



Donald Baechler: *Figure (Walking Figure)*, 2003-04, bronze, 10 feet tall; at Cheim & Read.

rivening onset of self-consciousness and guilt. It's a myth, of course: children are hardly angelic, and alienation is the state of humanity—while Baechler's art works hard to achieve its trademark appearance of prelapsarian sincerity and artlessness.

But perhaps because kids do not typically make bronze sculptures, Baechler's latest exhibition only fleetingly evoked a sense of childhood naiveté. Instead, 12 grayish-black bronze cutouts depicting some of his familiar images (flowers, body parts, animals, etc.) alluded more to the rustic esthetic of folk art, a kind of *cultural* innocence. With pitted surfaces and rounded edges, as if created in cookie molds, the pedestal-mounted sculptures combine the deadpan earnestness of Baechler's painting with the appeal of objects unearthed in rural junk shops. For example, *Tree #1* (all works mentioned, 2003-04) is a 7-foot-tall pine that seems like an archaic monument designed for purposes now obscure. Just over 24 inches tall, *Hand* (like his imagery, Baechler's titles have a no-frills directness) could once have been a sign marking the headquarters of some long-forgotten occult society.

Having worked in bronze for over a decade, Baechler animates his forms with suppleness and grace. This is especially apparent in the sculptures of potted flora, such as *Flowers (Tulips)* and *Plant*, whose stems and leaves,

etched by the superb lighting of the gallery, seemed to quiver in an invisible breeze. This forthright but delicate approach to sculpture continued with three additional white plaster works, two of which portrayed flower bouquets, the third a rabbit with ears erect.

One might be excused for appreciating Baechler's black and white cameos less as independent sculptures than as concretized images detached from his paintings. Not that the show lacked works that more fully exist in three-dimensional space—for example, six busts ranging from 18 to 27 inches high. Here, though,

Baechler's uneven globes, with their seemingly slapdash placement of small noses, eyes and lips, look too much like *Saturday Night Live's* Play-Doh hero "Mr. Bill." More successful is the 10-foot-tall *Figure (Walking Figure)*, a bronze diamond-shaped torso set upon an inverted V of legs and topped with a woman's round head. With arms swinging, the work seems almost alive in its purposeful stride. Unlike Baechler's other sculptures on view (which, like his paintings, have about them a shy, almost autistic introversion), the woman seemed to dominate the gallery space allotted to her. After decades of childlike imagery, one wonders if the artist's inner adult isn't coming out at last. —Steven Vincent

Robert Arneson at George Adams

Titled "Arneson and the Object," this exhibition, which was organized by the Palmer Museum of Art at Pennsylvania State University, featured 20 sculptures in ceramic or bronze and 10 drawings from throughout the career of Robert Arneson (1930-1992). Focusing on the artist's depictions of everyday objects, it was a compendium of his visual-linguistic puns, sculptural oxymora, trademark gaudy glazes and absurdist sensibility.

The earliest work in the show, *Six Pack 16 Oz.* (1964), a life-size ceramic sculpture of soda-pop bottles, displayed the clos-

est relationship to Pop art. Yet, the sculpture also epitomizes the differences between that movement and the West Coast Funk with which Arneson is usually associated. Contrary to the cool, industrial finishes of much mid-'60s art, his work remained emphatically handmade; he never abandoned craft. The repetition of bottles in *Six Pack 16 Oz.* is complicated by the expressionistic individuality of each form. The fact that one bottle is uncapped suggests a human presence now absent.

Indeed, the relationship between things and their users, heightened by the objects' fleshy anthropomorphism, was a primary theme of this show. *Scale* (1965) is a ceramic replica of a bathroom scale—impossible to use, for it would surely break under anyone's weight—imprinted by two feet, one of which has left behind its five toes. (These footprints are reportedly those of Bruce Nauman, Arneson's student at the time, whose connection to his teacher—specifically regarding Nauman's own penchant for artistic punning—is one of the revelations of this show.) *Scale* evinces Arneson's exceptional ability to produce objects that are simultaneously attractive and repulsive, funny and confounding.

Arneson's unrefined, at times adolescent, brand of comedy links him to a number of younger artists (Mike Kelley comes to mind). *Giant Eye Screw* (1971), for example, is an elephantine enlargement of the hanging device—also a homonym for "I screw." Such intentionally artless wit also informs Arneson's overtly political works of the mid-1980s such as *Ronny Portable* (1986), which envisions Reagan as a TV-head with thorny antennae.

If the show sometimes pushed the limits of esthetic tolerance—for me, the three garish, tongue-kissing self-portraits in *Potted Flower Heads* (1991) were a bit much—overall, it was an effective presentation of Arneson's challenging work and wicked sense of humor.

—Cary Levine

George Quasha and John Cage at Baumgartner

As a young artist, George Quasha was liberated by John Cage's esthetic. In celebration of that influence, this exhibition included a selection of Cage's *New River Watercolors* (1988). With their quiet forms and textures, these are the refined residue of an extended consultation of the *I Ching*. Quasha's own works are in two mediums: rocks, and graphite on paper. Quasha's rocks are medium-sized and usually flattish. It is the work of an instant to spot a likely rock, but it may take the artist days—or years—to see how two rocks fit together to form a single piece. This fitting follows strict rules: one rock must be balanced on another at a narrow point of contact; no adhesive is permissible, nor may either rock be modified in any way. The results are astonishing.

At first glance, one doesn't quite see what one is looking at. Quasha, it seems, has found a batch of wildly eccentric rocks. Then one realizes what is going on: in each case, two rocks have been joined at precisely the point that turns them into a unity. These are configurations so delicately balanced that the slightest touch would topple them. The title of this series, "Axial Stones," draws attention to the axis

Robert Arneson: *Ronny Portable*, 1986, bronze, 35 1/2 by 21 1/2 by 14 inches; at George Adams.

