



Animal Kingdom

by [Mario Naves](#) on May 17, 2012 • 9:02 am

Anne Arnold Humanizes the Wild

The sculptures of Anne Arnold, on display at Alexandre Gallery, are so masterful—so pointed and witty, economically configured and nuanced—that you can't help but wonder: Why has it been 24 years since this artist was last graced with a solo exhibition?

Read the accompanying catalogue *Anne Arnold: Sculpture from Four Decades* and you'll get an idea. Both veteran curator Chris Crosman and critic John Yau make a point of Arnold's "singular position in American sculpture"—that is to say, how the work sits firmly aside the run of -isms that typify the usual telling of post-war American art. You know the routine: Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptualism, Post-Modernism, etc., etc. and blah, blah, blah. What to do with an artist whose vision touches lightly, if at all, on these blue-chip precedents and, instead, goes its own blessed way?

You hope that the Alexandre show will dismantle "preconceptions about what 'important' art means" and that it "broadens our sense of history, progress in art, and what we consider modern." The sophistication of Arnold's meditations on the animal kingdom—dogs are the specialty, but her empathy and know-how extend to pigs, rabbits, cats and hippos—will be plain to anyone with the eye to see it. And there's the rub: Arnold's achievement is predicated on the visual and not on extra-aesthetic rationales or, as Crosman has it, the "self-consciously 'radical'".

But Arnold's art is radical—radically humane. Only a temperament in tune with sensibilities outside of her own—in fact, outside of her own species—could contrive personages as true and soulful as these. Don't be fooled by the work's accessibility and charm. It's a sculptor of stringent gifts and focus that could pull off pieces like *Ohno (Skunk)* (1974-75) or *Gretchen (Dachshund)* (1978) without devolving into a cloying, folksy mannerism.

Which isn't to say Arnold's art doesn't benefit from being accessible and charming. Viewers who don't take instantaneous delight upon encountering Arnold's work should check for a pulse—or a sense of humor. Delight is deepened upon realizing how seamlessly Arnold absorbs a cross-historical range of inspiration—from early dynastic Egypt and the Aztec Empire to American "primitives" and Russian Constructivism. But it is in direct experience, both in the barnyard and without, that Arnold's art finds its locus and generates its abundant pleasures.

Anne Arnold: Sculpture from Four Decades at Alexandre Gallery, 411 East 57th Street through June 8.

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