

Robert Arneson

Guardians of the Secret II

March 12–May 7, 2016



Robert Arneson, *Guardians of the Secret II*, 1990

Pure Arneson by Bill Berkson

That the meaning of these totemic figures is evocative rather than denotative, is true to the nature of totemic art.
—Frank O'Hara, on Jackson Pollock's
Guardians of the Secret

In the eight years between 1982 and 1990, Robert Arneson did 97 works using Jackson Pollock-related motifs, the largest number of them portrait heads of Pollock himself. Altogether, there are ceramic sculptures, drawings, editioned bronzes, prints, and one large painting with an image of Arneson's face superimposed on one side of Pollock's. Shortly

before, beginning in 1980, Arneson had been searching for a model other than himself; having used his own image in his sculpture over the past 15 years, he needed a surrogate artist, as Sandra Shannonhouse recalls, "with 'enough stuff' that he could work on that personage and stop making self portraits."

The two with whom Arneson eventually registered his greatest affinity were Jackson Pollock and Philip Guston, fellow abstract-expressionists, yes, but whose sensibilities were otherwise utterly remote from one another, as well as, finally,

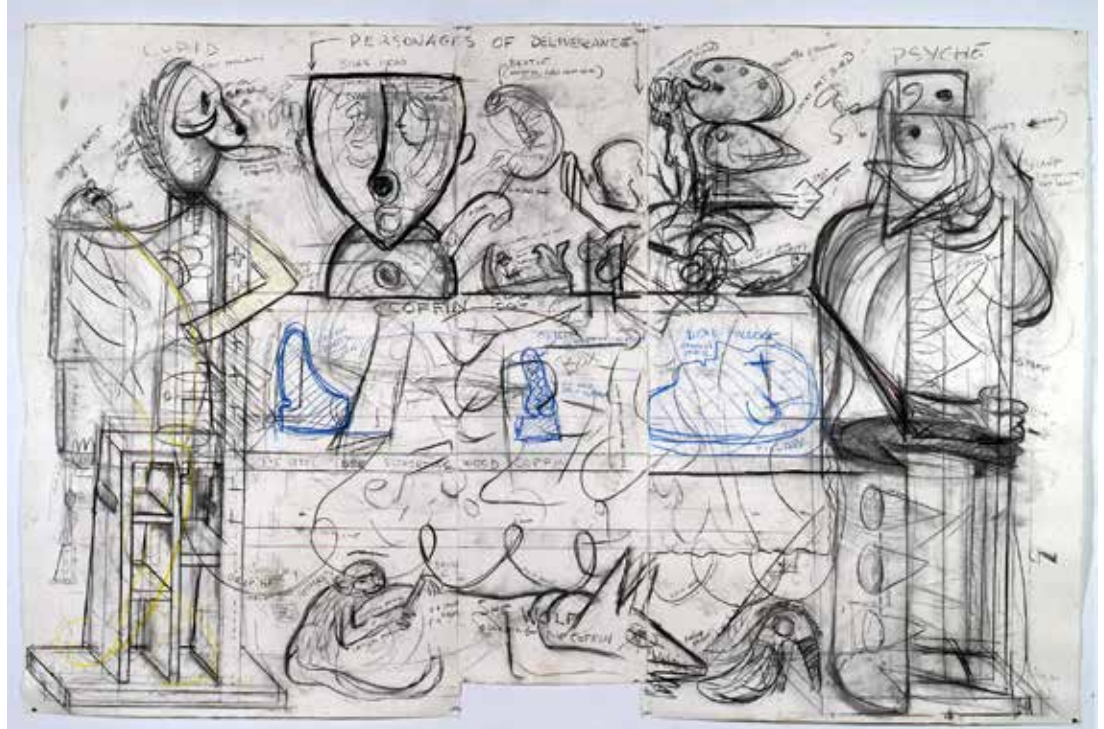
**Brian Gross
Fine Art**

from Arneson's own. Between them, it was Pollock—"a great liberator of painting and the sense that the work came from his gut level"—who proved the most compelling, appearing as he does, throughout the series, as mythological figure, alter ego, and regular guy, all rolled in to one.

When it came to dealing directly with Pollock's work and not the man Arneson imagined Pollock to be, Arneson took what was most close-to-hand: in this case, the one great Pollock locally on public view, *Guardians of the Secret*, in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He had seen the painting many times at the museum with his students on on field trips and made repeated visits to inspect it as his work progressed. Arneson really went after it. As Shannonhouse says, "He got every book on Pollock he could find and read them all." He also visited the Pollock-Krasner House in Springs, Long Island, and saw the barn where Pollock worked. "My last Pollock," as Arneson called it, was a highly personal rendering in sculptural terms of Pollock's *Guardian's of the Secret* that Arneson, true to his sense of having entered Pollock's domain, titled *Guardians of the Secret II*.

Pollock's *Guardians* comprises a smorgasbord-like outlay of images created insistently spurt-by-spurt—oils smeared and squiggled, lathered and flicked in Pollock's then-customary method, a reliance on clot-stiffened brushes, brush handles, palette knives, and streamers of unmixed colors squeezed straight from the tube. Amidst this riot of painterly approaches, *Guardians* projects a hotbed of simultaneity, with the different elements launched in its crucible, each on the edge of an isolate metamorphosis, a moment of reckoning prompted by some dire psychic alarm. Pursuing every plausible aspect of the original fitful tableau, its manifold array of arcane figures and markings in shifting scale, Arneson produced an outsized, wildly audacious yet remarkably faithful three-dimensional account of the distress, psychological and aesthetic, of Pollock's not so abstract abstraction. Arneson's version is a likewise convulsive, if necessarily more stabilized, assemblage of ceramic, rubber, wood, metal, canvas and plastic parts: 18 pieces all told.

Although Pollock's *Guardians*, done in 1943, had figured chronologically as a kind of testing ground for the then-31-year-old Pollock, Arneson's complete, freestanding seven-by-ten-by-two-foot translation, *Guardians of the Secret II*, 1990, becomes Pollock's cenotaph. (Arneson himself would die two years later, in 1992, at age 62.) To make his sculptural equivalent, Arneson produced



Robert Arneson, *Working Drawing for Guardians of the Secret II*, 1990

maquettes of individual parts and one slightly more than full-scale preparatory drawing on three abutted strips of heavy watercolor paper stapled to a studio wall. Working with both the drawing and a large catalogue reproduction of the original in full view, he handbuilt and modeled, applied glazes and sometimes ground them back to the gritty layer of fired clay. To secure the box containing the Pollock reliquary (head, penis, and work boots, *in memoriam*), he devised an 84-inch-long rectangular steel tube to fit into grooves cut into the standing "guardians" at hip level at either end. He then draped over the box a large rectangle of unstretched canvas embellished on the outward facing flap with a meticulous copy of the fish and other weedy glyphs of Pollock's central panel. (Impulsively penciled in, among Arneson's confident swathes of oil paint, are allusions to things heard in passing on his favorite radio station, KPFA—"Coming to You Live," "why do fools fall in love," "Senator Helms," and so on—accompanied by assorted taunts and expletives.)

Working through Pollock's picture, Arneson gave sharp definition, sometimes bizarre, to details and iconography unmentioned in the official literature. The uncertainties involved in what Rosalind Krauss once called Pollock's "fundamentally unstable imagery" had to be bypassed to a large extent for Arneson to be able to make distinct shapes. Given the many different

interpretations, he made his own decisions, deciphering with complete originality, and otherwise inventing substitutes where the originals wouldn't yield anything like a solidified image. In many cases, confronting Pollock's more wild-card improvisations, he improvised accordingly. Deciphering meant concocting and conjuring in one's own terms.

In a stunningly detailed 1992 statement for the Frumkin/Adams Gallery in New York, absorbed later that year in a longer essay in *Ceramics Monthly*, Arneson went so far as to name the symbolic figures where Pollock had left his moot:

The sculpture Guardians is composed of two 7-foot tall totemic figures supporting a draped coffin (reliquary) that contains "Green Boots" (under the grass), a "Phallic" (power of creation), with all-over drip painting, and "Head of Pollock" (eternal peace).

From the back view, its left totemic figure (cupid?) supports "The Dying Artist" (fear), who clutches 3 small canvases (three strikes, you're out!). The totem's head is split (personality)—one

half is in flames (passion); the other half is an animal skull with a forked tongue (equivocal).

The right totemic figure (psyche) is veiled (Jungian) and firmly brandishes a staff with flame (guiding light) (self belief). Her gown has 7 orifices (fertile possibilities?).

Both totemic figures are linked below the coffin by "Drip Hose" (umbilical cord) in a looping, autographic line (subconscious expression).

arms; resting on its back is red feathered cock (ghost of Picasso, castration?). Between "Boar-Head" and "Great Art Bird" sits the small figure "Bear-Man" conversing with an odd duck (alcoholism). On the top right edge of the coffin sits the figurine "Fish-Out-of-Water" (misfit).

The graffiti on the "Coffin drapery" features some obscure images of fish, faces and slanderous scribbles.

Very little of this jibes with accounts (rightly limited, as they have been, by the ambiguities involved) of Pollock's scheme. Arneson gives even the Jungian interpretations many idiosyncratic, often characteristically raucous twists, and he blatantly contradicts the normal (and fairly obvious) gender designations for the standing totem figures—left-female, right-male. What is clear is

that Arneson saw the mythic Pollock everywhere in the work, beginning with the eponymous "secret." (He was familiar with the Pollock biographer B. H. Friedman's suggestion that the secret under guard is Pollock himself.) As it happened, Arneson's passion for seeing into Pollock by making a parallel creation meant seeing through that work to himself, or rather, to the differences between him and the man he was invoking as a "role model." Pollock's set of constellated images exists as an allegory without a key, and so does Arneson's, despite his efforts to label every part. Ultimately, in form and spirit, *Guardians II* is pure Arneson. As he wrote in his compendious *Ceramics Monthly* essay:

Guardians [II] has so much going on that I am willing to call it my masterpiece... Pollock's work is so open to interpretation. It's inviting. It has hundreds of symbols. You can stare, focus, sketch it out, render, make a few little attempts at transference from two to three dimensions, and see what happens. You have to enter into the spirit of the work.



Jackson Pollock, *Guardians of the Secret*, 1943

courtesy SFMOMA

Atop the coffin sit the personages of deliverance. The left one, "Boar-Head," embodies good and evil, innocence and instinct; perched on its arm is a beetle (embryo, fetal obsession?) The right personage is "Great Art Bird," with a palette crown and paint can tightly held in outstretched

Beneath the coffin lies a large she-wolf (guardian of the land of the dead) being mounted by a brush-wielding monkey (mindless mimic and critical philistine). She-wolf sniffs the rear of "Odd Bird of Paradise."

Exhibition Checklist

Guardians of the Secret II
1989–1990
glazed ceramic, wood,
plexiglass, steel, canvas,
epoxy, mixed media
86 × 119 × 26 inches

*Working drawing for
Guardians of the Secret II*
1990
charcoal, graphite,
and pastel on paper
84 × 128³/₈ inches

Guardian One
1987
glazed ceramic
31 × 19 × 17¹/₂ inches

*Study for Element in
Guardians of the Secret II*
1990
glazed ceramic and wire
31 × 28 × 17 inches

*Pollock with
Guardian Crown*
1990
glazed ceramic and marble
20 × 10 × 9 inches

*Model for Guardians
of the Secret II*
1988
glazed ceramic
16 × 23¹/₂ × 7 inches

*Study for Element in
Guardians of the Secret
II (dog and monkey)*
1990
glazed ceramic
6³/₄ × 23 × 8¹/₂ inches

*Model for Element in
Guardians of the Secret II*
1990
glazed ceramic
6¹/₄ × 2³/₄ × 2 inches

*Model for Element in
Guardians of the Secret II*
1990
glazed ceramic
6¹/₂ × 5 × 3³/₄ inches

Golden Stone
1986
glazed ceramic with
redwood base
47 × 26 × 26 inches

Stringhalt J
1987
cast paper with paint
53 × 45 × 12 inches

J.P.'s Shadow
1987
charcoal on paper
47¹/₂ × 31¹/₂ inches

*Study for the Guardians
of the Secret II*
1990
mixed media on paper
30 × 44 inches

Museum Exhibitions

List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, 1991; "From the Jackson Pollock Series".

American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, NYC, 1991; "Exhibition of Award Winners".

Springfield Art Museum, MA, 1991; "Guardians of the Secret II".

Sawhill Gallery, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, 1991; "Robert Arneson: New and Selected Works".

Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA, 1992; "Guardians of the Secret II".

Museum of Art, University of Northern Iowa, Iowa City, 1992–93. "Guardians of the Secret II". In conjunction with Jackson Pollock, "Mural" (1943).



Robert Arneson, *Guardians of the Secret II*, 1990 (rear view)