

Beyond Cups and Saucers:

Lolo Artist Adrian Arleo gives Mystery to Clay

BY CHARLES FINN

SCULPTURE IN MONTANA TENDS TO BACK UP in predictable streams: bronze elk, grizzly bears, cowboys in boots and hats, breasty cowgirls in chaps. There are the ubiquitous bucking broncos, pack strings of mules, bison, horses, horses, and more horses — sometimes you wonder if Charlie Russell did us any favors at all. But you can find bright spots too, freshets of imagination and deep clear pools of penetrating thought: Kate Davis' welded wildlife and Native American artist Jay Laber's Rez Wrecks. In Lolo, there is sculptor and ceramic artist Adrian Arleo and her haunting, carefully sublime figures carving a unique channel of imagination into the world of art. Mysterious and graceful as cutthroat rising, she and they tell stories equally complex and psychologically challenging. Although in danger of taking the analogy too far, her work is indeed a far cast (pun intended) from the still waters of Montana's over-wrought, over-fished, and mythological past.

Tree branches emerge from a woman's head. Deer from another woman's shoulders. An owl is covered

STANDING LION WITH INTERNAL WOMAN





entirely in eyes, so too a lion. A dog is covered in hands. Arleo's work is unmistakable.

Arleo grew up half feral in Chappaqua, New York: catching frogs, playing in swamps, romping through the hardwood forests. Encouragement to explore art came at a very early age. Her mother was a "Sunday painter" and her father, for a time, a novelist. Her first formative experience with clay came when she and her mother went to pick up her older brother at a clay studio, where she found a bucket of slurry on the floor. "I just started to fool around with it," Arleo says, speaking to me in her studio in Lolo, "and I made this horse head emerging out of it. It looked like a horse swimming in a stormy sea and to me it had this huge drama that was exciting. I was like, 'This is cool stuff.' So I cut it out of the bucket and fired it up and that was the first moment of feeling like clay could have really emotional power to it."

About the same time, the Arleos were spending summers on Nantucket Island. "There's a lot of mermaid imagery, whaling imagery and stuff, so that was in my head," she recalls. "To

me it's kind of interesting because it's this early kind of metamorphic figure that's part fish, part human, and this whole theme of metaphor is something that has carried through. In hindsight it makes sense to me that I was attracted to that kind of imagery."

Arleo went on to study clay and anthropology at Claremont College in California, and after graduating accepted a residency at the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology in western Oregon. "There, a lot of things from the surrounding environment started coming into the work," she says, "tree imagery and stones and water. I was taking in a lot of the things around me and melding it with the work in different ways." Her next stop took her across the country to the MFA program at the Rhode Island School of Design. At RISD, Arleo started out making abstract cactus-like forms, but on the suggestion of her teacher, Jacquelyn Rice, started working with coils.

"I started coiling these weird forms," Arleo says, "that ended up looking like sea slugs or something." She liked them, thought they were beautiful, but admits she didn't know



Adrian Arleo sits in her studio in Lolo, Montana. This fall Arleo finished a body of work called Harbingers which was shown in the Jane Sauer Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico. "I have been doing this so long, I feel like I have the ability in my muscle memory," Arleo said. "Yet there's still a sense of discovery when I'm working."



CANOPY (VARIATION ON ROMULUS AND REMUS)

what they were about. “They lacked a specific content,” she says, “and I wanted more of a narrative, so I started working more directly with the figure.”

Narrative is a word that comes up often for Arleo. “Back-story” is the term Judith Schwartz uses. Schwartz is the author of “Confrontational Ceramics” and a professor in the Department of Art and Art Professions at New York University. A long time fan, she says Arleo “understands the psychological innuendo that goes into doing figurative work.” Schwartz discovered Arleo years ago when Arleo was at RISD, and although Schwartz seldom purchases work from MFA shows, she broke her own rule and purchased a piece at Arleo’s. “I was impressed with what I thought a rather unique point of view that was provocative and strange in many ways.” Ten years ago, Schwartz bought another piece from Arleo, a female form emerging from a cocoon. “It was like a butterfly emerging,” she says. “It was interesting because it was scaled rather large, and then emerging from the top of the head was another figure, and then the top of that had another figure.”

“I’m interested,” Schwartz says, “in artists who go beneath the surface and are using the clay in a very expressive, provocative way that gets you to really think about the backstory.”

Arleo uses animals emerging from human figures to suggest something going on inside the figure, a glimpse into the internal experience, thought or dream, mental or even spiritual state. Brandon Reintjes, curator of art at the Montana Museum of Art & Culture in Missoula, says he reacts to Arleo’s work almost as if she’s tapping into something collective, “something I feel like

I should have known, or do know, but haven’t recognized yet.” This element of knowing and unknowing is part of the appeal of Arleo’s work, the mystery and potential for discovery each piece brings with it. Reintjes agrees there is a narrative aspect to what Arleo does, “but aside from that it’s almost a series of connotations or interconnections that I’m not even aware I’m experiencing until I come face to face with the work.”

“It’s like she’s creating her own mythology,” says Penelope Loucas, an independent curator in Tacoma, Washington.

Loucas has admired Arleo’s work for a number of years, and is including two of her pieces in a show of contemporary surrealists she’s putting together for the fall of 2014. The show will tour Washington, Montana, Idaho and Oregon, and examine the theme of transformation and metamorphosis. The show will



TREE OF LIFE I



TWO BAS, CONSORT AND CONSOLE

include a pair of Arleo's 'Eye Series' pieces, a swan with eyes in its downy feathers, and a lioness with eyes all over its body.

"One of the surrealists' hallmarks," Loucas says, "is their interest in what they called the disembodied eye. Hers [Arleo's] are not really disembodied because they're attached to the fur of the animal. It gives this air of mystery, an air of another being from another planet or another world, something that is being revealed from the inside, like the eye is there to show us this presence is there."

Arleo visits the play between the internal and external in much of her work. At the same time, there's a peaceful quality to her figures, a calmness that is unusual for something that challenges the viewer to the degree that it does. Beth Lo, professor of art in the School of Art at the University of Montana says Arleo's work puts her in a peaceful or meditative frame of mind. "Her pieces have a little bit of an everyman or everywoman quality to them," Lo says, noting that many of Arleo's images reference aspects of nature. "Most of her figures," she says, "offer some kind of blending of the figurative and the natural world and I think it comments on the place of the human being in our world."

Immediately beautiful, Arleo's work is not shock value art. Figures, both animal and human, are often in passive positions or poses, contemplative, as if dreaming or lost in thought. Arleo herself is anything but dreamy. Thin and sinewy with thick glasses and hair pulled back in a ponytail, she gives the impression of someone accustomed to turning her attention inward. Like her kilns, Arleo's flame burns deep within and can be turned up or down. Unlike her kilns, it can never be turned off. Even away from her studio — relaxing, sharing a glass of wine or cup of tea — an intensity smolders beneath the surface, a steady flame of concentration that never quite leaves her.

Stephen Gluckert is the curator of exhibits at the Missoula Art Museum. Arleo's pieces are, he says, "highly refined, they are just so, so well done, she's a real technician. A lot of times you look at them and the surfaces are so elegant and beautiful that you forget it's ceramic. It could be some other material."

People know Arleo, quite rightly, for her technical skill, and in particular her unique, brave and experimental approach to surfaces. Reintjes calls Arleo's surfaces "engaging." Lo sees them as "seductive." Good artists, of course,

choose surfaces, patterns, and colors that reinforce the content of what they're intending to say. Arleo's signature, as Schwartz sees it, "is to deal with surface in a deep and meaningful way," one that reflects, highlights and reinforces the content. Arleo integrates color, pattern and surface elements so that they "become one with the idea... She uses the surface to energize the psychological underpinnings of the work."

It's no surprise that Arleo draws much of her inspiration — and perhaps psychological underpinnings — from her immediate surroundings. With her husband, writer David James Duncan, she lives on 12 acres in Lolo, with the town's

onymous creek running through the property. Some years ago, on a walk one day in late fall, the leaves gone from the trees, Arleo came upon a giant paper wasps' nest. Duncan, with the help of a friend, cut it down. "So I did this series of hanging wasps' nests," she says. As happens, one thing led to another and the idea came to her to cover the nests in bees wax and encaustic wax. The result? "They had this great aroma. They were luscious," she says. Her daughter, Cecelia, was 13 at the time and Arleo wanted to make a portrait of her. "She was like this luscious little thing just coming into young womanhood, blossoming, so it seemed like the honeycomb was



AWARENESS SERIES

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a really appropriate material."

As with the honeycomb series, there is an evolutionary component to Arleo's work, each piece building on the one before it, taking off in a different direction, like a mutating gene, beauty morphing into more beauty. In her well-known 'Hands Series' she made the first piece for a fundraiser, a small bird-like figure with human hands. Arleo keeps chickens, and shortly after doing the piece for the fundraiser she began noticing how the feathers around her chickens' necks were v-shaped and overlapping. "They had this feeling of overlapping hands to me," she says. She went to work and made a small squatting figure that had a bird-like posture but was covered in hands. She gave it the title, 'Plumage'. The next stage in the series came from the question, 'What would the hands/feathers look like on a figure that didn't have a bird reference? How would that feel?' With that in mind, came a standing figure where the hands looked like they were creating

the figure, forming it physically. From that she went to "just playing around with it." Darwin, no doubt, would have loved it. The result was a dog. Its fur is dozens and dozens of hands.

Unlike many surrealists, Arleo isn't in the business of making things that are weird for the sake of weirdness, just to create a bizarre juxtaposition. Nor does she like using her art for political purpose. She doesn't want it "to be specific in that way." As for inspiration beyond her 12 acres, Arleo says she doesn't look to other contemporary artists, but when she can get back to New York she likes to dip into the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "I just sort of soak it all in," she says, "I always go and look at the Egyptian stuff, then I go look at the Greek and the Roman ... I'll go and look at specific things and then I'll just go and wander and see where I end up. One of the things that's interesting is that so much of the stuff is really old and it still speaks, it still resonates, and so to me that's the most powerful thing art can do, to cross centuries, thousands of years — and still speak."

Back in Lolo, the mute figures in Arleo's studio speak volumes, and will continue to do so for years and years to come. After leaving, I came across this unattributed quote on the Amazon page for Schwartz's book *Confrontational Ceramics*:

"Those who associate ceramics with functional vessels or charming knick-knacks are in for a shock. Clay may start out soft, but in the right hands it can deliver a hard blow."

Sculpture in Montana need not only be bronze elk sparring. In Arleo, it is quite obviously in the right hands. You could argue Arleo's work delivers a hard blow, but if it does, that it must be a long slow detonation, a new river of thought. As Lo says, "She's doing a kind of work clay artists have avoided for years." And as Gluckert says, "She doesn't spoon-feed people. She doesn't spell it all out. She presents you with a mystery ... I think the audience that's not familiar with her work often fall in love with it right away." ❧

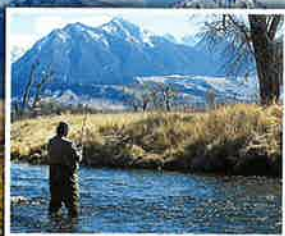
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