



Estate of Robert Arneson / VAGA

Robert Arneson's "Johns," including "The Pisser," are in the same show for the first time but aren't presented together.

Still finding its feet

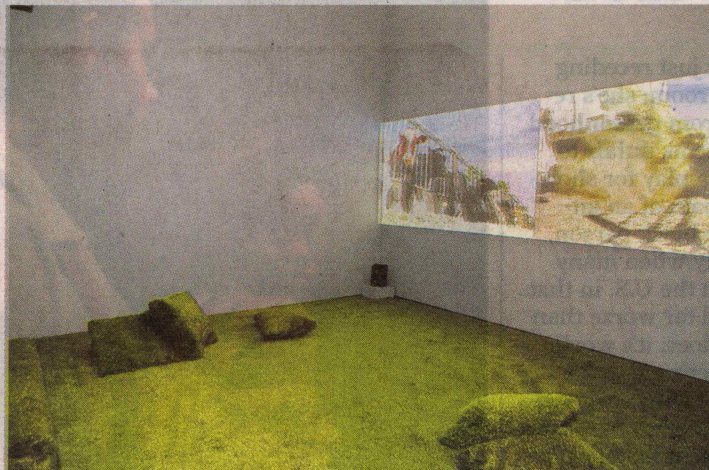
Some eye-openers and some missteps at UC Davis' new museum

By Charles Desmarais

Like any new effort, the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, unveiled to the public Sunday, Nov. 13, on the campus of UC Davis, has some kinks to work out. Of the four opening exhibitions, "Out Our Way," a look at the storied early years of the UC Davis art department, is the largest. It unveils some real discoveries but is uneven in presentation — no surprise, perhaps, in a building the curators are still learning to use.

Also on view, "Hoof & Foot: A Field Study" by Chris Sollars, is a witty video installation that draws visual analogies among the ani-

Shrem continues on E2



Terri Olson / UC Davis

Chris Sollars' "Hoof & Foot" is a witty video installation that draws visual analogies among the Davis campus' animals.

Out Our Way: 12-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays; until 10 p.m. Thursdays. 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays & Sundays. Free. Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, UC Davis, 254 Old Davis Rd., Davis. (530) 752-8500. <http://manettishremmuseum.ucdavis.edu>

► Read more of The Chronicle's coverage of the new museum and its building at www.sfchronicle.com.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Clay Johnson



Paul Macapia / Estate of Robert Arneson

Left: Ralph Johnson stages a selection of "Chairs" in the late 1960s. Right: "John With Art" and others by Robert Arneson are scattered throughout the show.

New museum still finding its feet

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mals, four-legged and two, of the UC Davis campus. Of the two smaller shows, one features drawings and models for the new building by its design architect, SO-IL, and the other — not yet installed a few days before the opening — is an audience-participation project designed by the Mexican artist Pia Camil.

"Out Our Way" briskly surveys the work of 13 artists, department founder Richard L. Nelson and the dozen people he hired for permanent jobs during his 18-year tenure (1952-70). Fully half of them garnered wide attention in the world of art, including Robert Arneson, Roy De Forest, Manuel Neri, Roland Petersen, Wayne Thiebaud and William T. Wiley. The others — John Baxter, Jane Garritson (an innovative art educator), Tio Giambuni, Ruth Horsting, Ralph Johnson and Daniel Shapiro — all built credible, if more regional, reputations.

The better-known artists are generally represented by instantly recognizable works, in all their Funk, comic, maverick glory. There are, though, a pair of stainless steel "Geometric Sculptures" (1966) by Neri and an abstract Petersen from 1973 that will surprise. One installation trick I like is the inclusion of a miniature projector near each biographical text panel,

showing slides related to the artist's life and career.

But the real eye-openers are Johnson's funny, homely, re-made wooden chairs; and Horsting's virtually unknown Abstract Expressionist bronzes.

A 1967 grouping of Johnson's stick-back chairs, with titles like "Hello Chair," "Speeding Chair" and "Love Chair" — all painted in that familiar 1950s kitchen green, all utterly useless for resting — cavort along one wall. They epitomize the serio-comic attitude cultivated at Davis, and popularized by Arneson, De Forest and Wiley in the 1960s and '70s.

One is tempted to ascribe our ignorance of Horsting to the era's disregard for the work of women — and, indeed, after personal setbacks, she quietly left her work as an artist. Her small, intense sculpture of the 1960s would surely merit deeper study than this show could give it, if there is any more work than the few pieces turned up here. An abstracted "Horse" of welded scrap metal (circa late 1950s-early 1960s), looks like a sure influence on the art of well-known sculptor Deborah Butterfield, who studied at Davis during Horsting's tenure.

The most important works in "Out Our Way," from an art historical point of view, are the 10 extant "Johns" (plus a drawing of the now-lost 11th) by Arneson. Full-scale ceramic



"Turgor" (circa 1963) is among Ruth Horsting's virtually unknown Abstract Expressionist bronzes.

Ben Blackwell / UC Davis

take-offs on toilets and urinals — bloated, glazed and inscribed with sexual reference and scatological scrawlings — they were Arneson's breakout works. He tells the story, recounted in the exhibition text, of being asked to join a major show of sculpture from throughout California. "I could see myself, Bob Arneson, in between John Mason and Peter Voulkos, and I would be just a junior version of those two guys and just a little pisser." He considered the most ubiquitous large ceramic form in American daily life, and its connection to avant-garde art via Marcel Duchamp; maybe he also thought of Jasper Johns, one of the hottest artists of that moment.

The "Johns" are, in the way of bloody horror films, repulsively

enthralling objects. Turds of clay, squeezed between greedy fingers, top "The Pisser" (1963) where the flush mechanism might have been. "Toilet: Life Size" (1964) is entirely smeared with a gloppy brown glaze. A grandly gross "Throne" (1964) stands nearly 6 feet tall.

Disappointingly, this unique assembly — it's the first time that all 11 works have been in the same exhibition — is not shown to best advantage. I had been excited to see how they would be presented (I engineered the acquisition of "The Pisser" by Laguna Art Museum many years ago). But they are scattered through the larger exhibition, with the effect that they sully the unrelated works around them. Worse, we don't get to see them together, and

there is no catalog to document this important showing. The installation—that-might-have-been would have allowed direct comparison, and the design could have brought unity to the presentation as opposed to its centripetal feel now, on four platforms throughout the show.

Leave time to fully appreciate a kind of sub-exhibition, "Community of Exchange," presenting small works and ephemera that tell the story of artists at Davis teaching, exhibiting and making together. Here is told the story of "The Slant Step" — the humblest, and certainly the most famous, object in the entire exhibition.

A 1960s thrift store find, for the longest time no one could quite figure out what it was for. Now, it is thought that it was meant "to improve the sitter's posture for excretory fitness." It was exhibited as art by Wiley and his now-famous student, Bruce Nauman; stolen by sculptor Richard Serra; copied, drawn and reinterpreted by many artists over the years; and, finally, donated to the university collection in 2012. In its simplicity, its silliness, its narrative overtones, it seems the perfect Davis fetish.

I would have made it the central piece in the show.

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