


## Having Your Cake and Painting It, Too

*Susan Landauer*

For years the laughable axiom that humorous art should not be taken seriously could be heard in art circles. “Light” does not illuminate. It was comic art’s uneasy relationship to entertainment that kept it a minor tributary of the mainstream. As critic Michael Kimmelman put it, the “no pain, no gain philosophy”—that “pleasure is O.K. only if it’s clearly subordinated to instruction”—has been a fundamental credo until relatively recently.<sup>1</sup> Although humor can be found as far back as the frolicking nymphs and satyrs of Athenian black-figure pottery, the best-known practitioners (Cruikshank, Daumier, and Hogarth, to name a few) remained within the precincts of illustration and cartooning. The anarchic spirit of humor appealed to early modernists such as Picasso, Miró, and Klee, but only Duchamp made it central to his oeuvre, and even then his approach was so subtle and confounding that he easily passed the high-art sobriety test. In the past couple of decades, of course, all of this has changed. The postmodernist breakdown of high and low has made clowning respectable, as the careers of Keith Haring, Jeff Koons, Kenny Scharf, William Wegman, and countless others attest. But comedy has long been a staple—even a defining characteristic—of the San Francisco Bay Area. Ever since Clay Spohn painted his wacky Rube-Goldberg *War Machines* in the 1940s, Bay Area artists have had a special penchant for humorous art, from the childlike playfulness of Joan Brown to the biting social satire of Robert Colescott.

As with so much that has been recognized as significant in Bay Area art, the crucible for this development was the California School of Fine Arts, now the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) on Chestnut Street in San Francisco. During the heyday of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, artists such as Hassel



Smith, Elmer Bischoff, and James Kelly reacted against the stifling seriousness of Clyfford Still, the movement's local éminence grise, with a whimsical abstraction that had no counterpart in New York. Smith's tongue-in-cheek *Alone with the Killer* (1948) (a parody of a Still painting) and Kelly's *Design for an Army Blanket* (1952)—complete with leopard-spotted frame and protruding rubber glove—exemplify the subversive humor that would soon fuel the Bay Area's Funk movement.<sup>2</sup> Clay Spohn, another teacher at SFAI, also provided comic relief from the high moral tone of Still with his Dada-inspired assemblages such as *Mouse Seeds* (composed of mildewed grains of rice in a bottle) and *Bedroom Fluff* (dust balls collected from under a bed).

Paradoxically, while these artists appeared to be committing blasphemies against the art Still represented, they remained steadfastly loyal to Still's own iconoclastic, anti-establishment ethos. It is doubtful, in fact, that humorous figuration would have flourished were it not for Still's powerful influence on the core philosophy of Bay Area art. More than any other Abstract Expressionist, East or West, Still repudiated the trendsetters and tastemakers of the art world. In Still's view, critics were "verminous" scribblers, galleries "brothels," and the Museum of Modern Art a "gas chamber."<sup>3</sup> This was far from empty invective, for in the late 1950s, Still permanently severed all ties with commercial galleries, never again entering into relations with the art market. While teaching at SFAI from 1946 to 1950, Still had encouraged the students and faculty to thumb their noses at New York's art establishment and to follow their own stylistic inclinations. By the time David Park, Richard Diebenkorn, and Elmer Bischoff betrayed Abstract Expressionism by "defecting" to figuration in the early 1950s, they had thoroughly imbibed Still's attitudes.

In this regard it is significant that David Park, the leader of the Bay Area figurative movement and a pioneer of humorous figuration, was a great debunker of high-flown New York theoreticians, and regarded aesthetic categories of any kind with suspicion. His oft-repeated remark that "concepts of progress in painting are rather foolish" was greeted with much delight in the Bay Area.<sup>4</sup> It was just this attitude that allowed Park to fly so flagrantly in the solemn face of Greenbergian formalism with paintings such as *Cousin Emily and Pet Pet* (1953; fig. 1) and *Cocktail Party* (1952; fig. 2), caricatures of pretentious San Francisco society. By contrast, his initial companions in figuration, Elmer Bischoff and Richard Diebenkorn, maintained



Fig. 1. David Park, *Cousin Emily and Pet Pet*, 1953; oil paint on canvas, 46 x 32 inches; Private collection, CA, and courtesy Hackett/Freedman Gallery, San Francisco, CA. © Estate David Park. Photo: John Wilson White

a high-modernist anathema towards narrative that precluded such folksy humor. On rare occasions Diebenkorn allowed a sly piece of wit to secret its way into his work, as in *Landscape with Figure* (1956; fig. 3), in which the “figure” is really a playing-card club masquerading as a tree. Privately, however, both Diebenkorn and Bischoff found an outlet for their irreverence in drawings that reveled in absurd and sometimes bawdy subject matter (see fig. 4). One Thanksgiving drawing session reportedly had as its assignment “pornographic turkeys.”

Joan Brown, a student of Bischoff and Diebenkorn and second-generation member of the Bay Area figurative clan, seems to have picked up where Park left off in her exploration of humorous narrative. Brown, like Park, developed a healthy disdain for theory-laden formalism. Like Park, she “got a wallop” out of doing what she saw as really ‘innocent’ business,”<sup>5</sup> taking “perverse pleasure” that her figures were “kind of corny.”<sup>6</sup> Works such as *Untitled (Noel and Bob the Dog)* (1964) and *Portrait of Bob for Bingo* (1960; fig. 5)—light-hearted yet deeply personal paintings depicting her little boy and pet dog—were miles apart from the purist abstraction and Pop Art then dominating New York.

Brown’s irreverent, self-sufficient attitude typified the Bay Area artists who turned to humorous figuration in the 1950s. Many of them, notably Peter Saul, William T. Wiley, and Roy De Forest, had been students at the San Francisco Art Institute, where they gave Abstract Expressionism a try before finding it too sanctimonious and ultimately too doctrinaire for their taste. De Forest came under Hassel Smith’s subversive influence as early as 1952, attending his raucous evening “lectures” at the so-called school Smith ran in his Potrero Hill attic on Kansas Street.<sup>7</sup> De Forest’s paintings of the time announced their spoofing intent with titles such as *The Pattering of Little Feet among the Geraniums* (ca. 1954). Wiley’s brief flirtation with abstraction ended almost as soon as it began. As he later remarked, the movement was “revolutionary in its way, but it soon became a heavy moral trip. ... If you drew a line it had to be grounded in God’s tongue or the core of the earth to justify putting it there.”<sup>8</sup>

By the early 1960s, artists on both coasts were questioning Abstract Expressionism’s authenticity, but in radically different ways. Bay Area artists generally rejected Pop Art’s slick surfaces and appropriation of commercial imagery, preferring



Fig. 2. David Park, *Cocktail Party*, 1952; oil paint on canvas, 36 x 40 inches; Courtesy of Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, MN. © Estate of David Park. Photo: Courtesy of Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, MN

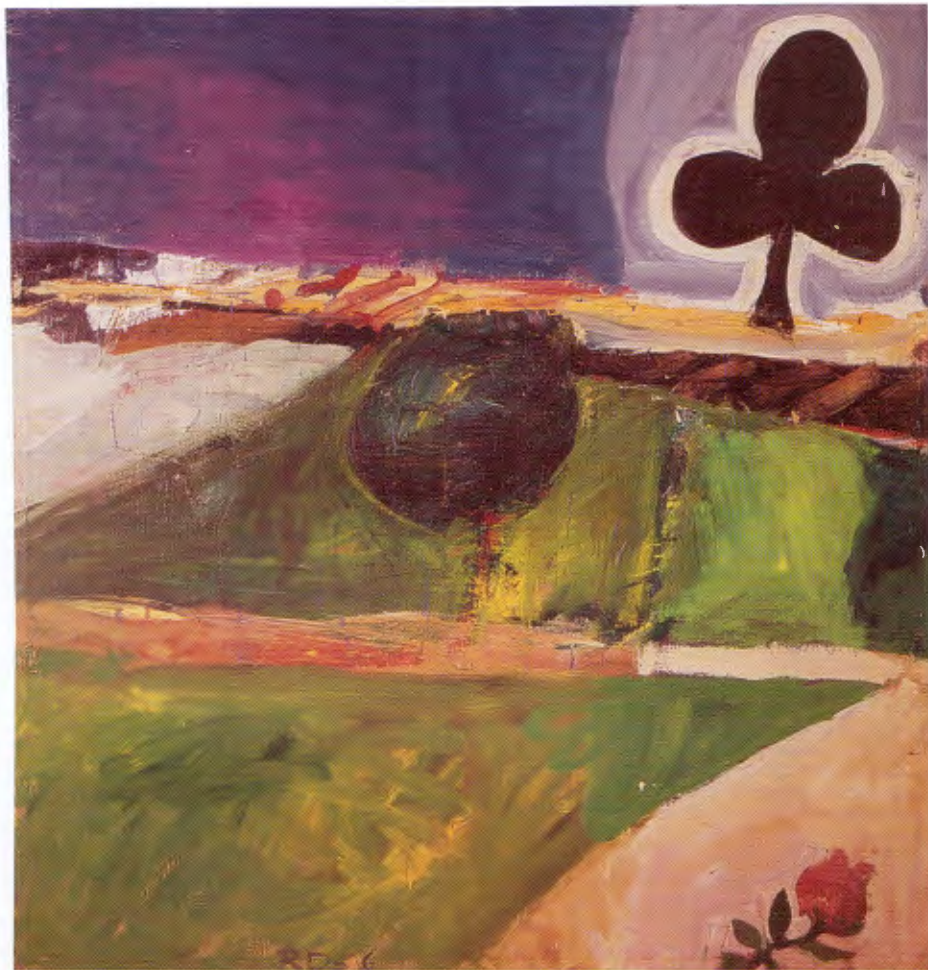


Fig. 3. Richard Diebenkorn, *Landscape with Figure*, 1956; oil paint on canvas, 50 1/4 x 47 5/8 inches; From the private collection of Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Eber, Kentfield, CA. © 2000 Estate of Richard Diebenkorn. Photo: Courtesy of the Alan Stone Gallery, New York, NY



Fig. 4. Elmer Bischoff, *Two Dancing Dogs*, 1965; mixed media on paper, 14 x 17 inches; Collection of Charles and Glenna Campbell, San Francisco, CA. © Estate of Elmer Bischoff. Photo: Ira Schrank, Sixth Street Studio

much more personal, idiosyncratic forms of expression. Many of them (including Brown, De Forest, Wiley, and David Gilhooly) recognized no aesthetic boundaries whatsoever, moving from one day to the next between assemblage and figuration. One of the traits that held them together, as Peter Selz recognized in his landmark *Funk* exhibition of 1967, was their sense of humor. As he commented in his catalogue, the Bay Area artists “know too well that a fraudulent morality is a fact of their world, and they have no illusions that they can change it. If these artists express anything at all, it’s senselessness, absurdity, and fun.”<sup>9</sup>

In keeping with this spirit of the absurd it is appropriate that the place where humorous figurative art flourished most vigorously was the unlikely outpost of the University of California, Davis, a sleepy campus town in the Sacramento Valley, about 70 miles northeast of San Francisco. Formerly a center for agriculture and home economics studies, by the mid-1960s Davis boasted an art department with a faculty that included such leading lights of California art as Robert Arneson, Roy De Forest, Manuel Neri, Wayne Thiebaud, and William T. Wiley. The program was soon energized by a group of unusually talented and adventurous students, notably Robert Brady, Deborah Butterfield, David Gilhooly, Bruce Nauman, Richard Shaw, and Peter VandenBerge. This mix of extraordinary students and teachers led to one of the most important chapters of Northern California’s art history.

Arneson later reflected that it was the very lack of tradition at Davis that was responsible for its success, since it gave the artists free reign to follow their personal whims. It was his view that “there is no academic hierarchy here, no worshipful old-timers whose word was the law.”<sup>10</sup> Asked whether he could identify a single style, Arneson responded, “I honestly can’t recall one, except that we were always interested in contrariness.”<sup>11</sup> Although their aesthetics may have differed radically, most of the Davis artists were engaged in exploring humorous narrative, whether in clay sculpture or representational painting. In the early 1970s, many of them exhibited under the banner “Nut art,” a designation conceived by De Forest and the poet David Zack as an alternative to “Funk.”<sup>12</sup> If these artists shared a single imperative, it was bucking the mainstream, a luxury that the remoteness of Davis certainly allowed.



Fig. 5. Joan Brown, *Portrait of Bob for Bingo*, 1960; oil paint on canvas, 29 x 28 inches; Collection of Joyce and Jay Cooper, Phoenix, AZ. © Estate of Joan Brown. Photo: Jay Cooper



Fig. 6. William T. Wiley, *All the King's Horses*, 1998; acrylic paint on canvas, 61 x 70 1/4 inches; Courtesy of Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, PA. © William Wiley/VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Cesar Rubio

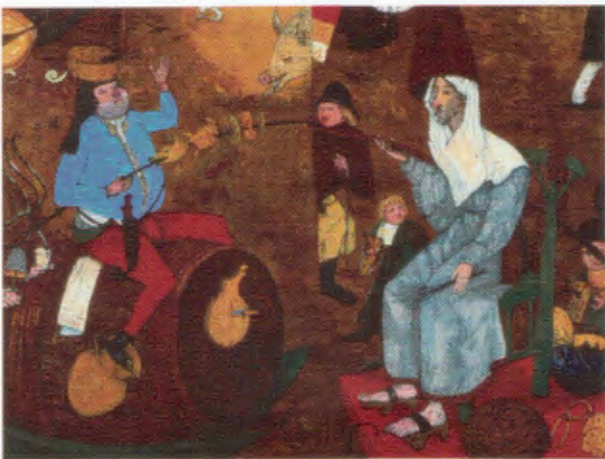


Fig. 7. William T. Wiley, *Modern Ark—After Brueghel*, 1995; acrylic on canvas, 70 x 93 inches; Collection of Joyce and Jay Cooper, Phoenix, AZ. © William Wiley/VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Courtesy of Joyce and Jay Cooper

As Gilhooly put it, “We knew about Oldenburg and H. C. Westermann, but in Davis it was really just us.”<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, their primary contact outside of their circle was with the artists of Chicago’s satirical Hairy Who and Monster Roster, some of whom, like Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson, found the area so compatible that they joined the faculty of Sacramento State in 1968.<sup>14</sup> On the whole, however, the Davis artists retained their own distinctive playful humor, which differed markedly from the Chicago school’s scatological wit and obsession with physical and psychological pain.<sup>15</sup>

One of the first artists on the faculty was William T. Wiley, who arrived shortly after receiving his master’s degree from SFAI in 1962. Wiley became a national symbol of Northern California’s eccentricity after *The New York Times* critic Hilton Kramer coined the term “Dude Ranch Dada” to describe his work—an improbable blend of Duchampian punning, Zen Buddhism, Western Americana, and a mythology entirely his own.<sup>16</sup> Wiley has never cleaved to a single aesthetic line, alternating freely between painting and funky assemblage. What holds his work together is his quirky wit, which is often difficult to decipher. Wiley thrives on a range of subtle word-games in the form of riddles, in-jokes, diaristic references, double-entendres, and sometime triple-entendres, as exemplified in paintings such as *All the King’s Horses* (1998; fig 6) or *Modern Ark—After Brueghel* (1995; fig 7), which revamps the 16th-century painter’s *Battle Between Carnival and Lent*, turning it into a contemporary political contest with slogans like “Nude Grin Rich” and “Rash Limbo.”

Wiley’s humor is rarely just an occasion for pure levity. In his view, the humorist’s role is ultimately serious business, not unlike that of the Shakespearean jester or Native-American trickster who may appear foolish dancing backwards, but speaks important truths.<sup>17</sup> In a series of lampooning self-portraits entitled *Mr. Unatural* (a play on R. Crumb’s truckin’ optimist), Wiley casts himself as an updated Northern California version of an idiot savant (see fig. 8). The figure—clearly a caricature of Wiley, complete with



droopy mustache, long nose, and gangly limbs—wears a dunce cap, yet is dressed as a Japanese sage in black kimono and clogs, surrounded by symbols of the occult.

Another contender for arch eccentric at Davis was Roy De Forest, who joined the faculty in 1964. While at Davis in the late 1960s, De Forest developed the whimsical paintings for which he is best known: canvases populated by wild-eyed, pointy eared dogs frolicking in brightly colored, crazy-quilted jungles dotted with nipples of paint squeezed directly from the tube (see figs. 9 and 10). De Forest described his ideal artist as “an eccentric, peculiar individual creating art as a fantasy with the amazing intention of totally building a miniature cosmos into which the nut could retire with all his friends, animals, and paraphernalia.”<sup>18</sup>

Later paintings and drawings (De Forest has always been a prolific draftsman) often depict figures on some sort of expedition. *Hans Bricker in the Tropics* (1974; fig. 11), for example, has the protagonist, inexplicably composed of bricks (hence his name), making his way with his snarling bulldog through a primordial forest of flailing palms. As art historian John Fitz Gibbon has noted, De Forest’s work seems like a return to childhood—not necessarily the lost paradise of childhood, but the child’s world in which there are as many dangers as there are thrills. Whether the “voyage” De Forest depicts is undertaken by Viking ship or propeller plane, he takes us back to the days when “we made our first attempts at empowering our personalities by manipulating our toys and tripping out with our cars, boats, and planes.”<sup>19</sup>

The work of Wayne Thiebaud also partakes of childlike whimsies, but in a far less idiosyncratic way. Thiebaud’s jawbreaker machines and lollipops (see

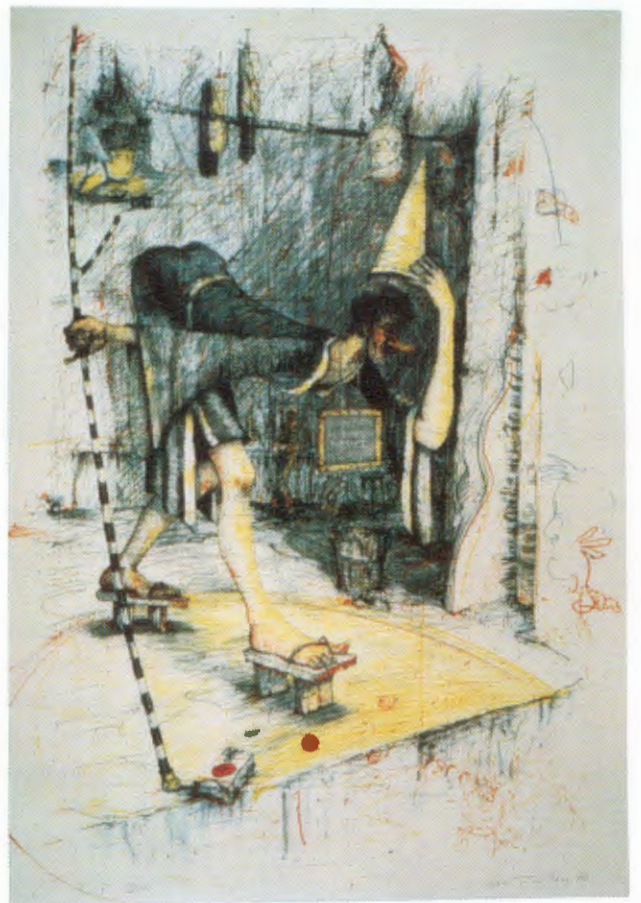


Fig. 8. William T. Wiley, *Mr. Unnatural*, 1975; lithograph, 36 x 25 inches; Courtesy of Morgan Gallery, Kansas City, MO. © William Wiley/VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Courtesy of Landfall Press



Fig. 9. Roy De Forest, *Country Dog Gentlemen*, 1972; polymer on canvas, 66 3/4 x 97 inches; Collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, Gift of Hamilton-Wells Collection. © Roy De Forest. Photo: Don Myer

Fig. 10. Roy De Forest, *Cross Viewpoints*, 1971; polymer on canvas, 65 x 65 inches; Collection of David J. and Jeanne Carlson, Carmel, CA. © Roy De Forest. Photo: Carlson Gallery, Carmel, CA

in his rendering of form. The humor in his work is far from parody, but rather is the result of mentally distilling his imagery through a process he called “essentialization.”<sup>20</sup>

The development of Thiebaud’s mature style coincided with his appointment at Davis in 1960, when he began painting intensively and making hundreds of sketches of cakes, pies, pinball machines, and jawbreaker dispensers—based in part on memories of the boardwalk in Long Beach, California, his childhood home.<sup>21</sup> That same year he had seen the Diebenkorn retrospective at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco and was powerfully impressed by the older artist’s opulent manipulation of paint.<sup>22</sup> His subject matter, however, was worlds apart from Diebenkorn’s interiors and landscapes. Thiebaud wanted to paint the overlooked side of American life that could only be found in the most prosaic subjects. By isolating base objects and presenting them as monumental, Thiebaud could make a single ice cream cone loom with a theatrical presence that transcends its ordinariness.<sup>23</sup>

fig. 12) are closer in look and feel to the work of a Pop artist like Oldenburg than they are to the faux-naive worlds of De Forest. Yet while Thiebaud painted mass-produced, consumer-based imagery, he never went in for the anonymous surfaces of New York Pop, working from memory rather the found image, and maintaining a personal touch in his paint handling, which more often than not was quite rich and sensuous. In addition, Thiebaud began his career as a cartoonist, and although he left the comic strip behind, he retained a sense of caricature

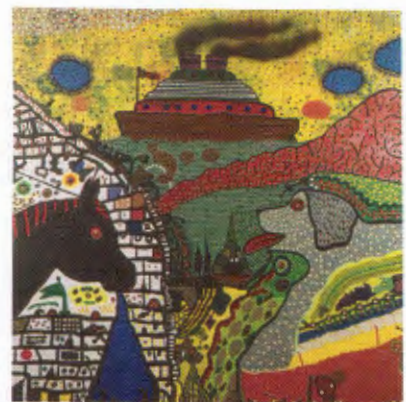




Fig. 11. Roy De Forest, *Hans Bricker in the Tropics*, 1974; polymer on canvas, 72 x 93 inches; Collection of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson, Menlo Park, CA. © Roy De Forest. Photo: M. Lee Fatherree



Fig. 12. Wayne Thiebaud, *Jawbreaker Machine*, 1963; oil paint on canvas, 26 x 31 1/2 inches; Collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO (Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Glenn through the Friends of Art) F65-46. © Wayne Thiebaud/VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: E. G. Schempf

Fig. 13. Wayne Thiebaud, *Day Streets*, 1996; oil paint on canvas, 59 3/4 x 48 inches; Collection of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO, Bebe and Crosby Kemper Collection, Gift of the William T. Kemper Charitable Trust and the R. C. Kemper Charitable Trust and Foundation, 1996.69. © Wayne Thiebaud/VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Dan Wayne

Thiebaud's talent as a caricaturist of the American scene reached its apogee in the cityscapes of the early 1970s. After moving to the Potrero Hill district of San Francisco in 1973, he began a series of truly whimsical paintings of the city's already preposterously steep streets. These works go beyond the topographical extremes of San Francisco, accentuating its plunging hills by means of exaggerated contrasts and juxtapositions. In a canvas such as *Day Streets* (1996; fig. 13), for example, the four-lane avenue has the same giddy verticality as the skyscraper next to it.

Thiebaud's playful subjects and his innovative painting techniques made a strong impression on Bay Area art. Viewers were quick to respond to his unique confectionery paint handling, so ideally suited to his delectable pastry subjects (see fig. 14). As one critic noted, "By some alchemy ... Thiebaud does not seem to be working with oil paint at all, but with a substance composed of flour, albumen, butter, and sugar."<sup>24</sup> In Davis, these paintings captured the imagination of a whole generation of artists, spawning a virtual industry of dessert-works, from the Oreo cookies of Gilhooly to the chocolate samplers of Sandra Shannonhouse. It seems that this local penchant for sweet subjects was the inspiration for the Candy Store Gallery, which Adeliza McHugh opened in 1962 in nearby Folsom, twenty miles east of Sacramento. Ironically, Thiebaud never had an exhibition there, but McHugh showed the work of the Davis group, including Arneson, Clayton Bailey, De Forest, Gilhooly, VandenBerge, among others, for more than thirty years (see fig. 15).<sup>25</sup>

Painter Raimonds Staprans found inspiration in Thiebaud's work, though he was never directly associated with Davis or even with Thiebaud himself. A Latvian by birth, Staprans studied at the University of California,

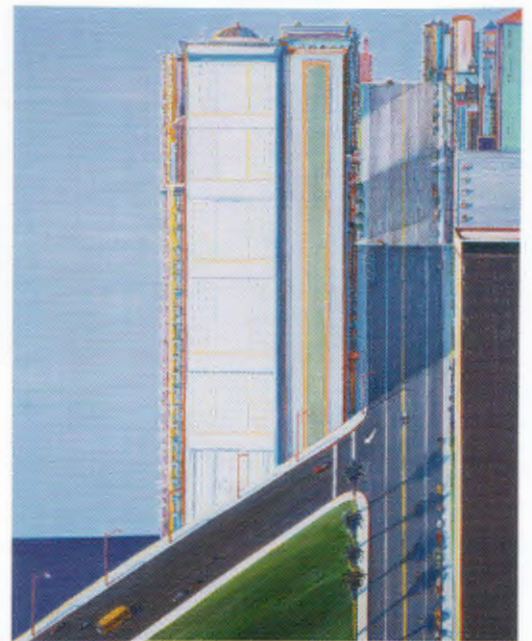




Fig. 14. Wayne Thiebaud, *Cakes and Pies*, 1994–95; oil paint on canvas, 72 x 64 inches; Collection of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO, Bebe and Crosby Kemper Collection, Gift of the Enid and Crosby Kemper Foundation, 1995.100. © Wayne Thiebaud/VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Dan Wayne

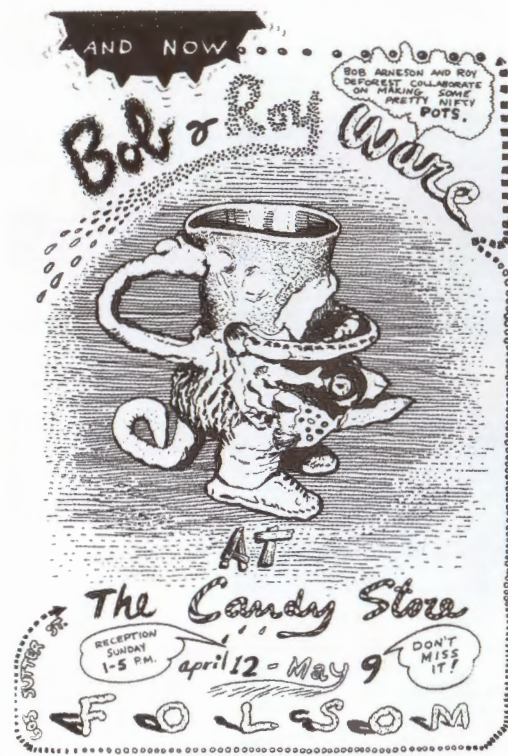


Fig. 15. Robert Arneson, announcement for exhibition at the Candy Store Gallery, Folsom, CA. © Estate of Robert Arneson/VAGA, New York, NY.

Berkeley, in the early 1950s with Karl Kasten and Erle Loran. His candy-colored palette, and specifically his use of complementaries (purple-blue shadows for orange subjects, for example), owes a good deal to Thiebaud's signature style, but his handling of content is for the most part more subtle and restrained (see fig. 16). Thiebaud's cartoony caricature is absent, yet playfulness is an important element of Staprans's work. As the artist recently said, "My painting is never really serious. I like to bring pleasure to the viewer and I enjoy teasing them just a little bit—pulling their leg."<sup>26</sup> One way Staprans does this is through the visual non sequitur, as in *Stairway to Heaven* (1998; fig. 17), which plays with the viewer's expectations by positioning the sort of concrete steps found in swimming pools at the edge of an ocean-like expanse. In another painting, he uses a similar device by bringing together a most unlikely pair of artists—Vincent Van Gogh and David Hockney—and showing how they might have combined talents to paint a single chair (see fig. 18).

Certainly the most influential artist to come out of Davis in the 1960s was Robert Arneson, who together with Peter Voulkos, revolutionized the medium of ceramics, elevating it from a traditional craft to the realm of fine arts. In 1962, when Arneson began teaching design classes in Davis' College of Agriculture, the school had a few potter's wheels in a cramped room in Temporary Building Number 9, a warehouse dominated by the Food Sciences Department. Four years later, Food Sciences had moved out, and under Arneson's guidance, the corrugated metal building known as "TB 9" had become the headquarters for the ceramic sculpture movement in Northern California. Arneson had learned from Peter Voulkos's enormous Abstract Expressionist pots that clay need not be functional, but after discovering white-ware and commercial low-fire glazes, he was able to move beyond that premise to cast figurative sculpture with expressive colors and effects. David Gilhooly, one of Arneson's first ceramic students, described the breakthrough they achieved:

Stoneware was like blowing glass: very limited in what it was willing to let you do with it. White clay is the opposite. You can do anything with it. People hate white clay because it is ugly com-

pared to stoneware, easy to work with and garish when used with commercial hobbyist glazes. We were the first people ever to make or desire to make an object—especially an irrelevant one—out of clay. No pots. We broke the pots of anyone that tried. This was always rumored by the students as to why I came in early in the morning—so I could break their pots.<sup>27</sup>

Arneson's early ceramic pieces at Davis were a kind of West Coast answer to Pop Art. *Six Pack* (1964), for example, renders "6-Up" bottles in an intentionally anti-slick manner one critic praised for its "expert crudity."<sup>28</sup> The clunky, vaguely anthropomorphic shapes and boisterous colors of these early efforts possess something inherently funny about them, a quality Arneson quickly recognized and began to exploit. By working



with both humor and clay, he broke two high-art taboos, creating a "double-whammy," to quote his student Richard Shaw.<sup>29</sup> Humor had been a preoccupation of Arneson's since his days as a sports cartoonist for the *Benicia Herald*, but it became his consuming theme in the 1960s, a theme he would ultimately explore in greater depth and range than any of his colleagues. The derision with which his humorous sculpture was often met by the East Coast art establishment only encouraged him to persevere. The day after Hilton Kramer dismissed the Davis artists as "provincial" in a review of their first major show in New York, condemning them for their "celebration of kitsch, low taste, visual gags, and facetious narrative,"<sup>30</sup> Arneson wrote:

The things that I'm really interested in as an artist are the things you can't do—and that's really to mix humor and fine art. I'm not being silly about it, I'm serious about the combination. Humor is generally considered low art, but I think humor is very serious—it points out the fallacies of existence.<sup>31</sup>

Much of Arneson's mature work does indeed pack a serious punch under its comic facade. A satirist in the pure tradition, Arneson's aim was to use humor to expose society's flaws and foibles through a wide span of visual styles and types of humor, from affectionate caricature to stinging assault. In the 1970s, Arneson

Fig. 17. Raimonds Staprans, *Stairway to Heaven*, 1998; oil paint on canvas, 48 x 44 inches; Collection of the artist, San Francisco, CA. © Raimonds Staprans. Photo: Almac Camera



Fig. 18. Raimonds Staprans, *Van Gogh-Hockney Chair*, 1989; oil paint on canvas, 68 x 54 inches; From the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Lowy, Beverly Hills, CA. © Raimonds Staprans. Photo: Almac Camera



Fig. 20. Robert Arneson, *Mr. Unatural*, 1977; Conté crayon on paper, 41 1/4 x 29 3/4 inches; Courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, New York, NY. © Estate of Robert Arneson/VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, New York, NY

was among the foremost sculptors in California to tackle political subjects.<sup>32</sup> America's sanction of war and nuclear weaponry were among his frequent satiric targets. His missile-snouted generals stand among the most scathing indictments of the American military in modern art. Caricatures of political leaders also figure importantly in Arneson's work, the best-known being the ill-fated portrait of George Moscone, which caused an uproar after it was commissioned by the city of San Francisco and then rejected for depicting the assassinated mayor in a "disrespectful" light. Arneson went on, however, to create numerous lampoons of political figures, notably a series of "memorials" to Ronald Reagan, which placed the president's insipid smiling face inside a television set (see fig. 19).<sup>33</sup>

It was not necessary to earn Arneson's scorn to come under his comic scrutiny. He parodied his home, his friends (see fig. 20), and even his artistic heroes. Arneson revered Bacon, Duchamp, Guston, Pollock, and Picasso, yet each was the recipient of his excoriating wit. One of Arneson's most successful satires in this vein, *Pablo Ruiz with Itch* (1980; fig. 21) places the artist's bust on a Greek pedestal like an object of worship.



Fig. 21. Robert Arneson, *Pablo Ruiz with Itch*, 1980; glazed earthenware in two parts: bust and pedestal, 87 1/2 x 27 x 22 inches; Collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO (Gift of the Friends of Art) F82-38, A, B. © Estate of Robert Arneson/VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: E. G. Schempf

The head is Picasso's own, but the scratching pose is derived from one of the prostitutes in *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907; fig. 22). Arneson's artistic satires are attempts at de-idealization, reminders that even the most accomplished artists are human. To quote the 18th-century philosopher



Fig. 22. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Paris (June–July 1907); oil paint on canvas, 96 x 92 inches; Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. © 2000 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, NY. Photo: © 2000 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY





Fig. 19. Robert Arneson, *Ronny*, ca. 1982; mixed media, 72 x 24 x 24 inches; Collection of Joyce and Jay Cooper, Phoenix, AZ. © Estate of Robert Arneson/VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Jay Cooper



Francis Hutchison, “ridicule is an attack against false grandeur and interferes with excessive admiration.” In other words, satire restores honesty.<sup>34</sup>

Although political and cultural issues remained an important topic for Arneson, his most enduring subject was the self-parody, a topic through which he exhaustively explored not only his own psychology, but also the social condition of the artist in contemporary culture. In countless drawings and a prolific production of monumental sculptures (in 1971–72 alone, he cast 18 self-portraits), Arneson examined the full gamut of artistic personae, portraying himself as a mischievous, lustful satyr or a reluctantly aging artist.<sup>35</sup> *California Artist* (1983; fig. 23) serves as a riposte to Kramer’s remark about the “spiritual impoverishment” of California with a self-portrait that epitomizes the stereotype of the stoned-out,

empty-headed West Coast artist. In others he portrays himself as a hapless and sometimes grotesque clown in outlandish, ridiculous costume. Relating to these artist-as-clown images are three portraits of the artist as a dog with a coat of shaggy fur, alternately scratching his head or lying on the ground surrounded by turds (see fig. 24). The message might be that the artist, like the dog, is society’s “pet” and is ultimately subservient, or it might be a characterization based on the slang meaning of “dog” as a scoundrel or rogue. In either case, it fulfills Arneson’s intention to “make ‘high’ art that is outrageous while revealing the human condition, which is not always high.”<sup>36</sup>

Of Arneson’s students, the one that most thoroughly embraced this philosophy was David Gilhooly, an anthropology major who enrolled in Arneson’s ceramic course on a whim in 1963 and

Fig. 23. Robert Arneson, *California Artist*, 1983; bronze with oil paint, 78 x 26 x 22 inches; Courtesy of Brian Gross Fine Art, San Francisco, CA, and the George Adams Gallery, New York, NY. © Estate of Robert Arneson/VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: M. Lee Fatherree

Fig. 24. Robert Arneson, *Bob at Rest*, 1981; glazed ceramic with individual parts, 39 x 26 x 12 inches; Collection of the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL, Purchased through the R. H. Norton Fund, 96.1. © Estate of Robert Arneson/VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Courtesy of Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL





Fig. 25. David Gilhooly, *The Frog Last Supper*, 1967; glazed ceramic, 13 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches; Private collection, CA. © David Gilhooly. Photo: Courtesy of Ross Turk

Fig. 26. David Gilhooly, *Breadfrog Dagwood*, 1977; glazed ceramic, 19 x 15 x 11 1/2 inches; Collection of Ross and Paula Turk, Redwood City, CA. © David Gilhooly. Photo: Courtesy of Ross Turk



stayed for several years, becoming his studio assistant. For Gilhooly, no subject was sacred. By means of a simple device—depicting significant personages as frogs—he effectively ridicules any human endeavor, whether in the realm of art, politics, history, or religion. What makes Gilhooly’s art palatable is that he shows no social or cultural

bias; everything is fodder for his jokes, to the point where it is impossible to tell whether Gilhooly takes anything seriously. How offensive can *The Frog Last Supper* (1967; fig. 25) be when one discovers his nearly pornographic *Tantra Frog Buddha* (1975), or his ultimate farce, *The Frog 10 Commandments* (1975), which makes a mockery out of the most sacred code in the Judeo-Christian world? In Gilhooly’s world of frogs, “Thou shalt not commit adultery” has become “Don’t fool around in front of God-frog.” There is a zany playfulness in *Mao-Tse Toad* (1976) or *Brunhilda and Her Sheep Bring Cabbages to North America* (1980) that is just plain innocent fun—parody more in the tradition of *Mad Magazine*’s “Lighter Side” comics than Arneson’s penetrating satire (see fig. 26). Among Gilhooly’s funniest and technically superb ceramic sculptures is the series he produced in 1976 for the bicentennial. All of them poke fun at hallowed events and individuals in American history. *Frog Franklin and the National Bird Debate* (1976; fig. 27) reaches the height of comic absurdity with Benjamin Franklin’s enormous frog mouth twisting and contorting as a turkey and an eagle duke it out on his head for the title of national bird.

Gilhooly’s fellow student Peter VandenBerge hit upon a similar strategy, except that in his case the dramatis personae were root vegetables. What frogs have been to Gilhooly, bushy-headed carrots were to VandenBerge. Two stories, equally intriguing, exist about the origins of VandenBerge’s ceramic vegetables. One proposes that the artist was inspired by the Food Science Department’s lab in TB 9, which contained thousands of cans of experimental produce, including such fantastic hybrids as “aspara-tomatoes” and “tangikiwis.”<sup>37</sup> The other more plausible story comes from VandenBerge himself, who was teaching at San Francisco State in the late 1960s:

David Gilhooly came by a lot. He was teaching at San Jose State College and we’d go around. One time we went by the Farmer’s Market [and] I was struck by the forms. First I did root vegetables: carrots, turnips, radishes, beets. ... Then I

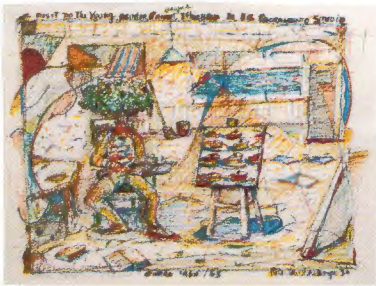


Fig. 28. Peter VandenBerge, *A Visit to the Young Painter Carrot Thiebaud in his Sacramento Studio*, 1984; pen and ink on paper, 12 x 16 inches; Courtesy of John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, CA. © Peter VandenBerge. Photo: Tony Novelozo

gave them a setting, because humor is particularly important. I did a sculpture of a carnivorous lady in a house with a tile roof and you could see into the house from all different angles. She had bones lying on the floor and things like that. In those days in San Francisco vegetarianism was popular.<sup>38</sup>

By the time VandenBerge's ceramic sculptures premiered at the Candy Store Gallery in 1974, he had settled on the carrot as his primary motif, and had developed a wide array of provocative guises for them (see fig. 28). They might be a couple entwined in a chair watching a Saturday night movie or simply lolling about in bed (see fig. 29). The Candy Store exhibition reportedly included carrots playing tennis and a "busty" young lady at the bath.<sup>39</sup> Compared to Gilhooly's frogs, these works contain little in the way of parody. As Charles Johnson, critic for the *Sacramento Bee*, discerningly wrote:

"VandenBerge's humor is far less slam-bang; his sculptures are smaller, more refined, and far more intimate. And his surfaces are entirely his own: rough, flaking sometimes, dry, beautiful."<sup>40</sup>

In the mid-1970s, VandenBerge's carrot-world came to an abrupt end and the artist began creating a series of ceramic busts with elongated heads. *Hostess* (1998; fig. 30) typifies these works, which suggest a demeanor of utmost seriousness by the meditative expressions on their faces while sporting outlandishly ludicrous headgear.<sup>41</sup> VandenBerge's source material does indeed come from



Fig. 29. Peter VandenBerge, *Couple Watching Saturday Night Movie*, 1969; ceramic, 13 x 12 x 11 inches; Courtesy of John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, CA. © Peter VandenBerge. Photo: Tony Novelozo

profoundly unfunny quarters. The heads combine touches of Giacometti, Modigliani, and the Buddhist icons VandenBerge saw as a boy growing up in Indonesia. (He spent three years of his childhood in a Javanese prisoner-of-war camp, which makes the latter reference all the more serious.) But to crown these figures with irrelevant objects like airplanes, cows, tea kettles, houses, and baseballs is to render them absurd in the best Dadaist tradition.

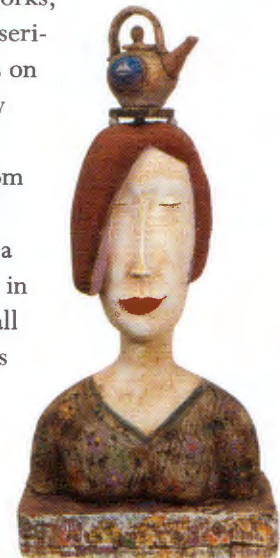


Fig. 30. Peter VandenBerge, *Hostess*, 1998; fired clay with slips and ceramic, 40 x 28 x 18 inches; Courtesy of John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, CA. © Peter VandenBerge. Photo: Tony Novelozo



Fig. 33. Constantin Brancusi, *Little French Girl (La Jeune Fille française)*, ca. 1914–18; oak, 60 x 13 x 14 5/8 inches; Collection of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, Gift of the Estate of Katherine S. Dreier, 1953, 53.1332. © 2000 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, NY/ADAGP, Paris. Photo: David Heald © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, NY

Humor in Richard Shaw's sculpture also draws from that spark that occurs when two profoundly disparate elements meet unexpectedly. Shaw had studied at SFAI with Voulkos converts Ron Nagle and Jim Melchert before enrolling in the master's program at Davis under Arneson in 1966. Soon after, irony and incongruity became central to his work. Shaw's early pieces are classic examples of what Nicholas Roukes termed "absurdist humor." According to Roukes, the "absurdist takes art to the outer fringes and beyond. Nonsense humor, fantasy, and comic surrealism present a systematic outrageousness. The absurdist may draw from an eccentric imagination, exploiting the creative potential of contradiction, absurdity, and displaced logic."<sup>42</sup> *Bull Run on a Danish Modern Couch* (1967; fig. 31) does exactly that. There is nothing extraordinary about the couch, other than the scene Shaw has painted of the battle of Bull Run, one of the most tragic episodes of the Civil War. The battle itself is famous for its farcical dimensions since it was Lincoln's first campaign and demonstrated extraordinary naiveté—not only because of the serious bungling on both sides due to the inexperience of the soldiers, but

because of the civilian picnickers who came to watch. In the mid-1970s, Shaw began to work in cast porcelain, a fine-grained, high-fired clay. After experimenting with underglazing and photo silkscreen, he refined the trompe l'oeil technique for which he is best known, creating whimsical "stick-man" sculptures out of what appear to be books, playing cards, sticks, and other common objects. Some of these works are funny just for the arbitrariness of their assembly; others, like *Little French Girl* (1996; fig. 32), are truly witty. A casual glance at this piece indicates a spindly pumpkin-headed figure. Closer inspection reveals a structure composed of hamburgers and hot dogs. But the piece becomes ludicrous when one discovers that its inspiration is Brancusi's elegant sculpture of the same name at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (see fig. 33).

Quite possibly the zaniest artist of the Davis group was Clayton Bailey, who began his career making grotesque gnome-like figures and "critter lamps" made of porcelain and chrome. Arneson had brought him out to Davis from the University of Wisconsin in 1968 as a visiting artist, and after one semester, Bailey found the "Nut scene" so sympathetic he moved to California, eventually purchasing a house next to



Fig. 31. Richard Shaw, *Bull Run on a Danish Modern Couch*, 1967; painted ceramic, 11 x 24 x 9 1/4 inches; Collection of Norman Russell, Pacifica, CA. © Richard Shaw. Photo: Schopplein Studio



Fig. 32. Richard Shaw, *Little French Girl*, 1996; porcelain with decal overglaze, 61 x 17 1/4 x 12 inches; Courtesy of the artist and Braunstein/Quay Gallery, San Francisco, CA. © Richard Shaw. Photo: Schopplein Studio

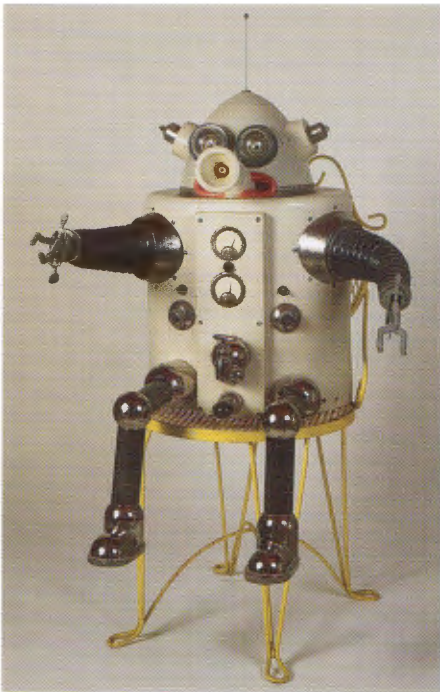


Fig. 34. Clayton Bailey, *Grandfather Robot*, 1971; ceramic, metal, light, and sound, 30 x 24 x 28 inches; Collection of Dr. Tom Folk. © Clayton Bailey. Photo: Peter Accetola


De Forest in Port Costa on the Carquinez Strait. There he developed his roadside Wonders of the World Museum, presided over by the illustrious Dr. George Gladstone (a.k.a. Bailey). Whenever Gladstone wasn't off on a "dig" or in the feverish process of preparing a new exhibit, tourists could visit the museum free of charge. The white-smocked scientist would usher them in to view such astounding archeological "finds" as the skeletons of *Pterodungus* (said to have been excavated from a suburban septic tank) and *Giganticus Erectus Robustus* (a creature apparently endowed with a double-jointed penis that could serve as a natural birth-control device). These "Bone Age wonders" were actually meticulously crafted ceramic sculptures, sometimes set in elaborate tableaux. The museum also inexplicably featured mad doctors performing bizarre operations, such as transforming a patient's legs into sausages.

Since 1971, Bailey has become something of a local legend for his wacky robots. The first, appropriately entitled *Grandfather Robot* (1971; fig. 34), was a high-fired ceramic and metal piece with a sound-device rigged to make a noise like a breaking spring every few minutes.

Subsequent models are composed entirely of sundry aluminum and chrome parts from vintage cars and appliances, which the artist has salvaged from wrecking yards and flea markets. Bailey has developed a whole line of *Marilyn Monrobots*, whose hourglass figures and coffee-percolator heads are adorned with blinking lights and costume jewelry. Other robots in his menagerie include *Robot Pet* (1990; fig. 35), a canine that barks when approached, and *Bug Zapper* (1986), which attracts flying insects into its body and electrocutes them.

Like Bailey's robots, Viola Frey's outsized ceramic figures take their inspiration from popular sources. She also spent hours scrounging in second-hand shops, yard sales, and flea markets, in her case looking for discarded toys and dolls. Painted china figurines—American kitsch in the purest sense—ultimately formed the basis for the colorful cast of characters she began in the late 1970s. In Frey's imaginary world, the people seem permanently fixed, as one observer remarked, in "some unplaceable decade between 1920 and 1960, when women dressed in strongly patterned prints and men wore ties and tightly buttoned suits" (see fig. 36).<sup>43</sup> Frey, who studied at the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) and teaches there





now, cites the awkward cartoon-like imagery of Philip Guston as an important influence. Much of the humor of her work comes from the ungainly postures and comic-book colors of the figures, which, combined with their preposterous size, provide something like the amusement one finds in roadside colossi.

Humorous figuration in the Bay Area has by no means been strictly confined to Davis-school sculpture. From the late 1960s to the present, it has continued to flourish in the traditional medium of painting. Drawing fresh inspiration from diverse sources in the popular media, Surrealism, and Chicago's Monster Roster, artists such as James Albertson, Robert Colescott, Philip Morsberger, Peter Saul, and M. Louise Stanley have built upon and significantly extended the Davis legacy. Like their predecessors, these painters rebelled against mainstream models by embracing debased narrative and humorous subject matter, as well as discredited techniques. Many of them have only recently come to public attention because of their profound deviance from art practices in New York and Los Angeles. Art historian Whitney Chadwick initially recognized this second wave of humorous Bay Area figurative artists in a landmark essay she wrote in 1985. Under the rubric "Narrative Imagists," Chadwick described them

[as having] produced works in which social comment, satire, morality plays, puns, and personal mythology combine with flamboyant and eccentric personal styles to form a visual running commentary on the world. Their sources range from autobiography and Surrealism's love of the bizarre and evocative juxtaposition to social and cultural taboos. Their paintings exhibit a maverick sensibility, downplay obvious skill, and break the "rules" of representation in ways often influenced by the directness of naïve art and popular illustration.<sup>44</sup>

Philip Morsberger exemplifies the more private, autobiographic strain of these comic figuratives. Like that of Joan Brown and Judith Linhares, his narrative is always deeply personal and difficult to decipher without a close analysis of his iconography. While studying art at Carnegie Tech in the 1950s, Morsberger came under the influence of the first-generation Bay Area figurative artists, notably Bischoff, Diebenkorn, and Oliveira. His subsequent work synthesized their lush palette and bravura brushwork with his own long-standing love of cartooning based on 1940s comic strips. Following his father's death in 1983, Morsberger embarked



Fig. 36. **Viola Frey**, *Man with Blue and White Polka-Dot Tie*, 1982; glazed ceramic, 87 x 28 x 23 inches; Collection of John and Maxine Belger Family Foundation, Kansas City, MO. © Viola Frey. Photo: Dan Wayne

on a long series of autobiographical explorations entitled *In Memoriam*, in which throws of the dice dictated which colors would fill in the outlines and spaces between his figures.<sup>45</sup> The artist's father, mother, and brother make regular appearances in these paintings, as does Morsberger himself, along with a host of storybook creatures—dragons, turtles, monkeys—surrounded by baseball caps, toy cars and airplanes, and other relics of childhood.

Many of Morsberger's best paintings were completed after he moved to the Bay Area in 1986 and joined the faculty of CCAC. *Transition* (1989) features what critic Mark Van Proyen wittily described as Morsberger's characteristic "billowing improvisations of phosphorescent color oscillating in a shallow field along with cartoon faces that suggest images of Ross Perot drawn by Gasoline Alley cartoonist Frank King."<sup>46</sup> The subject of this painting, however, is far more sobering, dealing with lost innocence and the inevitable passing of time. Each figure represents the artist himself at various stages of life, from the goofy, cigarette-smoking youth at center stage, to the bespeckled gentleman benignly smiling down from a quiet corner.<sup>47</sup> One of Morsberger's recurrent alter egos is the character he affectionately calls the "Cosmic Scribbler," who can usually be seen furiously recording the anarchic activity around him or else galloping his way through the "rat race" of the art world (see fig. 37). In all of his work, Morsberger treats his figures and their predicaments with warmth and humor, in keeping with his stated aim of rendering the "human comedy" with all of its defects and fallibility. For Morsberger, humor is the best way of coping with the painful realities of life. As he likes to point out, "You have to laugh to keep from crying."<sup>48</sup>

Most of the Bay Area's humorous "narrative imagists" have taken this view, but have turned their attention toward subjects of a more social and political nature. For Peter Saul, humor was the only palatable means of addressing the injustices of the Civil Rights Movement and the violence of the Vietnam War. A satirist in the classic moral sense—using humor as a weapon of social correction—Saul sought to provide "a kind of 'cold shower' for other people, to make them aware of their own feelings or 'social skin'."<sup>49</sup>

Born in San Francisco and a student at SFAI in its heyday, Saul fully embraced the school's anti-establishment ethos. He delighted in repelling the art



Fig. 37. Philip Morsberger, *Cosmic Scribbler*, 1989; oil paint on canvas, 56 3/4 x 44 1/4 inches; Collection of Trish Bransten, San Francisco, CA. © Philip Morsberger. Photo: Ben Blackwell



Fig. 38. Peter Saul, *Booby Trap*, 1969; oil paint on canvas, 93 x 144 inches; Collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA, Gift of Allan Frumkin. © Peter Saul. Photo: Ben Blackwell

world's "elite," by which he meant "artists, students, intellectuals—anyone who needs to feel superior in intelligence [and] sensitivity."<sup>50</sup> In 1966, he complained to his Chicago dealer that New York's current art stars (Poons, Dine, and Lichtenstein, for example) were "simply too mild," predicting their paintings would end up "resting in the vault of the Bank of America." His moral condemnations sounded much like Clyfford Still's when he began to fume, "I will not play the *Life* magazine 'roundtable game' where we decide which is the better way to make art. That thing was imported from France, infected in New York, has maggots in Los Angeles. The mainstream is a sewer."<sup>51</sup>

Around this time Saul made a conscious decision to pitch his art to an unsophisticated audience with the intent of shaking them out of their complacency. Saul's best-known works, painted in the 1960s while he was living in Mill Valley and teaching at CCAC, depicted military officers engaged in ferocious sexual and murderous acts (see fig. 38). His approach was as grotesque as his subjects, using eye-stinging Day-Glo colors and a rubbery *Zap* comic-strip style that anatomically distorted his figures to repellent effect. Other targets of his scorching satire included political leaders like Reagan and Nixon and art world luminaries such as Warhol and Henry Geldzahler.

In recent years, Saul has toned down his violence considerably, but his work remains avowedly populist. In the late 1980s, he painted several whimsical scenes of San Francisco. *View of San Francisco #5* (1997; fig. 39), gives the viewer a roller coaster ride through the city, which in Saul's bizarre imagination has become a tangle of anthropomorphic landmarks: The TransAmerica tower sports a teetering ashtray on its pointed head, and a woman leans out of a cable car to deposit cigarette ashes in it. Office buildings have sprouted breasts; the Golden Gate Bridge now has arms; and the entire city seems caught in the grip of a one-eyed monster, whose tendrils grasp everything in its reach (perhaps a reference to San Francisco author Frank Norris's muckraking *Octopus*, a novel about capitalist greed). Typically, Saul has inserted a touch of absurdity by including a toothbrush that appears to be frantically scrubbing the ensuing mess.

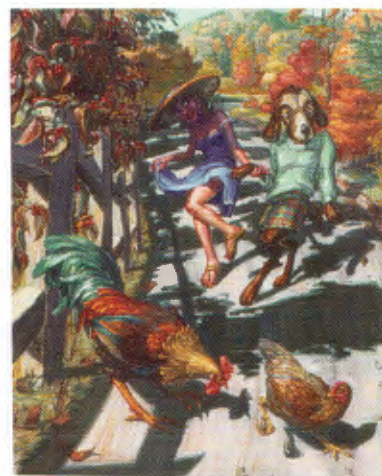
James Albertson, a student of Saul's at CCAC in the late 1960s, went on to develop a raunchy satiric style that surpassed his teacher's offensive figuration. Albertson was already a kindred spirit of Saul's when he arrived in the Bay Area in



Fig. 39. Peter Saul, *View of San Francisco #5*, 1997; oil and acrylic paints on canvas, 66 x 84 inches; Collection of Marvin and Alice Kosmin, NY, and courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, NY. © Peter Saul. Photo: John Wilson White, courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, New York, NY, and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, CA

Fig. 40. James Albertson, *Walking the Dog*, ca. 1988; oil paint on canvas, 38 1/4 x 31 inches; Collection of William and Joanne Rees, New Haven, CT. © James Albertson. Photo: James Albertson

1967, having received his B.F.A. from the Art Institute of Chicago, where he fully absorbed the Monster Roster's unsavory comedy. Albertson soon acquired a reputation for being the "bad boy"<sup>52</sup> of Bay Area painting, combining an agitated, almost Mannerist delineation of form and an abrasive palette with subjects that made his viewers squirm—incest, masturbation, childhood sexuality—realities of American life that most people would rather not acknowledge. With an eye to inappropriateness, Albertson dresses his unspeakable themes in sappy, cheerful allegories, reminiscent of the stylized illustrations of children's storybooks (see fig. 40). It is the appearance of innocence in



conjunction with Albertson's disturbing subject matter that may provoke nervous laughter.

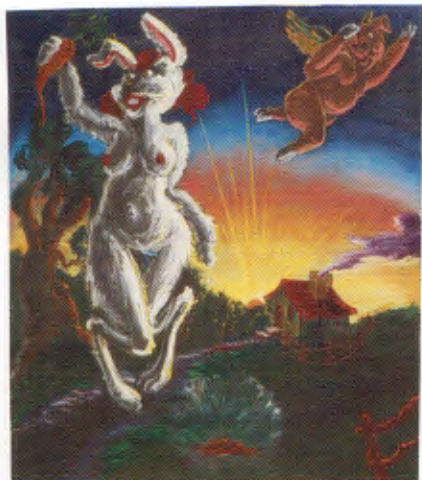


Fig. 41. James Albertson, *The Finding of the (True) Carrot*, ca. 1976; oil paint on canvas, 40 x 36 inches; Collection of John and Jane Fitz Gibbon, Pilot Hill, CA. © James Albertson. Photo: James Albertson

Among Albertson's most memorable works is his "Travesty" series—paintings and drawings that deftly parody hallowed themes of the "Old Masters." In *The Finding of the (True) Carrot* (ca. 1976; fig. 41), for example, the protagonist has become a voluptuous rabbit whose "Holy Grail" is a long carrot replete with phallic connotations. (Albertson does not recall whether VandenBerge was an inspiration.)<sup>53</sup> *Children Re-enacting the Deposition in a Manner Suggested by Titian* (1980) depicts a gaggle of children facetiously play-acting one of Titian's greatest paintings.<sup>54</sup> And one of the artist's most offensive efforts, *Sex, Religion, Violence, and the Good Life* is a tour de force of bad taste. Here, Albertson has achieved his stated aim of packing as many forbidden subjects as he could into a single work.<sup>55</sup> The deliberately eroticized mother stands beaming with pride in a state-of-the-art kitchen that might come from an ad in *Life* magazine, while her children feast like young cannibals on grotesque legs of meat.

Albertson has created purposeful ambiguities here, but his message is clearly an indictment of what he sees as the excesses and hypocrisies of middle-class America.

M. Louise Stanley, a classmate of Albertson's in the late 1960s, also works in satiric figuration, but her themes are a good deal more autobiographic. Stanley's pro-



Fig. 42. M. Louise Stanley,  
*Outside Interference*, 1988;  
gouache on paper, 26 x 41 inches;  
Collection of the artist. © M. Louise  
Stanley. Photo: M. Louise Stanley

Fig. 43. M. Louise Stanley,  
*All that Glitters is not Gold*,  
1983; acrylic paint on paper, 36  
x 48 inches; Collection of artist.  
© M. Louise Stanley. Photo:  
M. Louise Stanley







Fig. 44. M. Louise Stanley, *Pandora*, 1999; acrylic paint on canvas, 72 x 84 inches; Collection of the artist. © M. Louise Stanley. Photo: Sibila Savage

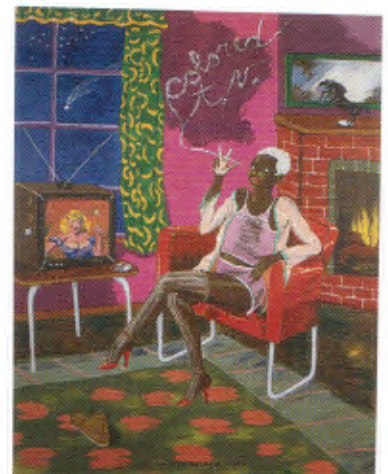
tagonists are usually women confronting their personal fears and fantasies, which are at times violent. *Outside Interference* (1988; fig. 42) depicts a woman kicking in her television, exasperated with the endless reporting of the Iran-Contra scandal. *Belly Dancer* (1993) shows a woman gleefully jumping up and down on a prone man's stomach—a humorous venting of the very serious frustration Stanley felt toward the gender inequities of the art world.

Stanley was among the first artists in the Bay Area to join the women's movement in 1971, and many of her best works deal with relations between the sexes. Like Albertson, she has never been afraid to tackle taboo sub-

jects. *All that Glitters is not Gold* (1983; fig. 43), for example, makes laughable the issue of penis envy. The woman spying on her boyfriend relieving himself behind a tree also pokes fun at what she views as the insatiable, and in this case completely fruitless, curiosity of women.<sup>56</sup> Other works, such as *Bar Room Brawl* (1977)—which depicts a pair of women scratching and clawing at each other while several helpless men stand by—deal humorously with the occasional no-holds-barred ferocity of female emotion.<sup>57</sup> The feisty red-head in this watercolor is a stand-in for the artist herself, identifiable by her capri pants and spiky stilettos. Stanley often inserts herself into her paintings with a mischievous confessional irony. Occasionally she becomes a kind of female Waldo, lost in a crowd or posing as an anonymous bystander.<sup>58</sup>

Since the mid-1980s, when she began regularly traveling to Italy, Stanley has adopted elaborate Italian Renaissance formats. Her new mural-sized canvases deal with classical mythological subjects presented like religious altars or stage performances, complete with faux-gilded predellas and proscenia. These paintings have little of the comic stylization of her earlier watercolors, but the new rich paint handling combined with the increase in grandeur only enhances the humorous effect. It is the contrast between the grandiosity of the presentation and the frequently ludicrous

Fig. 45. Robert Colescott, *Colored TV*, 1977; acrylic paint on canvas, 84 x 66 inches; Fractional and promised gift of Vicki and Kent Logan to the collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA. © Robert Colescott. Photo: Ian Reeves



subject matter that makes these paintings funny. As one observer commented, the gods and goddesses are really stand-ins enacting the amusing predicaments Stanley knows best.<sup>59</sup> Some of these situations are truly ridiculous, as the one depicted in *Pandora* (1999; fig. 44), which dramatizes the moment a guest at a party sneaks into the host's bedroom and steals a peek at her jewelry box.

Robert Colescott's satiric approach has remarkable parallels with that of Albertson and Stanley, yet he spent the formative years of the 1960s working in relative isolation in Portland, Oregon. He recalls wondering whether his humorous painting "was really art" before moving to Oakland in 1970 and meeting Albertson, Saul, Stanley, and other kindred spirits in the East Bay.<sup>60</sup> Colescott's subject, like that of Albertson and Stanley, continues to be a critique of middle-class America's absurdities; as he said in a recent interview, "If there is a message, it might be what fools we mortals be—how foolish we all look and how ridiculous our actions are."<sup>61</sup> Yet Colescott has upped the ante considerably by critiquing contemporary society from an African-American perspective. His hilariously bawdy satire, which joyfully revels in the crude and burlesque, actually functions as a sobering exposé of racism. By means of "counternarratives," Colescott strikes at the heart of deeply ingrained stereotypes of blacks in America.<sup>62</sup>

Colescott's paintings deal openly with clichés of African-American sexuality, ranging from the allure of black women's "exoticism" to the mystique of black male sexual prowess. Some of these works present one-liners, but most contain multiple levels of meaning that are not apparent on first glance. The pun of *Colored TV* (1977; fig. 45), for example, is far more elaborate than one might expect. It seems like a fairly straightforward indictment of racist ideals of feminine beauty. Colescott shows us an



Fig. 46. Robert Colescott, *Old Crow on the Rocks*, 1978; oil paint on canvas, 48 1/2 x 65 inches; Collection of John and Jane Fitz Gibbon, Pilot Hill, CA. © Robert Colescott. Photo: James Albertson

African-American woman in sexy lingerie and bleached hair seated before a television featuring a big-breasted blonde in lurid color. Rather than watching the star on the screen, however, her eyes gaze out past the window at the falling star in the night sky, as if wishing she too might some day become such a celebrity. The hope is futile because the “she” is in fact a he, as the man’s boot lying on the carpet indicates. It turns out that the “Colored TV” of the title refers not to the television set, but to the transvestite watching it.<sup>63</sup>

One of Colescott’s classic themes is the supposed unattainability of white women and the lust this is thought to provoke in black men. He is not above parodying his own such desires. In *Old Crow on the Rocks* (1978; fig. 46), he portrays himself as a lecherous black crow, a reminder of the vicious slang phrase for African-American men. The object of his leer is a buxom supine mermaid, whose scales lewdly reveal her pubic hair. According to John Fitz Gibbon, this female is a caricature of Joan Brown, with whom Colescott taught painting at Berkeley in the late 1970s.<sup>64</sup>

In 1975, Colescott began a series of parodies of famous paintings, a staple for Bay Area satirists since the early days of TB 9. But Colescott added a twist to the genre by replacing the white protagonists with blacks. Beyond demystifying the masterpiece as a sacred object—always the intent of earlier such parodies—Colescott

forced his viewers to confront the absence of blacks in history and high culture. One of his first and most successful uses of this strategy can be seen in *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (1975), which reconfigures Emanuel Leutze’s famous 19th-century patriotic painting. Colescott does much the same with *The Wreckage of the Medusa* (ca. 1978; fig. 47), a parody of Gericault’s landmark of French Romanticism, *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819).

In the case of Colescott’s *Les Demoiselles D’Alabama vestidas* (1985; fig. 48; and see fig. 22) the very title provokes amusement. The prostitutes of Picasso’s original have been replaced by sassy modern-day streetwalkers in tightly fitting, come-hither dress. This “appropriation painting” intriguingly comments on modernism’s own appropriation of African art. Colescott explained what he had in mind:

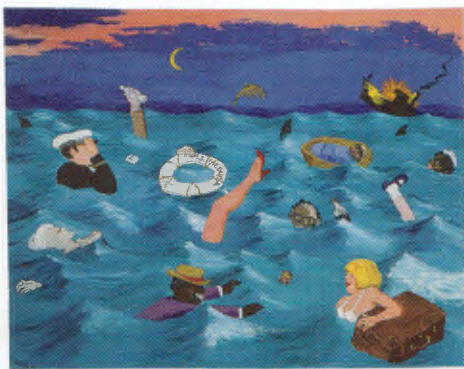



Fig. 47. Robert Colescott, *The Wreckage of the Medusa*, ca. 1978; oil paint on canvas, 66 x 84 inches; Collection of Joyce and Jay Cooper, Phoenix, AZ. © Robert Colescott. Photo: Craig Smith



Fig. 48. Robert Colescott, *Les Demoiselles D'Alabama vestidas*, 1985; acrylic paint on canvas, 96 x 92 inches; Collection of Hanford Yang, Edison, NJ, and courtesy of the Phyllis Kind Gallery, NY. © Robert Colescott. Photo: Semaphore, NYC



Picasso started with European art and abstracted through African art, producing “Africanism,” but keeping one foot in European art. I began with Picasso’s Africanism and moved toward European art, keeping one foot in Africanism. ... The irony is partly that what most people (including me) know about African conventions comes from Cubist art. Could a knowledge of European art be so derived as well?<sup>65</sup>

Colescott’s comic narrative and anti-elitist vernacular fit a Bay Area typology that dates back to the 1940s. Nearly all of the artists discussed in this essay, from the ceramicists of Davis to the “bad” painters of CCAC, have combined humorous figuration with debased “low-brow” media and technique. Initially, their efforts represented a deliberate defiance of New York-generated imperatives—specifically the reductive formalist orthodoxy of the late 1950s and 1960s. Thomas Albright recognized this “colonial” rebellion early on, and seems to have imbibed the Bay Area’s lampooning spirit in his appropriation of Harold Rosenberg’s parable of the “Redcoats versus the Coonskinners.”<sup>66</sup> In Albright’s version, the Redcoats have become New Yorkers, and the Coonskinners, Californians who refused to take directives from afar.<sup>67</sup> Of course, it didn’t really matter. They could stand on their heads and play buffoons all they wanted because, as sculptor Harold Paris put it, “The artist here is aware that no one really sees his work.”<sup>68</sup>

And this, finally, is the crux of the matter—not so much that the artists rejected “serious” art per se—but that humor became a strategy for coping with their isolation and celebrating their marginality. Excluded—often by choice—from full participation in the mainstream discourse, Bay Area artists turned to alternative forms of expression, adopting peripheral approaches to reflect their peripheral status. Humorous figuration fit the bill because it enabled them to address themes of marginality with particular trenchancy. How much less effective would Arneson’s *California Artist* be if the sculptor had resentfully confronted Kramer’s chauvinism, or if Colescott’s parodies of racist stereotypes were instead vehement diatribes? Humor has been their best weapon. In their bittersweet response to their marginality, some artists have been more bitter and some more sweet. Hence the cakes.

1. Michael Kimmelman, "Renaissance for a 'Lightweight'," *The New York Times*, 7 November 1999.
2. Susan Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 160.
3. Susan Landauer, "Clyfford Still and Abstract Expressionism in San Francisco," in *Clyfford Still 1904–1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, ed. Thomas Kelezin (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), p. 94.
4. David Park, quoted in Paul Mills, *Contemporary Bay Area Figurative Painting* (Oakland, CA: Oakland Art Museum, 1957), p. 7.
5. Elmer Bischoff, quoted in Paul Mills, *The New Figurative Art of David Park* (Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 1988), p. 74.
6. Bischoff, quoted in Mills, *The New Figurative Art of David Park*, p. 74.
7. According to John Natsoulas, Smith's "school"—which included James Kelly, Julius Wasserstein, and Sonia Gechtoff—constituted "Roy's main influence." Natsoulas, "Foreword," in John Fitz Gibbon, *Roy De Forest* (Davis, CA: Natsoulas/Novelozo Gallery, 1990), p. 9.
8. Christine Giles, "William T. Wiley," in Rosetta Brooks, Christine Giles, and Katherine Plake Hough, *Collaborations: William Allan, Robert Hudson, William Wiley* (Palm Springs, CA: Palm Springs Desert Museum in collaboration with the City of Indian Wells, 1998), p. 72.
9. Peter Selz, *Funk* (Berkeley, CA: University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, 1967), p. 5.
10. Judith Stockheim Schwartz, "Contemporary American Ceramic Sculpture: Satire in Selected Works of Robert Arneson, David Gilhooly, and Howard Kottler," (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1983), p. 76.
11. Schwartz, p. 76.
12. See David Zack, "Nut Art in Quake Time," *Art News* (March 1970) pp. 38–41, 77. See also *Nut Art* exhibition catalogue (Hayward, CA: California State University Hayward Art Gallery, 1972).
13. David Gilhooly, quoted in Henry Hopkins, *50 West Coast Artists: A Critical Selection of Painters and Sculptors Working in California* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books), 1981, p. 40.
14. Whitney Chadwick, "Narrative Imagism and the Figurative Tradition in Northern California Painting," *Art Journal* 45 (Winter 1985): p. 310. According to Chadwick, Nutt and Nilsson came from Chicago to attend the opening of Philip Linhares's Monster Roster exhibition at the SFAI in 1968 and decided to stay on. The hairy Who also exhibited at the Davis group's primary gallery, the Candy Store Gallery in Folsom, in 1973.
15. See Chadwick, "Narrative Imagism and the Figurative Tradition in Northern California Painting," pp. 309, 313.
16. Hilton Kramer, "Dude Ranch Dada," *The New York Times*, 16 May 1971.
17. Nicholas Roukes, *Humor in Art: A Celebration of Visual Wit* (Worcester, MA: Davis Publications, 1997), p. 86.
18. Roy De Forest, quoted in *Nut Art*, n.p.
19. John Fitz Gibbon, *Roy De Forest* (Davis, CA: Natsoulas/Novelozo Gallery, 1990), p. 15.
20. Karen Tsujimoto, *Wayne Thiebaud* (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1985), p. 134.

21. Tsujimoto, p. 55.
22. Although Thiebaud credits Diebenkorn with being a "big influence," he did not meet the artist until 1964 or 1965. Thiebaud, quoted in Stephen C. McGough, *Thiebaud Selects Thiebaud: A Forty-Year Survey from Private Collections* (Sacramento, CA: Crocker Art Museum, 1996), p. 15.
23. Tsujimoto, p. 51.
24. Max Kozloff, "Art," *The Nation* 5 May 1962, p. 407, quoted in Tsujimoto, p. 46.
25. *Welcome to the Candy Store!* (Sacramento, CA: Crocker Art Museum, 1981); *The Candy Store* (Redding, CA: Redding Museum and Art Center, 1989); Ellen Schlesinger, "Adeliza and the Candy Store Bunch," *Connoisseur*, November 1987, pp. 100–106.
26. Raimonds Staprans, conversation with the author, June 20, 1999.
27. *David Gilhooly* (Davis, CA: John Natsoulas Press, 1992), p. 19.
28. Mark Stevens, *Newsweek*, 26 May 1986, p. 73. *Six Pack* is in the collection of the di Rosa Preserve, Napa, California.
29. Richard Shaw, quoted in Jan Butterfield, *Richard Shaw/Ceramic Sculpture* (Newport Harbor, CA: Newport Beach, Newport Harbor Art Museum), n.p.
30. Hilton Kramer, paraphrased in *Sacramento Bee*, 2 May 1982. This was the Whitney Museum of American Art's 1982 exhibition, *Ceramic Sculpture: Six Artists*, which included Arneson, Gilhooly, and Shaw.
31. Neal Benezra, *Robert Arneson: A Retrospective* (Des Moines, IA: Des Moines Art Center, 1986), p. 67.
32. See Steven A. Nash, *Arneson and Politics: A Commemorative Exhibition* (San Francisco, CA: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1993).
33. On the back of the television Arneson placed two labels, one reading "CAUTION: do not expose this appliance to thought or reason," and the other: "WARNING: service by modern Hollywood screen fantasies only." While certainly mocking the president, Arneson seems to have expressed a certain empathy with Reagan's shortcomings by showing the leader wearing a hearing aid. The artist wore one as well, and sometimes included it in his self-portraits. Conversation with Jay Cooper, December 28, 1999.
34. Quoted in Kuspit, "Tart Wit" *Artforum* (January 1991): p. 97.
35. Nicholas Roukes notes that Picasso also examined his own multiple guises, some of which were the same. See Roukes, *Humor in Art*, p. 55.
36. Robert Arneson, quoted in Hopkins, *50 West Coast Artists*, p. 25.
37. John Fitz Gibbon, *VandenBerge* (Davis, CA: Natsoulas/Novelozo Gallery, 1991), n.p.
38. VandenBerge, quoted in Fitz Gibbon, *VandenBerge*, n.p.
39. Charles Johnson, "A Ceramic Sculptor Immortalizes Carrot," *Sacramento Bee*, 26 June 1974.
40. Johnson, "A Ceramic Sculptor Immortalizes Carrot."
41. For an excellent analysis of these busts and heads, see David Roth, "The Ceramic Sculpture of Peter VandenBerge," *Sacramento News and Review*, May 1993, p. 3.
42. Roukes, *Humor in Art*, p. 52.
43. Patterson Sims, "Essay," in *It's All Part of the Clay: Viola Frey* (Philadelphia, PA: Moore College of Art, 1984), p. 6.

44. Chadwick, "Narrative Imagism and the Figurative Tradition in Northern California Painting," p. 309.
45. See Marcia Tanner, "Well-Crafted Innocence: The Paintings of Philip Morsberger," in *Philip Morsberger* (San Francisco, CA: Rena Branstetter Gaffery, 1990).
46. Mark Van Proyen, "Air Traditioning," *Visions* (Summer 1993): p. 22.
47. Philip Morsberger, letter to Vicky Metzler, 15 December 1999. Copy in author's possession.
48. This is a lyric from one of Morsberger's son's songs, quoted in letter from Morsberger to Metzler, 15 December 1999.
49. Peter Saul, letter to Allan Frumkin from Mill Valley, California, 1966, quoted in *Peter Saul: New Paintings and Works on Paper* (New York, NY: Allan Frumkin Gallery, 1987), n.p.
50. Grace Glueck, "Peter Saul: Wild and Funny," *The New York Times*, 2 January 1981.
51. Peter Saul, letter to Allan Frumkin, 1966, quoted in *Peter Saul*, n.p.
52. The phrase is M. Louise Stanley's, his girlfriend at the time, in a conversation with the author, 4 January 2000. See also 'Bad Painting' (New York, NY: The New Museum, 1978).
53. James Albertson, conversation with the author, 4 January 2000.
54. Mark Van Proyen, "A Sardonic Wit," *Artweek* 14 (22 January 1983).
55. M. Louise Stanley, conversation with the author, 4 January 2000.
56. According to Stanley, the painting shows how "Women are always wanting more information, checking for clues, and men just go about their business, dum-de-dum." Correspondence with the author, 11 January 2000.
57. This painting was inspired in part by the Dorothy Parker short story, "Big Blonde." M. Louise Stanley, conversation with the author, 4 January 2000.
58. M. Louise Stanley, conversation with the author, 4 January 2000.
59. Michael Auping, *Colliding: Myth, Fantasy, Nightmare* (New York, NY: Artists Space, 1988), n.p.
60. Robert Colescott, lecture, Berkeley Art Museum, 11 May 1999.
61. Colescott, quoted in undated clipping, artist's file, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
62. Miriam Roberts, *Robert Colescott: Recent Paintings* (Santa Fe, NM: SITE Santa Fe and University of Arizona Museum of Art), p. 20.
63. This interpretation is based on a conversation between Colescott and the author, 4 January 2000.
64. John Fitz Gibbon, conversation with the author, 1999.
65. Colescott quoted in Lowery Stokes Sims, "Robert Colescott Redux," in Roberts, *Robert Colescott: Recent Paintings*, p. 46.
66. Harold Rosenberg, "Parable of American Painting," in *The Tradition of the New* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 13–22.
67. Thomas Albright, "Mythmakers," *The Art Gallery*, February 1975, p. 3.
68. Harold Paris, "Sweet Land of Funk," *Art in America* (March–April 1967): p. 98