



— masterpiece of nearly 20 feet in width [fig. 9.30], sums up, as Rosenquist says, “This is Love in 1971”: a roll of adding machine tape, a worn billfold, and nostalgic memories from the late thirties of his father’s Mobil station in Atwater, Minnesota (the flying red horse was Mobil’s corporate symbol), all tenuously held together with a paper clip.

In the mid-seventies Rosenquist settled permanently in Florida, near Tampa, and began a major commission for the state capitol in Tallahassee. A new self-confidence and renewed productivity burgeoned in his work, and an escalated level of ambition also emerged as the scale of some works increased over the next decade to extraordinary dimensions. *Through the Eye of the Needle to the Anvil* [fig. 9.31], a work of the late eighties, measures 46 feet in width. An increasing number of high-tech allusions appeared in Rosenquist’s painting at this time along with cosmic themes and a more exaggerated manipulation of the images into a dream of common objects gone wild. *Through the Eye* seems to be shot through with charged fields that operate on

multiple levels of experience simultaneously. The red lipstick and flesh tones of a woman’s face seem to slice across alternating wavelengths in and around the x-ray-like images of the brain in its cradle, portrayed as a kind of nexus of information and agency.

CHICAGO AND POINTS WEST

H. C. Westermann

H. C. (“Cliff”) Westermann inaugurated a tendency in Chicago in the mid-fifties to turn away from the psychological introspection of the Monster Roster toward the complex simultaneity of popular culture. Contemporary with Rauschenberg and Johns in New York and with the Independent Group in London, Westermann combined an assemblage aesthetic with an intuitive sophistication about visual language that rivaled that of Johns. But Westermann did not aestheticize the objects he assimilated; instead he permitted their original, often vulgar, context to survive their incorporation into his work. This makes the viewer acutely aware of the multiplicity of contexts and semantic levels that coexist in Westermann’s work.

9.31 James Rosenquist, *Through the Eye of the Needle to the Anvil*, 1988. Oil on canvas, 17 × 46ft (5.18 × 14m).

Collection of the artist.



9.32 (right) **H. C. Westermann**, *Memorial to the Idea of Man, If He Was an Idea*, 1958. Pine, bottle caps, cast-iron toys, glass, metal, brass, ebony, and enamel, 56½ × 38 × 14 in (143.5 × 96.5 × 36.2cm).

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Susan and Lewis Manilow, *Collection of Chicago Artists*, PG 86.2.

9.33 (below) **H. C. Westermann**, *Memorial to the Idea of Man, If He Was an Idea* (detail), 1958. Center with open door. See fig. 9.32.

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.



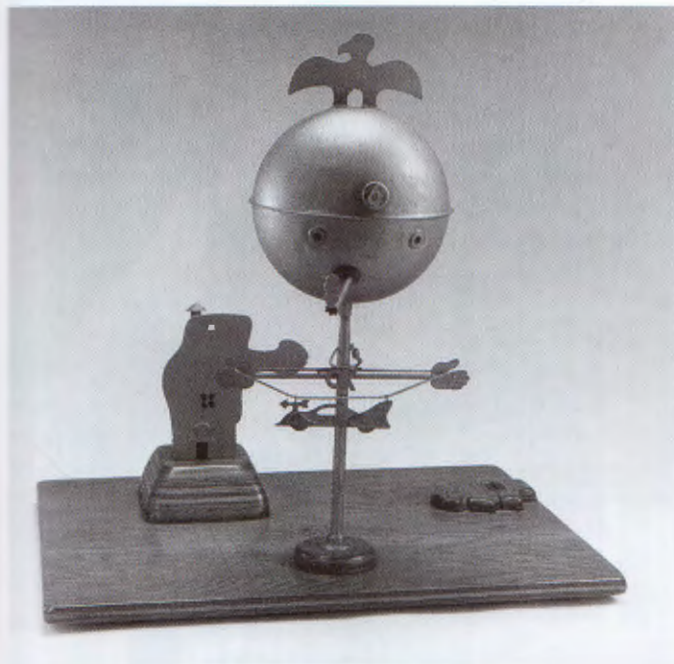
The methods and materials, not just the images, are what make works such as Westermann's *Memorial to the Idea of Man, If He Was an Idea* [figs. 9.32 and 9.33] genuinely subversive. Rising from the center of the head of *Memorial* is a tiny dime-store globe atop a carved, red-nailed finger. The boxlike head and the larger box-torso seem an indefinable hybrid of architecture, cabinetry, and knick-knack shelf in a dream-state of human animation. Meanwhile, the meticulous carpentry, with its beautiful brass hardware and screws, asserts yet another, completely self-sufficient level on which the viewer encounters the work—as handcrafted cabinetry.

Westermann lined the lower box with the then-ubiquitous bottle caps [fig. 9.33], using shifts in context to redefine them onto five separate semantic levels: writing his initials with them on the inside of the door, using them as the backdrop for narrative scenes of a sinking ship in a bottle-cap sea, and above that as background for two athletes at play, while a pop-top on this background also stands in visually for the head of the batter. Yet neither the bottle caps, nor the cheap little toys (the globe, the acrobat, the batter), nor the rustically simple wooden model of a ship ever lose their identities as pop-tops, toys, or models. This continuing connection of the incorporated objects to their real origins effectively integrates the rude reality of popular culture into the representation, thus compromising the usual boundary

that set “high” culture apart. Yet Westermann appropriated the pop materials and images because he felt a genuine affinity for them.

The title, *Memorial to the Idea of Man, If He Was an Idea*, suggests the death of existential metaphysics about man in the same way that the components of the assemblage—prefabricated elements, such as toys and bottle caps—undermine the abstract expressionist idea of the autographic gesture. *Memorial* commemorates the dissolution of identity itself into the enigmatic relativity of cultural context. The sudden shift of the batter’s head into a bottle cap (behind it) and back again, or the box itself, which is now a cabinet, now a human torso, are both analogies for the instability of things. The wry comment “A MAD CABINETMAKER MIGHT” (inscribed on the edge of the inner shelf) seems to consign even the artist’s intentions to the inexplicable realm of madness while also suggesting the idea of open-ended possibility in this destabilized field of image and meaning.

Like *Memorial*, Westermann’s *Brinkmanship* (fig. 9.34) relies on a kind of wisecracker’s humor to talk about serious things. As David McCarthy has shown, the title of *Brinkmanship* refers to the Cold War policy of John Foster Dulles (President Eisenhower’s Secretary of State), enforced by General Curtis LeMay, the cigar-smoking chief of the Strategic Air Command, which deployed the American nuclear arsenal. *Life* magazine pictured LeMay in a profile feature of 1954 entitled “Toughest Cop of the Western



9.34 H. C. Westermann, *Brinkmanship*, 1959. Assemblage of plywood, electroplated and welded metal, bottle caps, and string on plywood base, 23¼ × 24 × 19¾in (59 × 60.8 × 49.2cm).

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. Gift of Allan Frumkin, 1984.

World,”⁶⁰ and it seems as though Westermann may have used those photos as his source. Westermann, a decorated war hero of both World War II and Korea, adamantly opposed the U.S. policy of repeatedly taking the nation to “the brink” of nuclear confrontation in the fight against Communism.

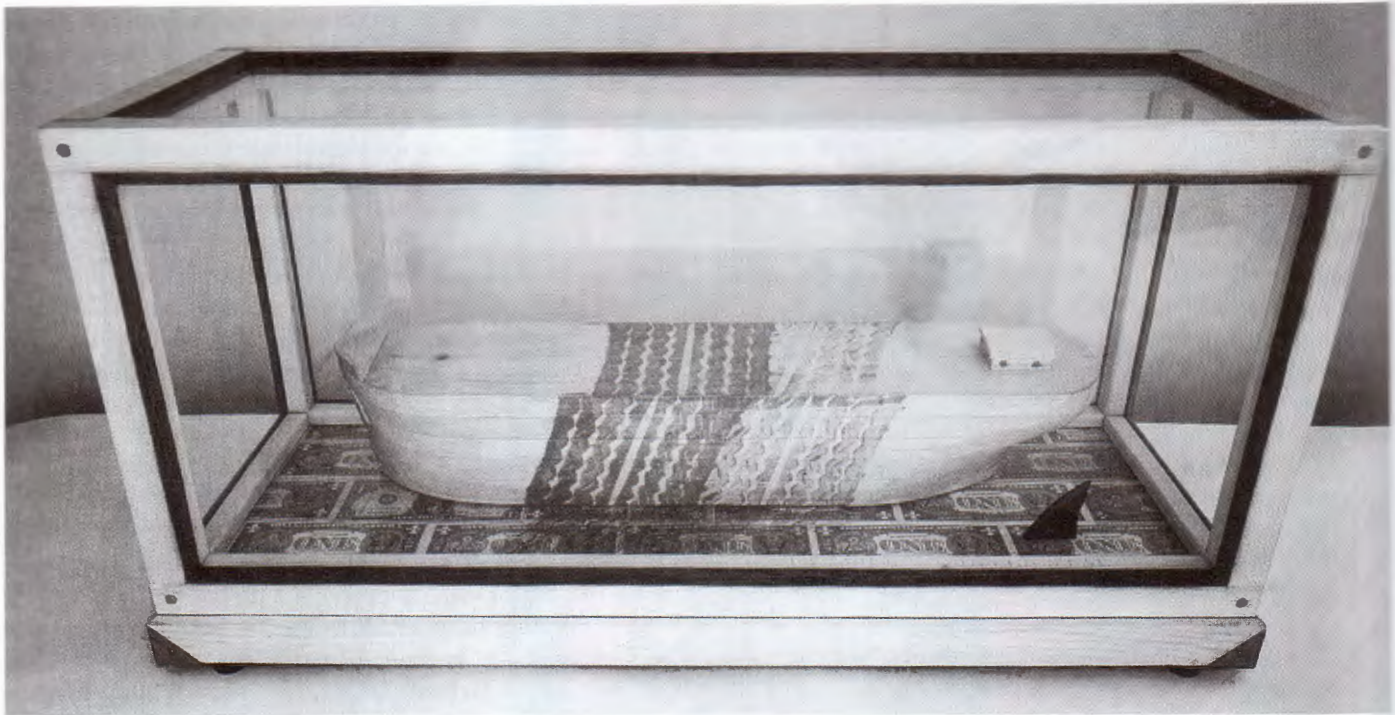
Here Westermann portrays LeMay’s plump face as a metal toilet float. The rim at the seam divides the top off as a helmet (surmounted by an American eagle), and the artist uses grommets for the eyes and mouth (one of LeMay’s popular nicknames was “the grommet”). The Pepsi bottle top stands in for the star on the front of the general’s helmet. He has a metal stogy in his mouth (like the one Westermann often smoked) with a flat cutout puff of smoke, and—miniature by comparison to the cigar—his penis sticks out from the lower part of the pole of his torso.

Meanwhile, the “ground troops,” so to speak, are Westermann himself with his wooden profile (labeled with his military “dog tag” number) laid down on the platform. The door of the ramshackle outhouse, with the tin smoke stack at the back, is framed by the legs of a humble little smiling figure with the number “25” (Westermann’s address on East Division Street in Chicago) across the face. On the façade is a much more robust-looking organ than the general’s, pointing off to the right, and the inscription “Sail on, old bird” over the door. Here the reference to Longfellow’s famous poem “Sail on, Oh Ship of State!” is turned into a bawdy joke.

In Westermann’s *Death Ship Run Over by a ’66 Lincoln Continental* [fig. 9.35] the menacing shark fin circles, endlessly waiting, in a sea of dollar bills. The fin has a strong illusionistic presence on the gray-green water, despite one’s awareness of the money as money. In the same way the fast cut from the narrative of the death ship surrounded by predators to the idea of inking the tires of the family car and literally driving over the piece has a slapstick absurdity. The extreme conceptual distance from the narrative of the boat and shark to the bills to the car is simultaneously disturbing and ridiculous. As in *Memorial to the Idea of Man, If He Was an Idea*, part of the humor of the work derives from the dizzying jumps from one mental context to another.

Westermann made a number of lonely “Death Ships” followed by an ominous shark fin in dangerous waters and the subject has a specific autobiographical source. In 1942 the twenty-year-old Westermann enlisted in the marines and went to sea in the Pacific on the aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Enterprise*. On March 20, 1945 he experienced a terrifying kamikaze attack.

I was the gunner there of that time. One morning early a lone Japanese kamikaze attacked u . . . I saw my tracers going into the god-damned thing but he kept coming . . . Well it was a terrific explosion + many people up forward were killed + wounded + there was a terrific fire up there . . . I looked down on the fantail of the ship + they had all the dead people stacked there like cordwood. It was a pretty ungodly sight.⁶¹



9.35 H. C. Westermann, *Death Ship Run Over by a '66 Lincoln Continental*, 1966. Pine, plate glass, ink, and currency, 15½ × 32 × 11¼in (39.4 × 81.3 × 29.9cm).

Collection, Ann Janss. Courtesy George Adams Gallery, New York.

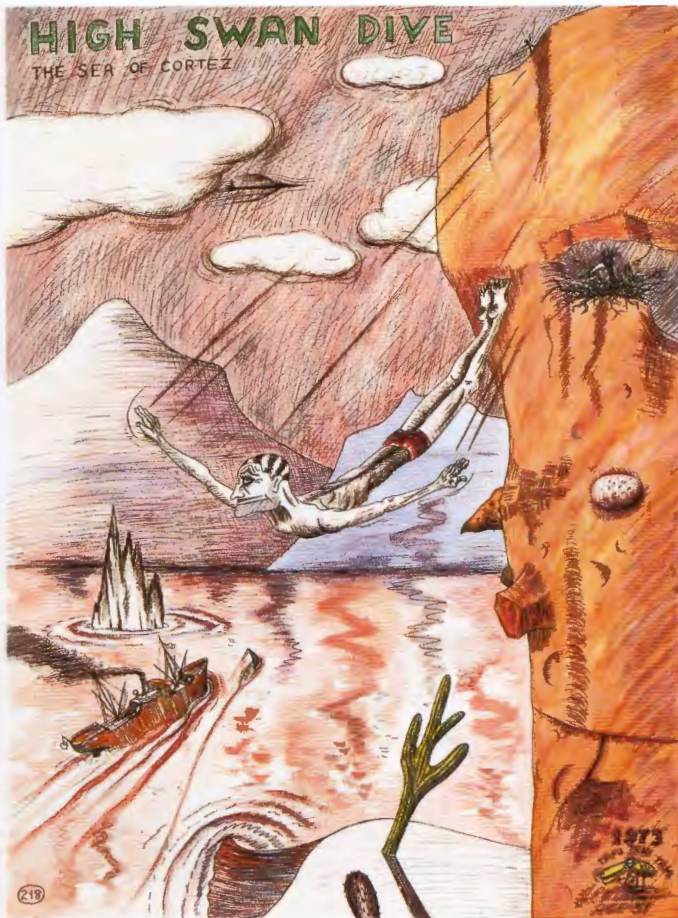
One can already see the first phase of Westermann's fully developed narrative drawing style in letters he sent home from the war, but his sculpture didn't emerge until the mid-fifties. As a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1952 he began studying carpentry from manuals, seeking a way to support himself while in school. By 1954 his interest in carpentry had developed into an obsession that drew him into sculpture and soon his craftsmanship became too exacting to take on household building projects for clients who wanted quick and simple results. In 1958 Westermann began showing at the Allan Frumkin Gallery in Chicago, and the sale of his sculpture brought in a modest income. In 1959 Frumkin opened a gallery in New York, giving Westermann regular exposure there, and Westermann was finally able to stop hiring out to do carpentry. In the fall of 1961 he left Chicago for his wife's family farm in Connecticut [fig. 9.36], where he stayed (except for a year in San Francisco) until his death in 1981.

The untransformed character of the materials that Westermann assimilated into his sculpture of the fifties gives that work a vernacular overtone of folk art. His work of the sixties and seventies on the other hand had an increasing indebtedness to the spirit of comics, not only in his cartoon-like self-caricatures as Mr. Swami, The Human Fly, Champion of Justice, and the aging Romeo with slicked-back hair in *High Swan Dive: The Sea of Cortez* [fig. 9.37], but also



9.36 H. C. Westermann building his studio at Brookfield Center, Connecticut, 1969.

Photograph by Joanna Beall Westermann, courtesy Martha W. Renner.



9.37 (above) **H. C. Westermann**, *High Swan Dive: The Sea of Cortez*, 1973. Ink and watercolor on paper, 30 × 22¼in (76.2 × 56.5cm). Private collection, New York.

in the comic book's methods of representation. In comics, as in Westermann's works, the images refer to concepts, not to the actual appearance of things. This point of reference in ideas rather than directly in the physical world results in a revolutionary concept of figuration in which a recognizable abstract symbol—like Popeye's anchor tattoo, which Westermann used for his signature—functions on the same level as an image with a direct reference in nature. This involved a radical rethinking of representation that profoundly influenced such artists as William Wiley and the young Chicagoans of the nascent Hairy Who in the sixties, and (more or less directly) many important figurative artists in New York in the seventies and eighties, especially David Salle and Keith Haring.

Peter Saul

Like Westermann, Peter Saul drew heavily on pop culture and had a profound influence on Chicago artists of the sixties, who became familiar with his work through regular shows at the Allan Frumkin Gallery, even though Saul never actually lived in Chicago. Peter Saul's packed compositions of the early sixties have a pop art layering of common images (as distinct from objects) in arbitrary profusion, manipulated in the manner of *Mad* magazine's satirical, adolescent fantasies. In *Mickey Mouse vs. the Japs* [fig. 9.38] Saul sends a vicious-looking Mickey Mouse with teeth to fight Japanese war machines in a sequence of disconnected actions. Neither rational space nor proportional scale apply. A comic strip



9.38 (right) **Peter Saul**, *Mickey Mouse vs. the Japs*, 1961–2. Oil on canvas, 4ft 11in × 5ft 11in (1.50 × 1.80m). Collection, Susan Wexler, Chicago.



9.39 Peter Saul, *Typical Saigon*, 1968. Oil, enamel, acrylic on canvas, 7ft 9in × 12ft (2.36 × 3.66m).

Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Purchased out of the "Illinois Biennial" exhibition of 1969.

thought bubble saying "Banzai" emanates from a Japanese fighter plane, a large Mickey Mouse on the graph paper grid leers to the right while the left half of his torso metamorphoses into a solid mass with a hole through the middle. A hammer grows out of this left side of the torso and smacks a war plane on the nose and off the side of the hammer an arm and hand come out thrusting a knife into a disembodied penis that happens to be floating by. These permutations reflect a free train of thought that goes from one idea to the next without looking back, modeled on the kind of doodle one might find in the margins of a high school notebook. "I'm guarding very carefully against any loss of vulgarity," Saul insisted.⁶²

Saul was born in San Francisco in 1934. From 1952 to 1956 he studied painting at Washington University in St. Louis, where he began painting from pictures in *National Geographic*. While in St. Louis he also discovered the complex political compositions of Max Beckmann and developed an admiration for Francis Bacon's "adults only" psychology," as he described it.⁶³ He then lived in Europe for eight years, until 1964. Matta "discovered" him in Paris and introduced him to Allan Frumkin who started showing his paintings in 1960. "The years 1959–61 were pretty much used in reconciling

specific drawings from *Mad Comics* [sic] with my need to resemble de Kooning," Saul wrote to Frumkin some years later.⁶⁴ Indeed, such early works as *Mickey Mouse vs. the Japs* have rich, gestural passages with an eccentric pop iconography. Perhaps the most widely discussed work in Saul's 1962 show depicted Superman on the toilet.

Saul finally returned to San Francisco in 1964 and stayed there through the ten stormiest years of protest against the war in Vietnam. During this period he shifted his attention to that and other political subjects, increasingly rendered in a crass, Day-Glo palette. The war is "a filthy pervert game," he told Frumkin and noted that his "work is an accusation."⁶⁵ Adamantly iconoclastic and hardcore in its description, a painting like the monumental *Typical Saigon* [fig. 9.39] indicts the cruelty of the American soldiers as well as the enterprise that brought them to Indochina.

In an orientalized script Saul wrote "Start Praying You Bastards" down the left side of *Typical Saigon* and lettered the title down the right. While the lurid Day-Glo palette and the slippery plastic surface are hard to look at, they pale compared to the violence with which he portrayed the American GIs sodomizing, assaulting, and crucifying Vietnamese women, whose bodies distort and metamorphose (especially in their sexual anatomy) like comic book superheroes to deflect the bullets and attack the soldiers. The painting makes its political statement by its deliberate attack on good taste. "My pictures always give me a hard

time psychologically,” he said. “[They] are meant as a kind of ‘cold shower.’”⁶⁶ Toward the end of the sixties Saul began depicting recognizable public figures in this shocking manner, explaining to Frumkin that he hoped to read in the press: “‘Upper Classes of Chicago Terrified by Mad-dog Sex Pervert at Art Gallery. Hundreds Faint.’”⁶⁷

Saul’s work directly influenced R. Crumb [fig. 9.54] and S. Clay Wilson, the originators of *Zap Comix*, who first saw his paintings in an exhibition at the University of Nebraska in 1965. He also had a profound impact on William Wiley. But Saul is more strongly associated with Chicago than with San Francisco, because his work was shown principally by Allan Frumkin and had an important influence on Chicago artists.

The Hairy Who

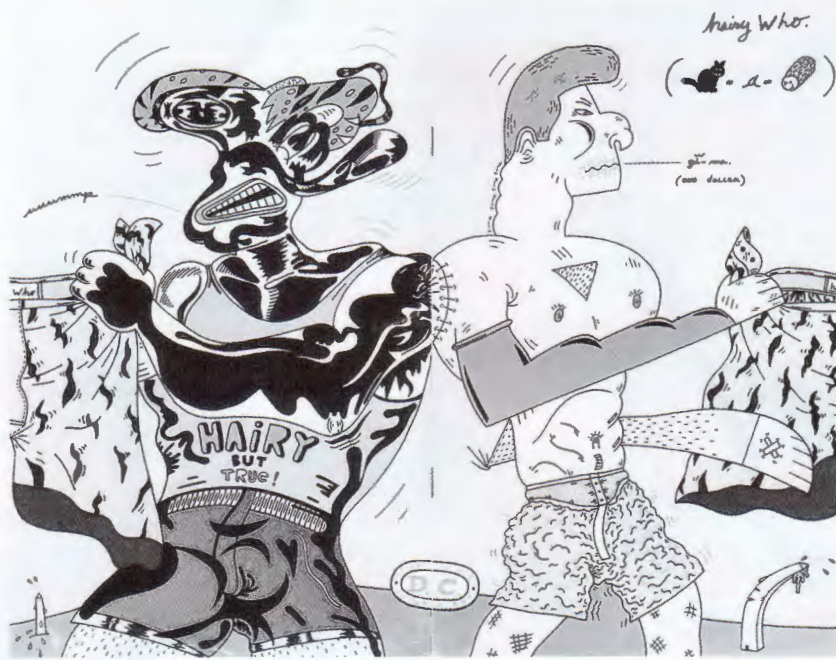
In Gladys Nilsson’s *Enterprize Encounterized by the Spydar People* [fig. 9.40] the particular manner of the surrealistic distortion and the complex, energetic composition seem indebted to Peter Saul. Nevertheless, the strange, elongated appendages, intertwining with what Whitney Halstead has called a “madcap sense of abandon,”⁶⁸ contribute to the uniqueness of the style. The title, inspired by the TV series

Star Trek, evokes a vivid science-fiction fantasy. As in the narratives of Saul and Westermann, each vignette in Nilsson’s composition evolves as a complete thought in itself, a sort of mini-adventure, before going on to the next idea. They proceed along a train of association that builds the whole of the composition in a cumulative fashion, unlike a work of the pop art mainstream—a Warhol or a Rosenquist—in which the details are subsumed by the overall design.

The same sequential composition characterizes the work of Jim Nutt and Karl Wirsum as well as much psychotic art, adolescent doodling, and naive or unschooled art—the so-called “outsider” art which the Chicago artists long admired. Nilsson, Nutt, Wirsum, James Falconer, Art Green, and Suellen Rocca all finished school at the Art Institute of Chicago in the early or middle sixties and banded together for a sequence of five exhibitions under the collective banner of the Hairy Who. While no ideological program united them, they shared certain predominant interests, including

9.40 Gladys Nilsson, *The Enterprize Encounterized by the Spydar People*, 1969. Watercolor on paper, 22¼ × 30in (56.5 × 76.2cm). Collection, the artist.





9.41 James Falconer, Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Suellen Rocca, and Karl Wirsum, *Hairy Who (Cat-a-log)*, 1968. Exhibition catalog cover in paper, printed in color, 11 × 14in (27.9 × 35.6cm) (open).

Private collection, courtesy Phyllis Kind Galleries, Chicago and New York.

an attraction to funky popular kitsch, comic books, and toys (which they presented alongside their work), and a propensity to play with language (using puns or having fun with spelling as in “Encounterized” and “Spydar”). Perhaps most importantly, they tended to view popular culture and outsider art not only as a source but as art in its own right.

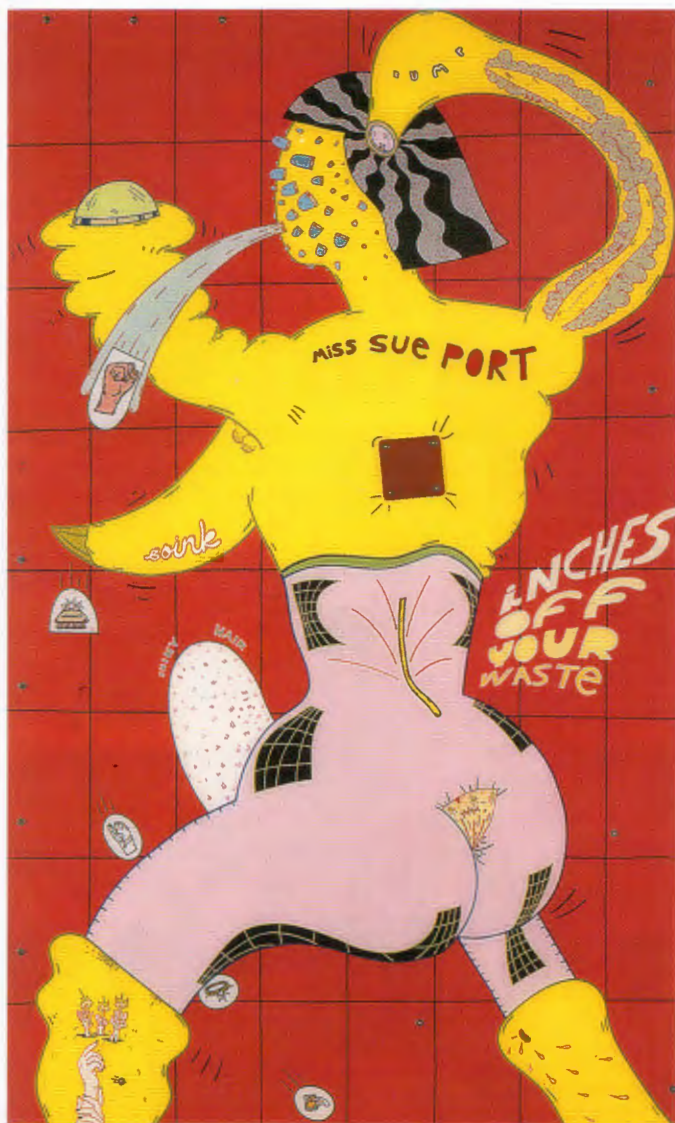
The Hairy Who existed as a group for four years. They had three shows in 1966, 1967, and 1968 at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago, a fourth in 1968 at the Gallery of the San Francisco Art Institute, and a final one in 1969 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. In the third show the artists covered the walls with gaudy flowered linoleum and hung bright yellow tags off each work with a bargain price in dollars and odd cents. The style of the exhibition, like the different styles of the six artists, accentuated that which upper-class “good taste” had left out.

For each exhibition except the one in San Francisco, the Hairy Who produced a collaborative catalog in the form of a comic book. The sci-fi he-man figures on the front and back covers of the Corcoran catalog [fig. 9.41] are joined with stitches at the shoulder, playfully responding to the way figures are pulled apart when the covers are folded around the booklet. In the other direction the figures tear apart a pair of boxer shorts with “Hairy Who” written across the front as the booklet is opened. The label on the waistband of the putty-headed creature on the back reads “Hairy but true!” while the inscription from the tight lips of the weightlifter on the front with the surrealistically deformed limbs says “g?-me. (one dollar)” using a phonetic spelling and diacritical marks. Above, to the right, “cat-a-log” is written as a rebus with the visual symbols of a cat and a log. These and other details make clear the intellectual sensitivity of these artists to the way in which language frames both reality and art in the human mind.



9.42 Karl Wirsum, *Screamin' J. Hawkins*, 1968. Acrylic on canvas, 48 × 36in (122.1 × 91.4cm).

Collection, Art Institute of Chicago. Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Prize Fund, 1969.248.



9.43 Jim Nutt, *Miss Sue Port*, 1967–8. Acrylic on Plexiglas and enamel on wood, blue screws and red rubber, 61 × 37in (154.9 × 94cm). Collection, the artist, courtesy Phyllis Kind Galleries, Chicago and New York.

The Corcoran catalog consists only of images—there is no text, though many of the compositions incorporate phrases or words. A version of Karl Wirsum's 1968 painting *Screamin' J. Hawkins* [fig. 9.42] (the title refers to a well-known blues singer) fills one page with its jarring clash of patterns and brilliant colors, influenced by the folk art Wirsum saw on a trip to Mexico in 1961. However complex the forms, they nevertheless have a comic book clarity of definition and flatness against the simple background color.

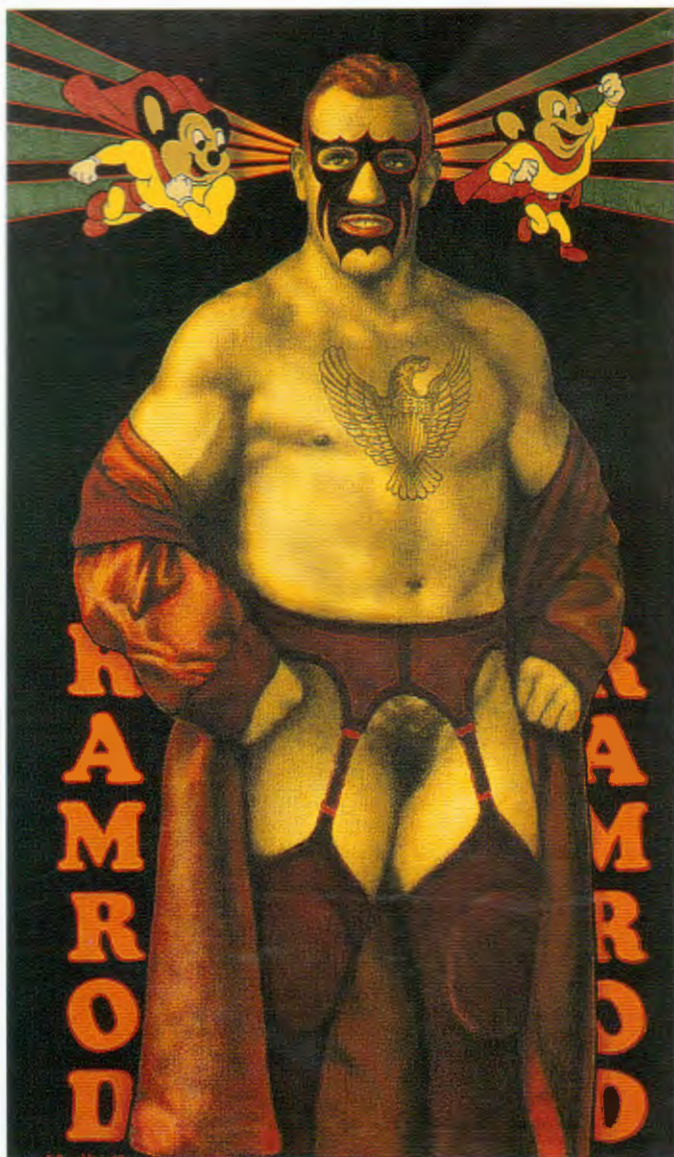
Jim Nutt also uses notational devices from the comics, such as motion marks and narrative frames within frames. He indicates spatial relations through overlapping rather than perspective, and completely eliminates all surface texture by painting on the back of Plexiglas and then reversing it so that the viewer looks at the images through it, as in

Miss Sue Port [fig. 9.43]. The glassy surface with bright colors evokes pinball machines, yet there is nothing mechanical in the genesis of these paintings.

Despite the stylistic individuality of each of the Hairy Who artists, they all built their vocabularies from blends of surrealism and expressionism. Nutt, in particular, found inspiration in Miró's metamorphosis of anatomy, especially his exaggeration of sexual parts. In *Miss Sue Port* (a pun on "support"), for example, Nutt distended the pubic area and annotated it with the words "shiny hair." The hardware and the rubber square in the center of *Miss Sue Port* derive from Westermann's assemblage aesthetic. In addition, Westermann's cartoon-like drawings, as in the mechanomorphic head on the side of *Angry Young Machine* [fig. 9.44], are a primary influence for Nutt and the other artists of the Hairy Who.



9.44 H. C. Westermann, *Angry Young Machine*, 1960. Painted wood and metal on casters, 6ft 5in × 3ft 4in × 3ft 4in (2.26 × 1.02 × 1.02m). Art Institute of Chicago. Restricted gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edwin A. Bergman, 1975.132.



9.45 Ed Paschke, *Ramrod*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 44 × 26in (111.8 × 66cm).

Jones/Faulkner Collection, Chicago. Courtesy Phyllis Kind Galleries, Chicago and New York.

Ed Paschke and Roger Brown were the most important Chicago imagists apart from (but contemporary with) the Hairy Who, and they share many of the same interests, although Paschke and Brown were less language-oriented. Paschke, a native Chicagoan, injected the most perverse imagery of marginal subcultures into the language of high culture. He portrays the truly popular culture of pimps, sideshow freaks, hookers, transvestites, and wrestlers, all with a bizarre sexual ambiguity. In *Ramrod* of 1969 [fig. 9.45] he transitions visually through the facial and body tattoos to the cartoon image of Mighty Mouse.

Roger Brown [fig. 9.46] came from Alabama and Nashville to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1962. His first important show was with a group of artists



9.46 Roger Brown, *Tropical Storm*, 1972. Oil on canvas, 6ft 1/8in × 4ft 1/8in (1.83 × 1.22m).

Collection, Marlene and Gene Siskel, Chicago. Courtesy Phyllis Kind Galleries, Chicago and New York.

who called themselves False Image (modeled on the pattern of the Hairy Who). He credits Ray Yoshida, one of his Art Institute teachers, with helping him, as he said, to “put myself into my art.”⁶⁹ Although his work has more variety of paint surface than that of Nutt or Wirsum, it nevertheless retains a comic book narrative (sometimes literally inscribed under the images on the painting), with a cartoon like description and flatness. Brown typically painted fantastic, anecdotal scenes filled with amazing, little dramatic details in luminous color, often located in familiar Chicago landmarks.

WEST COAST POP

Far Eastern culture—particularly Zen Buddhism and Taosim—has long influenced the intellectual climate of California and the Pacific Northwest. The contemplative

spiritualism of Mark Tobey [fig. 2.20] and his student Morris Graves was reflected in their meditative response to nature, while in the fifties the familiarity with Eastern philosophy contributed to the receptive climate for the meditative Dynaton painters in Los Angeles—Wolfgang Paalen (who began the journal *Dyn* in Mexico City in 1942), Lee Mullican, and Gordon Onslow-Ford. Zen also had a formative impact on the beats, who sought their escape from the mainstream by retreating into their own consciousness.

Funk Art

Alienation was at the core of beat culture. For writers such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, J. D. Salinger and William Burroughs, Samuel Beckett's sense of the absurd had replaced Sartre's existentialist "responsibility" in each of their

consuming journeys inward. Whereas the New York art world spotlights what is "in," the artists of San Francisco have, since the fifties, cultivated a tradition of being out—"far out" to use a phrase from "hip" (the language of jazz and the beats). The beat counterculture of San Francisco centered on the coffee houses and jazz clubs of North Beach—places with names like the Coffee Gallery, the Co-Existence Bagel Shop, and the Jazz Cellar—where poets, musicians, and artists gathered for readings, often to a background of cool jazz.

Bruce Conner's assemblages *THE CHILD* and *SENORITA* embody this beat sensibility [figs. 9.47 and 9.48], conveying the priority of improvisation with whatever material was at hand. The intuitive process of making the object takes precedence over any preconception of a final product. Conner shunned conventional art materials and craftsmanship precisely to celebrate the triumph of spontaneous



9.47 Bruce Conner, *THE CHILD*, 1959–60. Assemblage: wax figure with nylon, cloth, metal, and twine in a high chair, 34 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 17 × 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ in (88 × 43.2 × 41.9cm).

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Philip Johnson. Courtesy the artist.



9.48 Bruce Conner, *SENORITA*, 1962. Assemblage on wood, 34 × 21 × 5in (86.4 × 53.3 × 12.7cm).

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Purchased with funds provided by LLWW Foundation. Courtesy the artists.

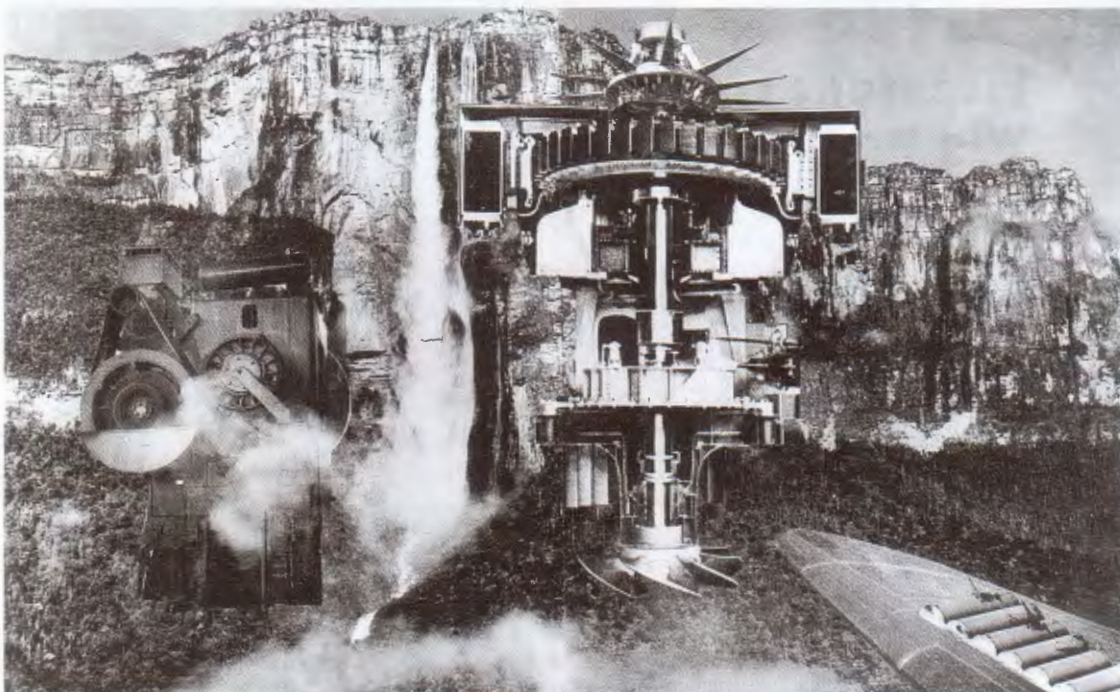


9.49 Robert Hudson, *Double Time*, 1963. Painted steel and aluminum, 58½ × 50 × 35in (149.2 × 127 × 88.9cm). Oakland Museum. Gift of the Women's Board of the Oakland Museum Association.

creativity over the grimy reality of the material world; he emphasized living for the moment. Borrowing from the parlance of hip, this art came to be known as “funk,” meaning something visceral and earthy, often so powerful and primitive as to threaten “good taste.”⁷⁰

Conner, who arrived in San Francisco in 1957, belongs to a group of funk assemblagists and collage makers in California that also included Joan Brown, Wally Hedrick, Jess Collins, Wallace Berman, and Ed Kienholz. Funk assemblages not only attacked the boundaries between one art form and another—Conner, for example, also collaged together underground films, such as *A Movie* of 1958 [fig. 7.19], from discarded Hollywood film clips—but also the separation of art from life. The humorously awkward, improvisational compositions and the bright polychromy that came to be associated with California sculptors such as Robert Hudson [fig. 9.49] in the sixties was one major offshoot of this assemblagist style, influenced by surrealist abstraction and pop color.

Jess Collins, one of the most gifted of the Bay Area assemblagists, cut up and reassembled Dick Tracy comic strips in seven “Tricky Cad” compositions (1953–9). By scrambling both words and images, he subverted the clarity of communication that normally characterizes comics. Jess, who went only by his first name, trained as a scientist, worked on the Manhattan and Hanford Projects, and then left the field in 1949 in response to the horrifying implications of the atomic bomb. He sought to create “an antidote to the scientific method.”⁷¹ In his photocollage *The Face in the Abyss* [fig. 9.50] the crown of the Statue of Liberty rests on top of a menacing machine, flanked by another enigmatic device that shoots out a jet of steam. They seem to have harnessed the forces of the scenic landscape into a frightful science fiction.



9.50 Jess Collins, *The Face in the Abyss*, 1955. Paste-up, 30 × 40in (76.2 × 101.6cm). First National Bank of Chicago.



9.51 Joan Brown, *Portrait of Bob for Bingo*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 29 × 29 in (73.7 × 73.7 cm).
Collection, Dr. Jay Cooper, Phoenix, Arizona.

The funky paint surfaces of Joan Brown's expressionism around 1960 is another development out of the beat assemblage aesthetic. Brown discovered the classes of Elmer Bischoff [fig. 6.26] in the summer of 1956, when she was eighteen. His influence proved decisive. In 1958 and 1959 Brown made crude, fetish-like figures (often animals), wrapped and tied in crumpled fabric, cardboard, and wire. Her heavily painted canvases of the early sixties, such as *Portrait of Bob for Bingo* [fig. 9.51], show more clearly the influence of Bischoff, as well as of Francis Bacon and Willem de Kooning, whose work she had seen in San Francisco. Over the summer of 1965 Brown left these densely painted, expressionistic surfaces and shifted her attention to an increasingly eccentric and original subject matter, including a magnificent series of self-portraits on imaginary voyages and another group of self-portraits with fantastic accouterments [fig. 9.52].

Peter Voulkos

Peter Voulkos had an important effect on a number of the Bay Area funk artists, particularly the sculptors. As early as 1950–2, while still a graduate student, Voulkos began pushing the limits of clay in both scale and form. He worked in a center for ceramic artists in Montana over the summer of 1952 and there a Zen-inspired Japanese potter named Shoji Hamada taught him about the “courting of the accidental.”⁷² This encouraged Voulkos to move away from the symmetry

of the potter's wheel. Further inspired by his encounter with abstract expressionism in New York the following year, he developed an abstract expressionist style of ceramic sculpture between 1954 and 1958 while he was teaching at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles.

This stylistic breakthrough in ceramics had a particularly direct effect on Voulkos's students at Otis, who included Ken Price, John Mason, and Billy Al Bengston. In 1959



9.52 Joan Brown, *Self-Portrait with Fish*, 1970. Enamel on masonite, 8 × 4 ft (2.43 × 1.21 m).
Courtesy George Adams Gallery, New York.



9.53 Peter Voulkos, *Sevillanas*, 1959. Glazed stoneware, 56¼ × 28 × 16¼in (144.1 × 71.1 × 43cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Albert M. Bender Collection. Albert M. Bender Bequest Fund Purchase. Work no longer extant due to 1989 earthquake.

Voulkos went on to Berkeley, where he built a foundry (the Garbanzo Iron Works), and by 1960 he had shifted largely to using metal. Robert Hudson and Manuel Neri worked with him in the foundry and he also influenced the young ceramicists Ron Nagle and Stephen De Staebler.

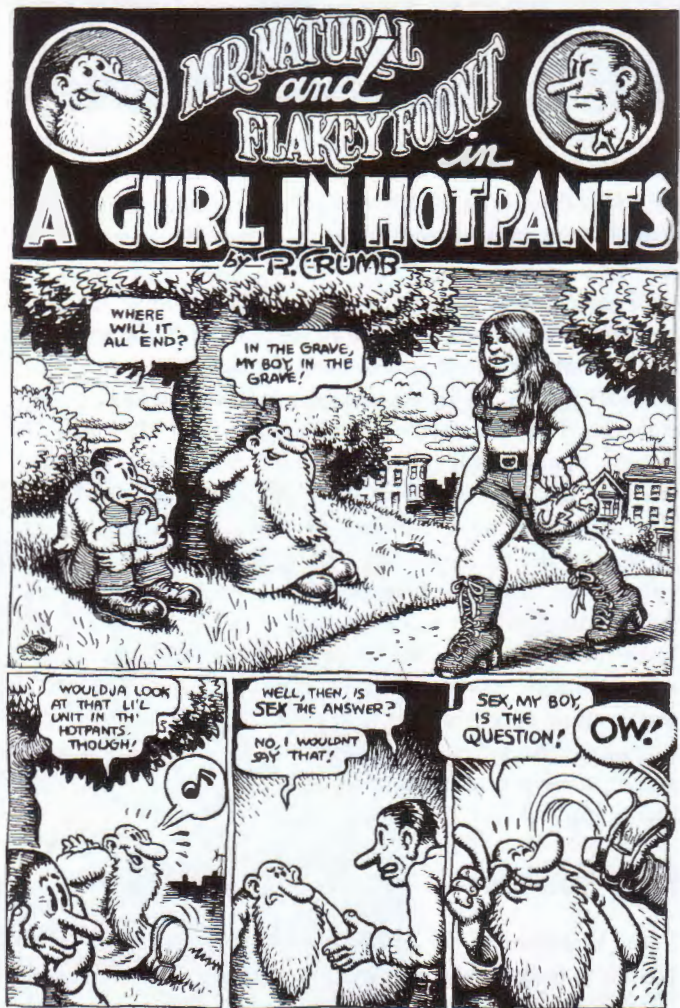
Voulkos pierced and sliced his clay forms in a loose, improvisational way. His organic response to the material suggests his affinity with the expressionism of Japanese Zen pottery. In works of the later fifties, such as *Sevillanas* [fig. 9.53], he achieved the freedom and gestural boldness of abstract expressionist painting. Yet, even though Voulkos followed Picasso and Miró in making ceramic sculpture, he still had to overcome the conventional notion that anything made in ceramic is necessarily craft rather than art.

The Politicized Cultural Climate of the Sixties

In the mid-sixties the cultural climate changed abruptly with the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the protest in the Bay Area set the pace for the nation. The Free Speech

Movement in Berkeley started in 1964, using mass demonstrations to disrupt “business as usual” and make the voice of young people heard on matters of national policy. Folk music and the Beatles replaced cool jazz, and the emphasis in everything was on youth. Radical revolutionaries rose up on university campuses and in city centers side by side with hippies, who turned the Zen introversion of the hip beatniks into a popular pastime of the young with the discovery that psychedelic drugs let you “tune in” to yourself.

“Doing your own thing” was one of many new buzzwords heard at “love-ins,” psychedelic light shows, and mass-audience rock concerts, and rising from the smoke of marijuana “joints” from college dorm rooms and public parks all across America. An aggressive scrutiny of public policy on every level, coupled with an unprecedented openness to a complex variety of opinion, also characterized the ranks of this youth culture. Poster-making flourished as a natural corollary to this highly politicized atmosphere, and



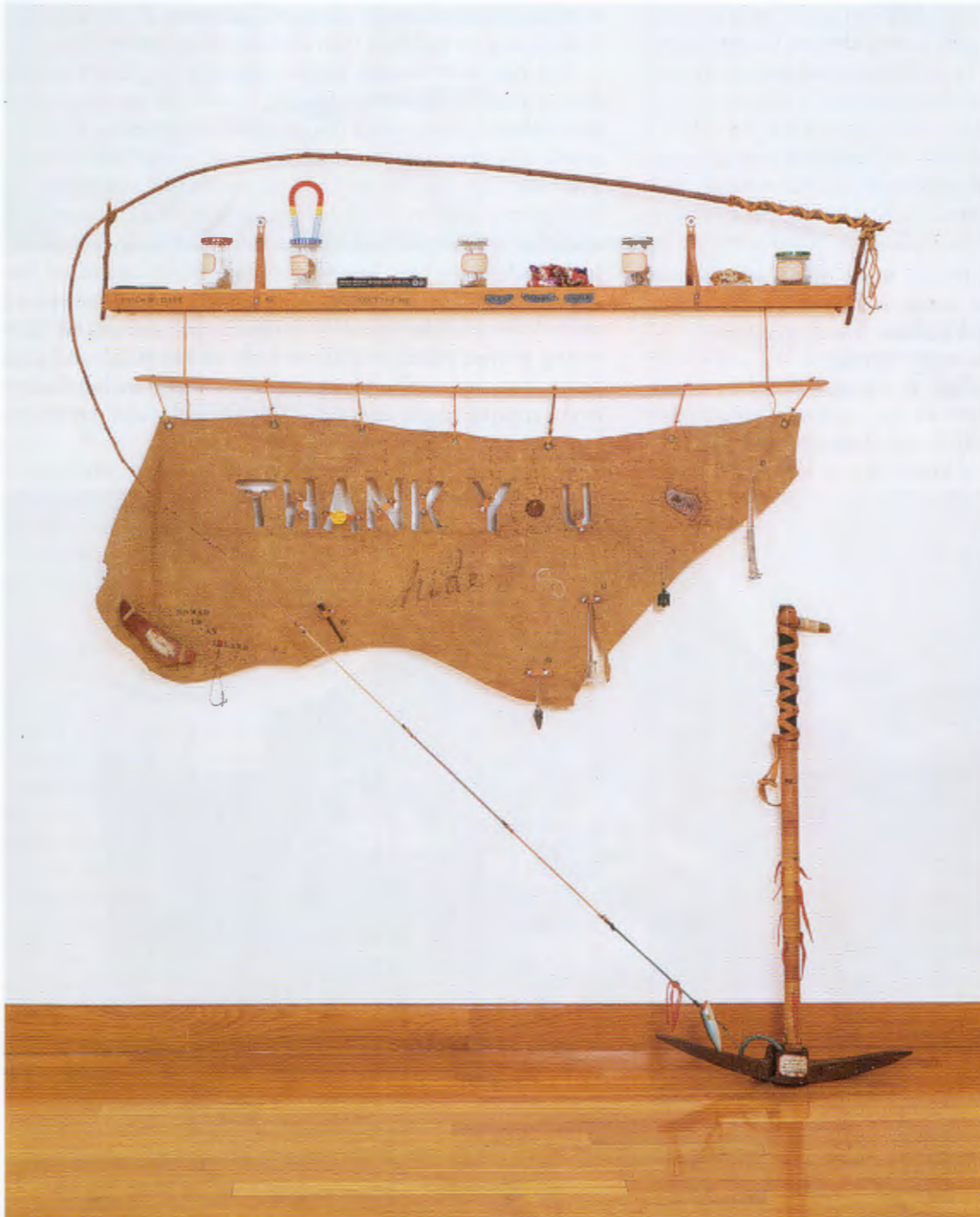
9.54 R. Crumb, “Mr. Natural and Flakey Foot in ‘A Gurl in Hotpants,’” front panel of comic strip from *Mr. Natural*, no. 2 (1971), p. 1, 9¼ × 6¼in (24.8 × 17.2cm).

out of the widespread interest in posters came the underground comics, originated by R. Crumb [fig. 9.54], S. Clay Wilson, Rick Griffin, and Victor Moscoso of *Zap Comix*. For a few brief years it seemed as if the counterculture would rival the mainstream.

William Wiley

Thank You Hide by William Wiley [fig. 9.55] emerged from this polarized context of intellectual activism on the one hand and an increasing retreat into complex, personal reference on the other.

I picked up the hide at a rummage sale—it was already there, so I felt absolved of any responsibility for killing [*the animal*]. Then Brenda [Richardson, a curator in Berkeley] gave me Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* to read. One day on the can, I just opened it to the middle and read a statement. I can't remember what it was, but it made me think, and I said "thank you" to myself. Then I saw the words cut out on the hide. The hide seemed like a perfect net for a whole lot of things, in terms of the history of objects—Indian artifacts, for example; I used to sift the ground for them when I was growing up in Washington. The broken bottle, a friend brought by one day.⁷³



9.55 William T. Wiley,
Thank You Hide, 1970.
Wood, leather, ink,
charcoal, cowhide,
pickaxe, found objects,
and watercolors, 6ft 2in
× 13ft 4½in (1.88 ×
4.08m).

Des Moines Art Center.
Purchased with funds from the
Coffin Fine Arts Trust, Nathan
Emory Coffin Collection of the
Des Moines Art Center, 1977.9.

reality of the reproduction. Ruscha also made photo books of *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), *Every Building on Sunset Strip* (1966), and *Thirty-four Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967), anticipating some of the issues raised by the conceptual artists in the later sixties.

Vija Celmins, a young artist at the beginning of her career in Los Angeles in the sixties, could hardly be called a pop artist. But she did have a very focused aesthetic on single, often common, utilitarian objects like her 1964 *Hot Plate* [fig. 9.59], which resonates interestingly not only with Ruscha but with the beginnings of minimalism. Like them, her work has a detached objectivity about it; it makes you want to look at something long and hard to see nuances in it that aren't about an outpouring of artistic emotion but rather a kind of wonder about familiar things. Finally, the degree of focus makes them unfamiliar and that is what is so interesting about them. The cord for the *Hot Plate* heads right for the viewer, making the object seem to be part of the viewer's space; and in this rather spare setting the red glow of the hot coils seems so important. A drama of some uncertain kind is implied. It also introduces a sense of time that is at odds with the timelessness of the presentation of the object. Celmins often takes a dramatic subject but looks at it with an eerily steady calm, sometimes representing it as a picture within a picture—making an almost photorealistic rendering of a newspaper clipping, as she did with the atomic bomb blast on Bikini Atoll.

Beginning in the late sixties, she began making graphite images and paintings of the moon's surface, segments of oceans, and the night sky [fig. 9.60]. In these images the Zen-like wonder at what was seen or imagined to be seen was aptly characterized by Stuart Morgan in this way: "For Celmins, art depends on slowness of making, slowness so extreme it resembles a belief."⁷⁵

ROBERT ARNESON

Robert Arneson was the most influential figure on the Bay Area arts scene in the seventies and eighties, though he emerged at the beginning of the sixties as a key figure in California "funk art" with his outrageous sculpture in clay. As with Manuel Neri and Robert Hudson, Arneson's encounter with the fifties work of Peter Voulkos was pivotal. Arneson first laid eyes on a Voulkos pot in 1957 and was simultaneously impressed and intimidated. "At that time," he recalled, "I never thought I'd be an artist. Just being a good potter would be enough. And then I saw Voulkos's piece."⁷⁶ Arneson had acquired a solid technical mastery by then but he was still reactionary in his ideas about ceramics.

Within two years, however, he was experimenting with rough, nonfunctional pots and by 1960 he had begun breaking through to his own organic, abstract expressionism.

Arneson's Break with Conventional Ceramics

In September 1961, while manning a demonstration booth at the State Fair, Arneson threw a pot on the wheel that reminded him of a quart beer bottle; so he put a ceramic cap on it and lettered it "No Deposit, No Return." Although he had had no thought of making a statement with this beer bottle, it nevertheless brought commercial culture into a fine art context, just as the pop artists in New York were beginning to do, and heralded a major transformation in Arneson's work. However, like Newman's first *Onement* or the initial sketch for Motherwell's "Elegy" series, the full implications of *No Deposit, No Return* for Arneson needed some time to germinate.

The beer bottle's sarcastic jab at the tradition of elegant vases and at the pottery establishment that maintained the compartmentalizing of clay as craft signaled Arneson's radical departure from that kind of work. In the summer of 1961 he had already begun making primitive, gestural sculptures in clay, drawing inspiration from Miró's ceramics and Asian works on display in the Avery Brundage Collection in San Francisco. In the fall of 1962 Arneson was brought in to establish a ceramic sculpture program at the University of California at Davis. Wayne Thiebaud [fig. 6.29], William Wiley, Manuel Neri, and Roy De Forest [fig. 9.61] all joined the Davis art faculty around that time, making it a very exciting place to be. The remarkable list of graduates from that program included not only important clay artists such as David Gilhooly and Richard Shaw [fig. 9.62] but sculptors such as Deborah Butterfield and the conceptualist Bruce Nauman, both of whose experimental approaches to natural materials and process owe something to the physical directness of Arneson's example.

The Toilets

In the summer of 1963 Arneson received an invitation to exhibit alongside Voulkos and John Mason in an important show at the Kaiser Center in Oakland called "California Sculpture." With his own style still somewhat unformed and feeling in awe of these celebrated clay artists, Arneson concluded that the occasion called for a personal manifesto. "I really thought about the ultimate ceramics in western culture. . . so I made a toilet,"⁷⁷ Arneson explained. He attributed sexual anatomy to the flush handle, the seat, and the opening of the bowl, put fingernails on one end of the



9.61 Roy De Forest, *Wise Horse's Dream*, 1972. Synthetic polymer on canvas, 5ft × 5ft 6½in (1.52 × 1.68m).

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchase with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, 73.29.

horseshoe seat and, as in *John with Art* of 1964 [figs. 9.63 and 9.64], he even installed a pile of ceramic excrement inside. Then he inscribed the piece with scatological jokes.

"I wasn't transforming anything," Arneson said. "I was looking at a toilet like someone would look at a figure, you know, a very traditional kind of art, and then I started to talk about it, putting the graffiti on."⁷⁸ The director of the Kaiser Center insisted that Arneson remove *Toilet* from the exhibition, causing the artist to realize that although it

was offensive, shocking, and in bad taste, he had succeeded in making something original. "This produced a presence of the artist," he explained, "... I had finally arrived at a piece of work that stood firmly on its ground. It was vulgar, I was vulgar."⁷⁹

With *Toilet* and *John with Art* Arneson aimed a vulgar satire at the abstract expressionist aspiration of letting everything within the artist spill out freely in the work. The heavy, monochromatic stoneware of *Toilet* resembled the ceramic sculpture of Voukos. In addition, Arneson treated the surface with an abstract expressionist touch. Despite his satirical irreverence, Arneson's outrageousness stems from and even pays homage to the iconoclasm of abstract expressionism.



9.62 Richard Shaw, *Seated Figure with Grey Head*, 1985. Glazed porcelain, 33 × 19 × 11½in (83 × 48.2 × 30cm). Courtesy George Adams Gallery, New York.

A Technical Breakthrough

Arneson worked for the whole of the summer of 1965 on an academic self-portrait to get away from “the silly stuff,”⁸⁰ as he described it, and was very upset when the bust cracked in the kiln. On an impulse he glued some marbles into the crack to look as if they were spilling out. Retaining cracked pieces and assembling elements with glue were procedures that ceramicists never used, but from this point forward Arneson did so without inhibition. In effect, the accident liberated him technically and later Arneson would regularly insist that his students build something, destroy it, and then rework it in order to free them from a sense of preciousness about the materials.



9.63 Robert Arneson, *John with Art*, 1964. Stoneware with glaze, 34½ × 18 × 25½in (87.6 × 45.7 × 64.8cm). Seattle Art Museum. Gift of Manuel Neri.



9.64 Robert Arneson, *John with Art* (detail), 1964. See fig. 9.63. Seattle Art Museum.

Objects of the Mid-Sixties

Around 1965 Arneson began working in the low-fired bright colors on white earthenware that James Melchert and Ron Nagle were using at the San Francisco Art Institute. Nagle had learned the technique from Ken Price, who started working with it in Los Angeles around 1959. Arneson concentrated increasingly on the expressive possibilities of glazing as a kind of painting and soon had an extraordinary mastery of the techniques. This interest in painting also belongs to Arneson's ongoing dialog with abstract expressionism, a recurrent theme in his career from the sarcasm of *Toilet* and this painterly glazing through his explicit investigations of Philip Guston and Jackson Pollock in the 1980s.

Toaster, created in 1965, has a surrealist tone, with the toasted fingers reaching out of the slot. But Arneson deliberately pushed the idea too far, scratching a small swastika on the side to turn the piece into a pun on the Nazi ovens, a joke in shockingly bad taste. Yet that startling offensiveness is precisely what raises everyone's emotions to maximum poignancy, prompting serious thought on the subject. No artist has ever been simultaneously so objectionable and so endearing and that combination is Arneson's signature. His preoccupation with common objects in the mid-sixties has neither the cool, dry cynicism of New York pop nor its tastefulness. Instead, his black, Brechtian humor rests on an outraged morality founded on a fundamental warmth toward his fellow man.

The Self-Portraits

In 1971 Arneson embarked on a concentrated series of self-portraits with works such as *Smorgi-Bob, the Cook* [fig. 9.65]. He turned to his own face [fig. 9.66] not out of an introspective urge but, on the contrary, as an infinitely malleable, neutral vehicle through which to explore ideas. In *Smorgi-Bob, the Cook* he used the pictorial device of one-point perspective to give an illusion of greater depth. He deliberately made the scheme explicit by forming the elements into a perfect receding triangle and then humorously put a portrait of himself at the apex. This ironic underlining of the formal device to point to himself deliberately parodies all the talk about flatness, illusionism, and the framing edge in the pretentious formalist art jargon of the late sixties. It also demonstrates the artist's ongoing dialog with painting. "My work," he noted in 1974, "is not about sculpture in the traditional sense, volumes and planes . . . I am making drawings and paintings in space."⁸¹ Moreover, the finish of *Smorgi-Bob, the Cook* looks like shiny porcelain dinnerware, which is what potters are expected to make anyway, and since the potter cooks his art in a kiln, Arneson sarcastically celebrates his achievement as a master chef.

Like plumbing fixtures and place settings, bricks also belong to the historic concerns of the ceramic craft that beckoned Arneson in the late sixties. He did a numbered edition of them, made surrealist transformations of them with ears and wings, set one in ceramic flames, and even finished

9.65 Robert Arneson, *Smorgi-Bob, the Cook*, 1971.
White earthenware with glaze, vinyl tablecloth, and wood table, 6ft 1in × 5ft 6in × 4ft 5in (1.85 × 1.67 × 1.34m).
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Purchase.





9.66 Robert Arneson
in his studio in Benicia,
California, 1978.
Photograph by James Woodson.

one with a delicate celadon glaze as in classic Chinese pottery. There is also a brick *tableau* called *Fragment of Western Civilization*, which resembles the antique ruins of a colossal self-portrait wall, inspired by pictures in *National Geographic* of ancient sites in Mexico with magnificent, monumental heads lying about on the ground.⁸² In this piece he wanted to break away from the singular object and make a scatter work of the kind that Barry Le Va or Robert Morris were doing in the late sixties [figs. 10.13 and 10.14].

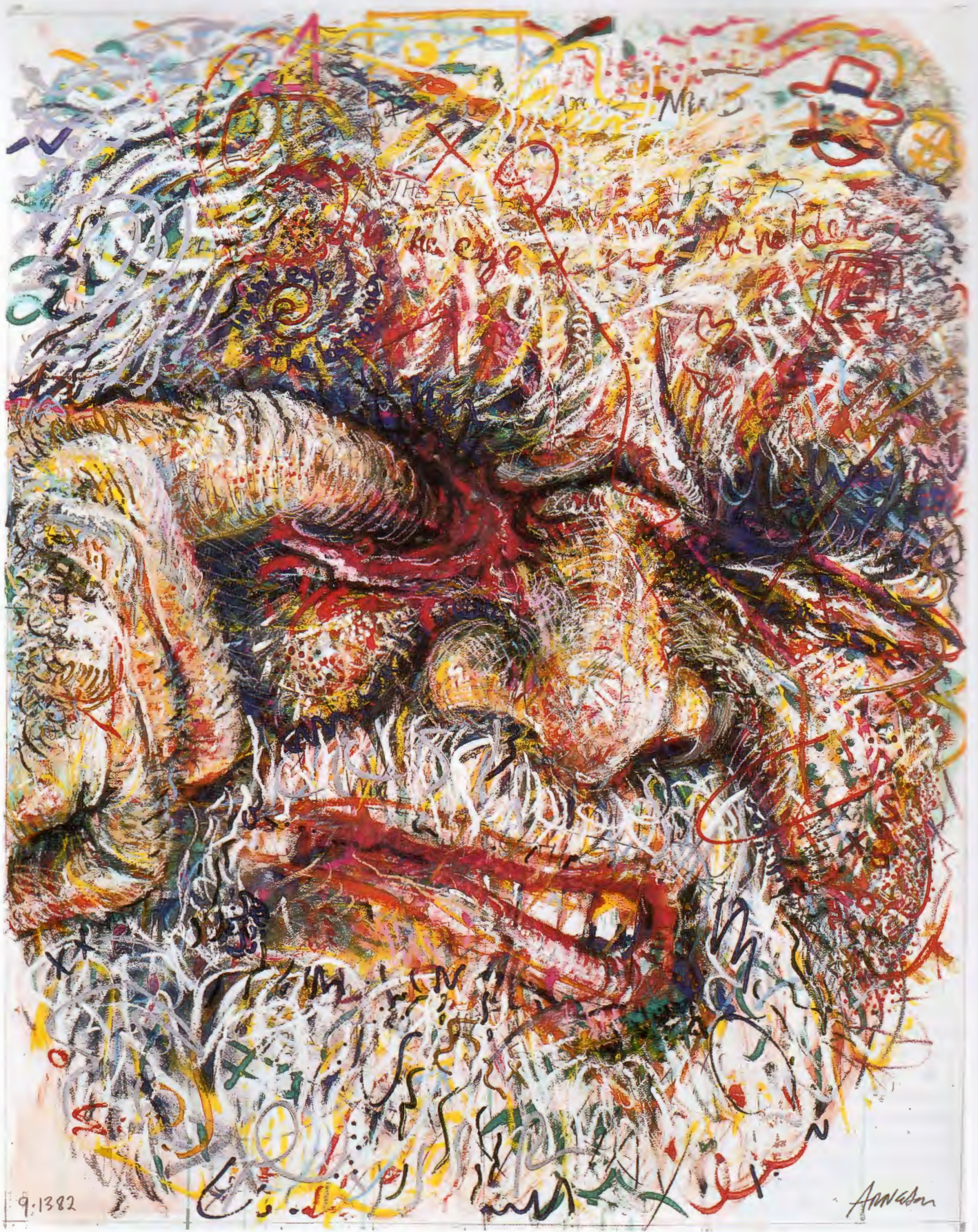
It was in part to avoid offending anyone that Arneson so frequently used his own face as a vehicle in the seventies. In *Klown* [fig. 9.67] he poked fun at himself in the best comic tradition, and yet the lifelike mask also appears to trap the artist underneath. In this work Arneson seems to have been more focused on the disconcerting “second skin” than on the internal character. The physical distortions of a self-portrait sketch by the seventeenth-century Flemish artist Adrian Brouwer, in which he is pulling faces in a mirror, and the psychologically impenetrable sculptures of the eighteenth-century psychotic sculptor F. X. Messerschmidt both informed the train of association that led up to *Klown*.⁸³ The graffiti scrawled all over the base are Arneson’s rendition of the satirical humor of the *vox populi*, the anonymous voice of the people.⁸⁴

In 1975 Jack Lemon of the Landfall Press in Chicago persuaded Arneson to make some prints and that exercise refocused his attention upon drawing. From that point until the end of his career, Arneson continued to make large, finished drawings in a loose, Pollock-like, color gesture that reflects his ongoing preoccupation with action painting. *Klown* and other sculptures of the late seventies have some Pollock-like splashes of color on the base that also subtly



9.67 Robert Arneson, *Klown*, 1978. Glazed ceramic,
37 × 19 × 19in (94 × 48.3 × 48.3cm).

Des Moines Art Center. Purchase, with funds from the Gardner and Florence Call Cowles Foundation, Des Moines Art Center permanent collection, 1980.4.



9.68 (opposite) **Robert Arneson**, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 1982. Acrylic, oil pastel, and alkyd on paper, 4ft 4in × 3ft 6in (1.32 × 1.07m).

Collection, Estate of the artist.

express this discourse, but it was not until 1983 that Arneson took up Jackson Pollock explicitly as a subject. The juxtaposition of Pollock's extreme emotional anguish and the lush, sensual beauty of his surfaces attracted Arneson in part because Arneson had identified this same conflict in his own work. *The Eye of the Beholder*, for example [fig. 9.68], is both exquisitely beautiful and cruel and the same time.

Discovering a Political Voice

Arneson had hit a stride in his work by early 1981, when he was asked by the San Francisco Art Commission to make a monumental portrait bust of the late mayor George Moscone for the new Convention Center. The head captured Moscone's likeness to everyone's satisfaction, but the inscriptions on the pedestal—that sarcastic voice of the people—caused a national scandal.

Dan White, a former San Francisco city official, had lost his position to an openly homosexual politician named Harvey Milk. On November 17, 1978 White walked into Mayor Moscone's office and shot him four times. White then reloaded, went down the hall to the office of Harvey Milk, and shot him five times. Six months later a jury convicted White of voluntary manslaughter rather than first-degree murder on the basis that he had hypoglycemia and had consumed a large quantity of Hostess Twinkies before the shooting spree, making him temporarily insane. This outrageous verdict caused the "White Night" riot at City Hall, which left 119 people injured (half of them police officers) and over a million dollars in damage.

On the base of the Moscone portrait Arneson portrayed a Twinkie and five bloody bullet holes as well as numerous inscriptions related to Moscone's career, including the headline "and Feinstein becomes mayor." Mayor Feinstein asked the artist to replace the pedestal, but he refused because it was part of the conception of the piece. So the mayor draped the pedestal for the dedication of the building on December 2, after which Arneson returned the money and withdrew the sculpture.

The publicity over the Moscone piece made Arneson realize that he had a platform from which to take up a cause,⁸⁵ so toward the end of 1982 he turned to a theme so sober it shocked even those who knew his work well. In *Ass to Ash* of late 1982 Arneson used his own head as ground zero for a nuclear holocaust. On the base of the charred and deformed *Holy War Head* [fig. 9.69] he inscribed a lengthy passage from John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, describing the horrific effects of radiation exposure on people. In 1983 Arneson began focusing on nuclear weapons, radiation poisoning, and above all on the terrifyingly detached attitude with which nuclear materials are handled and discussed.

Introspection Via Pollock

In 1984 and 1985 Arneson turned even more directly on the military establishment, portraying it as a savage martial court presiding over total annihilation. Then he looked to Jackson Pollock as a subject through which he could investigate his own psyche. Donald Kuspit described Arneson's growing interest in Pollock during the eighties as an identification with the artist as the brutalized and isolated victim and survivor.⁸⁶ But Pollock self-destructed, whereas Arneson overcame the odds. Far from being a hapless victim, Arneson externalized momentous rage and a corresponding terror in the anti-nuclear works and faced them head-on in his works on Jackson Pollock.

This exploration of Pollock seems to have contributed to the emergence of a late style in Arneson's work, with the loose gesture of his red conté crayon drawings of 1991 and a series of sculptures in 1991 and 1992 (the year of his death) that transcend the ephemeral emotions of present situations. Whereas the eccentricity of Arneson's wry humor had always represented rebellion against convention, these late works no longer concern themselves with external standards at all. Instead, a work such as *Head Eater* of 1991 (a double self-portrait mask of one self-image taking a bloody bite out of the head of the other) foregrounds the unruly forces of the unconscious mind as the norms against which to measure both experience and form.



9.69 **Robert Arneson**, *Holy War Head*, 1982. Glazed ceramic, 72 × 28 × 28in (182.9 × 71.1 × 71.1cm).

Collection, Rita and Irwin Blitt. Courtesy the Estate of the artist.