



Embrace (Detail). 2003. Clay, glaze, mixed media. 50.5 x 40.5 x 53 cm.

Adrian Arleo's Tricks of Radiance

Article by Conan Putnam

ON A SNOWY MORNING TOWARDS THE END OF A mild Montana winter, Adrian Arleo, moving around the table in her studio, studies the shifting angles on three new works. A life-sized greyhound, whiter than snow in its unglazed state, towers protectively over a bluish figure curling in on itself and a blue grandmother trying to catch a wild adolescent girl diving over her shoulder. Arleo runs her fingers along the greyhound's tail, tracing its elegant upward curve against the haunch.

"This is why I work in sculpture," she says. "When you move around the work, the feeling changes. Different things are happening on each piece. Your perception of what those things might be shifts as you move. The story keeps changing." One of the stories running through Arleo's mind as she

built the greyhound was of the way hospitals nowadays encourage the use of dogs and other furry animals to help patients recuperate. "I began thinking about the soothing presence of dogs, of petting them and caressing them." A firm believer in not letting analysis get in the way of creation, Arleo did not hesitate to follow when the idea arose to cover the greyhound in hands. At the moment, the overall effect is a bit more chilling than warm, but even in its unglazed, bright white state, the gently layered hands charge the animal figure with a nurturing quality.

In the studio's other room, another work-in-progress for her upcoming show in Seattle at Pacini-Lubel Gallery is slowly being transformed by the application of dozens of small, simply but beautifully made, hands. Arleo says that when she first started



Honey Child I. 2004. Clay, glaze, wax.
58.5 x 43 x 26.5 cm.

the piece, she had a large, curled-up figure like the small blue one on the table in the other room in mind. "But as soon as I started to do the bottom and the legs, I thought, 'This is going to be a baby.'" As the baby took shape, the figure evoked memories of the birth of Arleo's daughters, Celia and Ellie.

"Babies are a lot like dogs and other animals in the way that physical contact soothes them. Of course, raising a child is a much more intense experience. The whole family pours itself into the well-being of this little person. The sentimental image of nurturing a baby is much different than the actual experience of it. The mother-infant bond is a complex rich relationship and the repetition of hands suggests the depth and mystery of that involvement. I had no fear that the piece was going to be a Hallmark card."

Resting on its back on her work table, its damp pudgy, partially hand-covered legs frozen in mid-twirl, it is easy to see why. This baby's boldness would never pass muster with the greeting card police. Fairy tale-like origins in the imagination are reflected in the stillness of its face. Large, fleshy ears are reminiscent of the Buddha. It might be a changeling, or one of those preternaturally intelligent-looking babies out of a picture book by Maurice Sendak. Arleo laughingly recalls walking into her studio one day and being caught off guard by the life-likeness of the piece. "I swear it was about to roll off the table, like a real baby," she says. A

foam pad placed underneath now keeps it from going anywhere. She turns the piece on its cushion to study the angles. "Right now the features are babyish," she says. "But when it's covered in hands, a lot of that may be lost."

One might think that since the baby is Arleo's fifth piece covered in hands, the process of laying them on the figure would go rather quickly. It does not. To begin with, each hand must be made from a press mould and then altered individually; a task which Arleo says "can drive you crazy." To solve the problem, she makes nearly 100 hands at once, often in the evenings, with the help of video rentals and her teenage daughters. In the morning, the finished hands are meticulously applied, one by one, to the piece. Though, strictly speaking, this is the 'fun' part, the image and arrangement of the hands also presents problems.

They have to retain a certain verisimilitude. Depending on the surface texture Arleo means to suggest – fur, feathers, hair – and also on the psychological meaning of where and how the hands are placed, they need to flow in a certain direction over the contours of the figure. If the face is to be covered, decisions must be made on how best to do so without losing the quiet, otherworldly gaze that her figures have become known for. "The faces are tricky," she says. "I don't mind if the fingers make them seem woven in places, but I don't want them to look masked or fringed or as if the figure is suffocating. That's not what the work is about."

Small hands are generally thought of as female, essential to a girl or woman's identity as a nurturing being. As numerous themes in folklore, myth and cultural anthropology have shown, many different meanings have been ascribed to women's hands. The Maiden Without Hands of the famous fairytale loses her hands, only to see them miraculously restored when she dips her arms in a stream to save her drowning child. Guanyin, known throughout Asia as the goddess of mercy, is often depicted with multiple healing hands fanning out from her torso. Saints from every religious tradition have performed miraculous cures by the ritual laying on of hands.

In much the same way that fairy tales are made all the more luminous by their plain settings (forest, house, castle, sea), so too are Arleo's sculptures enhanced by the suggestive beauty of their surface detail. "With much of my work, I become curious about one small thing and then work with it intensely, almost obsessively, to see what form it will take."

For a 2004 show at Snyderman/Works Gallery in Philadelphia, Arleo found herself so taken with the sensuous quality of beeswax on a honeycomb-textured horse that she had made for a previous show that she recreated it on two new pieces, a bust of an adolescent girl and a woman entering old age. These she



Held Baby. 2005 Clay, glaze. 31.75 x 30.5 x 48 cm.

juxtaposed, in the gallery space, with a pair of lovers embracing inside a spiralling whirl of twigs and birds and two pieces depicting female figures being attended to by birds. Nearby, suspended from the wall, hung a series of alarmingly realistic wasp nests extruding an assortment of small human figures. Male, female, adult, child, some embracing, some just a tangle of arms and legs.

The tension between these images, of youth and age, gentle and stingy animal spirits, and lovers vs women in their solitude in cold landscapes is an outgrowth of Arleo's intense preoccupation with the terrors and pleasures of learning to look. Seen together, the figures comprise a kind of ongoing narrative of imaginings that arise when the world's double nature is pressed into our awareness.

"Adrian does this," says friend and fellow artist Kate Blacklock. "She pares an idea down to two or three images that are disparate and then she makes them overlap in a powerful way. All of her figures have a double meaning. From one vantage point the surface looks like one thing and then you look closer and see that it is made up of something else." Of all the pieces Arleo has made, Blacklock finds the wasp nests the most disturbing. "The wasp nests are strange, because you just see a body part hanging out of this nest. There is nothing comforting about them."

To Arleo, who has taken great delight in the

minutiae of her rural surroundings in Lolo, Montana, ever since she moved there 12 years ago with her husband, the novelist David James Duncan, the wasps are companionable co-workers. Last spring, glancing up at them jittering in the rafters of the room adjacent to her studio as she carried her figures to and from her kiln, she found herself playing with the idea of wasps building figures as well.

"I've been collecting wasp nests for a long time and I am always struck by how the 'architecture' of the nests varies depending on which species is doing the building. This brought to mind the ways in which human and nonhuman traits are often combined in creation myths. On the northwest coast, for instance, there is the Haida myth about ravens discovering the first tiny human beings hidden in a clam shell. In the wasp nest series, I started playing with the vocabulary of the surfaces and forms, and set out to discover what sort of creation myths the wasps and I might come up with as collaborators." While allowing that wasp behaviour connotes a kind of malevolent busyness (think: endless mastication of tree bark to make nests for things that sting; think: swarms of flinty god-fearing Anglo-Saxons, buzzing dementedly to the top of the corporate ladder), Arleo points out that it also conveys the pleasurable feeling that total absorption in work can give, when self awareness evaporates and time just falls away.



Wasp Nest - Breach. 2004. Clay, glaze, wood bracket.
43 x 17.5 x 30.5 cm.

"In the case of wasps, this intense effort is almost altruistic in its aim to create a dwelling in which to nurture young. I'm fascinated by this odd juxtaposition of what could be thought of as tenderness in wasps' behaviour, and that this is something we all share – an innate need to reproduce and nurture."

Shakespeare spoke of human artifice as subordinate to the myth-making potential of the art that nature makes. By fusing elements from her natural surroundings on 12 acres on the edge of the Bitterroot Wilderness with clay's earthy function and the expressiveness of the figure, Arleo charges her sculptures with an authenticity so powerful that it resembles myth. She thinks of all we don't see in an instant – bird tracks in the snow, the haunting stillness of a lovers' embrace, wasps quivering busily under the eaves of the horse barn – and creates objects that prod us, as myths and dreams do, to reckon with their beauty.

Arleo challenges the viewer to see past the artist to the interior lives of the figures. "I want people to feel drawn to what is going on inside the work," she says. "There is a quiet narrative about them that is meant to be open-ended. I have a fairly clear idea where I think they are coming from, but they're not a quick study. It can take a while for people to figure out what to make of them."

Plumage, a small, squatting girl with bird-like features created for the show at Snyderman/Works,

exemplifies the detached view that is her art's key personal quality. Hundreds of hands swarm in a carefully arranged pattern on the back, arms and part way down the legs, looking from a distance like feathers. The gesture of the figure – arms bent, elbows jutting out slightly, like wings – gives it an elfin look, like a forest creature out of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The face, watchful and innocent, suggests coming of age. Dressed as a bird to signify her affinity with the bird world, the girl might be enacting an initiation ritual in which she journeys out from her tribe, confronts the spirit world, and returns changed, in a way that makes her feel whole again.

"The face of the figure is always what draws you in," says Blacklock, who has known Arleo since they were graduate students at the Rhode Island School of Design in the mid '80s. "The gaze functions a bit like the locked door in a fairy tale. It's the eternal temptation, to enter or not to enter."

Not long ago, Arleo's friend, the novelist and poet Sherman Alexie, was invited for a rare studio visit to view work for an upcoming show. He expressed his thanks with a couple of poems. *A Short History of Arm-Horses* takes a shamanistic view of what's happening inside a sculpture entitled *Aquifer*, of a woman whose arms have changed into horses:

... She kneels in the Church of Horse
But how well can she pray with these horses
Pulling her away? How can she clasp wild
Horses together like hands? ...

The poem spirals with the horse-haunted woman's thoughts in horse-crazed widening circles "toward freedom in the wilderness," where she's gifted with the knowledge that whatever humans create emerges ultimately from the dark powers of nature rather than the artist's personality.

Entering into the spirit of *Pretending*, a sculpture of a woman whose arms have turned into deer legs, the narrator of *The Deer Politic* sacrifices his human eyes for those of the deer:

Starved by winter, this deer is dead,
So I lift her sepia head
And carve her eyes out with a spoon.
I want her sight, though it seems cruel
To force this trade: my eyes for hers.

His suffering releases him into 'the country of deer,' where an uprising against armed men allows him to prove himself a true friend of the deer. In thanksgiving for this swift but healing vision, he gives the deer back her eyes and sets out, transformed, on a new path, 'blind and wise...with hands for eyes.'

Arleo's trick of vanishing into the clay in order to invite the viewer to come undone a little, to step outside time and see double, is her way of playing with the

idea of transformation. It is also a reflection of the seriousness with which she takes her responsibility as an artist. With few exceptions, her figures aren't complete strangers, but they are nobody in particular. Their unfleshlike surfaces – the presence of the feathery hands, the horses for hands, the deer arms – suggests further that they have acquired their own history in the wilderness and grown in a particular, maybe even spiritual, way. "Making some aspect of reality real by showing its spirit is art's responsibility," as Eudora Welty has said.

Most people, after living for a certain number of years, come to see the world around them through a kind of mist. They stop expecting miracles to set their sight on fire and settle into a kind of dull neutrality, as if there were nothing more to see. Then one night, in a dream, a little light will jump off a table or a tree, linking them to a world more vast, more clear than they ever imagined.

This is something that happens to Arleo in waking life. While walking the short distance from her log house to her studio or while feeding her horses, Bonnie, Ruby and Rose, some tiny thing will catch her eye. "Sometimes I'll find a twig that has a beautiful kind of barky-lichen surface. One delicate bud of something will catch my eye. If you stop and look, it's so beautiful."

She laughs. "A lot of the stuff in my sculptures looks like things you would find on the ground. I love the concept of forms shedding life. Just think of the time and care that's gone into the evolution of this thing you pick up off the ground. Thousands and thousands of years. The time it takes me to re-create it in my studio is nothing compared with that. A bird's nest that may only last a year is built by a species that is way older than mankind."

The shift in identity, from being the centre to being a participant in the nonstop flow of the universe, strikes Arleo as the kind of leap of faith which, while unsettling at first, can lead from estrangement to a feeling of connection with nature.

Imagine yourself, the viewer, slipping under the 'skin' of any one of Arleo's figures. What would it feel like? Would you be oblivious to the surfaces moulded to your body or in agony? The beeswax dripping from the adolescent girl and the old woman, Arleo's *Honey Child I* and *II*, was once a seething comb of black and amber bodies burrowing into sweetness. The human figures emerging from the grey wasp nests suspended from the wall are made of the same tiny chambers that the larva of baby wasps once slept in.

Arleo's precise, strangely beautiful figures demonstrate that the lives we follow beneath the surface of the lives we lead are in essence restorative. The stories may be unsettling and elusive, but the feeling the sculptures radiate is cool and clear. It is an overriding heartfelt sense that the world, essentially, is a place of



Plumage. 2004. Clay, glaze. 53 x 39 x 38 cm.

redemption, where poison and medicine lie side by side, where wounds open and close – a kind of divine hospital with its afflictions but also its promise of health and joy.

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