Groundbreaker

By John Yau

I.

Anne Arnold made the sculptures in this revelatory exhibition between the mid-1950s and late 1980s, during a span in which Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Pop Art, Happenings, Photorealism, Op Art, Kinetic Art, Earthworks, Conceptual Art, Post-Pop, Post-Minimalism, Neo-Geo, and Neo-Expressionism came and went.

Made from a disparate range of materials, including clay, wood, and fabric soaked in resin, many of her sculptures are life-sized equivalents (or nearly so) of domestic animals (cats and dogs). As a body of work, it states as a matter of fact that throughout these heady and contentious decades, in which theorists increasingly pressured artists to conform to certain paradigms, Arnold has persisted in going down her own path, defining a singular position in American sculpture.

Beside Arnold, no one else was making highly specific sculptures of domestic animals (indeed who else would dare?), elevating realism into an unexpected realm. She became an observational sculptor who expressed her intelligence and wit through her sympathetic understanding of companionable creatures, and their complex relationship with humans. Although she has acknowledged that she got something from American folk art, not by any stretch of the imagination was she trying to update or modernize folk art, nor was she acting willfully eccentric. Only a truly sophisticated artist could have made these extraordinary works of art.

The interesting and rather unique position that Arnold carved out for herself broadens our sense of history, progress in art, and what we consider modern. One could make a connection between her sculpture and the dynamic three-legged animal pottery of the Yangshao culture in the Shaanxi area of ancient China. The same also holds true for her connection to the Early Dynastic period of Egypt, when Mafdet, the first feline goddess, was worshipped. And yet, paradoxically, Arnold is a thoroughly modern sculptor whose work manages to remain separate from the main currents of modernist sculpture, and not suffer from its isolation. By this I mean that Brancusi, Calder, and Duchamp do not stand behind any of her work.

Arnold is not interested in the fundamental nature of her subject, but in its very real muscles and bones, and the way they add up to an unmistakable personality that reveals itself through a particular look or gesture. Her works are explicit to the point that I would consider them portraits. Neither surface resemblance nor inner essence is of concern to her. Rather, she is focused on transferring the elusive, animating spirit—the particular being that animals become—into her work. Certainly, as anyone who has been around pets knows, they are not interchangeable. During their day-to-day existence, domestic animals repeatedly embody a set of specific actions and looks that we recognize as evidence of their distinct personalities. This is why we anthropomorphize our pets—we see aspects of ourselves in them. That Arnold is able to transfer this understanding of animals without resorting to anecdote is all the more remarkable. It comes down to a specific pose or look, a way of relaxing, sitting, getting up, or standing. It is about the alignment of the muscles and bones beneath fur, hair and skin. It is about the artist being attentive, precise and revealing.

Moreover, beyond her autonomy from modernist traditions and fashionable styles, I would advance that Arnold is among a handful of sculptors who have originated a singular space of possibility—I am reluctant to go so far as to call it a tradition because it has yet to manifest itself as one. Within the realm that she has defined for herself in wood, terra cotta, and resin, her sculptures of domestic animals anticipated the bronze and low-fired clay heads and torsos of mostly undomesticated animals by Daisy Youngblood (fig. 8), who is twenty years Arnold's junior. Although largely working at different times and in dissimilar art worlds, Arnold and Youngblood define, explore, and occupy adjacent niches, which share some aspects while remaining steadfastly distant from the hoopla going on around them. Such self-contained independence, in Anne Arnold's case, in particular, should be honored. It bespeaks of a rare spirit, at once tough and gentle, single-minded and generous.

II.

From the outset, Arnold seemed to be intent on selecting the materials and processes that best suited her subject matter. It might be cast bronze, using the lost wax process. It might be Dynel (a synthetic fiber) stretched over a wooden armature and then coated in resin and, in some cases, painted. It might be carved pine. Or it might be terra cotta

painted in acrylic. This methodology is the opposite of the artist who uses the same materials or processes to turn every subject into his or her signature style.

In Arnold's case, the subject, process and material feels inevitable. I cannot imagine the sad-eyed *Lady (English Setter Head)* (1978, cat. no. 31) being made of anything other than terra cotta and painted with acrylic. I certainly cannot imagine Arnold making different versions of one of her subjects in different materials. This strikes me as an ethical decision as well as a practical one. She is not exploring a theme or making a version: she is both honoring and celebrating the unique animated spirit of her subjects. She is memorializing their uplifting existence.

Take Arnold's stoneware sculpture, *Sunny (Skye Terrier)* (1978, cat. no. 2), which is one of the most delightful sculptures I have ever encountered. (Arnold is the rare artist who is able to achieve delight repeatedly in her work.) It is a portrait of the Skye Terrier that Alex Katz and his family owned during the 1970s. In order to fully appreciate Arnold's inimitable exactitude, the viewer should know that Skye Terriers have a double coat of long hair, as well as long hair over their eyes. The hair is to protect their eyes from injury. (They were bred to kill vermin). Skye Terriers are known for their extreme devotion to their owners. They have muscular bodies and short legs, and their hair must be constantly brushed and trimmed.

Katz did a number of paintings and prints of Sunny, including *Sunny #*4 (1971, fig. 9), which is in the collection of the Milwaukee Art Museum. In Katz's marvelous painting, we see Sunny's unmistakable head poking through the grass, his pink tongue hanging out. He has just had a lovely romp through the wild sea grass growing above the bay, which is visible in the distance. He is both thirsty and eager for more fun.

In choosing to make her sculpture out of stoneware, Arnold picked an opaque, impermeable material that usually comes in gray or brown. The material's density fits perfectly with her sweet but impermeable subject, which is encased in two coats of thick hair, that hang like strands of neatly hand-cut fettuccine drying on a rack. In Arnold's sculpture, we cannot see the eyes, but we know that they are there, and feel them watching.

Arnold's Sunny stands at alert, as if on guard duty. His tongue protrudes, rather than hangs down, as in Katz's painting. We know that something—not necessarily dramatic,

except to a dog—is soon to happen. Sunny is poised to bark out a warning or give chase to a transgressor

Arnold's ability to suggest that her subject's state of attentiveness—that it is either in the act of doing something or on the verge of doing something—is just one of the many undeniable merits of her work. In contrast to the stasis that inhabits much modern sculpture, particularly when it comes to Minimalism, Arnold's works occupy a liminal moment between before and after, inception and completion. I cannot think of another sculptor capable of achieving such a state of wild and charming potentiality. Reality, as her work quietly but forcefully suggests, is never still. Movement is everywhere.

III.

In 1956, Arnold made her one and only sculpture that owed something to Constructivism and de Stijl. She stacked short sections of pine planks and equally-sided boards to make a supine cat, one front leg sticking straight up, like a signal, while the other is bent, like an L, near the cat's head (is he using his paw to wash his face, as cats often do?). The artist painted her cat orange. And then she moved rather swiftly into her own territory without looking back.

While making *Orange Cat* (cat. no. 3), Arnold seems to have decided that the rigidity of its materials and process were too limiting, and she did not stack cut pieces of pine again. Thus, she seemed to know from the outset of her career the capabilities of materials and processes, and how far they can be pushed, She always attempts to stretch out, to discover what can be done—this is her genius. How far will her devotion to exactitude take her? In retrospect, it seems necessary for Arnold to have made *Orange Cat*, but she also realized that she didn't have to make it again. This is evident from *Reclining Cat* (1956, cat. no. 4), made around the same times as *Orange Cat* from a handful of pieces, which she cut and joined together. Again, she did not repeat herself, or settle into a style.

Arnold's orange supine cat is playful and self-absorbed while her dark brown reclining cat is attentive, majestic and solemn. Both cats exist in a world that is at one remove from the human domain. Her respect for difference is always something that comes to the fore when her subject is an animal.

Arnold quickly deduced that she wanted to work with materials that were more yielding, more sensitive to the touch. She began chiseling—something she had done previously—and using clay, becoming ever more painstaking in her approach. She devised a way of stretching Dynel over an armature, and using a resin to stiffen it, making it hold its shape. She made a number of pieces in wax, and then cast them in bronze, using the ancient lost wax process (fig. 10).

In her bronze, mask-like head of the relaxed and dutiful, ever-watchful *Eliza I* (1968, cat. no. 7)—it's a slightly curving plane that supports itself—the dog's oversized ears hang down. In *Eliza II* (cat. no. 8), her ears have spread; they are literally hang down, like a bat's wings. Her nostrils are wide open, as is her mouth, as if she is about to bark. Eliza is alarmed by something, telegraphing her tension through her unchecked gestures. Like the actual subject, there is something comic, tender, and endearing about both *Eliza I* and *Eliza II*. In both instances, beyond capturing her subject's face, the artist transmits a very particular state of mind, ranging from calm to highly agitated.

Arnold's immense sympathy for animals is brought to bear on her intense meticulousness. They are, after all, dependent on us for their well-being, which is also true of sculpture itself. Perhaps this is why she made a number of works portraying pets standing on their hind legs, trying to rise into the human world and get our attention.

Arnold's painted terra cotta *Gretchen (Dachshund)* (1978, cat. no. 23) is resting on her hind legs, with her butt anchoring her to the floor. Her short front legs are almost perpendicular to her torso, with her front paws dangling down. (She seems to be begging for food.) Her head is tilted up, her long ears extending downward at a slight diagonal, as if she will soon zoom into the air if you don't attend to her. You would need a heart of stone not to be moved by this sight.

It is an awkward and engaging position that Dachshunds cannot maintain for very long, if at all. And yet Arnold makes us believe what we are seeing is possible. Clearly, Gretchen wants attention. (Don't we all?) And in the case of *Ohno (Skunk)* (1971, cat. no. 18), which is made of resin-coated Dynel stretched over an armature and then carefully painted, is the artist good-naturedly suggesting that she will cause a stink if she doesn't get the attention she wants and, let's face it, truly deserves?

There is something very human, touching and vulnerable about acknowledging this basic desire for attention. It is a state that artists rarely concede in their work, but one that Arnold makes one of her focal points. By establishing this relationship between object and viewer, Arnold presents a reflexive view of both her work and sculpture in general. In this regard, her sculptures can be understood as a lens through which she examines the very nature of her art form.

For all their innocence and charm, these are deeply complicated works that present viewers with very real and ethical questions—ones that, in my opinion, go beyond aesthetics. Arnold's work implicates us. This, of course, is what separates ordinary art from great art.

Are sculptures simply trophies that we need not pay any real attention to, except as another addition to our trove of possessions? What about our pets? In bridging the gap between art and life, which is what I think Arnold does in her sculptures It is a question so basic that we may not have actually stopped to consider it. Beyond their substantial wit and charm, it is for this reason that her sculptures are so important and necessary. Her animals are endowed with an incomparable eloquence and possessed by an unsatisfied urgency that places spirited demands on our attention. We would do well to heed.