

CHARLES ARNOLDI: 1998-2001

Potato mojo: Consider these selections of drawings, paintings, and sculptures by Charles (a.k.a. Chuck) Arnoldi from 1998 to 2001 belonging to his *Potato* series, formal explorations of bulbous shapes inspired by *solanum tuberosum*, the spud. It might seem far-fetched to draw a postmodern line linking the imagery of Arnoldi's *Potato* series to the paintings of Robert Motherwell's *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, the large-scale horizontal canvases of stark black-on-white processional reliefs with the iconic repeating motif of monumental ovoids floating/engaged between vertical bands. Bear with me.

Arnoldi makes no such grandiose claims. In fact, the gallery press release recounts how school children visiting the artist's studio in Venice, California years ago saw in the oval forms in his paintings the likes of Mickey Mouse (ears) and Bullwinkle (nose). *Ex ore infantium*, sayeth the Psalm. From there, Arnoldi's next step with his ovoid forms—to the common potato—was not a big leap.

The anecdote resonates with an experience I had when I first began teaching art history to college students. On seeing the crudely carved figures of the Late Roman reliefs on the Arch of Constantine depicting senators whose squat proportions, block-like shapes, and cookie-cutter bodies were in marked contrast to the graceful, idealized classical forms they had studied in the Early Empire, my students branded these Late Antique figures "the potato-head people." Fresh from grad school, steeped in the Western legacy, I was not amused.

But the little wankers were onto something. That something was built into the evolution of Western art from the start, denoted much later by the elevated term "vernacular art" to give it some footing against the dominant "classical" peaks of the Western

tradition. It took the advent of Modernism to give vernacular art its due. The wiry, hyperactive relief figures who cavort on the bronze cathedral doors of Hildesheim as God and Adam and Eve in the Garden—they would surely have delighted Arnoldi's young visitors—now hold their own in dramatic import against the monumental treatments of the same themes from Genesis on the Sistine ceiling. Within the evolution of Western art there's a kind of creative entropy in which some of the energy lost in developing a new style is less "lost" than it is diverted, only to reemerge at a later date to displace that style when its energy has dissipated.

An example much closer to home is the displacement of the Modernist canon with a Postmodern entropy aptly conveyed in Fredric Jameson's comparison (from *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*) of one of van Gogh's paintings of peasant boots (1887) with one of Andy Warhol's photo-based acrylic-on-linen paintings from his *Diamond Dust Shoes* series (1980-1982). Discussing the two works, Jameson cites Heidegger's grounding of van Gogh's image in the peasant soil it embodies: "In [the boots] there vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of ripening corn and its enigmatic self-refusal of the fallow desolation of the wintry field." The boots "belong to the earth... Engraved in the intimate obscurity of the hollow of the boot is the weariness of the steps of work." On the other hand, Warhol's image of women's shoes is reduced to a "text," a simulacrum in which the Modernist expression of individual alienation and anomie is displaced by a Postmodern response of utter detachment—a liberation from anxiety at the cost of "a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well"—what Jameson terms the new era's "waning of affect."

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Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* is no more a gloss on van Gogh than Arnoldi's *Potato* series is a subconscious meditation on Motherwell—we're not talking *Elegy to the Spinach Republic*. But what is at work here is the cycle of creative entropy in Western art that continually displaces the content of visual motifs and informs them anew, arriving at an old, "humanist" position from a very new place. The obvious whimsy of Arnoldi's tubers taps into the roots of the motif, going back to van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* and forward to Motherwell's elegiac ovoids—themselves the monumental residue of even more abstracted ovals by, say, Henry Moore.

Arnoldi's vernacularizing of abstract form pursues a course similar to that at work in Motherwell's *Elegy* series. In discussing entropy during an interview in 1973, Robert Smithson said, "Pure science, like pure art, tends to view abstraction as independent of nature; there's no accounting for change or the temporality of the mundane world. Abstraction rules in a void, pretending to be free of time." Arnoldi's *Potato Series* invests his oval forms much as his earlier stick sculptures re-materialized Action Painting's gestural abstraction.

The monochrome potato paintings in the Arnoldi exhibition evolved into large, multi-colored lateral canvases (e.g. *Moving Pictures*, 7 1/2' x 50', 2001), recapitulating the monumental relief format of the most expansive paintings of Motherwell's *Elegy* series (e.g. *Elegy to the Spanish Republic 100*, 7' x 20'). You could call this connection a stretch. But "stretch" is one way to denote the continuity of change in the entropy of Western art that ensures its abiding link to contemporary life.

—RICHARD TOBIN



Charles Arnoldi, *Tasty Spuds #1*, cast bronze, 5" x 5" x 4 3/4", 1997