

For immediate release

ROBERT ARNESON

Early Work

July 8 – August 9, 2013

Opening reception: Monday, July 8, 6 – 8 PM



Herinal, 1965/1971

Glazed ceramic

50 x 66 x 72 inches (127 x 167.6 x 182.9 cm)

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David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of early work by American ceramicist Robert Arneson (on view at the gallery's 537 West 20th Street location). Closely associated with the countercultural California Funk movement of the 1960s, Arneson was integral in elevating ceramics from mere craft to a valid form of aesthetic expression. This exhibition brings together a grouping of Arneson's seldom seen early works that simultaneously demonstrates the genesis of his unique artistic vocabulary and underscores his tremendous influence on generations of artists working in clay.

Having made his living as a high school (and sometimes college) ceramics teacher, in the spring of 1962, the still relatively unknown Arneson accepted a teaching position at the University of California's Davis campus. Thanks in particular to the antiformalist leanings of its faculty, the newly established art program quickly gained a reputation for being a hotbed of experimental and conceptual work. Arneson's ceramics studio in particular became a focal point of artistic exchange and his students, including Bruce Nauman, would often stay there late into the night.

It was during this developmentally fertile period that Arneson began to experiment with subject matter and to develop his own distinctive iconography with overtly grotesque and often humorous works. His ceramic sculptures possessed a distinctly Funk aesthetic, expressed through an insistence on figurative imagery, non-traditional techniques and materials, and low cultural subject matter, grafted on to the forms of quotidian objects—a West coast modulation of the Pop aesthetic. Arneson's deliberately taboo and vulgar visual puns challenged accepted notions of what constituted appropriate subject matter both for art and for the medium of ceramics, which at the time was primarily relegated to the realm of crafts.

Throughout the 1960s, Arneson produced highly charged and highly sexualized work that stood in stark contrast to the Minimalist constructions made by his contemporaries in New York. Drawn from public and private collections, the exhibition includes roughly 20 works that clearly show Arneson's artistic development and also prefigure his

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later work, which delves even further into the topics of identity and the self, as well as political upheaval and war. Highlights from the exhibition include several “Trophies,” Arneson’s first cohesive body of work made between 1963 and 1965. These debauched accolades, such as *Jack and John (Trophy)* (1964) and *Sex-Life Trophy* (1965), explicitly embody his turning against convention by introducing incongruous and shocking elements such as phallic forms, breasts, and human excrement onto trophies. Arneson’s subsequent series of toilets both expands and literalizes even further this strand of inquiry. In works like *Throne* (1964), he playfully suggests a double entendre between a toilet (colloquially referred to as a “throne”) and a ceramic object (which is “thrown” on a wheel). *Toaster* (1965), which depicts a human hand reaching out of a conventional toaster, represents one of Arneson’s earliest engagements with politics. A swastika emblazoned on the side of the object alludes grimly to Nazi ovens and the inescapability of the legacy of that horror in our day-to-day lives. Also on view here is Arneson’s seminal work *Self Portrait of the Artist Losing His Marbles* (1965; Collection of the Museum of Art and Design, New York), his first full-scale ceramic self-portrait and a breakthrough in his career. The genre of self-portraiture, which is rife with art historical implications, would preoccupy Arneson for the majority of the 1970s and come to constitute some of his most-known work.

Born in 1930 in Benicia, California, **Robert Arneson** received his B.A. from the California College of Arts & Crafts (1954) and his M.F.A. from Mills College in Oakland, California (1958). Arneson remained on faculty at U.C. Davis until 1991—just one year before his death. He has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions at venues such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (1974), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1974), the MIT List Visual Arts Center (1991), and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (1992). His work has also been shown in seminal group exhibitions including *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1968) and the Whitney Biennial (1979). Arneson’s work can be found in important public and private collections throughout the United States and Europe, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

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