

ART

Bear hug

Robert Arneson's tribute to Pollock

It's doubtful that Jackson Pollock would have liked the work of Robert Arneson. It's also doubtful, judging from Arneson's show at the Dorothy Goldeen Gallery in Santa Monica, that Arneson would care a whit.

The show is an unabashed tribute — a big bear hug lavished on a proper, self-conscious ghost. The fact that the ghost takes himself quite seriously makes Arneson's slobbering embrace all the more endearing.

Pollock was a movie-screen image of The Artist: brooding, introspective, obsessed. He saw his paintings as a manifestation of the unconscious; he abandoned himself to chance.

His art was as much about painting itself — about the surface of the canvas and the way paint was applied — as it was about any identifiable subject.

The major critics loved him, but the Philistines of his day derided him, particularly for the drip paintings of his later years. (Time magazine credited him only with having "invented a new kind of decoration," which was his "one big contribution to the slosh-and-spatter school.")

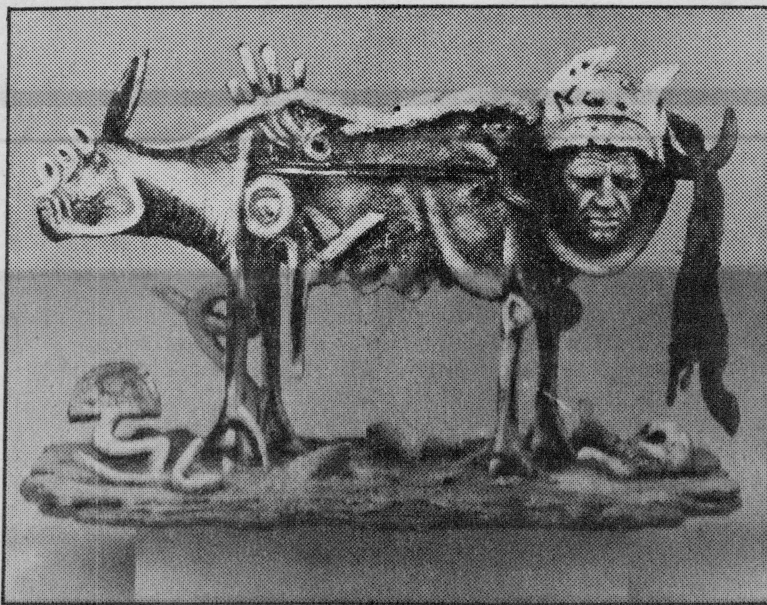
Arneson, by contrast, is a kind of cartoon realist whose broad humor immediately endears him to kids but makes some art professionals a little suspicious. The Northern Californian's best-known work is done in clay, a medium that has received some grudging acceptance since Pollock's day, but is hardly the stuff of abstract expressionism.

Arneson's brand of introspection may be seen in his ongoing series of self-portraits. He usually depicts himself as a little foolish, if not a total buffoon. Robert Arneson may well face some terrible inner conflict, but the work rarely deals with anything heavier than what looks like a bad morning.

The current show is titled simply "J.P." Arneson presents 10 pieces, most of them portraits, but of very different sorts and in a variety of media.

There are paintings and drawings, including a brilliant and untypical image, "Wolf Head," thick with the oranges and yellows Arneson loves, but Pollock would have found too unsubtle. And there's a 2½-foot-high bronze "Big Head of Jackson," sitting on the floor in such a way as to suggest that the rest of Jackson stands beneath the gallery, ready to emerge when art needs him again.

Some of the new work is tediously obvious. The opening



"Last of the Great Buffalo Hunters," wood, Fixall, ceramic, paint and leather by Robert Arneson at Dorothy Goldeen Gallery in Santa Monica.

On Art



Charles Desmarais

piece of the exhibition, "Jackson's Crash," is an example. It is a narrative of Pollock's last wild minutes and a depiction of his death in 1956. They are little porcelain cars on pedestals, knickknacks providing no more information or impact than a brief paragraph would.

On the other hand, the most intriguing object in the whole exhibit is a very nearly dumb transcription of a Pollock painting into sculpture. "Last of the Great Buffalo Hunters" is Arneson's good-hearted tribute to Pollock's 1943 painting, "The She-Wolf."

"The She-Wolf" was a major early success for Pollock, the first painting to be bought by a museum (and New York's Museum of Modern Art, at that). Arneson has given three-dimensional form to the wolf, interpreting every line and brush stroke literally, and in the process has reduced a painting of great power to an emaciated stick figure.

Where Pollock left an amorphous black scribble at the animal's flank, Arneson conveniently locates a bust of the painter.

Rest assured that Arneson knows what he's doing here. For him, "the image" (a depiction of something concrete in the world) is quite nearly everything. For Pollock, it was but one element. Arneson knows that "The She-Wolf" is a great painting precisely because the wolf is a mere suggestion in a canvas full of powerful painting gestures. "Last of the Great Buffalo Hunters" works because this ridiculous creature now exists.

The Robert Arneson exhibit is at the Dorothy Goldeen

Gallery, 1547 Ninth St., Santa Monica, through Feb. 13.

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At L.A. Louver, 77 Market St., Venice, a rare opportunity is being presented. The work of the late Wallace Berman, considered the founder of the California Assemblage movement, is on exhibit through Saturday.

Berman, who lived most of his career in Los Angeles, had few exhibitions in Southern California or elsewhere during his lifetime. Part of the reason for this was Berman's own attitude: For years he turned down shows as he waited for "the right time." Part was out of his control: His first major show was closed by a 1957 vice squad for a single erotic fragment of a larger piece.

Even since his death in 1976, exhibitions have been rare, in part because without an outlet for his work he produced relatively little.

Along with Bruce Conner, Ed Kienholz and others, Berman developed during the 1950s and '60s a visual equivalent of Beat, bringing dissonant imagery into a new kind of harmony.

A recurring image for more than 10 years — a hand holding a transistor radio — is the basic element of most of the works in the L.A. Louver show. The hand and radio form a frame for a succession of images, each like a blared announcement. Make of it what you will, it's the sound of our popular culture.

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A celebration of the work of one of the central figures of modern architecture opens Tuesday at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. The gallery will spotlight not one, but two exhibitions on Frank Lloyd Wright through March 13.

"Frank Lloyd Wright in Los Angeles: An Architecture for the Southwest" will feature drawings, models and photographs of the work he did here in the 1920s. "Frank Lloyd Wright and the Johnson Wax Buildings: Creating a Corporate Cathedral" deals with the Racine, Wis., project considered one of his best works of the 1930s.