

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

Anne Arnold

By Christopher B. Crosman

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any years ago, on my first day as a new museum educator, I was greeted by *Charlie* (1969, fig. 1) and *Charlotte* (1971, fig. 2), two of Anne Arnold's painted and shaped canvas sculptures in the collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, as well as a group of giggling girl scouts (or whatever the pre-teen version of scouts was called back then). E. B. White meets Arthur Danto. Not that any such thought crossed my mind at the time. Instead, the utter whimsy and technical prowess captivated me then and, perhaps, even more so in the second decade of the 21st century when balloon dogs, sharks suspended in tanks of formaldehyde and a pig copulating with a former president are the media mascots of spectacle, emblems of contemporary art's most recent market-savvy present tense. Indeed, Arnold's animals hark to a gentler, more affable era when artists like Mary Frank, William King, Lois Dodd, George Segal, Marc di Suvero, Alex Katz and others gravitated to the area of Manhattan around Tenth Street, where diverse styles and approaches all seemed possible and mutually supportive. And while no particular style dominated, much of the work of these artists ran against the grain of full-blown abstract expressionism and also participated in a sensibility of honest personal expression, directness and truthfulness, both formal and emotional.

Charlotte, Arnold's almost svelte and well-mannered pig, was as new to the museum as I was (acquired in 1972, a few months before I began at the museum). She joined *Charlie*, a rather elegant, black and white cat, slightly left-leaning as any New York "cat" would have to be in the late sixties. Both were installed among some of the most important examples of post-war and pop art in America: Andy Warhol's *100 Cans*, (1962, fig. 3), Jasper Johns, *Numbers in Color*, (1959) an early Rauschenberg combine painting, *Ace*, (1962) Tom Wesselman's ironic combination of a Mondrian reproduction and a color/composition rhyming bathroom cabinet and sink (with a knowing nod to Duchamp), *Still Life #20* (1962), James Rosenquist's homage to roadside advertising (and disturbingly colored canned spaghetti), *Nomad* (1963), and Roy Lichtenstein's classic *Head—Red and Yellow* (1962) among others. Nearby, Frank Stella's vibrant *Lac Laronge III* (1969) and Kenneth Noland's monumental horizontal stripe painting, *Wild Indigo*, (1967) vied for attention. A few steps away, Giacomo Balla's furiously scurrying *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* (1912, fig. 4) and Francis Bacon's more sinister, noir-ish *Man with Dog* (1953) ensured Charlie's ever-watchful attention. In such august company, Charlie and Charlotte always seemed comfortably at home and somehow provided a measure of friendly familiarity among their more raucous and self-consciously "radical" neighbors.

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In Buffalo, it was pure joy to be able to compare and contrast Arnold's work with a spectacular second century A.D. Roman bronze, Diana and the Stag, a Shang dynasty Chinese ewer depicting an owl, a Meso-American vessel in the shape of a strikingly naturalistic dog (fig. 5), along with a fine example of an allegorical Peaceable Kingdom by the mid-nineteenth century Quaker artist Edward Hicks (fig. 6). Vastly varying in media, style, historical and cultural context, every animal in the museum had its own personality, its own dignity and sense of aliveness imparted by artists across time measured in millennia. That said, Arnold's work clearly embodies its own time and could never be mistaken for its many artistic antecedents. While her work in wood, metal and clay constitute the wide repertoire of a virtuoso, the construction of these "shaped" canvases can be compared to such artists coming of age in the early to mid-1960s, as Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland, Ellsworth Kelly, and others who often emphasized the abstract conformity of painted surface to supporting structure; although it is doubtful that Arnold had any such Greenbergian agenda in mind.

Nor is her relationship to the cooler, cultural critiques, or ironic manifestations of high Pop simple. Arnold's work is quirkier, more personal and tangibly evokes the artist's clearly affectionate relationship to her subjects. Humor has often been mentioned as a characteristic of Arnold's work, although this may be more applicable to her human subjects who are made more human and sympathetic for their accessible awkwardness (including the artist's own) than is ever present in the animals. Rather, her animals' body language is spot-on, the stretching lean of a cat, the raked ears of a crouching rabbit, the unexpected lightness and grace of an elephant. We know an animal differently after seeing one of Arnold's sculptures and, perhaps, care about them more for their individual traits evoked so precisely as essential form and gesture.

This exhibition, the first to focus on Arnold's work in nearly twenty-five years acknowledges Arnold's early role in the development and wide acceptance of Pop but also broadens our understanding of that movement's many-faceted sources and inflections. It can be argued that Arnold understood better than her peers the traditions of the first "popular" American art forms found in vernacular, vintage folk objects such as weather-vanes, decoys, hand-painted country advertising signs and related paraphernalia (life-size plaster horses and carved wood Indians). The inclusion of stylized dogs and cats in the paintings of many early, self-taught itinerant portrait artists is, perhaps, also relevant to someone familiar with New England artistic conventions where young women were often portrayed with large dogs or with compliant cats—girls as the nurturing agent for civilizing and "training" the wilder, undisciplined instincts of unruly boys and young husbands.

For many observers, myself included, it is precisely Arnold's uncanny ability to convey the individual personality of her subjects, as well as her own attentive, warm sensibility, that animates her work in the most direct approximation of that word I am able to imag-

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ine. Looking back to those days over forty years ago it is undeniably true my girl scouts understood Arnold's work at a level that professional tour guides and "experts" can only hope they will ever know. More immediately, they—the Arnold sculptures and the girl scouts—charmingly dismantled preconceptions about what "important" art means absent a body of critical, scholarly writing or on-going press and media attention, an inexplicable oversight this exhibition will hopefully begin to redress. And, if beloved art works could speak of the memories they evoke and the pleasure they give, "Charlie" would surely purr contentedly.