; Ameson frequently made sketches and studies for his three-dimensional works before, during and after their completion. Often featuring notes and collaged elements, these studies demonstrate the conceptual underpinnings of their sculptural counterparts. The multiplication that results increasingly became a tool Ameson employed directly in the work, where not only could he engage with himself in the making of the work but also explore in three dimensions what would otherwise be an internal dialogue. That dialogue is most visible in the sculptural work done in the last two years of his life, many of which were done in bronze. The inherent multiplicity of the casting process only amplifies the reflexive and introspective nature of Ameson's portraits and he exploited this quality in pieces like *Poised to Infinity* (1991), where shrinking copies of his own head are stacked in a precarious tower. Similarly, his series of double portraits, in their quietly humorous pairings of aggressor-victim, embody the full range of human emotion.