

# Identity and Embodiment

1961–1969

**I** GOT INTO ART BECAUSE I misinterpreted all the other questions on the aptitude test,” Arneson wisecracked to a group of undergraduates in 1981.<sup>1</sup> But his decision to make art was hardly by default. His drive for artistic expression was already evident in his childhood drawings. He wanted to become a cartoonist-illustrator, and then an art teacher in the 1950s, because he had no models for being an artist. It was lack of both sophistication and self-confidence that kept him in art education and crafts (ceramics) through his twenties. His encounter with the work of Peter Voulkos toward the end of the 1950s showed him the possibility of something more. At that moment, “I wanted to be Peter Voulkos,” he told a lecture audience many years later, adding, with his customary, self-effacing irony: “I did that for three years and couldn’t make it.”<sup>2</sup>

Three years was about how long it really did take for Arneson to work his way past the model of Voulkos. By 1959 he had mastered the craft in ceramics, but the example of Voulkos made him realize that he could forge an artistic identity in his own style, an ambition that transcended the technical skills. So, between 1959 and 1963, Arneson’s use of ceramics evolved from a material practice, focused on making good “art pottery,” to a symbolic language using his increasingly virtuosic technique with clay and glazes for fashioning an artistic persona through which he could intellectually and emotionally engage his experience.

In July of 1961, *Craft Horizons* reproduced one of Arneson’s organic vases in an article titled “The New Ceramic Presence.” The essay connected Arneson with Voulkos and abstract expressionism. “I was receiving reviews. . . . I was becoming aware

of who I was. I was feeling very good about what I was doing. . . . I was going to be an artist. I wasn’t going to be a potter.”<sup>3</sup> This article further inflamed the tensions with Tony Prieto to the point that Arneson had to stop going into the Mills ceramics shop altogether. So, for the 1961–62 academic year, Arneson set up a studio (which he shared with the photo-realist painter Richard McLean) on Thirty-Fifth Street in East Oakland and worked on large collage paintings. “There aren’t too many artists that can really be ceramicists because of the hang-up with all that equipment and things. You can’t get a loft in New York and start building big kilns,” he explained to a group of art students many years later, “they’ll run you out of town in a month.”<sup>4</sup> But by the summer of 1962 he was back in a ceramics shop, a new one that he set up for himself and for students at the University of California, Davis.

In the early 1960s Arneson grew beyond ceramics as a medium-based discipline, making it a vehicle for ideas and for finding his voice stylistically. In the process, he had a defining role in Funk art—a rebellious, counterculture aesthetic in the Bay Area that transgressed the rules of taste with deliberately crude techniques and materials. Funk fused influences from the 1950s Beat culture with the improvisation of jazz, New York School gesture painting, and Eastern philosophy. “There is an opening in jazz . . . that in my mind is equivalent to Eastern thought . . . it’s an interior thing,” he said.<sup>5</sup> Arneson’s Funk, like jazz improvisation, was a practice of breaking apart the structure and spontaneously rearranging the discrete fragments into a new totality. He did this literally and conceptually. This practice engages the viewer on a visceral level in part because the fracturing and reconfiguration

mirror the viewer's own psychic processes, continually accommodating to experience in the perpetually changing world. The visible flaws and awkwardness in Funk—its physicality and the collision with the unexpected—is precisely what opens up that “interior thing,” giving it a bodily dimension. Funk was also very much involved with the vibrancy of youth culture and had an endearingly sophomoric humor in its transgression of the rules. Arneson consciously cultivated all of these traits in his work from that time forward.

more explicitly figurative elements. Its awkwardly modeled, charcoal-glazed, vertical form stands just over two feet high, and across the center of the body is a deeply textured relief that recalls the art pottery of the late 1950s. The title riffs on “seahorse,” and Arneson modeled a crude seahorse head on this rough torso. In addition, he gave the figure human breasts like a mermaid<sup>7</sup> and punctuated them with prominent red nipples.

Arneson stuck a white flag on top of the head of *She-Horse and Daughter*; the flag reads more like

## “That I was I knew was of my body”

—WALT WHITMAN, *CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY*, 1856

In the summer of 1960, Arneson took a class in metal and jewelry, which suggests that he was still concerned with his preparation as a teacher of “crafts.” But he was surrounded and encouraged by other Bay Area Funk artists in the early '60s, artists such as Joan Brown, George Herms, James Melchert, Manuel Neri, and William T. Wiley. Looking back, Arneson also singled out the work of Bruce Conner, whose 1960 show at the Batman Gallery, especially Conner's sculpture *THE CHILD* (FIG. 2.2), had a transformative impact. *THE CHILD* vividly embodies the Beat sensibility of improvisation with abject materials and unconventional techniques.<sup>8</sup>

Arneson's eccentric, suggestively figural sculptures of 1961—works such as *Noble Image* (FIG. 2.1) and *Sign Post*—signal the emergence of his stylistic individuality. These sentinel-like, primitively gestural works, together with his expressionist pots of 1961 (FIG. 1.10), defined a unique artistic identity in ceramics that emphasized painterly aspects (in the glazing and in the gestural surfaces) and a working process rooted in the improvisational freedom of drawing. *She-Horse and Daughter* of 1961 (FIG. 2.3) is prescient in bringing together this gestural Funk expressionism with

caricature than representation. Below, a hooked appendage juts out on one side and a platform-like arm on the other delivers up a tiny, voluptuous, female nude in contrasting red terra cotta. This miniature figure sits there like a cartoon thought-bubble and, although sculpture physically demands balance, the composition here seems to develop from one thought to the next by free association, like a doodle, instead of privileging a compositional whole. This practice derives from the spontaneous processes of drawing and the imagery of comics rather than from sculpture. Peter Saul had begun exploring this style of free association as a compositional principle in painting at the time—indeed Arneson later bought a 1962 Saul drawing that does this (FIG. 2.4)—but the clay allowed Arneson to pioneer the idea in sculpture.

Another prescient work of 1961 came about in early September while Arneson was manning a demonstration booth at the State Fair in Sacramento with a group from Mills College. He threw a bottle on the wheel that reminded him of a quart-size beer bottle. He put a ceramic cap on it and lettered *No Deposit, No Return* on the side (FIG. 2.5). Like Barnett Newman's first *Onement* painting or the initial sketch for Robert Motherwell's *Elegy*

**2.1**

*Noble Image*, 1961, glazed  
stoneware, 30 x 18½ x  
8½ inches (46 x 77 x  
22 cm). Private collection.



## 2.2

Bruce Conner, *THE CHILD*, 1959–60. Wax, nylon, cloth, metal, twine, and high chair, 34½ x 17 x 16½ inches (87.7 x 43.1 x 41.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Philip Johnson.



series in 1948, the full implications of *No Deposit, No Return* took time to germinate.<sup>8</sup> The work was eccentric for Arneson at the time in its literalness, and it paralleled the new interest in commodity culture that was emerging among the pop artists in New York. Jasper Johns's *Painted Bronze II (Ale Cans)* of 1960 predates the Arneson beer bottle by roughly a year but, as Arneson later stated, he was not aware of the Johns *Ale Cans* at that time; Warhol showed his *32 Campbell's Soup Cans* of 1961–62 for the first time a year after Arneson's *No Deposit, No Return*.<sup>9</sup>

*No Deposit, No Return* revealed something fundamentally new in Arneson's work. If *She-Horse and Daughter* adumbrated the emergence of overt figuration, *No Deposit, No Return* pointed to a major transformation that would take place in his work with the expressive renderings of common objects in 1963–64. "After I had done that first beer bottle, I had continued to do abstract expressionist kinds of things, and that one bottle kept on haunting me in its referential manner. And, I then made . . . a conscious change in my work, and proceeded

to make what one might call objects . . . they're not really Pop, because they're much more romantic and they're dealing with touch."<sup>10</sup>

That romanticism perseveres in the gestural forms and in the use of glaze in a work such as *Pot for Exotic Tea* of 1962 (FIG. 2.6). The ceramics of Joan Miró and Josep Llorens Artigas that Arneson had seen in publications like *Craft Horizons* inspired the crude surface and bright color of this sculpture.<sup>11</sup> It is an object with a lot of personality. Like something out of a book by Dr. Seuss, it has a humorously animated, anthropomorphic, and anti-functional form. It sets the expectation of a teapot against the object's utilitarian ineptness, and that ironic distance became an increasingly overt signature of Arneson's work.

In the spring of 1962, the University of California, Davis (seventy-five miles northeast of San Francisco) hired Arneson as an assistant professor of art and design to set up a ceramic sculpture program for the coming fall. He must have been incredulous to find himself a professor at a major research university when he had barely adjusted to thinking of himself as a high-school teacher just a few years before. Davis was the rural, agricultural arm of the state university system; the art department had grown out of home economics in the College of Agriculture where three-quarters of Arneson's initial appointment resided.<sup>12</sup>

The family moved in the heat of summer into a suburban tract house at 1303 Alice Street in Davis. It was on the edge of the tomato fields and Arneson often described it as "the last house in town."<sup>13</sup> The kids would get lost in the fields and the farmers would bring them home; sometimes they even got crop-dusted. Arneson said that moving from the beautiful Oakland hills (near Mills College) to Davis was like moving to the desert. But with three boys between the ages of one and six, Jeanette, in particular, was happy to have more room, and their own house with a washer and dryer.

Arneson already knew Wayne Thiebaud, who had started teaching at UC Davis in 1960. They met at the California State Fair where Thiebaud had done painting demonstrations and was (until 1959) in charge of installing the art show for the Fair.

2.3

*She-Horse and Daughter*,  
1961, glazed stoneware,  
27 x 17¼ x 8½ inches  
(68.5 x 44 x 22 cm).  
Collection of Arlene and  
Harold Schnitzer.



2.4

Peter Saul, *Untitled*  
(*Mad Black and White*),  
1962, mixed media,  
27½ x 32½ inches (69.9  
x 82.5 cm). Private  
collection.



**2.5**

*No Deposit, No Return*, 1961, glazed stoneware, 10 3/4 x 5 x 5 inches (27.3 x 12.7 x 12.7 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Smits Ceramics Purchase Fund, Modern Art Deaccession Fund and the Decorative Arts Council. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California.



**2.6**

*Pot for Exotic Tea*, 1962, glazed stoneware, 9 x 14 1/2 inches (22.8 x 36.8 cm). Racine Art Museum, Gift of David and Jacqueline Charak.



Wayne broke into his signature pop style with the now famous paintings of hot dogs, pies, and cakes in 1961–62. William T. Wiley joined the UC Davis faculty with Arneson in 1962, and in 1965 Roy De Forest and Manuel Neri arrived. This remarkable collection of talented young artists worked well together, and as one former student described it, the impact of this art department in the sleepy town of Davis was like dropping an Alka-Seltzer tablet into a glass of water and watching it explode. Teaching became a big part of Arneson's life and this faculty constituted one of the most dynamic art programs in the country well into the 1980s.

Arneson started his ceramics program in Temporary Building Number Nine, known as TB9. It was a long, low, corrugated metal building (one of the first Butler Buildings constructed on the campus around 1928). When Arneson arrived it housed the campus police and the mail sorting facility, a food science library, and storage for some of the agriculture departments. "Bob . . . encouraged us to slam the door hard [and] make a lot of dust to drive the police out," Peter VandenBerge reported.<sup>14</sup> Pretty soon the police did leave. Then the library and postal services went. "The Food Science canned goods area went in a hurry because all the graduate students in the Art Department were coming down there and eating it up," Arneson later recalled.<sup>15</sup> Over that first summer, Arneson started clearing out space, building tables, and ordering the kilns and the wheels for throwing pots. He found a commercial bread dough mixer for mixing the clay and all in all he was feeling great about being there in a stable job.

After getting ceramics set up, Arneson helped Tio Giambruni (a sculptor who had arrived on the faculty the year before) build a foundry with a casting area and a burnout kiln next to the ceramic kilns at the back of the building. "For me, being picked up by the University of California at Davis was, in a way, like the Medicis deciding that they were going to sponsor me as an artist. I made considerably more money. But I was still a very beginning professor. . . . There wasn't everything that I

could want, but . . . it was just a great experience, being able to be somewhere."<sup>16</sup> Arneson started recruiting students while demonstrating at the state fair that summer and wrote to former students from Santa Rosa Junior College to let people know where he was and that he was starting up a new program.

TB9 quickly became a legendary place and Arneson proved to be a legendary teacher. "My philosophy was you establish a studio atmosphere, not a teaching atmosphere. The best way to establish a studio atmosphere is to work and to have work going. You can't really always be telling the students something."<sup>17</sup> David Gilhooly was a sophomore in 1962–63 and at first the only male in Arneson's classes. By the time Richard Shaw arrived four years later "the place was radiating energy. Everyone [Arneson as well as the grad students] seemed the same age and the amount and kind of work was phenomenal. . . . What was going on in TB9 was like a rushing locomotive. . . . Each week I would arrive and the studio and Bob's office would be crammed with quantities of new work."<sup>18</sup>

"I don't try to lay too much of a verbal trip out," Arneson explained. "I'll give you a critique, a little bit. I don't want too much dogma. But I do . . . want to see some action. . . . Let's face it, the students are students and they're going to be real awkward. The first thing, of course, in teaching, is that you must provide a vehicle in which the students will trust themselves. . . . So that they don't come to you and say, 'Is this right?' or 'Is this what you want?'"<sup>19</sup> In 1962, Arneson was thirty-two and many of the graduate students were only five or six years younger than that. The whole scene around the art school was very experimental and very familial, it had "the zany playfulness of *Mad* magazine," one former student reminisced.<sup>20</sup> It was also the beginning of the sexual revolution (with the FDA approval of oral contraception in 1960); art schools have always been permissive environments and Davis was no exception. In California of the 1960s there was a lot of pot, a lot of drinking, a lot free-wheeling sex. They were all having fun.



2.7  
*Just 2 Fingers Please*, 1963, glazed stoneware, 5 3/4 x 3 3/4 x 3 1/2 inches (14.3 x 7.9 x 7.9 cm). Private collection.



2.8  
*Covered Jar*, 1962, glazed stoneware, 9 3/4 x 8 x 8 inches (24.7 x 20.3 x 20.3 cm). Private collection.

Arneson made a goblet in 1963 with breasts hanging off one side, another with a brassiere on it. The obscene joke of modeling a vagina, held open with two invisible fingers, on the side of a cup in *Just 2 Fingers Please* (1963, FIG. 2.7) sums up the atmosphere in TB9, though that went hand-in-hand with a high level of serious productivity. Beyond the locker room humor and the allusion to measuring a drink with two fingers of booze, *Just 2 Fingers Please* also addresses the sensuality of the artist's relation to his materials. The eroticism in the sense of touch was central and the finger came up increasingly as an iconographic (and self-reflexive) element in Arneson's work because the finger is crucial to making forms as a potter. It stood for the artist's body in relation to his materials—to clay and later to the tactile sensation of drawing. Arneson continued to make art pottery even after turning principally to figurative sculpture after 1963, and as early as 1962 he occasionally drew comics-inspired graffiti on his ceramics (FIG. 2.8), which anticipated his annotations on later sculptural work. But even in the simplest of his clay pots (works that were completely nonrepresentational), viewers did not miss the reference to the intimacy of the body in the manipulation of the materials. Quoting a "Mrs. Buddie M. Shrier of Los Angeles," concerning Arneson's ceramic pots in the 1963 state fair, the reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported her saying, "They were disgusting, I saw men blush."<sup>21</sup>

So even the nonrepresentational forms of Arneson's dysfunctional pots and plates pushed some of his viewers out of the comfort zone. The homemade, goopy look of the organic forms and glazes gave these works a bodily sensuality (FIG. 2.9). But the explicit, deliberately vulgar representational subjects are what brought Arneson's artistic identity into clear focus. In 1963 he began making a series of ceramic trophies "that were dealing with some aspects of my body."<sup>22</sup> Most of them made explicit sexual allusions and exploited that same tactile materiality as works like the abstract *Wall Piece* of 1963 (FIG. 2.10), in which the form seems to ooze down the wall. In other works of the 1960s he would build up the forms



27

*Just 2 Fingers Please*, 1963, glazed stoneware, 5 1/4 x 3 1/4 x 3 1/4 inches (14.3 x 7.9 x 7.9 cm). Private collection.



28

*Covered Jar*, 1962, glazed stoneware, 9 3/4 x 8 x 5 inches (24.7 x 20.3 x 20.3 cm). Private collection.



Arneson made a goblet in 1963 with breasts hanging off one side, another with a brassiere on it. The obscene joke of modeling a vagina, held open with two invisible fingers, on the side of a cup in *Just 2 Fingers Please* (1963, FIG. 2.7) sums up the atmosphere in TB9, though that went hand-in-hand with a high level of serious productivity. Beyond the locker room humor and the allusion to measuring a drink with two fingers of booze, *Just 2 Fingers Please* also addresses the sensuality of the artist's relation to his materials. The eroticism in the sense of touch was central and the finger came up increasingly as an iconographic (and self-reflexive) element in Arneson's work because the finger is crucial to making forms as a potter. It stood for the artist's body in relation to his materials—to clay and later to the tactile sensation of drawing. Arneson continued to make art pottery even after turning principally to figurative sculpture after 1963, and as early as 1962 he occasionally drew comics-inspired graffiti on his ceramics (FIG. 2.8), which anticipated his annotations on later sculptural work. But even in the simplest of his clay pots (works that were completely nonrepresentational), viewers did not miss the reference to the intimacy of the body in the manipulation of the materials. Quoting a "Mrs. Buddie M. Shrier of Los Angeles," concerning Arneson's ceramic pots in the 1963 state fair, the reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported her saying, "They were disgusting, I saw men blush."<sup>21</sup>

So even the nonrepresentational forms of Arneson's dysfunctional pots and plates pushed some of his viewers out of the comfort zone. The homemade, goopy look of the organic forms and glazes gave these works a bodily sensuality (FIG. 2.9). But the explicit, deliberately vulgar representational subjects are what brought Arneson's artistic identity into clear focus. In 1963 he began making a series of ceramic trophies "that were dealing with some aspects of my body."<sup>22</sup> Most of them made explicit sexual allusions and exploited that same tactile materiality as works like the abstract *Wall Piece* of 1963 (FIG. 2.10), in which the form seems to ooze down the wall. In other works of the 1960s he would build up the forms



**2.9**  
*Untitled Ceramic Plate*,  
 1963, glazed stoneware,  
 12 x 11 x 4 inches (30.5  
 x 28 x 10.2 cm). Private  
 collection.

**2.10**  
*Wall Piece*, 1963, glazed  
 stoneware, 24½ x 20½  
 x 6 inches (62.2 x 52 x  
 15.2 cm). Private  
 collection.



in muscularly applied slabs that vividly take the viewer to the immediate physical sensation of working and layering damp clay.<sup>23</sup> But the recognizable elements are what made the trophies howl with personality and transition his Funk aesthetic—the rebelliously crass humor and the exaggeratedly tactile handling of the materials—into a figurative iconography.

The trophies, which Arneson made between 1963 and 1965, are the first cohesive body of representational objects, though there are a few individual representational works earlier like *No Deposit, No Return* and *She-Horse and Daughter*. The limp, attenuated handles of *Trophy* (FIG. 2.11) look more like a section of intestine—despite their shiny gold glaze—than the handles of a real trophy. Two weirdly corrugated breasts with long, dark nipples form the outside shell of the “trophy.” Arneson inscribed the 1965 *Goldfinger Trophy* (FIG. 2.12) with “007” in block letters across the front (in case anyone missed the allusion to the James Bond movie in the title), and he stuck a disembodied gold finger on top and reaching out the front and down toward the middle Os, which double as hair-encircled vaginas. Up one side, he scratched “HERE PUSSY PUSSY,” a double entendre on the movie’s female lead character, Pussy Galore, and he crowned the piece with an open hand on which he glazed the middle finger gold. The 1964 *China Trophy #1*, an even more offensive piece, graphically illustrates a racist sailor’s joke that Chinese women have vaginas slanted sideways like their eyes; *Tit Trophy* is surmounted by a pair of breasts shaped like footballs with silver glazed nipples and a red-lipped, hairy vagina on the base. Scatological images and male genitals also abound; he laid a turd across the top of *The Official Souvenir Trophy* (1964) and hung testicles off of the 1964 *All American Trophy*, the 1965 *Love Trophy*, and the *Heart Memorial Trophy* (1965), underscoring the sublimated male sexual prowess which athletic trophies symbolize. *Flush Trophy* (FIG. 2.13) triumphantly celebrates Arneson’s breakthrough work of the preceding year, *Funk John* (FIG. 2.14), setting it

**2.11**

**Trophy**, 1964, glazed stoneware, and acrylic paint, 19 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 8 inches (50.2 x 29.9 x 20.4 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum purchase made possible by the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program 1990.74.



**2.12**

*Goldfinger Trophy*, 1965,  
glazed stoneware, 32 ½  
x 15 x 9 inches (82.5 x  
38.1 x 22.8 cm). Private  
collection, New Jersey.



2.13

*Flush Trophy*, 1964,  
glazed stoneware, 34 x  
13 1/2 inches (86.4 x  
34.3 cm). Private  
collection, New Jersey.



2.14

*Funk John*, 1963, glazed stoneware, 36 x 28 x 20 inches (91.4 x 71 x 51 cm), destroyed.



on top of a pile of excrement that overfills the cup and exudes disgustingly out holes in the sides. On either side of the boxlike base are a "girls" room with a closed door and an open doorway for "men" in which Arneson shows himself, pants down, on the toilet inside. Arneson made twenty trophies or more. "I had a whole trophy show and I got trophy cabinets . . . and then I advanced to the toilet," he said.<sup>24</sup>

In the trophies, Arneson went straight to the most vulgar and embarrassing subject matter he could find. They are a rebellious slap at the decorum of the ceramics profession, but above all they blatantly explore what we are not supposed

to say in public. In his relentless exploitation of uncomfortable subject matter and in the vulgarity of his materials Arneson reopens areas of feeling and experience that good manners and the imposed amnesia of socialization into adulthood normally wall off. He found his distinctive voice in the work of the mid-1960s precisely by probing this raw content.

Increasingly and ever more deliberately, Arneson's work of the '60s transgressed cultural hierarchies about acceptable, much less appropriate, subject matter and materials. The coarseness of the common people (including their humor) and the perpetual reinvention of the rules have always been important threads in American art.<sup>25</sup> But the deliberate crudeness of these works also embodies the abject in their portrayal of the self. Here, the artist has transformed into works of art the dynamics that took place in his thoughts as he negotiated his own psyche and interacted with his cultural moment. In so far as others can recognize the psychic forces symbolized in such forms, they can use the works to articulate their own experience too.<sup>26</sup>

Early in 1963, Arneson received an invitation to exhibit on the Kaiser Industries roof garden in Oakland in a big exhibition of California sculptors. "Suddenly I had to present myself with my colleagues, how was I going to stand up amongst them?" he wondered. "I could see myself right now Bob Arneson, in between John Mason and Peter Voulkos, and would I be just a junior version of those two guys and just a little pisser? That really put my mind into gear." So over the summer he reflected on his "heritage as a ceramicist . . . about what were the ultimate ceramics in Western culture." He found himself thinking about this one day in the bathroom at TB9 and realized: "Hey, man, you're on it. This is it. This little pot has no heritage. . . . And it is 100% ceramic!"<sup>27</sup> With his own style still forming, and feeling in awe of the celebrated clay artists with whom he would be exhibiting, the thirty-three-year-old Arneson felt that the occasion called for a personal manifesto and he made a *Toilet* (later retitled *Funk John*) (FIG. 2.15).

2.15

*His and Hers*, 1964, glazed stoneware, 34 x 24 x 28 inches (86.3 x 61 x 71 cm). Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, Museum Purchase from the Modern and Contemporary Art Fund.



With *Funk John* he knew he had succeeded in making something original, something uniquely his own.

Arneson made *Funk John* in stoneware like his other Voulkos-inspired pieces of the time; it was a dirty white with a brown tank lid. A large, revolting ooze bulged out of the tank and flowed in a curl down the side. He turned the flush handle into a bluish turd and painted fingernails with bright red polish on one end of the horseshoe toilet seat. A long, undulating, turd-like pipe of clay also meandered out of the base and around the back. On the front of the tank he painted two red breasts (a motif repeated more legibly in *His and Hers* of 1964, FIG. 2.15), and in the bowl he put some bright red ceramic turds.<sup>29</sup> "I explored it in the Voulkos mannerism, 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. . . . There's something about turds and clay that have to do with toilet training anyway."<sup>30</sup>

Arneson was doing all his work at this time in TB9 where the kilns were not very large, so he had to build *Funk John* in four separate sections and then assemble and glue it. He high-fired the piece and then added some low fire color touches. "I had finally arrived at a piece of work that stood firmly on its ground. . . . It was vulgar, I was vulgar," he later explained.<sup>31</sup> *Funk John* was pivotal. It embodied who Arneson was as an artist and in his mind it followed out of a material logic about "the ultimate ceramic" in Western civilization.

After installing his work in the roof garden show with a group of his students, Arneson watched people come around and look. At one point a group of Girl Scouts on a field trip came by. "I thought this would be the ultimate test: you don't want to offend Girl Scouts. They crawled around and looked at it. They all had a good time. They all proceeded then to climb up on my pedestal and look down inside, and they knew what they were

going to find. They all went 'Ooooooo,' laughed and screamed, and were delighted."<sup>32</sup> Content with what he had accomplished, he drove back to Davis with his assistants.

*About eight o'clock at night I got a phone call. . . . "Bob, we're in serious trouble down here. You've got to get this toilet off this roof." . . . So the next day I drive down to the Kaiser Building. My piece is already down, it's in the basement. I'm really pissed off. "What's the big hassle?" . . . "Well, Bob, I had to take that piece down because the Vice President of Kaiser Industries came through last night and . . . when he came to your toilet sitting up there on a pedestal, he said, 'God damn, no fucking artist is going to attack American capitalism in this manner.' . . . That blew my mind."<sup>33</sup>*

Arneson took the toilet home and put it in storage but "I was pleased," he recalled.<sup>34</sup> The piece had not only succeeded in transcending the focus on the craft in discussions about his work but it elicited a response about ideas. Moreover the confrontation with authority (the vice president of Kaiser) fit perfectly to Arneson's character and expanded the meaning of the piece. "Suddenly, it was more than itself," he said.<sup>35</sup>

Eventually, one of Arneson's students, Nina Kelly, bought *Funk John*. She was an adventurous collector and had work by most of his UC Davis colleagues. But her husband, the right-wing owner of a television station in Sacramento, did not have much sensitivity to art and on top of that he was jealous of his wife's affection for Arneson.<sup>36</sup> One day, in a rage, he pushed the piece out the sliding doors of the living room and it smashed on the patio. She carefully gathered up the pieces and Arneson glued it back together. "It broke in a nice, wholesome manner," he recalled. "There weren't a lot of little shards, so I restored it to its original."<sup>37</sup> Then a friend of Nina's who also collected Arneson's work agreed to keep it for her.

Arneson persistently tried to buy *Funk John* back after that and in 1974 he borrowed it for a



major retrospective. But after the 1974 show it went back to the Kellys and about two years later Nina ran into Arneson and Sandra Shannonhouse (his second wife) at an event in Sacramento. "Nina told us that it had been destroyed," Shannonhouse recalled, "I was there: 'After two years of therapy and a divorce I can tell you that it no longer exists.' Then she went on to say that it had been destroyed to redeem her relationship with Bob Kelly. . . . I started crying. . . . Bob drove home from Sacramento and kept saying 'I just can't believe it!'"<sup>38</sup> Who knows what the work symbolized for Kelly's husband; maybe it inflamed his jealousy or perhaps the powerful sensuality of the piece opened up feelings in him that he couldn't handle, like the Kaiser executive who thought it was an attack on capitalism. "You can exhibit a penis more easily than you can a toilet," Arneson later remarked.<sup>39</sup>

With *Funk John*, Arneson finally made a major sculpture that extended the formal character of his Funk style in ceramics into a Funk subject matter, and it was uniquely his own. It was a statement of his artistic identity. While the heavy, monochromatic stoneware of *Funk John* resembles the work of Voulkos, the imagery, the inscription, and even the illustrational use of color are all strictly Arneson. The representational and narrative aspects are unlike anything that preceded it, "and then I started to talk about it, putting the graffiti on."<sup>40</sup> Spontaneously, he scratched "Kilroy was here" into the bowl of *Funk John* and after that, writing became a more and more prevalent corollary to the imagery in his work. Increasingly, his works resembled personal diary entries. Even minor pieces tended to have this kind of diaristic character. There is a sequence of little cups from 1963–64, for example, that he gave to a female graduate student at the time and he inscribed them: "What Is it," "There's Something About You," "I Get Your Message," and "Handle with Care." "You would allow the clay to talk to you a little bit," he explained. "Instead of Voulkos—just pure gut action, response to the clay, slap-bang, poke a hole, rip and tear—you also alluded to a subliminal type of imagery which crept through."<sup>41</sup>

The abstract expressionist idea of autographic brushwork alluded to in Arneson's expressionistic treatment of the surface in *Funk John*—the gestural handling and his painterly glazing—became a subject in itself for him and he treated it with a certain remove. When Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston and their colleagues turned to existential introspection as their source for an original subject matter, they adopted automatist brushwork as a formal principle with which to embody it. The gestural work in clay by Voulkos and John Mason followed out of this tradition. At first Arneson embraced this idea of autographic expressionism too, but by 1963 he also infused his expressionist style with a streak of ironic distance, increasingly transforming it into a set of symbolic attributes associated with abstract expressionism and the Beats as though pre-formulated rather than as a direct vehicle for his own introspective expression. This remove implies an epistemology in which even everyday experience is understood in terms of pre-constructed formulations (images from television and magazines, for example, and the interpolation of language where the words we use to describe our experience actually shape what we see in the world and at the same time stand between us and the world). This was a change in perspective that took place broadly in the 1960s as people increasingly apprehended the world as signs (in the semiotic sense) rather than as what they had previously thought of as unmediated or "direct" experience.

Pop art was important in giving form to this shift in point of reference from nature to culturally constructed images of the world. But Arneson differed from artists such as Warhol and Johns in that he layered his intuitive grasp of this detachment through language with a persevering expressionism; indeed he embraced the contradictory complexity (and defiled impurity) of having both at once. While reifying the reference to automatism into an icon or sign, Arneson nevertheless also retained some degree of emulation of the abstract expressionist's introspective act. The problem became to understand how his existential anxiety was connected to this new sense of detachment from experience.



**2.16**  
*John with Art*, 1964,  
 glazed stoneware with  
 overglaze, 34 1/2 x 18 x  
 25 1/2 inches (87.6 x 45.7  
 x 64.7 cm). Seattle Art  
 Museum, Gift of Manuel  
 Neri.

**2.17**  
*John with Art*, 1964,  
 detail.

In *John With Art* of 1964 (FIGS. 2.16, 2.17), Arneson punned on the abstract expressionist idea of letting everything spill out from within the artist into the work, making “beautifully rendered ceramic emblems,” as he called the clay turds in the toilet bowl.<sup>42</sup> He made this point still more explicit by shaping the turds as letters that spell out the word “ART.” Yet despite the bawdy humor and the disgusting imagery, the sensuality of the surfaces, the richness of the colors, the “painterliness” of the way he applied the glazes, even the self-effacing nature of the subject matter point to an endearingly romantic expressionism.

After *Funk John* Arneson made a tall, skinny floor model *Urinal* and then a squat one that looked more like a toilet. He continued to work with the idea of the toilet as well, making several sketches (FIG. 2.18), lithographs, a painting, and about half a dozen more ceramic toilets between 1963 and 1966 (FIG. 2.20). He played with the *double entendre* of “throwing” a pot on a wheel (“thrown”) and the common slang of referring to the toilet as a “throne” and a “pot” in the titles of pieces from 1964 and 1965; in one of them he added a regal chair back with arm rests, surmounted by



a heraldic eagle. Under the front edge of the twin bowls of *His and Hers* (FIG. 2.15), Arneson stenciled the words “His” and “Hers” respectively. On the lower backside of “Hers” he modeled rounded buttocks and for the tank he created a pair of vertically erect breasts, standing up like missiles with nipples pointed skyward. The red oval seat is a mouth with lipstick and the bowl an organic orifice. A small hole just above the bowl completes the torso with a navel. On *His*, by contrast, a bright red erect phallus stands where the tank should be and the horseshoe seat rests, limply relaxed, on a wide-bodied bowl.

The full-scale toilets ended in 1965 with a metallic-glazed version on a checkered pedestal (with a checkered turd in the bowl) and the white *John Figure* (1965) (FIG. 2.20), the most formally restrained work in the series, but also one that opens out in new directions formally. In the course of working on *John Figure*, Arneson eliminated the color and glazed over the inscriptions. Then he created a tableau with a square tiled floor onto which he set the toilet. He replaced the tank with a fully modeled female torso, installing the flush handle over one breast, and setting a face inside the bowl

**2.18**

*John Study*, ink on paper, 25 1/4 x 19 inches (64.1 x 48.2 cm). Private collection.



**2.19**

Arneson in TB9 working on *His and Hers*, 1964.



looking up. Nasty-looking pipes of clay emerge out of one side while the short arms of the horseshoe seat fold open sensuously around the lip of the heart-shaped bowl and a truncated foot rests on the tile floor, a footprint away.

Arneson had seen the work of the minimalists in New York in 1964<sup>43</sup> and was aware of all the writing that positioned minimalism as a reaction against abstract expressionism: “an art whose blank, neutral, mechanical impersonality contrasts so violently with the romantic, biographical abstract expressionist style which preceded it,” as one critic famously wrote at the time.<sup>44</sup> *John Figure* responds to the probity of these early minimalist works in the austerity of its white on white surface and in the way it sits on the floor and opens compositionally into the gallery space rather than remaining self-contained as an object on a pedestal. It was two years after this that Carl Andre first placed his grids of metal squares directly on the floor, but earlier minimal works by Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and by Andre himself may have

suggested Arneson’s experiment with disposing his work in the gallery space this open-ended way. On the other hand, the eccentricity of simultaneously including an “impure” expressionist handling of the surface and such unconventional and narrative subject matter runs counter to the cool, impersonal tone of minimalism. Arneson experimented with the white on white tiled tableau again in *Short Stop* (1965)—a standing urinal with foot prints tracking down the inside of the bowl and onto the floor, leaving a single foot running away as in *John Figure*. In 1966 he made models for a *Sinking Toilet* and a *Sinking Bathtub* with that same white on white, square tiled floor. In these, the explicit subject literally melts away, receding into the floor.

Meanwhile, having helped Tio Giambruni to build a foundry in TB9 Arneson himself took an excursion into bronze casting in 1963–64. Perhaps he saw this as a way to make something that would be treated more seriously than the *Funk John* and he later recalled that “at the time I always thought my bronzes were my art, and my ceramics were



**2.20**  
*John Figure*, 1965, glazed  
stoneware, 28 x 60½ x  
35 inches (71.1 x 153.7 x  
89 cm). Private collection.

my fun."<sup>45</sup> However, the work in bronze at this time was not a success. He did not go to bronze with an idea of something he wanted to make that demanded that medium. So he cast brassieres and girdles and footballs (FIG. 2.24) and painted some of the bronzes with the pop art colors that were fashionable at the time. But because the bronzes did not follow organically out of his other work and thought, they seem arbitrary; they don't even look like something made by Arneson. The only aesthetically satisfying bronze from this period is the monochrome *On and Off* in which he modeled a garden spigot and cast it. The gestural modeling of a common object related to his work in clay and that is probably what saved it.

Arneson went to New York in June of 1964 for a ceramics conference at Columbia University. He toured the galleries while he was there and met with the New York dealer Allan Stone, who gave him a one person show later that same year. This is how he remembered that happening. "At the end of July, Allan Stone comes to California, and Wayne Thiebaud brings him over to my house in Davis. We open my garage door and I show Allan my bronzes. . . . Meanwhile, in my two-car garage, I've got one of my toilets. . . . He said, 'forget the bronzes, this is your stuff.' I should have known that too."<sup>46</sup>

In 1964–65 Arneson looked in a number of different directions in search of a "significant subject matter"—a phrase he would use sarcastically in the title for a self-portrait a decade later. He wanted his work to have deep meaning in the way abstract expressionist painting did. While the toilets had succeeded in building on the transgressive Funk aesthetic to bring his artistic character into focus, it was hard to see where to go from there. He began rendering the common objects around him in clay and metamorphosing them with inspiration from the vocabulary of surrealism, as in such artists as Salvador Dalí and René Magritte, although Arneson's unique language of the everyday remained more steadfastly in the prosaic reality of ordinary experience than the work of the surrealists did.

In 1965, Arneson branched out from the toilets and started working his way around the

bathroom—he made a sink, a bathroom scale (with a "surrealist" touch—it has footprints and toes), and toothbrushes (he titled a rack of five of them "*Family Portrait*"). Then he turned to other things around the house. His *Toaster* (FIG. 2.21), the two versions of *Typewriter* (FIG. 2.22),<sup>47</sup> the camera (called *Klick*) with an eyeball in the lens, and the binoculars (also with eyeballs), all exploited the surrealist vocabulary of dream-metamorphosis. He saw (and loved) Claes Oldenburg's *Soft Typewriter* of 1963, although Arneson's transformation of the keys on his *Typewriter* (1965) into fingers with red nail polish deliberately addressed an explicit and current social topic (sexism in the workplace).

Arneson took the idea for his *Toaster*, from a picture of a "Toastmaster" in a Montgomery Ward mail order catalogue where he went surfing for subject matter. But "maybe someone had burned their hand," Sandra Shannonhouse speculated,<sup>48</sup> "and he was thinking that it had to be more than a toaster, and he made the hand coming out of the toaster, and then the Nazi connection entered his mind. I think that is how he worked."<sup>49</sup> The sequence of free association from the burnt fingers reaching out of the toaster slot to the swastika under one handle makes a shockingly bad pun on the Nazi ovens. But the Nazi references probably just crept in as he went along and he was not going to edit them out, in part because the experience of exhibiting *Funk John* had taught him the power of upsetting people. But censoring himself would also have undermined the integrity of his process. His 1965 *Sink with Hard to Get out Stain* grew naturally out of the *Toaster*, referring to Auschwitz with the ceramic bar of "stone" soap resting on the sink. The "hard to get out stain" functions simultaneously as commentary and memorial. But the Holocaust subject also tapped into the artist's profound and persevering anxiety about his own mortality, and that anxiety—not the historical reference—is the real subject in this work.

The offensiveness, the anger, and the coarseness in a work like Arneson's *Toaster* are provocations that open a well of powerful and motile emotion in viewer and artist alike. Deep feelings overwhelm us with the exposure of their powerful,

**2.21**

*Toaster*, 1965–66, glazed earthenware, 6 x 11 x 7 inches (15.2 x 28 x 17.8 cm). Private collection, New York.



psychologically primitive content. This content is so disjunctive that it threatens the boundaries we erect around ourselves to maintain the integrity of the self. By the 1970s Arneson intuitively recognized that this challenge to the boundaries of the self was the “significant subject matter” he needed to pursue. It was also possibly the most important emerging issue in the social psychology of American culture at that time. The free association that took place in the process of working is one way in which the artist gained access to this material. He referred to this free associative process as the “drawing quality” of working in clay because unlike sculptors who necessarily plan out the final form of a sculpture before making it, Arneson explored his subject as he worked and the clay allowed him to do so with the freedom of drawing. This reliance on

spontaneous free association is part of the legacy of the abstract expressionist ceramics of Voulkos and Mason.

In 1958, Allan Kaprow famously summed up “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” in a highly influential article of that title for *Art News*. He wrote that “we can become entangled in the web to some extent and by moving in and out of the skein of lines and splashings can experience a kind of spatial extension.” He pointed out that Pollock’s work differs fundamentally from all previous painting in that we are forced to “identify with the process” rather than to transport ourselves into a pictorial space.<sup>50</sup> “The ‘picture’ has moved so far out that the canvas is no longer a reference point,”<sup>51</sup> and we experience “a delirium, a deadening of the reasoning faculties, a *loss of ‘self’*” [italics

2.23

*Case of Bottles*, 1964,  
glazed stoneware, 10½ x  
22 x 15 inches (26.7 x 55.9  
x 38.1 cm). Santa Barbara  
Museum of Art, Gift of  
Mr. and Mrs. Stanley  
Sheinbaum.



the humor of personifying the bottles and undermining our familiarity with them also gives them a layer of irony.

Concurrent with the everyday objects, Arneson continued to make Funk sculptures like the stoneware *Trophy*. These works have a sarcastic edge in their sexually allusive forms and flaunting of the tradition of elegant, functional pottery. But having found a way to embody himself in his Funk aesthetic (first in abstract and then in representational objects or, as in the trophies, with aspects of both), Arneson wanted to get away from the humor and find a serious content. So he labored the entire summer of 1965 on a sober ceramic self-portrait—his first self-portrait bust.<sup>54</sup>

As an extension of defining his artistic identity, he attempted to visualize himself literally. When the bust came out of the kiln he had himself photographed beside it (FIG. 2.26), as though for comparison. Its academic sobriety is broken only (but significantly) by the strange treatment of the eyes as two simple holes of radically different sizes. It's hard to fathom Arneson's motives with respect to the eyes. He never spoke about it in interviews, but the emphasis on abstraction in his treatment of the eyes resembles Matisse's handling of the boy's face in his famous painting *The Piano Lesson* in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and it may be relevant as an expression of Arneson's emerging desire to be "serious," placing himself