

BAY AREA CLAY

A LEGACY OF SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS



ROBERT ARNESON STEPHEN DE STAEBLER VIOLA FREY ARTHUR GONZALEZ
MICHELLE GREGOR MARC LANCET MARK MESSENGER
RICHARD NOTKIN LISA REINERTSON RICHARD SHAW
EHREN TOOL MONICA VAN DEN DOOL STAN WELSH WANXIN ZHANG

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–Lisa Reinertson

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BAY AREA CLAY
**A LEGACY OF SOCIAL
CONSCIOUSNESS**

Robert Arneson
Stephen De Staebler
Viola Frey
Arthur Gonzalez
Michelle Gregor
Marc Lancet
Mark Messenger
Richard Notkin
Lisa Reinertson
Richard Shaw
Ehren Tool
Monica Van den Dool
Stan Welsh
Wanxin Zhang



Robert Arneson *General Nuke*, 1984
Glazed stoneware and bronze on granite base, 77 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 30" x 36 $\frac{3}{4}$ "
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution
Gift of Robert Arneson and Sandra Shannonhouse, 1990
Photo credit: Lee Stalsworth ©2017, Estate of Robert Arneson, License by VAGA, New York, NY

BAY AREA CLAY: A LEGACY OF SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Lisa Reinertson, *artist and exhibition curator*

From Robert Arneson's "War Heads" to Stephen De Staebler's enigmatic figures, the early Bay Area clay sculptors were addressing themes of the human condition reflected in the social and political issues of the times.

How these pioneers of the Bay Area ceramic movement influenced several generations of West Coast clay sculptors, and how the current clay artists continue to bring their commentary on the social, political and environmental issues of our times is the theme explored in this exhibition. These early contemporary ceramic sculptors not only projected thought and inspiration into the future with their timeless work, but through teaching, mentored generations of artists to carry technical mastery and social engagement into their own artwork and into the flux of our shared future.

Bay Area Clay: A Legacy of Social Consciousness

is a legacy of hopefulness for our future. Whether the artwork is expressing something beautiful of the human spirit, or the artwork is an expression of social criticism; the underlying idea is that artists are called to speak their truth. And, as Dr. Martin Luther King stated, "Speaking truth is ultimately a powerful weapon for change."

The 1960s ushered in a radical shift in consciousness that permeated our culture. In the San Francisco Bay Area this shift was felt deeply. The War in Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement, and Women's Rights Movement had us looking at our society with both a more critical, and what is seemingly contradictory, a more hopeful spirit. People were taking on the

responsibility to "question authority" as a moral obligation with the goal of improving our society. A certain individual freedom of consciousness was in the air, which was reflected in the work of Bay Area artists. And clay, a medium that was outside the realm of the 'Fine Art Establishment', was the perfect vehicle for playing around with this spirit of freedom.

Robert Arneson, Viola Frey and Stephen De Staebler were among the teachers of the clay community that was blossoming in the Bay Area. Ideas grew exponentially as students became mature artists in their own right exploring this medium with the freedom that came with the insight that clay, like paint or steel, was just another opportunity for artistic expression; expression that broke new ground. From sculpture to painted surfaces, from abstract expressionist works to political narrative, from pop art to installation, clay proved to be the most versatile and expressive of mediums.

Robert Arneson's work moved rapidly through the changes of abstract expressionist pottery, to pop inspired objects, to becoming one of the founders of the "Funk Art" ceramic scene. But his work resisted categorization as he explored the trials and travails of the human condition through his series of self-portraits, portraits of artists who influenced him, and his infamous George Moscone bust in which he utilized the pedestal of the sculpture to portray the life and death story of San Francisco's mayor. His later works boldly confronted the darkest side of humanity in the "War Head" series, and painfully exposed the excruciating reality of his battle with cancer.

Stephen De Staebler's work expressed layers of evocative meaning addressing the human condition. The vulnerability and fragility of our existence on earth is expressed with such tragic beauty. One feels the history and impacts of war, famine, the Holocaust, in layers of earth that express a timelessness of human suffering and man's inhumanity to man.

Viola Frey's life-size women and over-life size businessmen reflected back on our culture's gender politics and the domination of corporate capitalism. Her "Corporate Men" exude an oppressive power, towering over the viewer, a dominating presence felt in all of her 9 feet tall 'men in suits'.



Stephen De Staebler *Standing Woman and Standing Man*, 1975
Stoneware and porcelain, two figures, 96" x 14½" x 33½"
Photo credit: Scott McCue



Viola Frey *Man Observing, Series III 1984*
Ceramic and glazes, 105" x 44 x 28, ALF no. VF-3206CS
Art © Artists' Legacy Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York NY
Collection of Oakland Museum of California,
The Ted and Ruth Nash Collection 2007.52.2

One of the common threads I see in the work that has come from this legacy of clay artists is what I call 'the subtle Art of social criticism'. As bold as the work often is, it seems to share a common subtlety of social critique. These artists avoid confrontational verbal argument and overtly dogmatic literal statements by blending technical mastery, humor, beauty, pathos, and rich visual layers of meaning. Thus the artist can express an idea in their artwork in a way that hits the viewer deeply and intuitively. The personal is political and the political is aesthetic.

Robert Arneson

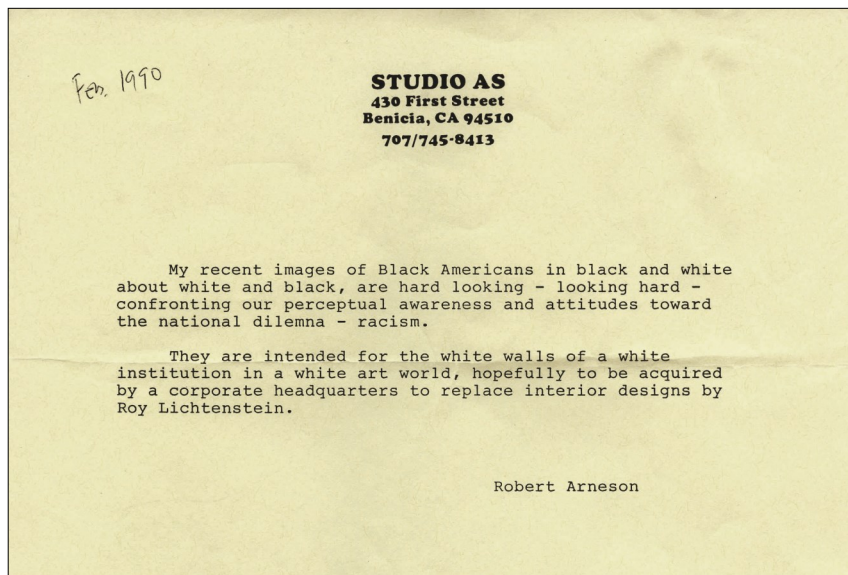


Robert Arneson *Chief Executive Officer*, 1989
Ceramic, 25" x 12" x 12"



Robert Arneson *Rapist & Drug Dealer*, 1989
Ceramic, 25" x 12" x 12"

Courtesy of Brian Gross Fine Art, San Francisco and George Adams Gallery, New York.
© 2017, Estate of Robert Arneson, Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



Robert Arneson received his MFA from Mills College in 1958. He was the head of the Ceramics Program as a Professor in the Art Department at UC Davis for nearly three decades, from 1962 until his retirement in 1991.

Stephen De Staebler



Stephen De Staebler *Blue Wedge with Fragmented Leg*, 2009
Clay, 62" x 20" x 21"
Courtesy of Stephen De Staebler Estate

Stephen De Staebler

In his quest to express the complexities of humanity's earthly existence, De Staebler also sought to access a realm of fuller being and admit the possibility of transcendence despite our earthly limitations. The recognition of the spiritual's place in and impact on the physical, temporal world is expressed formally through various visual references. The often armless or headless torsos of his figures, for example, sit magically atop slender, gracefully elongated legs reminiscent of the exaggerated anatomy found in Italian Mannerist paintings. The preternatural, almost ethereal quality of these limbs, together with the occasional appearance of a winged appendage, produce strong totemic associations in which humanity's kinship to a divine other is affirmed.

“De Staebler’s creation of his sculptures was inherently an act of affirmation, yet the artworks offer equivocal rather than definitive statements. They focus instead on the transitional or metamorphic states that lie between nature and culture, life and death, integration and disintegration, and matter and spirit. They thus manifest the pervasive dilemma of existential doubt while also serving as rare sanctuaries for humanist values and spiritual beliefs in an increasingly materialist age.”

- Timothy Anglin Burgard

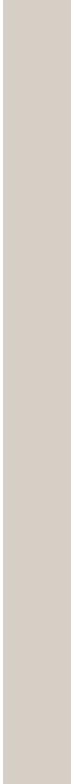
— **Frances Malcolm**, 2012, for Dolby Chadwick Gallery, San Francisco

Stephen De Staebler graduated from Princeton University in 1950 with a degree in Religious Studies. He received his MFA at UC Berkeley in 1961, studying with Peter Voulkos. After teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute, he taught at San Francisco State University from 1967 until his retirement in 1990.

Viola Frey



Viola Frey *Deer*, *Endangered Animal Series*, 1972-1974
Ceramic and glazes, 35" x 20" x 21"
Art © Artists' Legacy Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York



Viola Frey produced an impressive body of work over the course of her five-decade career beginning in 1954, including ceramic sculpture, bronze sculpture, paintings, and drawings. Internationally respected—with works held in over seventy public collections—Frey was drawn to the expressive potential of clay and, along with her colleagues Robert Arneson and Peter Voulkos, was instrumental in cracking the barrier between craft and fine art.

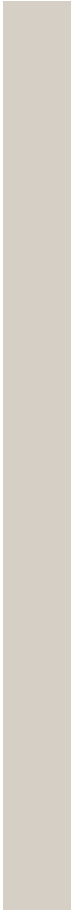
Deer, Endangered Animal Series, mixes Frey's interest in extinct, endangered and non-endangered animals. Frey has been called a visual anthropologist and an urban archaeologist. The work reflects the era's ecological issues and the growing conflict between human needs, industrial pollution, and threats to nature.

Viola Frey received her BFA at California College of Arts and Crafts in 1956. She began teaching at CCAC in 1965 where she eventually became head of the Ceramics Program until her retirement in 1999.

Arthur Gonzalez



Arthur Gonzalez *Acid Rain*, 1988
Ceramic and mixed media, 36" x 21" x 12"



Arthur Gonzalez' powerful and deeply human sculptures reflect a subtle feeling of 'the personal as political'. There is a wonderful sense of poetic freedom in his use of materials, and the often felt "fool's journey" as his figures navigate this troubled earth.

The current series that I am working on is called "The Fence in the Hole." This work incorporates the elements of the main character that is pre-occupied in various dynamics. The common thread with this series and all the work in the past is the continuation of the personal study of the nature of narrative (as opposed to the idea of an absolute or specific story being told). This is accomplished through placement of elements and the protagonist's dealings with those elements. Through this approach, the reader is compelled to interpret the work through visual triggers and compositions.

Arthur Gonzalez received his MFA in 1981 at UC Davis working with Robert Arneson. He has been teaching in the Ceramics Department at California College of the Arts for over 25 years.

Michelle Gregor



Michelle Gregor Scout, 2011
Ceramic, 30" x 16" x 18"



Michelle Gregor's figurative ceramic

sculptures evoke a timeless and yet contemporary expression of the human condition embodied in the exploration of “woman” as subject. Gregor handles the clay medium and her rich color palette with a process-oriented and intuitive approach that resonates from her Bay Area roots and her deep understanding of Abstract Expressionism. Her female figures are solid and strong, as they carry both their mortal history and the beauty of their spirits intact.

Sculpture is a tributary that runs deeply through the great creative current. The Process of sculpture in clay, with its slow beginning, heavy physicality, and transformations through both water and fire, compels me. To practice this art form is to be deeply humbled by its treasures, exquisite and remarkable. This long conversation between artist and material takes many courses: a wandering dialogue. Through the vehicle of the Figure, my intention is to articulate something of the precious source that animates us. The transient state of our existence is the muse.

Michelle Gregor received her MFA in 1992 at San Francisco State University working with Stephen De Staebler. She is head of the Ceramics program at San Jose City College.

Marc Lancet



Marc Lancet *Missile Defense*, 2014
Wood-fired ceramic, 28" x 29" x 16"



Marc Lancet's

figurative sculptures are rooted in the aesthetic traditions of wood-fired ceramics while simultaneously expressing the destructive impact of humanity's obsession with war. As a professor and artist, he is deeply committed to the idea that art matters, to the health of the human spirit and to humanity's future.

All we do in this world, we embody. All our actions become part of us, culturally, socially, historically, psychologically and even physically. I bring to the studio my own fascination with the 'complex, dynamic, cultural forces' and a trust that these interests will emerge in the work without my forcing them. I endeavor to create sculpture in which conceptual integrity and sculptural attributes are intertwined, inseparable.

Marc Lancet received his MFA in 1983 at UC Santa Barbara and migrated to the Bay Area where he has been head of the Ceramics and Sculpture program at Solano Community College for over thirty years.

Mark Messenger



Mark Messenger *Cliffhanger (detail)*, 2017
Earthenware, 120" x 38" x 28"



Mark Messenger's

clay sculptures

combine three-dimensional form with narrative imagery carved onto the surface. With a graphic narrative quality, his recent sculptural works evoke reminders of the complex history of oppression and conquest of indigenous cultures. These artworks ask timeless questions that address our basic humanity.

My work represents a personal mythology based on a contemporary perspective. Through my ceramic works, I explore social, political and psychological issues in the form of narratives. This involves a variety of characters which might be viewed as elemental components of "self". These characters interact amidst an eclectic, often anachronistic array of images and objects derived from history, religion, mythology, contemporary life, media and art. Their drama, in a variety of often humorous situations, forms the dominant undercurrent. My aim is to piece together universal aspects of this dynamic.

Mark Messenger received his MFA at San Diego State University in 1994. He has been teaching ceramics at Diablo Valley College in the East Bay for 20 years.