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Oral history interview with Robert Arneson,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Arneson on August 8, 1981. The interview was conducted at Lake Tahoe by Mady Jones for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Jonathan Fineberg and Sandra Shannonhouse reviewed the transcript in 2016; their corrections or annotations appear below in brackets. The reader should bear in mind they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MADDY JONES: [in progress] —13th. Mady Jones interviewing Bob Arneson at Lake Tahoe.

Let's start with your family, when you were born, growing up in Benicia and the influences you had there.

ROBERT ARNESON: Starting when I was born? I don't remember all of that. I was born at home on September 4, 1930.

MS. JONES: At four a.m.

MR. ARNESON: I'm guessing it was four a.m. Aren't babies usually born early in the morning?

MS. JONES: Yes, they are.

MR. ARNESON: So I'm making an assumption. I don't have the facts. I was born at home. A doctor came to the house. I had an older brother, eight years ahead of me. You'd better ask another question.

MS. JONES: What did your father do?

MR. ARNESON: My dad was born across the street in Benicia in about 1897. We were rooted there. My dad finished high school just about the time of the First World War so he went in the service. He was stationed at the Benicia Arsenal. He never got too far. He was stationed on Alcatraz Island when it was used as a military prison. He was in the Medical Corps. My dad was interested in medicine. He was a very bright man. The valedictorian in high school. He briefly worked for the town dentist as an assistant.

MS. JONES: He was Portuguese?

MR. ARNESON: Norwegian! My grandfather on my dad's side came from Norway. He was a sailor, and had actually run away from home at the age of fourteen. He sailed for about eight years. He had been to San Francisco. I guess he legally immigrated. He was a deep sea diver, and he became employed at Mare Island Naval Shipyard as a diver. They were drilling a pier over the Mare Island Canal. My grandfather met a Norwegian lady, I'm sure by arrangement—to bad my dad's not around to tell me all these things—somewhere in Modesto. They settled in Benicia around the 1890s. My grandfather was a big Norwegian. He must have been one of the bigger men in town. He died when I was fourteen [seventeen]. He was a man of six feet, over 200 pounds, and very adventurous. He raised four [five] boys and worked all his life at Mare Island. My dad followed in his footsteps. After the war [WWI] he went to Mare Island Apprentice School and became a machinist. He put in forty years at Mare Island and retired. It was probably assumed that I would do the same thing. When I left high school I would probably go to Mare Island Apprentice School and become a machinist. My attributes really weren't there. Although I might have been a very good pattern maker, which in a sense is a high craft, an art. You develop a prototype of a form.

MS. JONES: Already you were doing sports cartoons for the *Benicia Herald* weren't you?

MR. ARNESON: I started drawing when I was about six years old.

MS. JONES: What kind of encouragement did you get?

MR. ARNESON: I was allowed to sustain my work. I spread out all over the front room floor with my drawing materials, and I would carry on. My dad was always proud of me. I could draw very well as a youngster. He always implied I was very skillful, very talented. My dad could draw very well, too. He certainly encouraged that along the line.

MS. JONES: How about your mother?

MR. ARNESON: On my mother's side there were some artistic qualities. My mother sang and studied voice. She was always an amateur and performed in community events. Still at her age of eighty she sings in the choir at St. Dominic's Church. She has been singing ever since I remember.

MS. JONES: Was her family from Benicia?

MR. ARNESON: My mother was Portuguese. She was raised in Vacaville. Her father came from the Azores. He immigrated at the age of fifteen to a Portuguese settlement. First he came to Rhode Island. I don't know how it went in those days, but I guess everything was structured in Portuguese settlements, because there's a big Portuguese settlement around Vacaville and Benicia, San Leandro and San Rafael. My grandfather on my mother's side came at the age of sixteen. He worked as a farmer in Vacaville and eventually acquired land. He was actually becoming prosperous. He raised six daughters and three sons and became a big property owner in Vacaville. He had several businesses. A brewery and whatnot. Prohibition wiped that out, and I think Vacaville went dry long before the Prohibition. He had to make [the brewery into] a soda works in Vacaville. He had grocery stores plus a ranch. My grandfather died of appendicitis at the age of forty-two which left my grandmother with nine kids. Hard times came and I believe that had to sell off most of their holdings, and move to Benicia around 1915 or 1916. My dad was out of high school. He was in the service. My mother met him. He was a very handsome man who wore all-white uniforms. He was part of the Medical Corps. They were married around 1918 or 1920 [July 13, 1918 in Oakland, California]. My dad got a good job on Mare Island. He rented a house across the street from where I was born. The house where I was born became available, so they bought it and remodeled.

MS. JONES: But it was happy times for you growing up. You really had a feeling of belonging?

MR. ARNESON: I think so, particularly at my mother's side. My grandmother resettled in Fairfield. There were always big Portuguese gatherings in Fairfield, and we had big Norwegian gatherings in Benicia. I never had a grandmother on my dad's side. My dad's mother died when he was around nine, so her sister moved into the house to raise the boys. When my dad went to the first grade, he could speak no English, only Norwegian. It was all that was spoken around the house. My dad had to spend an extra year in the first grade to learn the English language.

MS. JONES: And did you pick up any Norwegian?

MR. ARNESON: I have no Norwegian and I have no Portuguese. And my mother and my grandmother always used to speak Portuguese. No, I had enough time with English. I still do. I guess it was happy times. Sure, why not. I think being a child is always happy.

MS. JONES: It should be.

MR. ARNESON: It should be happy.

MS. JONES: When you went to school, you were still drawing. Did you have other ideas about what you wanted to do?

MR. ARNESON: When I was in school what I wanted to do was childhood fantasies: mailman, policeman, fireman. As you get older, into grammar school, you see yourself as a hero in various forms. I used to draw comic books and in these comic books I'm sure I was projecting myself in various heroic characterizations. These comic books were pretty well-developed. I would spend the entire summer emulating the comics, the funny papers.

MS. JONES: What were the comics you liked the most?

MR. ARNESON: I looked at them in two ways. One was storyline. One that I thought had a good continuous story which kept you involved. Somebody like "Captain Easy." Then there was the artistic level, the drawing. I was starting to find certain people's style that I thought was really very good. One was Al Capp. He had a terrific linear strength in his drawings. The other one who I emulated was Milton Caniff, who first drew *Terry and the Pirates*. He syndicated and sold that and took up a new strip called *Steve Canyon*. I can recall being fifteen years old and actually cutting out a strip that he rendered and relaying it myself. In reading the history of these guys I could figure out the original scale to which they drew. I'd lay it out, pencil it in and develop my India ink technique. Also the drawing instrument, whether it was a brush, a ball point pen—a Speedball pen in those days. I developed my own fountain pen which I could fill with India ink. If you pressed hard enough with fountain pens you'd get a split line. Price, who draws for the *New Yorker*, has a split line.

MS. JONES: George Price

MR. ARNESON: Yes.

MS. JONES: You were really self-taught.

MR. ARNESON: I worked hard at teaching myself through comic strips. That was something I was seriously interested in wanting to become, a cartoonist or a comic strip artist. I had an older cousin on my mother's side who was a very good cartoonist. I used to watch him draw. He was about seven years older, and eventually he was drawing cartoons for a newspaper, the *Mare Island Grapevine*. He eventually went into drafting. Today he teaches drafting at Napa College. He's written a textbook on drafting. I had another cousin, two years older, whom I considered a fine artist. He painted with oils. He encouraged me to go to art school. When I was in high school he was attending California College of Arts and Crafts. He invited me to spend a day or two, and personally took me around classrooms he had to attend that day. He introduced me to the professor, and some other students. I was taken under the wing and encouraged to go to this school for art. I didn't do that, actually. I went to junior college at the College of Marin when I finished high school.

MS. JONES: And what were you taking?

MR. ARNESON: I went there to be a football hero because my high school coach had gone to the College of Marin, and our high school picnic was over at the Marin Town and Country Club. I thought that was another world. I just loved that school. So I matriculated at the College of Marin. I had a lovely time. Two and a half years. I would have gone forever. I played some football and got injured after about a third of the season. That terminated my personal heroics. I became sports editor of the paper and drew cartoons for the college paper the *Mariner*.

MS. JONES: What were they?

MR. ARNESON: They were comic strip style, or one-line jokes which for the most part dealt with athletics. In some cases they dealt with current themes.

MS. JONES: Did they have a lot of puns?

MR. ARNESON: They really weren't punny, they were pretty mundane jokes. Not highly original. I was better off when I was in high school drawing the sports cartoons for the *Benicia Herald*. Those had a pretty strong character.

MS. JONES: You were pretty young to be drawing for the *Benicia Herald*, I mean, that was a life?

MR. ARNESON: Actually I started when I was a senior. It was a weekly paper. I was writing a sports article on the high school teams for the town paper. I thought about drawing, and I asked the editor—I took him a drawing of one of the players. It was a pencil drawing I had worked up from a photograph of the player. The editor thought he could run it. He would have to take it over to have it half-toned in Vallejo. At that time this was the *Herald's* printing policy since they were affiliated. So that was my first drawing reproduced in the town paper. I started doing it every week. The drawings got better every week. The editor would tell me about the kind of line that would print better. So I gave up the pencil drawing, and we went into India ink and strong dark and light. I would draw the face, and then I would add writing about the heroics of this particular athlete, and then maybe a little cartoon in one of the corners. It was a style that I borrowed from several other sports cartoonists whose names I don't remember, but who used to appear in the *Oakland Tribune*. The *Oakland Tribune* fellow was terrific. I started clipping his drawings out of paper, saving them, and looking at them. And then there was a nationally syndicated cartoonist out of a St. Louis sporting news section who was very good. I used to save his drawings and base something of my style on his, or I would try to figure out how they did it. I drew these cartoons after I left high school. I continued for about five years. I would do them in the summer until I had a whole pile. I would go down and spend some time with the local coach, and he would kind of size me up on who the sports stars were going to be for the coming year. He would either furnish me photographs or I could get photographs from the students. I had a lousy camera. I couldn't really take good photographs, but in one or two cases I had to shoot my own. This involved taking a photograph and gridding it off into squares, and then enlarging those squares, double or triple scale, penciling and then inking them in. It would take a couple of days in some cases to do some of these. If you had a good photograph in some cases you could start with an overlay tracing, and work out and simplify, and then enlarge the photo from a tracing. I got five dollars a drawing. One time I took my portfolio of drawings to a daily paper, the *Vallejo Times Herald*. I thought I might as well prepare for the future. They already had a sports editor who was doubling as the sports cartoonist. It was thirty or forty years before they could use me. My cousin's husband was the managing editor so I had an in, but it didn't work out. I thought, "Well, maybe the *Oakland Tribune*." When I was in Marin Junior College I drew a strip for the college paper. Simple cartoons of some kid being run over in the student parking lot, jokes like that. While I was going to junior college I took art courses.

MS. JONES: Did you get any encouragement?

MR. ARNESON: Sure, I think the art teachers encouraged me. In fact, they went to the trouble of taking my works

from my second and third year in junior college to the California College of Arts and Crafts and the Art Institute for scholarship application, since you had to turn in a portfolio. At the California College of Arts and Crafts I was awarded a partial scholarship, kind of a little come-on. I was given partial money and some work, which covered the tuition.

MS. JONES: And living expenses were your own.

MR. ARNESON: Everything else was on me. But I had no anxiety over money. My folks would certainly have supported me.

MS. JONES: Who was at California College of Arts and Crafts when you were there? Were there any teachers who were of particular influence?

MR. ARNESON: When I first went I thought I was going to be a commercial artist, so I took some commercial art courses. These people I thought were very professional, and I realized that, but I wasn't particularly excited. I could see that I was just a very ordinary student. Up to that time, I always thought I was brilliant. Everywhere else I was top dog, just a cut ahead. But in this school, I was just another one. I actually could not render nearly as well as some other students in terms of rendering and airbrushing. Poster making—I didn't like to letter. Some things I just thought were awful. I just didn't enjoy it. So after a semester I was actually discouraged. I dropped out for a short while and went to work at the Shell refinery. I worked just long enough to realize that school was a lot better. I thought I'd go back to art school, and I went back. This time I didn't know whether I was going to be a commercial artist. I was not a fine artist anywhere along the line. I had no notions of that. I wasn't going to be a painter or a sculptor.

MS. JONES: And were you seeing fine art at that point?

MR. ARNESON: In art history, but nothing that turned me on. Even in high school, I thought Matisse was very weird. My high school art teacher tried to tell me that Matisse was good art. "Boy, you've been warped by the university," I thought. Because I really was into cartooning and drawing, I liked all that, and she thought that wasn't art. So I always assumed I wasn't a fine artist. I was on the borderline of another low-grade kind of thing.

MS. JONES: Who were the students that you met when you were at C.C.A.C.?

MR. ARNESON: The ones I remember are the ones who are still involved as artists, Bob Bechtle and George Miyasaki. I didn't know George as a classmate, but as a basketball player out there at the noon hour. They used to have tennis courts and basketball courts at Arts and Crafts. All that's been bulldozed out now for a dormitory. Bob Bechtle worked in the student shop. He was a watercolorist. Actually, I was a pretty good watercolor artist at Arts and Crafts. The only awards I ever won as a student were on the basis of watercolor paintings. I took that pretty seriously, along with studying art education. Unfortunately a lot of classes were not involved with studio art, but more with teacher preparation, philosophy of education and history of education. A lot of loaded courses where in a way I guess I cheated myself out of an education.

MS. JONES: But you had to do it to get your certification?

MR. ARNESON: I think I was more determined to become self-employed, or at least employable when I left school. That's why fine arts was an uncertain notion. What I was doing was not fine art. Watercolors were relatively hokey. You followed traditions, derelicts, tugboats, barns that were kind of leaning over -

MS. JONES: Was George Post there?

MR. ARNESON: Post was teaching watercolor, and a very good teacher. I became a Post-Toasty in the process. I could emulate his style because he demonstrated so often. You learned by how he approached and organized the composition, and how he approached the watercolor medium, white to dark. If you followed your lesson well, you pretty well came out with a Post-Toasty. I thought I was about the best in the class.

MS. JONES: And you just couldn't have white paint, it always had to be the -

MR. ARNESON: —white paper—very honest. I still believe in that. There is some integrity in that. You couldn't become an illustrator. You really had to proceed on pretty good, solid, English traditions, from light to dark, learning how to glaze and how to alter your colors a little bit.

MS. JONES: Who were your other teachers?

MR. ARNESON: There were several people teaching courses in Art Education. They are long gone, I don't know where they are. I took a number of classes from a fine teacher, Alton Ribley. I took courses in silk screen, bookbinding, and leathercraft, all from him. I was becoming a jack-of-all-trades. I thought Arts and Crafts was a very good school preparing a student to become a high school art teacher, because you really learned

everything. You learned how to print, you learned how to fabricate metals. I took metalsmithing and jewelry, and working with plastics.

MS. JONES: How many years were you there?

MR. ARNESON: I went there for two and a half years. Free brush lettering, I could have gone to work for Safeway, learning to paint "specials" in big bold letters. You learned a great number of techniques. I never took a painting course other than watercolor because I had taken painting in junior college. So I never had to take a painting course, which is a shame. I should have gotten involved there but I didn't. I never took painting. I'd hang around the painting studios. I took jewelry making. And then when I was graduating I was reaching a time where I started applying for teaching jobs. This meant you took your portfolio. The Teacher Placement Office would receive inquiries as to what jobs were available and what school districts were looking for art teachers. I was going to graduate with a special credential in art education which qualified me to teach art.

MS. JONES: Had you taken any ceramics at that point?

MR. ARNESON: I had taken one ceramics course in junior college for one unit, for which I received a "D" grade. I didn't even know what it was. I needed one unit to fill out my fifteen unit student load. I thought I would take "sarahmacks." They said, "Oh, you just play with clay," and I said, "Okay, that won't be too hard." It was an afternoon course, three to five, and sometime around three thirty there was no way after the coffee break, I just never went back. There was always something else to do at the College of Marin, playing around. So I earned a "D." I did a few objects that we still have.

[Audio break.]

I was offered a position finally [in fall 1954, after graduating from CCAC]. There was an opening down at Menlo-Atherton High School. I went with my portfolio of cartoons, drawings, and watercolors, and a couple of the teachers—there were already four art teachers—were very good watercolorists. They thought, "Gee, it would be great to have another guy down here for Saturdays. We can all go out to the coast and paint watercolors." The classes, though, were a mixed bag. They needed two ceramics classes and architectural drafting, but this involved advanced work. I was pretty good at drafting, and three-dimensional illustration of architectural sites, and a basic crafts course and that's it. There's a certain chic kind of show-off thing in group ceramics. There are probably other people from the course that might be famous now. I don't know who they were. I just came and tried to do the problem, and tried to get out of there. I didn't even like to get my hands in the mud. It was no fun at all. I tried a lot of things. I made plaster molds one time. Everything was lousy. I did everything wrong. The plaster set up too fast. There were no textbooks, to my knowledge. Nothing to really read. It was hit and miss. I was always missing. But when you start teaching high school, you can't be missing. You have to have some kind of information. I started reading *Ceramics Monthly* magazine so I could have projects for my students. While I was teaching high school I'd go down at night to practice so I wouldn't look stupid. Christmas vacation I'd spend down there. I actually got interested in ceramics by teaching high school. I mean interested where I would actually spend all day Saturday making things.

MS. JONES: What kind of things were you making at that point?

MR. ARNESON: Learning to throw and learning to make a mold.

MS. JONES: You were still doing all stoneware, earthenware?

MR. ARNESON: I was doing stoneware. I had an electric kiln in this school which I learned to fire. We had a couple of potter's wheels, and I was learning to throw. After a year of teaching high school I was interested enough that I would spend my next summer—no, I got married and went to Mexico. The following year I was teaching adult ceramics one night a week and making things.

MS. JONES: Still at Menlo-Atherton High?

MR. ARNESON: At old Menlo-Atherton High School. The second year I made all kinds of wine goblets and things. I was getting so I could throw pretty well. And it was a hobby. My serious art was watercolor. On weekends, I'd go off to Princeton and paint the ocean and the boats. And then that summer [1956] I went to summer school. First I went to San Jose State and studied ceramics with Herbert Saunders. I took two classes and developed my skills and knowledge. We worked in low fire ceramics. I think all the glazes were pre-mixed. It was just a matter of coating your pots. I learned how to make pretty well-formed pots, but pretty dead. They were not very alive. Herbert came from Ohio State, and his pottery was well-turned. You threw a form. The next day you came back and trimmed the entire pot to make it correct and pretty, so that it looked machine-made. So I did that too. The second session I went to Arts and Crafts and studied ceramics with Edith Heath. She took an industrial approach to ceramics, and at the same time alienated all the ceramicists at Arts and Crafts. I remember they were all quitting. But I was not a ceramic student per se. This was 1956, and some of the more serious potters were

leaving Arts and Crafts and going to Los Angeles to study with Peter Voukos, who I was aware of because of the very radical school of ceramicists in Southern California.

MS. JONES: Were you looking at crafts magazine then?

MR. ARNESON: Yes, I would read *Craft Horizons*, *Ceramics Monthly*, and I think I even wrote a letter to the editor with a negative comment about Voukos's work. A real stupid kind of thing.

MS. JONES: Not neat enough?

MR. ARNESON: Yes, right. I was definitely at the other end of the line. I was not a reactionary, hardcore, clean-pot-type ethic. But I wasn't a potter, I was a high school teacher, and I was taking these classes. I learned at Arts and Crafts with Edith Heath the clay body. We must have made 100 different clay bodies and shrinkage tests and all these absorptions. I don't know what it was all about, but it was learning about different clays. I don't know if it was important. I guess I didn't mind doing it. I don't think I made anything. We had to make something from a mold, a very complicated mold. Heath was a very industrial person. I went back and taught another year of high school. That year I was really interested. I was really seriously thinking I wanted to do something. I quit coaching so I could spend more time potting at night and on Saturdays. I was reading again, *Ceramics Monthly*, Carlton Ball's articles once a month. I would follow whatever he was writing about. Whether it was a decorating technique, or a glazing technique, or a clay body process, I would try it. Halfway through that year in high school, I decided I was going to go to graduate school. I was following the work with pottery that was being done. There were a number of places -- one was Mills College, with Antonio Prieto. Arts and Crafts certainly was a good school. I was coming around to looking more at Voukos in those days.

MADIA JONES: What was your fascination?

MR. ARNESON: They were heroic looking things, although I was only seeing reproductions. I went all the way to Sacramento the following year to see a big pot of his that was in the State Fair. I was totally impressed, and certainly intimidated. I had a young child by then. I had to really think pragmatically where one could go. My wife was a teacher, graduating from San Jose State with a teaching credential. She was already teaching that year in Redwood City. So I could go to graduate school, and she could teach. But who would take care of the baby? We had to be near a relative in Berkeley where my wife had an aunt who was more than willing to be a babysitter in the daytime. So I applied to Mills College because that was still a very strong atmosphere there. I was able to visit the campus and meet some of the students out there. I thought the work was of high quality. And I was accepted. So I quit teaching high school and went to Mills, starting actually in June. I went to summer school. We found an apartment in Berkeley. My wife got a job in San Leandro teaching third grade, so we could all commute together. We'd drop off the baby, zip down to Mills, and she'd go teach. Eventually I became a commuter with another graduate student who lived in Berkeley.

MS. JONES: Who was that?

MR. ARNESON: Harold Myers, quite a good potter, teaching now at Hayward State. He's been out of ceramics for ten years. I think he's involved with printing and printmaking techniques. I sure enjoyed going to graduate school.

MS. JONES: And Antonio Prieto was definitely the big -

MR. ARNESON: Sure, he was an award-winning potter. Everyone knew Voukos had been a student of his, so his reputation was quite strong. There were four or five graduate students in ceramics at Mills College. It was an interesting experience. Being a ceramics student, I didn't have to take graduate seminars because I was a ceramicist—therefore, I wasn't a fine artist. So the painters and I would only meet at coffee breaks.

MS. JONES: Who were the painters?

MR. ARNESON: A fine fellow was Ted Bielefeld, who died a few years later. I learned a lot from him as a student. Harry Meyers was there. Now who were the painters? Well, Bob Nelson was a painting student, a filmmaker now, of course, but a graduate student in painting. There were a few others who are now teaching on the East Coast. I can't recall their names. The graduate program was quite good, certainly the graduate program in music at Mills was Darius Milhaud. The graduate students were interesting. We had dance and painting, and us guys out in ceramics who still had to sit in the back three seats of the bus. We never got involved in philosophical issues, although my requirement for graduation was to write a philosophical statement about my work. That went basically with a catalogue, with reproductions of everything I made, photographs and a technical manifesto. I really enjoyed the opportunity to just do something I really wanted to do. Sometimes when you're ready, I was twenty-seven then and serious, and I had gone through a lot of different phases. I started exploring a lot of other kinds of derivative forms, and even doing quasi-Voukos, although this was certainly frowned upon at Mills.

MS. JONES: Antonio Prieto really had an attitude about Voulkos, even then?

MR. ARNESON: Oh yes, he didn't care for any of that stuff. Although Tony [Antonio] at the time was doing forms that were reminiscent of Miró, kind of adventurous putting together of multiple thrown forms, and decorating them a little more robustly. But there were assignments one had to make for a while, and my graduate show was just a hodge-podge of everything. I look at that work and I think, my God, teapots and sets of dinnerware. I was making coiled absurdities and loopy-dooey things that were nothing, mostly decorative, nothing massive or heroic. But some forms were cutting down to basics, and it was pretty good. When I finished Mills, again, what does one do when one graduates from schools? One applies again for teaching jobs, and that year I was finishing Mills, I had an opportunity to go to Santa Rosa Junior College to teach. That was a sabbatical replacement position. Off to Santa Rosa I went teaching ceramics, teacher education and design. God, the work load I did! Plus evening classes in ceramics.

MS. JONES: Were you doing pottery demonstrations on the side?

MR. ARNESON: In the summer. I'd go up to the California State Fair. That was arranged through Tony Prieto. I can remember meeting Tony when I was a high school student, going to the State Fair and seeing this potter making pots. Years later, there I was, making pots. That was great fun. All the materials, clay and tools, everything we needed, was donated by a ceramic supply house in San Francisco. They're still in business. Good people. Plus we got a salary from the California State Fair, fourteen dollars a day. That was maintenance pay. I had friends I could stay with up there, so I would demonstrate pottery, gee, from ten o' clock or eleven in the morning until about eight o' clock at night, with breaks, of course across the bandstand. Oh, God, it was more fun. People would come up and they just thought you were marvelous. The magic of the mud. The first time I went up there was for two weeks in September. It usually started the last week of August and into September, and in 1957 I went. We would make all these pots. Oh my God, I must have made 200 pots. We would dry them in the Sacramento heat, and we would gently pack and haul them down to Mills College where we would fire them all. We would usually have a Christmas sale or something like that. So I did that in '57. In 1958 I couldn't do it. I think I was moving on to Santa Rosa at that time. I'm a little confused whether I did that or not. I might have gone up there. Santa Rosa was nice. I just continued making what I wanted to make, which was still exploring in different directions. I was making big thrown pots, handsome lamp bases, as I look back on them, volcanic glazes. I was winning prizes in a lot of the craft exhibitions in California and becoming a pretty good potter on the exhibit circuit.

MS. JONES: You said one that you even considered going into the lamp base business.

MR. ARNESON: Oh, up to a point. I was making wine bottles up there and taking them down to Gump's Gallery and they were selling. I made 100 wine bottles out of stoneware. I thought, gee, I'd get this going and I would really have a nice side item. I think they only sold for five dollars. I was pretty naive. I took a pilgrimage up to Pond Farm and talked to the *grande dame* of the potters, Marguerite Wildenhain. Pond Farm was only a short half hour drive from Santa Rosa at the time -- Guerneville. She wanted to know, "Are you going to be a teacher or a potter, young man? You better make up your mind. You can't do both." Well, that kind of clarified it in my mind.

MS. JONES: Did she encourage you into being a potter, though?

MR. ARNESON: She's committed to being a full-time potter. But I had no notions. I suddenly realized that I wasn't going to be a potter because that meant you had to really develop a line of things, and I usually got bored. I basically wanted to always explore and try things. Even at Santa Rosa, I spent that year working. My forms were wheel oriented, and I went from the decorative lamp base pottery to some more adventurous strong forms that were stacked and battered around. I was looking more and more at Voulkos reproductions, even taking pilgrimages to where I might see a Voulkos piece.

MS. JONES: Had you met him by then?

MR. ARNESON: I hadn't met him, no. I had not met him until the following year. At the end of the year at Santa Rosa my appointment came to an end, and the instructor came back to teach. So I was at that point looking for another teaching position. I was offered one in the state of Washington, at Central Washington College of Education. I flew up there and met everybody on the staff. They really liked my work. I was budding ceramicist then, you know. But I got very frightened. I said, "My God, nobody to talk to," because even when I was at Santa Rosa, Voulkos had come to Berkeley that year and I used to take trips down to Berkeley. Then I met him.

MS. JONES: That's when you were doing your mental health days. You would take an afternoon off.

MR. ARNESON: No, these were legitimate times off. I had just met Jim Melchert.

MS. JONES: How did you meet Jim?

MR. ARNESON: I met Jim Melchert when I was delivering my wine bottles to Gump's Gallery. He was with my old friend, Harold Myers, whom I had been with at Mills College. Well, Harry was working with Voulkos at Berkeley. I was very jealous and intrigued. That's where the action was. In all reality, that's where the action really was. You have to be around to get a sense of the substance of it. Photographs are nothing. What you read is nothing. Melchert, my God, he was really into the Voulkos mystique. Steve De Staebler was there and a number of other people, all pushing clay beyond its realm. My work was always suffering from being too well made, too thinly thrown. I was still warped into pottery skills, which was throwing too thinly and all that, rather than using the wheel as a building instrument. You've got to throw stronger and thicker and in a much different way. So I'm still learning. So here I was then, with an opportunity to go off to Central Washington College of Education, teach and be isolated, and I turned the job down, just turned it down. I said, "I can't leave the Bay Area. I really have to hang out." I knew I had the opportunity to teach, I always had a sort of open position, if I ever got into trouble, to teach in the Oakland Public School System. Stanley Cohen had met me and knew my work. We had sort of an agreement that if I ever needed a job, be sure to look him up because he was the Director of Art Education for the entire Oakland Public Schools, which was a very good-sized system. So I called Stan up and it just so happened that there was an opening at Fremont High School [for the 1959-60 academic year], which was just down the road from Mills College. So I came back to the Bay Area and we got an apartment right next to Mills. My family's growing now—I'm into two boys [Kreg was born October 6, 1959]—so I always have to have a new job. I joined the Mills College Ceramic Guild which provided a working place on weekends for me, and I taught.

MS. JONES: Did you belong to the Potters' Guild at that time?

MR. ARNESON: The San Francisco Potters' Association?

MS. JONES: The Potters' Association.

MR. ARNESON: Right. I participated in their annual exhibitions, or semi-annual exhibitions, at the de Young Museum, and the Art Festival. In the Art Festival I participated with the Mills College Ceramics Guild and made a few dollars. I participated in a number of art festivals. My work was always pretty idiosyncratic. Good things, and they were all different than any others. They were selling for ten and fifteen dollars. A few people bought my works. But, God, if I made \$500 a year on pottery, it was a big year. It was absurd, and they were good things. But it didn't matter, it didn't matter. I always had my teaching, and I had summers. That's why one teaches, of course. One has three months of the summer to go full speed to work, and I did all that.

[Audio break.]

So here I am now, teaching at Fremont High School in Oakland. This was kind of another cultural shock for me because here I am teaching high school. And I had quit high school, gone to graduate school, and acquired a nice junior college teaching position. Lets face it, it was much nicer than teaching high school. There were no disciplinary problems. So I had come back to teach in the Oakland system and I had to confront another kind of reality. I had this classroom that was a prefabricated structure sitting out on the asphalt playing fields away from the main building where I was hired to teach crafts. This meant the whole realm of jewelry, metalsmithing, whatever one once labeled crafts, and ceramics. This first six weeks I was going to do ceramics. But actually, in the first two weeks of that six weeks, I just had to be a policeman. I had to really establish a serious kind of order in the classroom. Five classes a day teaching ceramics and you really have to seriously establish a procedure to find out who the problem student is. I had a class that would be, looking back, one third black, one third Chicano, one third white. That's kind of a testy mix. I had to find out who was going to be my troublemaker and either win them over, or try to eliminate them from my classroom. It was nice, I was teaching out on that asphalt field. I came in working clothes, no longer in my suit and tie, with my jumpsuit or anything. I just came in working clothes and I decided then and there that I was going to teach the way I was going to teach, very seriously, and it was going to be my way. If any principal or anybody didn't like it, they could pretty well find somebody else. In reality I was a good teacher, I knew that much, and I was going to be very serious about teaching. I just wasn't going to baby-sit anybody. I had a couple students who were problems, with criminal records, high truancy and who were very unhappy. The options were either they would come around, and we would become respectful to each other, or we'd have to part. Obviously I wasn't going to leave, so they could leave. There was one student who was a race baiter—that was a problem. I just can't have that in class. A big strong white kid, and he was unhappy. He didn't want to be in school, he wanted to be a truck driver or be in the army. I think I finally had to take him to the principal and I said, "Well, here it is. I'm sure this kid hates me. And in reality I probably hate him too because he's lousing up what I want to do. So I haven't brought him to you before because I've been trying to handle it in my own way in the classroom, and I can't do it anymore. So I've reached this point here where that's it."

[Audio break.]

I was having this problem with this student and I took him to the principal. I squared up to the principal and said, "I'm at a point now where either he goes or I go. He can't be in my classroom. He's not happy there and not

trying to learn." We had his mother at the meeting, and I said, "Your son, really," we spoke, "he's very honest. We've got to be upfront about everything, and he dislikes me and I dislike him, but I understand what he wants to do. He wants either to be in the service or driving a truck. And he's old enough, and it's absurd for him to be down in ceramics because he's unable to do any other academic area. In all reality, the reason ceramics is being taught is because those students certainly aren't going to be able to take high school chemistry or any other advanced courses. But that doesn't mean they can't be serious students. I can do something with them and give them a sense of their own honor and they can have a sense of achievement that might be more than they can normally expect from the situation." I got my way because I was just at a point where this was absurd for me. I'm not going to teach anymore. So I decided it was going to be my way or no way, and the principal respected me. I hadn't been a problem. He questioned the fact that I never wore a tie, but I explained it was a dirty place and we all worked. And after about eight weeks, six weeks, I was starting to get the class humming. So my supervisor, Stanley Cohen, came by and I said, "I think I've got them where I want them, but I'm all out of clay." And we were starting to get a little program going and he said, "Well listen, they're not using much clay over at Oakland High, so I'll go get their allotment." So I got all their clay, brought it over, and really started to get the kids going, and with five classes. I established a T.A. for every class. I established a program of after school work. I mean, I split, man. The bell rang and I was the first one out the door. When I found a kid that was getting serious—there weren't too many—someone that really wanted to work after school, I said, "Well, somebody is going to have to be in charge." And I found a kid and I said, "You know, you're in charge. Boy, if there's any problems, it's your ass." He said, "There'll be no problem, Bob." He was big and strong, "and we'll take care of it." I said "Terrific." Then my black kids said, "He man, there's no jive going on, man. We've got to have a little sound going." I said, "Well, what do I do, what do I do for sound?" He said, "I know some kids here, man, at school. I've just got to get them out, man, out of that room and come on down." "Oh yeah, who are they?" They'd tell me who the kids were. "Okay, let's get them a pass." And they'd come down and they'd play for us.

MS. JONES: How fabulous.

MR. ARNESON: It was terrific. We got into music groups coming down and playing so we'd have a little sound. I got to a point where we decided we're going to do figure work from a model. So I had to have a good looking gal who's going to be in leotards. She can't be nude, it's high school. It's got to be real tight leotards, on somebody who could be up there. Every period for a week we worked from a model. There wasn't any of that normal high school—if I were a high school student there would be all kinds of innuendos and gee, I had some black girls, beautiful, and they would model and it was really serious. A very serious kind of effort they were giving. I had kids, I got this back from their counselors, who were totally "F" students. They were failers all the way along and, suddenly, their academic level was starting to rise. They'd come down and say, "What's going on? What are you doing?" Kids were having achievement. They were feeling good about themselves. They could do something. Some kids were learning to become good potters. I'd show them how to do it. They had to work at it. None of this goofing off. I trust you, you trust me. If you've got a problem, if you're hung up about a smoke, let me know. You know where to stash it. I don't care. You don't get me in trouble. I honor you, you honor me, and then you work hard and we all get along. If you can hold off your smoke until the free period it sure would be good. And that really worked out. I worked hard, I taught very hard. I showed slides.

MS. JONES: What kinds of slides were you showing?

MR. ARNESON: Well, my stuff and whatever I could find. I taught ceramics the whole damn year. When I ran out of clay, I'd call Stanley and we'd go to another high school and get their clay allotment and bring it over. At the end of the year, we had an exhibition at the Oakland Art Museum of the work of the Oakland Public Schools. But that's a misnomer, they were all my students. And those kids, the black kids and whatnot, came in with suits. They were gentlemen, they were just terrific. I gave them problems in self-portraiture even long before I wanted to do that. I said, "You've got to do a self-portrait."

[Audio break.]

I would periodically photograph all of their work, particularly the self-portrait pots, or their self-portrait as a tiger, but it had to be their face. They could make an animal or whatnot or they could make a pot, but it had to be their face. I'd photograph it and we'd have slide shows of their work. It was a great success. It really feeds back. I was one hell of a teacher. I mean, I was young enough.

MS. JONES: Did any of your high school classes go on to join you at U.C. Davis?

MR. ARNESON: Not at Davis. But I remember this one kid, Larry Martinez, who I didn't think was academic at all. Many years later I was teaching at U.C. Davis, and I came down to Berkeley for a day. I went into the sculpture department, and I ran into this graduate student—it was Larry Martinez. "What the hell are you doing here, Larry? How did you get to a university?" And we just had a good talk. He had gone into the Peace Corps after high school and done a lot of serious things and arrived at the university. When I left Fremont High School, I went to Mills College and took a position teaching, of all things, Design. I taught two courses in Design, and I had

to teach again this course called Basic Crafts. I was always into Basic Crafts. And I had to be in charge of the teacher training program because I was the "great high school teacher," and I was good. I think a lot of people knew that. But boy, it took a lot out of me.

MS. JONES: Were you working right along with the students when they –

MR. ARNESON: I tried, but I couldn't. I mean, you have to teach. I made some things.

MS. JONES: I told you once that that's what Richard Shaw told me about working with you at U.C. Davis. The most impressive thing was your work ethic and how much time you put into your total education.

MR. ARNESON: Well, in the university, I really did. Until the time I left my studio and moved to Benicia. My attitude was, my philosophy was: you establish a studio atmosphere, not a teaching atmosphere. The best way to establish a studio atmosphere is to work and to have work going. You can't really always be telling the student something. You can if you're very pedagogical, loaded with theory. From my own experiences and understanding the hindrances that entered into my becoming an artist was that sometimes I admired the fact that I always was in the back seat, and I couldn't take philosophy. I couldn't take those courses. I don't try to lay too much of a verbal trip out. I'll give a critique, a little bit. I don't have too much dogma. But I do want to establish a procedure. I want to see some action. The name of the game is action. Get into it. You'll discover, once you're committed, passions, if you can get your student's passions going, everything else will go. You can put it into place and you can resolve the issues as they come. You may hate what they're doing, but you've got to realize where they are. They're very young, they're immature, but gee, if you see something happening, keep it going, don't try to snuff it out, and maybe they'll come to a level where you'll say, "Boy, they're just real pros." Because let's face it, the students are students, and they're going to be real awkward. The first thing, of course, in teaching, is that you must provide a vehicle in which the student will trust themselves. The student must really trust himself, and that's the toughest thing in teaching. So that they don't come to you and say, "Is this right?" or "Is this what you want?" I guess I could say, "Well, sure, I want everything to look like me. Oh my God, I don't want you to look like me. But I do want most of all that you look like you, and that you feel good about what you're doing."

MS. JONES: Probably that's how you got into having them do the self-portraits.

MR. ARNESON: Well, in high school teaching that was right, that was a nice thing.

MS. JONES: How long did you teach at Fremont High School?

MR. ARNESON: Oh, one year. I was burned out. I taught from seven-thirty a.m. to three p.m. I would go home and go to bed and sleep for two hours. I wasn't a very good daddy. I think I probably had three children by then [Derek was born January 10, 1961]. They just kept on coming. I never knew the system. A good Catholic family. It was pretty tough on my wife.

MS. JONES: When you were there, were you going to see Anthony Prieto at Mills, or were you seeing Voulkos?

MR. ARNESON: Well, when I was teaching high school, sure, I would come home and sleep until five and be daddy. I didn't help out very much. But I tried to be daddy. And then, at nine o' clock at night I would go down to Mills College. I took advantage of my membership in the Mills College Ceramics Guild, and I would work on whatever I was involved in. The only people there would be the graduate students and myself. I tried to work every night on something. I was moving in 1959 into an Abstract Expressionist idiom and then I would occasionally—I think about once a month—I would take a Wednesday off from teaching—sick leave, mental health day I gave myself. I would go over to Berkeley and I would hang out with that ceramic shop of Voulkos's. It was just called hanging out. That's all I did. I just hung out and breathed the air, listened, watch, shoot the breeze. People would come and go, go to lunch, and try to put in a good—and then go home at night, or, in some cases, I'd go down there at ten o' clock at night. I can remember Peter [Voulkos], "Say, I thought I'd come over and talk to you," and he said, "Well, I really don't get into talking much until after ten." And I thought, "After ten! Shit, I'm in bed, man. I'm a high school teacher." But I said, "Okay, I'll figure it out, I'll take my naps and I'll be ready to come over." And so you go over there and you hang out from ten until three, you know, and you drink some Scotch, and I'd get a sense of his being a very important man.

MS. JONES: Was Voulkos responsive to you at the time?

MR. ARNESON: Well, I don't think he saw me particularly as someone he would want to have around. I was uptight in some ways, I mean, I'm a –

MS. JONES:—A little square?

MR. ARNESON: I was square, a high school teacher, a family man, I had to always know that I was going to take

care of those kids and be a regular shooter in all ways. Because I can remember, I asked Harry, there were some guys hanging out there and working, I hinted that I sure would like to hang out. He said, "No," and I respect that. That was good. I might have been submerged and eaten up by the system and become a minor Voukosite. Because I was taking it in, but there were still critical elements.

MS. JONES: But it was definitely were things were happening.

MR. ARNESON: It was an art studio. You have to realize that in teaching, students never have the opportunity to be around where the action is. If you take a painting course and the instructor comes in and teaches, he's not painting there, he's not hanging out. You don't hear his playing the guitar or see what he drinks or anything. Whereas in the ceramics shop, it all happens there. I don't think Pete actually taught in the traditional sense that you give a lecture, but I'm sure he did. It was just his presence. Of course, he was making ceramics. He was making these big strong vertical forms. Then he was getting into the bronzes, too.

MS. JONES: Wasn't he also commuting then from L.A.? Didn't he also share a studio with John Mason at the time?

MR. ARNESON: But he built things at Berkeley. Yes, he said he commuted to L.A. That was a shock to me. I could hardly commute from Oakland to Berkeley. How could some guy, what kind of commitment is this, that one would spend money? I mean, art was a hobby, you know what I mean? But I didn't know you would actually stake a part of your good hard earned money and put it into art. I was uptight about that.

MS. JONES: Did you meet John Mason then?

MR. ARNESON: I met John I think the following year, briefly. He came and taught at Berkeley one summer. I don't know if I was at Mills anymore. I taught two years at Mills. That was a fantastic experience in itself, because, again, Mills had lively graduate students. I had nothing to do with ceramics, so my obligation was to keep my mouth shut around the graduate students. But I can remember one night I went in, and Win Ng was a student then, a graduate student. I think I was discussing some firing techniques with Win, and it got back to Tony Prieto. And the following day I was teaching my class in Basic Crafts which was right across from Ceramics, and Tony came bursting into my classroom and started screaming at me. He took me aside and said, "I never come into your classroom and tell your students what they ought to be doing, and I don't think you should ever come in Ceramics," which I had never come into. It was only a night time discussion with a graduate student about some of my wisdoms. I was wise, and there were alternative ways. I realized that there were no privileges. So I stayed away from the shop. I think in my second year Tony and I were not speaking too well. There were some questions about my teaching. My design problems were too radical. "Somebody like Rauschenberg, you were showing Rauschenberg's to your students? Some of you design students were doing assemblage?" I had some Mills College students who were terrific. God, the girls were great minds. I didn't teach. I wasn't interested in Design like Design. You want to be around something stimulating.

MS. JONES: At this point when you were saying that you and Antonio weren't really getting along so well, were you going around and doing throwing exhibitions with him?

MR. ARNESON: No, only at the State Fair in the summer. When I went up there I made Christmas ware for the most part.

MS. JONES: When did you do your bottles, *No Return*? That was 1961?

MR. ARNESON: Oh yes, 1961. We went up there. Well, Tony would go off and do other things at the State Fair. He was a very popular man. He'd be on the radio program, or be wining and dining. A friend of mine, Wayne Taylor, who was teaching high school and had gone to Mills College, and I would be the anchor men in the late evening program in this pottery booth. By that time we were just going to have a good time. It was the dinner hour, and we didn't have an opportunity—nobody was wining and dining us for dinner.

MS. JONES: Were there pottery groupies?

MR. ARNESON: No, no pottery groupies, just Wayne and I. Oh, there'd be serious people. But they were not groupies. I don't think anybody then, if they weren't serious, they weren't anybody. So I remember one night Wayne and I decided since we weren't taken out to dinner, we were going to make dinner right there. So we'd throw a dinner plate, and then we'd start making the dinners, and we'd drop them on the plates. We were just high enough to have one hell of a good time. And we made all these dinner wares, God, chickens, and steak dinners. Then we would make drinks, beer bottles. We were just having a good time. The next day Tony saw that stuff and said, "What's this shit?" He was really upset. I think we ended up probably feeling bad enough. We probably broke a lot of it because it was just free-spirited playing around. But I saved some of them, and the quart beer bottle. I had a show. My first exhibit was at the Oakland Art Museum in 1960.

MS. JONES: 1960, the two-man show with Tony DeLap?

MR. ARNESON: Tony DeLap and I. I was going to show pottery and Tony was showing collages. So the summer of 1960, when I was really working, Tony Prieto went off to Spain and I took over the ceramics shop. There was no summer session. I built all kinds of big pieces, everything. I was in my organic period, quasi-Vouklos. But they were organic, but ripped and torn. Or they were cubistically structured forms. Some of them were quite large, five feet, four feet, and they were form the most part sculptural rather than pottery. My first show in the Oakland Museum, which was on the second floor of the Oakland Auditorium at the time. You were kind of lost up there. But at least I had an opportunity to see my work and photograph it and have a sense of who I was at the time. And it wasn't bad, it wasn't bad work. I don't know what happened to it all. Did I sell anything? I don't think so. I might have sold something.

MS. JONES: Was anyone reviewing you at this time? Had *Craft Horizons* found you?

MR. ARNESON: Well now, let me think. I was mentioned several times in *Craft Horizons* on the basis of—I can't remember. Rose Slivka wrote an article then on "The New Ceramic Presence." "The New Ceramic Presence" were the followers of Vouklos and younger people. I was reproduced, the first reproduction was a pot-like thing, very organically, smacked and twisted, tortured and ripped and poked.

MS. JONES: Just what it should be.

MR. ARNESON: And then I was receiving the reviews. Who was it?

MS. JONES: At this point, by the time you were receiving reviews, had you really decided that this was going to be much more than just a teaching career? That you really wanted to be more than an art teacher?

MR. ARNESON: Well, I'm still an art teacher. I was becoming aware of who I was. I was feeling very good about what I was doing. I thought I was an artist. I was going to be an artist. I wasn't going to be a potter in 1960. My next show, 1962 at the de Young Museum, that's when my works were much more influenced by Miró. I was getting a little Surrealism creeping into my forms. I was using occasional low fire colors as accents, which was right out of Miró, where you would use a kind of orangey-red blob here and there. I showed one piece that was from the State Fair the previous season. I had saved that beer bottle [*No Deposit, No Return*] and I put that in the show. It seemed to be the one work that became lacerated by the critics. Alan Meisel, who was a friend of mine, was writing a monthly article. I think he still writes. I don't know whether he does or not. But up until two years ago when the magazine *Craft Horizons* sold, he was writing a column called "A Letter from San Francisco," a monthly survey of what was happening. Certainly that show at the de Young was—again, it was a craft show with a gal that did appliqué tapestry things from Fresno.

MS. JONES: And was Vouklos in that show, too?

MR. ARNESON: No, that was a two-person show. It was part of their "Decorative Arts" exhibit. I was still linked with the Decorative Arts wing of my career. And in the Fine Arts wing, Wayne Thiebaud was showing recent hamburgers and pies.

MS. JONES: Did you know Wayne then?

MR. ARNESON: I had known Wayne for two years, because Wayne also demonstrated at the California State Fair. And Mel Ramos was demonstrating, so we were already having a good time. In fact, Wayne Thiebaud was the Design Coordinator for the State Fair. He had a three-month job designing and installing the art show. He'd even painted murals up there, and then he would demonstrate silk techniques. Mel Ramos was a student of Wayne's and would help along. Jack Ogden, David King, and Ruth Rippon would come out and demonstrate ceramics with us, with Tony. It was a good time. I certainly feel good about this period.

MS. JONES: In 1961 you threw your bottle and you said, "No return."

MR. ARNESON: "No return," but I returned. I spent a year still doing Abstract Expressionism.

MS. JONES: Was there a rift between you and Antonio Prieto?

MR. ARNESON: Well, let's go back and discuss the problem with Tony. I think I became more influenced by Vouklos's work. We'd have to go back to my exhibit at the Oakland Art Museum in 1960.

MS. JONES: Which was a two-man show with Tony DeLap.

MR. ARNESON: There was one thing that I had picked up from Vouklos, and that was his building system which involved a column structure, like a backbone, on which one would then hang or suspend slab elements. That pretty well revolutionized ceramic sculpture. One could actually construct very large forms very quickly. And

that show I had at the Oakland Museum, I did a number of works that were monolithic in size. They were about forty inches in height, and they were rock-like slab forms constructed in a Voulkos manner. In other words, I'd thrown a number of cylinders and stacked them up and built the slabs around them, and the cylinders acted as the supporting element in those forms. So obviously I was becoming a follower of Voulkos. Certainly Tony was more inclined to quasi-Oriental bottles with narrow necks, and very accomplished forms and dishes and things like that. If you're doing something and somebody else is going another way, you probably don't appreciate it, and Tony was a very uptight guy. I don't think he appreciated my going that way, to the point where I would never do any work around him. He would have to leave town. I would do some works. My friends would let me know where he was and how much time I had, then I could get it done. And so, again, those first works at the Oakland Museum—I don't think Tony even saw the show. When was the exhibit?

MS. JONES: It doesn't have a date on what I'm looking at here.

MR. ARNESON: It was probably after a summer. I probably worked all summer when I had the opportunity to build things. I worked at Mills. They had an updraft kiln with a guillotine door that I would use when I fired those things to about cone eight. It took a friend of mine and I to load them. In some cases, I had to make them so that I could handle them myself, it was mostly a two-man job. The graduate students around Mills would certainly be my big supporters. My works were very lively. I was also making pot-like forms in which I would slap slabs of clay on. That was right out of Voulkos imagery. Except my slabs, after they were slapped on, I would go right back and read into them, like a Rorschach ink blob.

[Audio break.]

Actually I was making plates and bowl like forms and I would slap slabs on them and stand back and take a look at them and see if I read into any image content that they might suggest. And I would, into the wet clay, draw a few linear elements that would bring out what the image might suggest. They were very lively forms. I wish I had some of them back today. I think I sold them. I was involved with street craft fairs, most notably the Jack London Art Festival. I think I used to participate with the Mills College Ceramic Guild. I would try to at least make beer money. And the San Francisco Art Festival. One year at the San Francisco Art Festival, after four days, I made \$200. That was the height of my art festival career days. If you just try to do something out of the norm- the problem is I also knew what I should do if I wanted to make money. I used to make Danish Modern for the Oakland Museum Christmas Craft Fair. And these I would not sign but these were like big titted vases glazed in two colors only- a copper red reduction. I also had picked up a green reduction glaze. The combination of those two and a very bulbous like form with a very tiny opening, with no lip and right out of the design magazines. And I threw, my god, fifty hundred of them. And you know, the kids needed thick clothes and everything and I wasn't making much money teaching. Because I was always at the bottom of the line in terms of how much tenure level experience I had. And so I made two kinds of things. I made my Danish Modern. I had a ring I had made at Arts and Crafts in my casting days. I would stamp my ring into the bottom of the wet clay as I trimmed it. That would be the signature for my other kinds of wares.

MS. JONES: And of course it was a handmade ring that you had done in one of your-

MR. ARNESON: Right. And you know those things were really hot sellers. I could have made those all year long and I probably could have made a living. But I had integrity. I would start around Thanksgiving and whip them out. And you get sort of mechanized and start producing a certain line. I did them in three sizes. That dictated the prices, whatever they were five, ten, and fifteen. Or they were ten, twenty, and thirty. I don't know but it was whatever one can get for a pot that was hand-thrown. Oh my god, it was absurd. It's terrible. I didn't do that after. Well one year, maybe it was '61 or '62, I decided the hell with that crap. I'm gonna give to the Oakland Art Museum Christmas Craft Fair Arneson pots at the same price. They would be whatever they were, five, ten, and fifteen, or maybe they were ten, twenty, and thirty. I can't remember. More adventurous works.

MS. JONES: Did they sell?

MR. ARNESON: Same scale. No I didn't sell them but I can remember when Jim Melchert and I went to get all our pieces that we started trading each other. I said, I'll take couple of his and Jim would take couple of mine. We were both out on the limb. What were we doing? We were still making pots. They were pots with openings. So we weren't making Danish Modern. Other than that-

MS. JONES: At that point was Melchert still at Berkeley and hadn't gone over to the Art Institute yet? Or had he just-

MR. ARNESON: Oh, I don't know. Where was he? I don't know where he was. '61? He probably was teaching at the Art Institute. He had to make extra money too because he had a family like I had. Let's see, I was teaching at Mills. I took a cut salary when I left Fremont High School to teach at Mills. So to make up my salary I taught two nights a week at the Oakland Recreation Department teaching pottery at whatever the minimum salary was, I taught. And then on Saturdays I taught children. Mills College had an art for children program, which I

conducted from nine to twelve. I mean I was a teaching fool. And then unfortunately what happened was you do all this and you try to maintain your art and you're also raising a family. You are probably neglecting somebody along the line. [inaudible] I was young enough that I could do it. I was thirty or thirty-one. And then in 1960, I was teaching at Mills. It was the spring of '62.

MS. JONES: Well before we get to the spring of '62, we were going to talk about your rift with Tony and how he felt about your-

MR. ARNESON: Well I think the rift only came about with the fact that he saw where I was going as a ceramicist. He didn't want that stuff around. That meant that if I was going to have that stuff around, it had to be something else. So what I did in '61, I quit making ceramics. I got a studio. My first art studio. I got it with Dick McLean who was a young painter. And he just finished graduate program at Mills College. In fact, Dick had been my TA for one of my classes. We got along real well so Dick was unemployed. His wife had a good job at the bank. So Dick and I got a studio. We found an old grocery store on 35th avenue in Oakland for \$35 a month. We could split that and afford it. He and I went down there and he painted and I did collages. Which meant, I sort of pasted- I would soak colored papers and wheat paste, slap them on board. Most of papers I gathered from the gutters as I was heading out of the studio. I'd go in and they were a releasing agent for me. This was 1961 so Rauschenberg's work was already visibly known to me.

MADIA JONES: Reproductions of it or did you actually see some Rauschenberg shows?

MR. ARNESON: If you were living in San Francisco, what you see are always reproductions. It takes some time later to see it. And probably even so with the beer bottle that I made at the California State Fair. I want to maintain innocence on this because we all know that Jasper Jones did the famous beer cans in 1960. And I confessed that I looked at *Art News* and he may have been reproduced and that may have given me the impetus but I can't honestly, at this time, say that I remember. I would love to have been innocent and just have discovered it on my own terms. But looking back, one can't be innocent because of the nature of reproductions appearing. I should imagine that in 60s Jasper Jones was reproduced somewhere along the line with the beer cans that he cast in bronze and then he painted them to look like the ale that he had borrowed it all from. Innocence is bliss. God, I love innocence. One is free. The more one knows the more one can't do. And that has always been my background. I think I was basically innocent all along the line. In ceramics, you are not an artist so you are really innocent and you are out of it so you can do anything that you want to do. And you are free to explore in that sense.

MS. JONES: After you had done your *No Return* bottle. Was Prieto visibly angry when you did this at the show?

MR. ARNESON: [Inaudible] He was concerned that that kind of thing wasn't visibly around so that his graduate students couldn't be intimidated or influenced in any way. I mean he was outspoken about it to a point where I was intimidated and I was told not to make that stuff and don't hang around ceramics and also quit talking to the graduate students in ceramics and everything else. To a point where I quit talking so that's where Dick and I went off and got our studio and I didn't make ceramics and I was very blissful not making ceramics and making my collages and pursuing those things and I worked. I taught at Mills. My classes. My radical teaching or whatever it was. Inspired the students to be serious. I think I still have students still from Mills who correspond with me or speak to me. They felt that I was always a good teacher. I am a good teacher. We used to play touch football. Oh boy, those were the days. And I enjoyed my studio experience. I think I seriously thought that I would never do ceramics again and that I would get onto something else. I started drawing more and doing my collages and then in the summer of- where are we?

MADIA JONES: '61.

MR. ARNESON: The summer of '61. Tony went somewhere so I took over the whole ceramics shop again. Moved. I cleared out all the potter wheels and made a big space and made another big body of work. And then that body of work was more influenced by, I think, Miró and who else- there was a couple of Italian ceramicists that I had been looking at reproductions of. I liked their work but again it was quasi-surreal. That means that instead of Voukos, just being a pure gut action response to the clay- slap, bang, poke a hole, rip and tear. You also alluded to subliminal kind of imagery that would creep through. Then you would allow the clay to talk to you a little bit. So I narrowly defined my forms to more vertical kinds and building off of that and these forms would take on a kind of an iconography that looked like- looking back on it, it could be a [inaudible]. The nature of the forms, I wasn't looking at [inaudible]. They were nothing and something. I would branch off a tree-like form and then I would use a graphic inscribed mark in the wet clay. And then I'd glaze and fire it. And then I would look at it again and say, "Well it needs a little more articulation with color". Throw a little color on there. Oh you know it'd pop out that shape there. But they were very vertical and static in their structure.

MS. JONES: But you were using white clay then?

MR. ARNESON: No, no. I was still working with house clay. Where I got my clay- I used to go to San Jose to a

pottery shop that made crocs. What was the name of that place? They made a nice- they are still making them. These big stoneware crocs with a blue stripe around the lip and one to ten gallon sizes. I had a Volkswagen bus and I'd drive down there and get my clay. Already ready to go. It was- I forget the name of the pottery. But it was pretty good clay. It was stoneware clay. Also at that time I was going up to Lincoln, California to the Gladding McBean Plant, where they made the Big Sur tile. The famous old factory there that used to make architectural tile and they were producing tiles for the Wrigley Building in Chicago. Pretty much all the decorative motifs on architecture were produced by Gladding MacBean Factory up there in Lincoln. Historically, they had at one time nine sculptures working up there who were building a unique ceramic reliefs for buildings. I guess you would call it decorative ceramic or architectural ceramics. They made a clay body that had a real grog content. They would regrind their shards, in other words, and re-mix it into the clay and the clay was very strong. I was introduced to that clay when I was demonstrating at the California State Fair in, I think Ruth Ripon was buying or getting or donating greenware- slabular drainage tile which he would carve relief elements onto. Also Tony Prieto also had a couple architectural commissions and he was using their extruded elements from the factory and he would then glaze on them. At the time he did a pancake house down in San Leandro.

MS. JONES: Really?

MR. ARNESON: Yeah. And he decorated on the exterior. So he had ambitions.

MS. JONES: Was Ruth Rippon, Tom Rippon's mother?

MR. ARNESON: His aunt. Ruth had been a student at one time of Tony Prieto at Mills College. No, at Arts and Crafts. And now she's been teaching at Sacramento State College since- whenever the college was founded, which was in the mid-50s.

[Audio break.]

MR. ARNESON: Dick McLean and I shared this studio on 35th street and I worked on collages and Dick was a painter at the time. When he was painting in those days he was still under the influence of [Richard] Diebenkorn and [Nathan] Oliveira. Probably more Oliveira but there was still a sense of Diebenkorn. When I say influence that means that you have a certain tool, visual aspects where you introduce a linear element, either in the upper left or upper right and then it meanders down into the middle of the canvas. The colors are oil and then you retreat out right or left and I don't think you never come down. Diebenkorn had a sense where he entered the canvas on the right. I was doing collages without any orthodox procedure other than they all tended to look like my sculptures. And I would kind of slap around- I had a big tub with a lot of wheat paste and it would sour. I always had to put oil of cloves and whatnot in there to keep it from being inhabitable. Dick would always call out from his studio that I stunk. "Your work stinks, Bob!" I would keep pouring in smelling goodies into it. Also, one of the advantages of Mill's College was that I could clean out the student lockers. Out of the student lockers I could gather up all of the left over art materials. That was one of the advantages of being a man of position.

MS. JONES: What kind of things did you retrieve?

MR. ARNESON: Well, paper. Colored paper, white paper, drawing paper. Any kind of paper. You can soak those down into the wheat paste tub. You just let it sort of age for a week and then you would build your stretcher bar and nail on your masonite panel and intuitively develop an imagery within the allotted time that you were going to have for that day. You can always come back another day. Lay on more color and then you could rip through it. I had a technique where I would just slap on a lot of colored paper and white paper- anything and develop nothing. Having nothing, then I would reinvestigate the surface. And I would tear through it. The colors would be a revelation. I'd say "Oh my god, red!" Is that enough red of not. You'd fall back. It was abstract expressionist right? As an archeologist would discover it. These works never went anywhere in a sense, but I was becoming serious. In the meantime, I was still teaching my classes at Mills College. One day a phone call- I'm near the phone for the department, for Tony. The phone call rings and I was teaching my basic craft course. I answered the phone. It was from UC Davis and they wanted Tony Prieto. So I went out and got Tony Prieto and he came to the phone and I didn't go back to my class. I stood there and listened. And the phone call was inquiring about a former Mills College student who had applied for a ceramic position at UC Davis. And I had heard that and Tony was responding and giving him answer. Then he hung up. I said, "What? Ceramic job up at the cow college? What's going on?" He said, "Oh no. They've got letters and science now. They've got a ceramic course and they're asking about somebody"- who I can't remember right now. I actually don't know who they were inquiring about. And I said, "Tony, if you don't mind, who called you?" Even though we were uptight about each other and what we were doing, he was very upfront. He says, "You call this guy, Richard Cramer." Name is Richard Cramer. Am I fantasizing about this? Did I tell him what my intent was? I think so. He would have encouraged me in that sense. So anyways, I didn't call. I think I wrote a letter to this guy. I misspelled his name. I used a K rather than a C. And inquired about the position of ceramics at Davis. And got a response with the name corrected. They wanted to have slides sent. That was a revelation.

[Audio break.]

I got a letter back from Richard Cramer and he said that I should send a body of slides to the chairman of the art department, whose name is Richard Nelson. Along with any other information that I would have that would clarify my significance or whatever might be. That was a revelation. That was the first time that I was ever asked to declare myself. I had to go through my slides. In all reality I was doing this and that. I was playing on both sides of the road. I'm just going to pick out the works that I thought were my best works and no Danish Modern. They were going to love me or say forget that guy. I picked out a body of slides- 20 or 30, whatever they were, of what I felt were the strongest works that I had and sent them off to Dick Nelson, chairman of the art department of UC Davis. Gee, shortly after I get a letter inviting me to come up to Davis. Boy, that was a revelation. That means that halfway you done it right, man.

MS. JONES: This is a state university?

MR. ARNESON: University of California. And there is somebody there that wanted somebody. Who is that somebody? Even though I was nobody. At least, I was on my own feet, whatever I was sending at the time. I went up there and I met Dick Nelson and we talked. I met the faculty. Went to lunch. Wayne Thiebaud, who I had known in my days of the California State Fair in our demonstration days. Roland Petersen, Ralph Johnson. Very small department. There were only a few people. And then we discussed what they were looking for. Situation was a very bizarre situation actually. Ceramics was in the art department but the bulk of the teaching- I was going to be able to teach was in the College of Agriculture in the design department. Therefore I had a meeting with the Design staff at the College of Agriculture, whose chairman was Richard Cramer. And there I met Dick Cramer, of course. We had a luncheon with Dan Shapiro and Ruth Horsting, who gloriously all were artists. Dick was an architect. Ruth was a sculptor and Dan Shapiro was a printmaker. They all had joint appointments in the art department because in those days art department was very very small. The college of letters and science at Davis was infantile. So the only means of getting anybody there was to teach in the college of agriculture, which was a long established college at Davis for Berkeley. That was Berkeley's college of agriculture, originally, up in Davis. Since 1920, I guess. And in the College of Agriculture, you always had a program for the ladies. And you had design. And that meant how to set a table, how to make curtains. It has a lot of these really decadent kind of qualities, which still goes on. But nevertheless, graciously for whatever reasons, the stars were shining, the right people were in the right places, and I can certainly teach design. I was teaching design at Mills College even though I wanted to be artistic. I met artists who were teaching design on the same basis. It was just beautiful. Everything just fell into its place. And they liked my radical kind of ceramics in the art department and the artists who were teaching in the design department liked my radicalness for what I did and they thought that they could cover for me in terms of the chairmen of the department who was actually a food scientist.

MS. JONES: Food scientist?

MR. ARNESON: Food scientist. Dick Cramer was the head of the design group but that was 60 per cent of the employment. But we were the in the College of Agriculture in the department of—foods. No actually, it was—whatever it was. I can't remember. Psychosomatically, I can't remember. You should be able to remember that department, Bob. Spent three years there.

MS. JONES: Aggies

MR. ARNESON: Yeah. I was an Aggie. I had to attend the- what was I in? Home Economics. That meant that you had to be sure you're students were really into Chem1A. Whenever I found a good student, I always talked to them about art. The problem is, when you teach design and you are really into the design department, there is an outward kind of thing. It is an engineered kind of systemic type of procedure while when you are teaching art, it is an inward thing. You try to bring out the individualism. When you teach design, you are trying to bring out pluralism. So you are at a crossroads. So you got artists teaching design. Beautifully they were all artists teaching design and we all taught individualism. They were beautiful people to be around. After three years, all of us eventually were able to get ourselves into the art department as Letters and Science grew. We could take on courses in drawing and the structural elements in art. And we assumed that design would die.

[Audio break.]

For me, being picked up by the University of California at Davis was, in a way, like the Medici's deciding that they were going to sponsor me as an artist.

MS. JONES: Were you making a lot more money?

MR. ARNESON: I made considerably more money. But I was still a very beginning professor. And the Chairman of the Art Department said, "I want you to get that Ceramic thing going, Bob. We have respect for what you're doing. What do you need?" Well, what I needed was, I need this kiln. There was a little bit of money. There

wasn't everything that I could want, but I designed the ceramic—I went up there in the summer. I cleaned out a building. I really spent my own labor, as a basic laborer, building a ceramic teaching facility. I designed certain kinds of tables that I thought I would need. I bought some throwing wheels and whatnot, and God, it was just a great experience, being able to be somewhere. I even went out and proselyted a couple of students whom I'd met. Of course I had students in junior college, and I started writing letters and told them where I was, and that at the university we were going to have one hell of an Art Department. I met budding artists when I was demonstrating at the California State Fair. I wrote their names down. I knew who they were, and I let them know where I was now, and they ought to come on over. We were going to have a thing going here. This was sort of like the blossoming of Bob Arneson.

[Audio break.]

What was I talking about?

MS. JONES: You're just staring the ceramics room. You've got the tables designed.

MR. ARNESON: The ceramics building was located in a facility called "TB9," which stood for Temporary Building Number Nine. It was one of the first Butler building constructions built on campus on the University of California at Davis, dating from about 1928. Originally it was a sort of dormitory and kitchen complex. When I arrived in the summer of 1962, it served multiple purposes. It was the Police Department headquarters and home of the Dairy Science storage facility. The Mail Department was located in one section of the building. There was a library headquarters located there for Food Science, and a laboratory storage area also for Food Science in which there were canned goods. It was a wonderful building. The Art Department at the time had about three spaces. We had a room that we could design for conducting a ceramics studio. We had a small room for metalwork, which we could use later on when we built a foundry near the back, opposite the kilns. We also had an auxiliary room which we used primarily for wax forming, when we developed the casting program. Can you imagine working down there late at night, and the Police Department's just made a bust? They've got some weirdo guy who's zonked on beer and whatnot, and you're trying to do your art, and he's in there screaming his lungs out for his mother. He's been busted for being inebriated. It can be very harrowing in a sense. But it's a very serviceable building. And today, in 1981, I still have the building, "TB9." It's no longer a temporary building, but a permanent laboratory sculptural facility for the Art Department. And the Postal Department is gone, and the Police Department is gone. The library for Food Science is gone, as well as the Dairy storage facility, and the Food Science storage facility is gone. The Food Science canned good area went in a hurry because all the graduate students in the Art Department were coming down there and eating it up. These were unmarked cans and they were taking their chances.

MS. JONES: On everything.

MR. ARNESON: Someone told me, one of the graduate students in Food Science, that they were researching toxicology in canning processing. I told the graduate students, who were rapidly consuming all the goods, and what they had to experience. Oh, those were the good years!

MS. JONES: Botulism 101.

MR. ARNESON: Yes, then no one ever got sick, and that's healthy.

MS. JONES: Who were the other instructors when you were there?

MR. ARNESON: When I went to Davis, Wayne Thiebaud and Roland Petersen were on the faculty, and Ralph Johnson in the Art Department. Originally I was teaching in the Design Department with Dan Shapiro and Ruth Horsting, and Tio Giambruni was in the Art Department. He came the year before I did. He had a long experience of high school teaching, and he had thought at Arts and Crafts in Oakland. He was involved in casting, and he came to Davis and built a foundry. When I came to Davis I had the privilege of helping him in a minor way in "TB9" in the back area. We were going to clear out a part of Food Science. We built a foundry casting area, and then we built a burnout kiln next to the ceramic kilns. I became involved with the casting in 1963 and worked for about a year pretty seriously casting once a week. I must have cast about a ton of bronze.

MS. JONES: Where are those things now?

MR. ARNESON: The bronzes are everywhere. I had an exhibit in San Francisco at the Arleigh Gallery in early February of 1974, wait a minute, 1964. It had to be 1964. The Arleigh Gallery was located opposite the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, on McAllister Street, above the Cellini Marble Shop, a second floor gallery. Dan Shapiro had introduced me to a number of artists who were involved in the gallery. We had had a group show earlier, and I think it was in May, I'm not sure, when I had my first exhibit in San Francisco, which included many of the bronzes I had cast. I hadn't given you ceramics, but I had put it on a back burner. But the back burner might have been hotter than the bronze burner. I had shown a number of trophies, maybe about twenty ceramic

trophies, dealing with certain aspects of our culture, epitomized graphically. For example, a trophy to my finger, a trophy to my foot, a trophy to my hand, and then they got scatological, a trophy to sex.

MS. JONES: What did that entail?

MR. ARNESON: Well, very graphic sexual imagery, cock and balls, things of that sort. This came out of a body of ceramic works, too. Prior to that, when I started working at Davis—it must have been early 1963—I was invited to exhibit at the Kaiser Center Roof Garden, where the first in-depth exhibition of California sculptors was going to be shown. I would say probably 100 sculptors, and I would have been the Mr. 100 on that list, I'm quite sure of it. I think the curator was—well, Paul Mills was involved, from the Oakland Museum.

MS. JONES: And John Coplans.

MR. ARNESON: John Coplans at the time had been the editor of *Artforum*, I was chosen among a lot of other sculptors, ceramicists and whatnot, and this really created an awakening for me. Suddenly I had to present myself with my colleagues, and how was I going to stand up amongst them? I knew John Mason and Peter Voukos were going to be in the show. I could see myself right now, Bob Arneson in between John Mason and Peter Voukos, and I would be just a junior version of those two guys and just a little pisser. That really put my mind into gear. Even though Coplans had picked works out based upon photographs and slides, I thought that I would have an opportunity during the summer to build another work. I really put my mind together and I reflected back upon heritage as a ceramicist, remembering my notations and the absurdities of making the quart bottle. After that I made six-packs and didactic works that dealt with the nature of being a ceramicist, somebody that dealt in reproduction. I really thought seriously about what were the ultimate ceramics in Western culture. I was thinking about this one day while I was taking a crap in "TB9" and my old knuckles knocked on the pot and I said, "Hey man, you're on it. This is it. This little pot has no heritage. You can't reflect on art in any way on his thing. And it is 100% ceramic, man. This is it, and you're just going to have to cut loose and let yourself go." So I actually pursued that and I made a toilet. I cut myself loose and let every scatological notation from my mind flow freely across the surface of that toilet I was making. This was 1963. And God, it came out fantastic. I had to make it in a number of sections because I had a very small kiln at Davis at the time, so I had to make it in about four parts and then I had to assemble it together, glue it and whatnot. It was a brilliant work as I look back upon it. It was made of stoneware, and I explored it in the Voukos mannerism, using a lot of organic pinch and pushing with the clay, piercing the clay and letting my fingers leave a trail across the clay wherever they meandered. This produced a presence of the artist, both in the toilet bowl and in the tank. Keeping with that, I allowed my previous attitudes about Surrealism to have its place. Surrealistically, if I had a notion about something erupting through the tank, I had this kind of bump form erupting out of the tank, and creeping over the edge with a little curlicue. Curlicues were always good, solid Surrealist Miró symbolism. I had to have that thing coming down and circling around. Naturally I had a few turds in there which were beautifully rendered ceramic emblems. There's something about turds and clay that have to do with toilet training anyways. Anybody who deals with clay—oh, you haven't been trained properly. So I did these beautiful turds, and then I went into my Pop art graphic quality and wrote "Kilroy was here." That was a very hot object in 1963. Everybody was scribbling "Kilroy was here" graffiti across the walls. There were other little curlicue emblematic curious idiosyncratic shapes and forms I inserted on the piece. I bisqued it, and I threw in some low fire color for emphasis, reds and oranges, out of a Miró spirit, not out of any other kind of low fire symbolism that I felt was paramount at the time. Then I glued that thing together. I knew I had one hell of a—I had finally made [a] Bob Arneson. I had finally arrived at a piece of work that stood firmly on its ground. It was vulgar, I was vulgar, I was not sophisticated, I was a vulgar person. And if you're not sophisticated, you're vulgar. You better be very real about that. But it was also, more significantly, a very important piece, much more important than any beer bottle I could possible make. That was the ultimate ceramic, and that was all about our Western civilization. It was also about all the symbolism and verbiage that one would put into what later became Pop art at the same time, notions and sub-notions, subconscious and conscious, about our heritage. God, I felt good about that. I took that piece in my van down to the Kaiser Building in Oakland, and it was on the roof garden, the seventeenth floor. I had arranged for a large number of concrete blocks to be delivered to the site because I had this vision about my toilet: because it had contents, turds inside and everything, that might be a problem. Therefore the bowl had to be displayed above eye level because I didn't want to offend anybody. I built a pyramid form that one could actually step up toward because I had built it in such a way that I could step into it to be able to carry up the toilet. We spent a whole day. I brought a sample of students down from Davis. We worked all day and I put up my toilet.

MS. JONES: How did the students react to the toilet? What were the initial reactions?

MR. ARNESON: Well, I don't know. I think they were my students and they were proud that their teacher was in a show. We were all innocent. I looked around me, and I put the piece up, installed it. Maybe around three-thirty I stood back, and all the other sculptors were installed: John Mason and Pete Voukos and all the other sculptors from Los Angeles and the Bay Area that had works. There was Bill Geis, a lot of Bob Hudson, there were a lot of top notch people whose works were very powerful. I was pleased to feel that I stood there on my own. I was

proud of my own [work]. I went and sat down and relaxed. There were a lot of people moving around on the deck, even though the opening hadn't occurred. There was a group of Boy Scouts that came by on a field trip, or Girl Scouts, not Boy Scouts. I thought, this would be the ultimate test: you don't want to offend the Girl Scouts. They crawled around and looked at it. They all had a good time. They all proceeded then to climb up on the pedestal and look down inside, and they knew what they were going to find. They all went "Oooooooo," laughed and screamed and were delighted because they found the turds they knew they would find at the bottom of the toilet. I don't think that they were terribly offended; they weren't all going around in any shocked level. So I went back to Davis that night with my crew. About eight o'clock at night, I got a phone call. It was John Coplans, I believe. He said, "Bob, we're in serious trouble down here. You've got to get this toilet off this roof." "Why, John?" "Because it's not the piece I picked. Remember, when I was looking through your work I had picked—" So theoretically, right, he had picked some other work. But he had also left it open for me to create a new work if I felt it more significant. I certainly had created a work more significant than the work he had selected. But anyways, I said, "Okay, John, I'll come down and take my piece down." So the next day I drive to the Kaiser Building. My piece is already down, it's in the basement. I'm really pissed off. "What's the big hassle? I mean, I see some pretty dirty works out there, John. My work is not dirty. There's not a foul word anywhere." And I'd made works later on that had foul words. "Well, Bob, I had to take that piece down because the Vice President of Kaiser Industries came through last night and was looking over the show. And when he came to your toilet sitting up there on the pedestal, he said, "God damn, no fucking artist is going to attack American capitalism in this manner, and god damn, the thing is going to have to get out of the show. Take that thing out of here right now." That blew my mind. I mean, I was attacking American capitalism? I didn't even know what American capitalism was about. You can make an image of something—it was a toilet. I said, "Can that guy go to the bathroom in his home with that same kind of attitude? Not at all. He goes with relief in his mind. Where does he get off that because I made a toilet I'm attacking American capitalism?" I didn't say anything in there, nowhere was I attacking American—there were no words, there was no title, other than "John," that would tell you I was attacking anything whatsoever. I went home. I was really bothered and pleased. God, I was pleased. How can you be so perverse to be pleased that you really hit somebody far beyond your own imagination? I wasn't attacking anything and my mind wasn't even there intellectually that I was attacking anything.

MS. JONES: What happened to the piece after the show?

MR. ARNESON: The piece came back to my studio and I put it in storage for a while. And I loved it, of course, it meant so much. Suddenly it was more than itself. And later on, a student of mine, Nina Kelly, bought the piece. She was a graduate student in art at Davis. I'd known her for a few years, and she was married to Robert Kelly who was the owner of Kelly Broadcasting in Sacramento. Nina was a very adventurous collector of young artists, collecting some of my other colleagues at Davis, William Wiley and Roy De Forest and Manuel Neri. She bought the piece which created other further adventures down the line, because she bought it and her husband certainly didn't accept it. I built this piece without a pedestal about three feet high on rollers so I could move it around once I installed it. So I took it over to Nina's place in Fair Oaks and she wanted it in her living room. So I brought in the pedestal and installed the piece. Some time later Nina came back to see me at Davis, and she was very upset. She discretely asked me, "How does one fix ceramics?" I didn't know what she meant. She said, "Well, how do you fix things that are broken?" "Well, what's broken?" She said, "Well, I must tell you. My husband opened the living room door the other night, took your toilet that was on rollers and rolled it right out to the front porch and down five flights of stairs [this is misremembered, there were no stairs]. It tipped over and was just really pulverized. I gathered up all the pieces and put them in the yard." So I said, "Well, just bring up all the pieces and let me see what we've got." So she brought up all the pieces back to me. Remarkably, she had them all. It broke in a nice, wholesome manner. There weren't a lot of little shards, so I restored it to its original. One thing about my art is that I have always had an impatience with my processing. My work always cracked and did weird things. So I learned to fabricate and repair them. In some cases, I also forgot to make certain sections of my work that were missing, so I always had to fabricate them out of plastics. I really learned how to fit and make pieces belong and come together that were negligent originally in their construction. I put the piece together very nicely. I didn't give it back to her since I didn't want a violent act repeated on the piece as I was really liking it. So I asked her, "Now where is it going to go? We have to find a friend of yours." Eventually Nina was able to finally bring it back to her own home, and hide it in the back of her garden somewhere under a shrub so it wouldn't be offensive. Later on when I had my retrospective in 1974 at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, that toilet was certainly one of the pieces that I wanted to have in my exhibition. I made arrangements to borrow it. It had been sitting at the Kelly's under a shrub for about ten years. Some of the epoxy had deteriorated under the weathering process. I had to bring it back to my studio at Davis and spend about two days on it, etching it in acid and removing some of the shearing epoxy pigments that were coming off, loosening up the epoxy that was wiggling away. I rebuilt it, putting it back together to make it certainly even better than new. And it was a beautiful piece after that. When that show came down, I had reached the point where I decided—I knew that the toilet was such a crucial piece in my life that I really wanted it back. I offered the Kelly's the opportunity to have any work that they would wish or they could even commission a piece, for that toilet, which they had originally purchased for \$500. At current value in 1974, they could have something closer to \$3,000 or \$4,000, whatever they wanted, or I would make them a piece, or they

could choose a piece within the next few years, irregardless. Anyway, looking back on those toilets, that was the impetus to a body of work on my part that I felt was finally arriving at what Bob Arneson's art was going to be about. I must have made about a half a dozen toilets, urinals, sinks, and other bathroom accessories that were the epitome of the ceramic artist. And then in June [1964] I went to New York to attend the World Craft Conference that was being held at Columbia University for two weeks. I had gotten a university grant to provide flying time [tickets] to go to New York. Wayne Thiebaud told me, "Well, when you're in New York, be sure to go down and see Allan Stone and show him slides of your work." I took a bus from 115th Street around the Harlem area, and down Madison Avenue to 68th Street, got off at Allan Stone's and showed him slides of my bronzes. We talked about them briefly. At the time I always thought my bronzes were my art, and my ceramics were my fun. He thought my bronzes were pretty interesting. He was going to come out to California at the end of July because he was going to visit Wayne Thiebaud to see his new paintings. So when he came out to Sacramento to see Wayne, I told him to be sure to come to Davis to see my bronzes. At the end of July, Allan Stone comes to California, and Wayne Thiebaud brings him over to my house in Davis. We open my garage and I show Wayne my bronzes. He looks them over and says, "Mhmm, that's okay." Meanwhile, in my two-car garage, I've got one of my toilets. There was about three at the time, three toilets and a couple of urinals, assorted test tiles and whatnot dealing with my ceramics. He said, "Hey, man, tell me about these things." He seemed to respond very warmly to the color and texture of the clay, and even my test tiles he liked. I had a number of toilets and he said, "Forget the bronzes, this is your stuff." I should have known that, too. My God, that's where the spirit was, that's where the color was and that's where the whole impact of whatever I had as an artist was ever going to be, in my touch and the color and the feeling I had. So Allan said, "We're going to have a show in the fall." I said, "Yes, I guess so." Whatever one does with a New York dealer—I was overwhelmed. Jesus Christ.

MS. JONES: Did you even have a California dealer then?

MR. ARNESON: He said, "I'm going to buy all this stuff." He just kind of waved a finger around my little two-car garage and said, "\$1,000." I said, "Yes, a thousand bucks, oh, yes. You bet, man." A thousand bucks, I mean, all my great work. It cost me a thousand bucks to get to him. I mean, I didn't know nothing. I was paying shipping. If they didn't sell, I'd pay shipping back. But I was so excited, gee, I was so excited. I built crates and I got tennis elbow by building crates. My elbow actually locked, because I was not a good carpenter. The only reason I was in ceramics was because I couldn't build anything. Here I was, finally having to build a whole bunch of goddamn crates. My elbow clamped up. I had a painful time with it for a number of days, and I had a hard time with the crating. I had actually confiscated a number of piano crates from pianos that were shipped in from Japan. There were hardcore crates, and that really was the problem, my additional problem. I was trying to cut down Japanese hardwood crates to the size that would fit my ceramic toilets and urinals. There was a lot of cutting and hammering. I remember my neighbors on Alice Street would call up late at night and chastise me because I was making so much noise. They would say, "Look, we have to work for a living. Can you knock off the hammering?" Boy, that hit me hard. I said, "I work for a living, I'm working for a bigger living than that." So anyway, I had to knock off. But whenever I wasn't teaching I'd have to be building a crate. I got all my ceramic toilets and urinals and sinks—no sinks, but there were scaled—oh, peripheral kinds of objects I was making that related to—they were not directly related to the bathroom fixtures, [and] more abstract ceramic sculptures, quasi-Voukos things. Allan liked anything that was made of clay basically, anything twisted, warped, and fired, and with a little color. I crated all these works up. The first batch I shipped off to New York. I still had this other batch. I started making another crate. With more crates I shipped them off. It was late September and I applied for a University grant. God bless the University. In those days, a guy could request travel funds for lectures and shows. This was my first one-man show in New York. I requested a travel grant for air traffic and air costs, which I got. I went to New York a couple of days before by show. I went to the gallery. Half of my works were there. I said, "Allan, where's the other stuff?" "Well, it hasn't come in yet." "It hasn't come in yet—I just shipped it a week after the other stuff and the first stuff's been here for three weeks." I get on the phone and I said, "Hey, there's something going on here." "Well, wait a day. It's coming tomorrow." Tomorrow came and it didn't arrive. Of course, the other crate was where all my significant work was. Always, right? The last, down-to-the-line work. So I got on the phone the next day, I don't even know how to write or phone, but somehow I sat on the phone for a half a day with some operator in New York who liked my voice. All she wanted was a date that night. She really persisted.

MS. JONES: Did she get a date?

MR. ARNESON: How could she get a date? I couldn't find my fucking art. I wasn't interested in that. I said, "If you find my art in New York, you've got a date." She couldn't get my art in New York. My art was sitting on the loading dock in Sacramento. You bet. I was just blown because I said, "Oh shit. My first show in New York, and my best stuff is still sitting on the fucking loading dock." The show opened a day later. There was no way it could get in. I must have just said, "Leave it where it was." That's the only reason I still have a few toilets in my own collection. It was absurd to ship it at that point. Allan didn't care -- he was pretty loose about it. "Oh well, we'll show it again." In the meantime, I had to get out all his pedestals and paint them, clean up the gallery, move all the crap around. He was notoriously a crap collector and still is. I really cleaned up the gallery, and we had our show. I don't know anybody in New York, so nobody comes to my opening, of course. Allan has three

friends and they come. We go out after my opening to Nathan's Hotdogs to have some hotdogs. I feel vindicated. I've really been out to New York.

MS. JONES: Right, exactly.

MR. ARNESON: So I go home. Anyway, during my opening the telephone rings and a bunch of people from Davis had called and wished me congratulations and encouraged me. And meantime, in New York, in 1964, that was the season Pop art was just popping to its full blossom. I had an opportunity to go around the galleries for a day or two. I saw in one gallery flocks of grey blocks.

MS. JONES: Whose grey blocks?

MR. ARNESON: Robert Morris's primary forms. I went to another gallery and saw neon corners, Dan Flavin, of course. These people got all the press. I was just some schmuck in the press.

MS. JONES: Didn't you tell me that you had met Norton Simon?

MR. ARNESON: Norton Simon? Yes. I'm at Allan Stone's gallery on my knees painting pedestals. Simon comes into the gallery because Allan Stone had a couple of Gorky's, beautiful Gorky's, and Simon needs a Gorky for his collection. So Allan comes out and says, "Well Norton, I want you to meet a current artist who is painting pedestals for his show. It's going to open Saturday." I said, "Oh, you're Norton Simon." "Yes." "You're a Regent, right? And you also own Hunt's Food. By the way, I live in Davis, teach at the University of California at Davis. I also live a mile from your Hunt's plant, and you're making a pizza catsup which is so fucking god-awful, it stinks my house up for two months. Can you knock off that pizza catsup? By the way, I make this kind of art." His wife comes in behind him. She's very majestic and so nice. She's so nice, he kicks her in the ass and gets rid of her after that, right? Right, he has to marry that other lady. But she tries to put me in a nice, spiritual way. He couldn't care shit about what I was doing. Well, I can understand him not caring about what I was doing because it was on a shit level, what I was doing anyway. But a guy's for to fake it somewhere along in life when one has certain appointments. Say, if you're a Regent, and you're dealing with some guy who's an artist, even though he's a schmuck artist, and he has to live under one of your schmuck plants, there's a certain amount of dignity you've got to come across. He should have at least shook my hand and said, "Oh, yes," because he just can't say, "I'm only interested in Rembrandt's," because no way am I Rembrandt. I could live for a thousand years and I'll never be a Rembrandt. Some days I may be as good as Rembrandt, but that's irregardless. Some day he's going to have to pay his dues. And he didn't bother.

MS. JONES: You also told me at one point that when you were at Allan Stone's you were trying to set up the pricing. He didn't want you to charge so much for the ceramics because they were ceramics.

MR. ARNESON: Did I say that?

MS. JONES: Yes. You said you just really wanted your times and materials out of the ceramics.

MR. ARNESON: I think that was my other dealer. Anyway, Allan Stone, theoretically, he bought the works. He owned everything. So all I got out of it was—what did I get out of it?

MS. JONES: A trip to New York.

MR. ARNESON: The University paid my way there and back. Allan owned the work. I painted the pedestals for free and cleaned up the gallery. Allan took me out to dinner. I respect him, though. He's one of the fun people in New York.

MS. JONES: Did your show sell then?

MR. ARNESON: No, it didn't sell a nickel. I don't think I ever sold a work of art until 1970, not a nickel [this is strictly speaking inaccurate, but he was still selling very little and he could only buy materials for his work as he sold things because all the salary money was going into the house and family]. I got reviews that were minor in their emphasis. Allan gave me another show in 1966, I believe, although I never bothered to come to it. I'm not sure it was officially held. He conducts a very informal gallery, and the works may or may not be on exhibit when they are said to be. But he printed up a little notice. I have no copy of the announcement, so there's no way I can validate it. But I do have a review in *Art News*. That was a show in which I showed toasters and typewriters and more Pop images dealing with the human conditions, all in ceramic. Other than a few objects, I don't really know how much of a show I really had. I didn't bother to go because I was so basically low down on the New York scene. I felt what I was doing and what they were looking for was just out of time, out of place. I didn't even ask for a University grant to go to New York. I think I was down. I said, "Well, he'll want it, I'll send it. If he wants to have a show, he can have a show. I'm just going to stay here and not even worry about the goddamn thing." Because what I was doing I felt good about, but what the art world was doing—I said, "I'm not going to fight that

shit, I'll just stay here. I'm not going back there to have somebody trample on me." They didn't trample on me there. I don't think they did anything at all. Some people saw it. There were a couple of objects and those objects went onto exhibitions. The typewriter went on to a Surrealist show at the Museum of Modern Art, and the toaster went off to a show at the Whitney Museum and the [inaudible] went off to a show at the Craft Museum, and probably a few other minor things went off somewhere.

MS. JONES: In 1966 there was a show at U.C. Davis, "Ceramics from Davis." There was a review in *Craft Horizons*. Why don't you tell me about that?

MR. ARNESON: That was a very important show for me, and hopefully for ceramics, the kind of ceramics I was trying to teach at Davis. The show was a group of my students and myself. The students were David Gilhooly, Richard Shaw, Jim Adamson, Margaret Dodd, Bruce Nauman, Chris Unterseher, Jerry Walburg. These were undergraduate and graduate students concentrating at the time in ceramics. What was quite unique in what I was trying to teach was certainly a mild revolution. We have to keep in mind that ceramics traditionally taught in the West, in America, had been in the decorative arts and crafts category. My concern, my purpose certainly as a teacher, was to treat ceramics as another art process. This meant that we had to deal with ideas and content, and I'm not concerned with forms and processes in the craft tradition. This show in 1966 was at a new museum in Ghirardelli Square, it was the Western Edition of the Craft Museum in New York. Of course, here we are again, showing in a craft museum. Remember museums weren't going to touch ceramics unless they were pre-Columbian. The tradition was that ceramics would be in the crafts. Lois Ladis was the Director of the Western branch of the American Crafts Council's Museum in New York. They had one show prior to our show, and then, the Davis show. She was very excited about what she saw going on in ideas, and what the kids were doing. I was excited to bring all this work together in one place. I thought it would have a real impact on the scene. I think it really did. It was reviewed extensively in *Craft Horizons* magazine—there we are again!—And the local press as well. It really brought forth kind of a new ceramic presence. No pots, no dishes. Even if there was something that resembled a plate, that plate had other pictorial content to it. Most of the works were idea-oriented or object-oriented. In my case, I was making big roses. I showed some big roses. These were about one hundred pounds each, about five or six of them. It was reviewed by Joe Pugliese for *Craft Horizons* magazine with lots of reproductions. We were all well reproduced. He praised everyone until he got to me. He said the biggest surprise was how awful my work was in comparison to all the students. But that really made me feel terrific. It wasn't that I wanted to be the hero and surround myself with a lackey. The kids all put forth some real exciting works, and I was very pleased. I felt good about what I was doing. I had a rose garden in the show.

MS. JONES: Were the flowers supposed to be the antithesis to the Johns that you made before?

MR. ARNESON: Well, I'll tell you how the roses happened. I was sweetening up my situation. I had been dealing with, since 1963 certainly, a very didactic dialogue with ceramics about ceramics. I think I hit the high point dealing with all those Johns and toilets. I went into flowers. That came about when I was walking through my studio at "TB9." Lying on the floor there was a rose catalogue. What intrigued me mostly were the colors. It was all reproduced in color, and I was really concerned with color in ceramics. A year before I had started using white clay in my teaching so the students had to think of approaching ceramics as a painting process. You would make something, and it would be white. You would just naturally want to put some nice bright color on it. By using a low fire clay, when you're first firing at low temperatures, it produced a wide color spectrum of possibilities. So this rose catalogue with the brilliant reds and yellows was just terrific. I could also start to get some very sexy forms going, very organic forms. I started making roses and coloring them bright with yellow and red glazes. They would all nestle together in an area. I probably should have made more. It would have had a greater impact. Yes, it was corny, cornball in its way. Remember that little old ladies make ceramic roses. That's one of the traditions. I was trying to extend the scale of things and get a lot more aggressive.

MS. JONES: How big were the roses?

MR. ARNESON: They were what I could fit into the kiln. They were one hundred pounds a piece. Maybe three feet across, and down to maybe only a foot across. They had no stems, of course, they were flattened out, and they would come up about one or two feet. They were spirited. The other students' works were very lively in that show. I remember in the "Letters to the Editor" column in *Craft Horizons*, following the article, everyone seemed to be up in arms toward the destructive processes of ceramic traditions that were going on in the West, but certainly I was very excited. At the time, Gilhooly was working on an animal series, doing elephants and a beautiful head of a camel. I remember he would go to the Sacramento zoo and photograph and work with this image. Chris Unterseher was doing nostalgia. I think it might have been his Boy Scout Series on plate forms. Richard Shaw was in his cow period. Margaret Dodd was making replicas of small cars, particular models that she would get from the parking lots at Davis. She became quite famous for her automotive art forms. As you can remember, she had a two-page spread in *Automotive Magazine*. They reproduced an old Buick that had the ports on the side. She was commissioned by a New York dealer to model up a guy from his collection. She went back to Australia shortly after that.

MS. JONES: What was Jim Adamson doing?

MR. ARNESON: Jim Adamson was doing objects that were triangular, dealing with pyramidal shapes, I believe.

MS. JONES: How about Nauman and Walburg?

MR. ARNESON: Well, Bruce Nauman did a series on a cup in process, a Futurist rendition, like a "cup descending a staircase" syndrome. Steve Kaltenbach was doing cast dish as a form, with repeated shapes. Walburg had a series of jars, forms that were quite interesting and dealt with old-fashioned containers that he actually took from an ad out of *Time* magazine and reproduced the forms. A form that looked like it could have been made out of some other material.

MS. JONES: Anyway, so Pugliese wrote this review, and totally panned the teacher.

MR. ARNESON: Totally panned the teacher and praised the students. That was just fine. The teacher didn't suffer. I wasn't trying to overwhelm anyone, certainly.

MS. JONES: I guess a little bit before this you had a show in Philadelphia, "How the West was Done?"

MR. ARNESON: That was a group show. I might have shown some flowers, maybe my roses were shown.

MS. JONES: You showed with Paul Harris, Jim Melchert, William Wiley, Ed Ruscha and Mel Ramos.

MR. ARNESON: I can't remember what I did there, I'm sorry. I never went to Philadelphia to see the show. You know, sometimes you just pack off works for the show, and a catalogue comes back. I don't know if there was very much of a catalogue for that show.

MS. JONES: 1966 was the year that you started the Alice Street series.

MR. ARNESON: That was a very important body of work. I lived in a tract house, three-bedroom, two-bath, two-car garage, standard ticky-tacky tract house, on the corner of "L" and Alice Street in Davis, California. I thought Alice was terrific, Alice in Wonderland. I tended to always work in series. I thought that could be a tough issue, how to deal with landscape and content and whatnot. So I started making little houses in clay.

MS. JONES: When you say "little," what size are you talking about?

MR. ARNESON: Oh, little sketches.

MS. JONES: But not like one hundred-pound roses.

MR. ARNESON: No, ten pounds, five pounds. They were only ten inches. A lot of quick sketches. It would be as if you were going out and doing landscape sketches. These were three-dimensional, of course. You'd take clay, go across the street, sit there and model your house, the shrubs, the garden, as you see it. And I drew it. Then I would photograph the house to give me more information. I think originally I was going to do the house as a little landscape, but it became more than that, and I wanted to get into a larger scale. I made a house box in which you could go all around the sides of this box form, which was a box with a roof shape on it, and it had a picture of my house. You could go around the block it you went all around the sides.

MS. JONES: How big was that? About what scale?

MR. ARNESON: Oh, there was no scale to these things, just ten or twenty inches. But I did then get into scale with the house, and this was very important. By going to a larger scale I had to develop a modular system in which there would be interlocking parts. I did develop a number of drawings and models of how I would proceed. I was pretty faithful with doing sketches. I developed a modular system of working, the first time I'd done that. I did a large sculpture landscape of Alice, eight feet by eight feet, and about two feet high. There must have been about sixty parts to that sculpture that would all fit together. I did another version of Alice going vertically. It was rendered in a sense like a wall, and it had a pictorial landscape. You could walk all around it and each of the modules was glazed according to lawn or tree and faithfully, but not realistically. Eventually the spirit of the house got to me and I think, as well as the large sculptures and body of drawings, I was making cups with images of Alice on the covers. It was a greatly spirited process. Alice on my knee, Alice in all forms. This culminated in the early spring of 1967, maybe April. I had an exhibit, a one-person show, in my house on a weekend. I cleaned out the living room and moved all the furniture into the back bedroom and turned the living room area into a gallery.

MS. JONES: Were you being your own representative at that point?

MR. ARNESON: I was my own gallery. I printed up a poster and mailed it out. About 300 announcements. I would

have this opening on Saturday and Sunday only, and I had a huge gathering. People came to see the show. I pedestaled, and I had the big Alice house and all the other variations on Alice. Drawings on the wall, Alice as souvenir dishes, like the old castles in the plate. It was a really fun thing. It was the only time that that body of work was ever exhibited in its totality. After that, curious parts of the units were shown separately in exhibits.

MS. JONES: Were there any reviews of that?

MR. ARNESON: There was a very small review. I think Allen Meisel came up. He was writing his "Letter from San Francisco" column in *Craft Horizons*. I believe he did write something. But other than that, there were no newspaper accounts of it. At that time at Davis, we did not have any art editors.

MS. JONES: Who was supporting you then? Was anyone buying your work?

MR. ARNESON: The University was my only support. I was having some success periodically on a minor level. I'd been showing some works at a funny little gallery in Folsom, California, called Candy Store Gallery. It was run by Adeliza McHugh. Very bizarre. This lady came to "TB9," wanting to show some of my stuff. "Oh, that's nice, but you want to have some works of mine?" So I gave her some really raunchy funky cups I made, little small works that were relatively sexual, I thought.

MS. JONES: What were they? Do you remember?

MR. ARNESON: Oh, they had probably penis-like shapes going on. They were goblet-like forms. Maybe a little bit scatological. They were offshoots of my toilet series. They were totally off the wall and no one on earth, certainly in Folsom, California, was going to touch anything like that. So, being a wise ass, I gave her these pieces, "Here, take these." I sort of laughed as she went out. She was all excited. I thought, well, that takes care of that little old lady. In about two weeks time she came back at my studio in "TB9" and said, "Well, I need some more work." I said, "Oh, you're kidding!"

MS. JONES: What were they going for? Do you remember?

MR. ARNESON: Oh, they were top dollar. They were fifteen dollars, twenty dollars. I just thought they were totally non-saleable. Even up to thirty or forty dollars. It wasn't the price; they were just weird little things. I gave her some more work. After a year's time I started having little annual exhibitions up there. Adeliza had formed quite a nice little gallery featuring like-minded souls. Like Roy De Forest, and David Gilhooly, and some of the other students of mine that were doing the weird ceramics, and a group of painters in Sacramento, Jack Ogden, that were highly spirited in their own works. And this became –

MS. JONES: This was 1963.

MR. ARNESON: 1963 was when she first came to town. I probably had a first show up there in 1964. I have shown, I think, every year since. It's a famous little place right now. In fact, I'll be showing this October with a little show group.

MS. JONES: She had come to see Alice Street?

MR. ARNESON: She had come to see it. She had brought some collectors from Sacramento, and they bought some works. I'd always take works up to the Candy Store and leave them there. They'd always be sold. This because my first earning situation, maybe \$100 a month I was getting. Nowhere else did I ever sell anything.

MS. JONES: Wasn't it about this time too that you went with Wanda Hansen?

MR. ARNESON: Right. That was about the spring of 1967. Wanda wanted—came to the campus at Davis. She was acting as a buyer, I believe, for Joseph Monsen from Seattle who was starting a ceramic collection. This was the first collector of ceramics to my knowledge. Joseph got into ceramics when he was in New York. He visited the Craft Museum in 1966. There was a show called "The New Ceramic Objects." I was shown then. I don't know what objects I had there. Richard Shaw had a series of objects, and David Gilhooly, and a few other students. He noticed that all the works were owned by the artists. He started visiting the artists and making contacts with them. He started forming his own collection. Although his concerns at the time were basically traditional, the thing had to be quasi-functional. I couldn't understand that.

MS. JONES: Well, he had a lot of Rudy Autio.

MR. ARNESON: —early works that came out of the pot medium. And I had nothing. But I did have a plate from my Alice House series. Wanda came by and tried to see what I might have. I had all kinds of objects. He could have really done terrific by me. He couldn't handle objects, because that was not in the ceramics tradition. But I had this plate with the image of Alice on it, and he thought that would do quite nicely.

MS. JONES: That will count.

MR. ARNESON: He picked up that one. And then Wanda was interested in ceramics and looked at all my work. She introduced ceramics to the San Francisco Bay Area that spring in a group show at her gallery, which then was on Sutter Street. That was in 1967, on the fifth floor.

MS. JONES: When was she on Tillman Place?

MR. ARNESON: Well, that's the back door.

MS. JONES: The back door. Okay.

MR. ARNESON: The front door was on Sutter Street and the back door was on Tillman Place. Then we had a show of four ceramic sculptors. I remember Steven De Staebler, myself, and John Mason. I showed three large bricks, again, a series dealing didactically with ceramics in our Western civilization. A kind of a Pop art element, certainly dealing again with the object in Western civilization. The brick was certainly the foundation of it. These bricks were about three feet long. They were in scale proportionate to a brick. Three feet was the longest dimension. They were done in red terra-cotta. They were imprinted with the factory name of Arneson on the side. One was a large brick, slightly used, one was a brick broken in half. I had to create this large brick in two sections. There was the large brick turning into regular bricks, and that was kind of surreal. But I thought they were, like the John I was talking about, the very basic heritage of ceramics that had no art heritage to it.

MS. JONES: Wanda was right behind you from the beginning, wasn't she?

MR. ARNESON: Yes. Then she asked me to become a member of the gallery.

MS. JONES: Do you remember who else was showing at the time?

MR. ARNESON: I can't really remember because I didn't go to the gallery.

MS. JONES: She was Voulkos again, didn't she?

MR. ARNESON: She had Voulkos, but he may have left the gallery because he was not in that group. He must have left and gone to the Quay Gallery.

MS. JONES: Braunstein, yes.

MR. ARNESON: Bill Wiley probably joined the gallery about then. David Gilhooly joined the gallery, and another student of mine, Chris Unterseher was in the gallery. She was the first gallery to have ceramic artists in the Bay Area.

MS. JONES: How were the reviews?

MR. ARNESON: There were reviews—that's important. They were art reviews written by Alfred Frankenstein and other people. They were about what we did. The reviews, for the most part, were very lively. Tom Albright wrote also, and has covered certainly my career since then. The first museum showing for ceramics came in that summer at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. They would have a "Young California Artists" show, a big group show. Again, David Gilhooly and I were showing, along with Mel Ramos. I can't remember all the other artists, there were about twelve of us. Part of my big Alice House pieces were shown and my funk toilet. I called it *Funk John* then. I didn't coin the word "funk." That spring there was also the big funk show at the Berkeley [Art] Museum. Peter Selz had come out from New York. He wanted to start with a big splash and try to come up with what he thought would be peculiar, idiosyncratic Bay Area, West Coast art. At Berkeley was the first museum showing of ceramics. Myself and Gilhooly were well represented. I got awful good press, reproduced in *Time* magazine with my toilet. I had a typewriter with fingers and the fingernails brightly painted. I was doing objects that were dealing with the human condition. I had a telephone that had genitals for the receiver. I called it the *Call Girl*, and a toaster. These were all pretty lively works, and there was a very handsome catalog printed. The show traveled to Boston. It was seen on the East Coast, so a great deal of publicity came out of that.

MS. JONES: These are some of your most famous pieces. Now they were being reviewed, but was anybody buying them?

MR. ARNESON: Well, I was selling a few objects directly to buyers who would come to me. I did not basically have a gallery affiliation. Some works were in New York at the Allan Stone Gallery. The typewriter happened to be borrowed from Allan Stone because he had, in a sense, sold it. That was an interesting story in itself because I didn't realize it had been sold. After the opening of Funk Show I must have had a few drinks too many, and in my good-hearted way, I offered the typewriter to Peter Selz for the permanent collection. He accepted it graciously. Then we heard that the piece was owned. What I did was I remade one relatively faithfully. There are

actually two typewriters with fingernails, fingers. So I got a lot of travel out of having two.

MS. JONES: What happened to the Alice Street pieces?

MR. ARNESON: The works all dispersed in 1969. Johnson Wax sponsored an exhibit called "Objects U.S.A.," which was a great deal of ceramics and weaving, and the forms were organized and exhibited throughout the United States. Johnson Wax bought the works. They had a curator -- I forgot his name -- from New York, kind of a nice, handsome bloke to go with the show. But they bought a number of my works. They bought a urinal from 1963. I'm not sure what year, but it was one of the urinals. They bought *Alice House Wall*, *Alice House Block*, they bought work from my flower series, they bought a sink, a sink with hard-to-get-out stains, and they bought a first self-portrait, *Portrait of the Artist Losing his Marbles*, which I did in 1965. They bought a large body of works. They bought four and then they bought some more. The reason they bought a few more was that a couple got destroyed on the various exhibition spots. My sink apparently fell off of a museum wall in Omaha, Nebraska and exploded. One of my flower pots was knocked over in another gallery, and so forth and so on. The big *Alice House Wall* was given to the Pratt Museum in New York [actually the Museum of Arts and Design in New York], along with the john. The big *Alice House* that was flat, I mean, sat on the floor, was installed in a building in Los Angeles, for some reason, that was loaded with craft objects, ceramics and whatnot. Metromedia Corporation has the building. My *Alice House* is sitting up on their roof patio.

MS. JONES: And you said that Price Amerson at Davis -

MR. ARNESON: We're hoping to do a show this next year at Davis that will bring together for the first time since I had the show in my house the Alice House series. I thought it would just be terrific to bring it all back, catalog it, and have it at Davis.

MS. JONES: This is planned for 1892 at Davis.

MR. ARNESON: '82, next spring, and it would travel then to a few West Coast museums. I don't know the particulars of how much that has developed, but I will know in a few weeks. Price will tell me. So there we are. 1967 was a pretty good year. I also received that year an appointment to the Institute of Creative Arts. This was a wonderful thing the university had established which enable artists at the university to have a year off with full salary to do art. I went east that year to do Doylestown, Pennsylvania with my wife and four kids, four boys by that time.

MS. JONES: How did you -

MR. ARNESON: How I got to Doylestown? My colleague Ralph Johnson had a sister who had a house in Doylestown that she was renting. She was going to move out to Long Island, and Doylestown was pretty close to New York City, a few hours away.

MS. JONES: It's in Bucks County.

MR. ARNESON: My youngest son, Kirk, three, had a severe hearing loss, I didn't know how severe. We wanted to attend the Diagnostic Hear Center at St. Christopher's Hospital in Philadelphia, to which I took him every week for the year for his hearing evaluations.

MS. JONES: You said that you had your salary to live on, and then you were getting a monthly check from Adeliza's.

MR. ARNESON: I got a monthly check from Adeliza which enabled me to rent a loft—one half of a loft—in New York City.

MS. JONES: Your monthly check was a hundred dollars a month.

MR. ARNESON: A hundred dollars a month, and my rent was eighty-seven dollars a month on the loft. Steve Kaltenbach paid the other eighty-seven dollars. Steve did all of the work, too. It was one of those rag merchant's loft spaces.

MS. JONES: It was at 81 Green Street?

MR. ARNESON: 81 Green Street, third floor. Steve had to clean up all the rags, patch all the holes in the walls. He had to bring in and install a shower. There was a toilet there.

MS. JONES: Yours, or one that went with the loft?

MR. ARNESON: It had to be a real toilet. It was just a wonderful year. I commuted in from Bucks County. I would come in on the Wall Street special. I would drive to Jenkinstown, Pennsylvania and catch it down there. I'd ride

with all the lawyers going to Wall Street about ten in the morning. I'd come in on Tuesdays in the morning and work Tuesday, Wednesday, all day Thursday and go back Thursday night. What does an artist do in New York? An artist paints. So I still had Alice on my mind. One was to paint her life-size. The first painting I did was *Alice in the Billboard*. It was an absurd kind of painting. It was Alice seen from the corner of "L" and Alice with a perspective view. The canvas was about twenty feet long and ten feet at one edge and then reduced itself down to three feet in height at the other. You had a degree of illusion in depth with the painting of Alice that was around a green Foster and Kleiser billboard trim. Then I painted an Alice life size, sixty-five feet long. I thought that would be significant. It took me about four months in New York to paint that one. It was on seven panels, rolled up, of course. I tried to get a museum back there interested.

MS. JONES: Who was the person you went to see at the museum?

MR. ARNESON: I don't know, someone, the Curator at the Whitney Museum. I'm terrible about remembering.

MS. JONES: But he was familiar with your work.

MR. ARNESON: Yes, he wanted to buy. When I went up, he was delighted to see me. Immediately he wanted to buy a couple of ceramic pieces. I said, "I don't have any ceramics. I'm a painter and I want to show you my painting, and maybe show here at your museum on one of your walls." and I whipped out the slides. I shot a slide of each of the panels then I taped it all together. "God, nobody does this sort of thing." I said, "Now what is it?" "This is not what's going on in painting today." So I rolled up the painting and I shipped it back to Davis. At the end of the year, that summer, when I got back to Davis, I unrolled the canvas and put it around the university gallery and looked at it. Well, it needed a little bit more work. Maybe in about six months I can really snap it. Well, I'm not going to waste my time. So I threw it away in the Dempster dumpster.

MS. JONES: We haven't talked about the people you were meeting in New York.

MR. ARNESON: I'm not sure I met too many people. The nicest thing about New York—well, I met more artists, I went to artist bars.

MS. JONES: Which bars did you frequent?

MR. ARNESON: Max's Kansas City was a wonderful place. I could go there and hang out. I used to go with other friend that would come to New York. Andy Warhol was hanging out there. After a while you're surprised, you're meeting a lot of old friends in New York and artists get together. I didn't do too much self-promoting of my work. I was really there just to paint. I didn't want to be conspicuous. I did try to see a lot of museum shows. I had no shows of my own that year there. I had my first show at the Hansen Gallery. I think it then became the Hansen Fuller Gallery. I think they moved to a new space on Grant Avenue. I showed a body of work dealing with flower pots. It might have been my weakest body of ceramics I had ever done. I was in the East so I did not see the show. I don't know if it was reviewed. I think it was reviewed relatively negatively. They referred to the flower shop on the first floor, and the flower show on the fifth floor. But I was far removed from it, and I was having a good time.

MS. JONES: Was there any work in New York, other people's work that you were seeing that you liked? Was there anything that was impressing you?

MR. ARNESON: Well, I can't remember anything that impressed me. I kept on doing what I was doing. I'm very stubborn that way. I think if I'm overwhelmed by anything I would have gone with it. I generally always enjoy art, all kinds of art. A lot of conceptual artists were showing then. Actually a former student of mine, Bruce Nauman, had a big show at Leo Castelli, and that was fun. Bruce came and stayed at the loft. Steve Kaltenbach was doing quite well.

MS. JONES: What was Steve doing then?

MR. ARNESON: He was doing a number of conceptual things. In [early] 1968 I was getting ready to work on my way back West after my year's leave from the university. I had arranged for a teaching summer appointment at the University of Wisconsin in Madison for ten weeks. I packed up all the paintings and we shipped them West on a moving van. We arranged for them to be delivered to the house there. Put all the kids in the old Dodge van and drove off to Madison, Wisconsin to teach ceramics and painting for the summer. I got a painting studio. I didn't paint Alice there at all. I was into a fabulous new image, called the picture frame. I painted picture frames. These were on raw canvas, with the remaining paints I had. I was using Magna paints at the time. I painted a group of old-fashioned picture frames that had molding on them. I just painted them [in] different kind[s] of brushing styles. One was very thin and washy, one was very de Kooningesque, one was Abstract Expressionist, one would be very linear and tight and one was Pointillist. I must have done about eight or nine or ten of these paintings, all of the same frame, different sizes, a pretty dumb notion. I mean, if you don't know what to paint, big frames, and then, of course, you paint only around the edge of the canvas and in so doing, you leave the

whole middle free.

MS. JONES: Your George Post training.

MR. ARNESON: So it was all clean and decent, and it was high-spirited. I took those all back West with me this summer and exhibited them at the Hansen Fuller Gallery that fall of 1969, or maybe it was earlier. I'm not sure, but I got back in the summer of 1968. And doggone, I think I probably sold half of them. Something can sell paintings, even lousy paintings, easier than three-dimensional objects. That was actually the first show in which I made a little money. When I got back, I had to get back into ceramics. I made a series of teapots, about thirty-five teapots. Why did I make teapots? I guess I made teapots because it was an assignment I had as a student. At Arts and Crafts I never could do it. I didn't know what to make. I was just trying to get back in shape. They were really funky things. Again, I adorned them with some of my personal styles, testicles, or mouths, tongues. I mean, just a lot of dumb stuff. They were wiggly and sluggish looking and limp looking. Just crazy, and good spirit. Minor work, but I got my fingers busy. After that body of work, Roy De Forest and I collaborated on a body of ceramics. That was early 1969, and that was kind of a fun adventure. We had to do it like you would play poker. We each had three shots at the work. I would initially throw a lot of forms, forty or fifty. Roy would come to the studio, and he could mess with them all. After he finished messing with them all, I could mess with them. After I messed with them, he could come back and mess with them some more. We took turns as to who would start first and second so that we each had the same number of last shots. Then we colored them ourselves, fired them up. We had a show up at Adeliza's gallery in Folsom. We called it "The Bob and Roy Show." And we sold a few works, but not too many. Esther Robles Gallery in Los Angeles actually was showing some of Roy's work. Roy had mentioned to Mrs. Robles the fact that he was collaborating on these ceramics with me. So we sent slides off and she said, "Oh, let's have a show." So Roy and I boxed up all the pieces and drove down there and had our show. We didn't even pay for the gas.

MS. JONES: Really? Nobody bought anything?

MR. ARNESON: I know we sold a piece. I mean, the top price was forty dollars. We must have spent \$100 going down there and back, I'm sure. So that's success in the art world, and the Bob and Roy world. We eventually dispersed from here to there. We gave them away and we each had our own collection that we kept.

MS. JONES: Also in 1969 you had a show at the Allan Stone Gallery in New York.

MR. ARNESON: That's written on my bibliography, but I can't remember having a show there. I have no idea what it is that I would have shown—I know what I showed. I showed those teapots.

MS. JONES: It said that you showed the teapot, the bricks, the typewriter, and other assorted objects.

MR. ARNESON: The typewriter was shown in 1966. Of course, Allan generally bought my work. I just thought of him as my collector. He would come out and see—well, like all the teapots, he must have bought fifteen of them, and he got a good price that way.

MS. JONES: He got the good price; you didn't?

MR. ARNESON: He got a good discount. But you know, it kept my storage area relatively clear, and I could get on with some other work. There's nothing worse than to have a lot of stuff piled around. All my early sculptures I used to pulverize and throw in my garden and use as retaining walls. I was still in my Peter Voulkos Abstract Expressionist ceramics. I was really not clearly focused or committed to one kind of searching out. But that whole show, after it was down, I just broke it up. I was redoing the garden. I could use those pieces as a retaining wall. They came in very functional.

MS. JONES: In 1969 the Johnson Wax actually showed the "Objects U.S.A." show. You said that they had bought the pieces beforehand, and you were in a "Spirit of Comics" show at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania.

MR. ARNESON: That's where I finally had the opportunity to show my big Alice House painting. Not the life-sized one that I destroyed when I came back from New York, but the first one, *Alice as a Billboard*. It was about seventeen feet. I still have it. It's in storage. When we have the big "Alice Show" again, I'll unroll it and stretch it. I showed that painting there. The first time it was actually shown it was in a faculty show at Wisconsin that summer. It went on to an exhibit for the comics, and they were artists that were dealing with comic-like imagery. I guess the way I painted it, it had a comic spirit. I was happy to be in that show.

MS. JONES: Who else was in it?

MR. ARNESON: Well, let's try to think. Probably a lot of Chicago artists, "Hairy Who" types that dealt with imagery right out of the comics. I would imagine Peter Saul was certainly in it. I don't know if H.C. Westermann

was in it, or whether Wiley was or not. I think Wiley must have been in it. There's a certain comic spirit. I'd have to get out the catalog really and find out who was in it. That show was organized by Steve Prokopoff, so I met him. I had met Steve when I was in the East, living in Doylestown. I had attended a party where Bill Wiley was—Bill Wiley had the same grant that I had, and he went east, too. He was in New Jersey, so we bumped into each other quite a bit in New York. Wiley had his first show in New York at Allan Frumkin Gallery. I had an opportunity to go to the opening and meet Allan Frumkin. Many years later, I'm in the gallery, but he really didn't know who I was at the time. But he introduced me to a few other artists. I met H.C. Westermann in New York that year. One of the nice things about being in New York was the Museum of Modern Art exhibition called "Dadaists, Surrealists and Their Heritage." Lo and behold, I'm the artist that gets to be in that show, and it's my typewriter. And god, this is with all the old Surrealists. They have this exclusive opening with dinner and everything, in an executive suite of the museum. Gallery dealers and artists were all there. Well, Miró didn't come. It was too bad. It was a wonderful show, and I was in it. I was right there in it. And I met a few people. What happened, though, was there was a revolution going on out in the streets, a group of New York artists. Younger people felt that Surrealism should never be welcomed into the museum, so they were picketing the Museum of Modern Art. During the evening's festivities somehow exploded a stink bomb. We all had to vacate. It went off after dinner. I was sitting down at the table with a lot of big shots, New York dealers. I was telling them about my other important works, my toilets. They just sort of started frowning at me. So I soon realized that I was speaking out of turn.

MS. JONES: Now were you reviewed in this show?

MR. ARNESON: Well, it was a huge show. I was in the catalog. No, I think the people the show focused on were the original Surrealists. I was one of the heritages. So that was not too crucial. People like myself, H.C. Westermann, and a few other artists. I don't think they got any press out of it. But we got to be in the show.

MS. JONES: That, "Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage" show was in 1968 at the Museum of Modern Art. You also were in a show in 1969 at the Whitney Museum in New York, "A Human Concern: Personal Torment."

MR. ARNESON: Again, that was with the toaster, another one of those works of mine. That was a good period of work I did in 1966. You can see it was making major museums and thematic exhibitions and getting quite a nice little bit of press out of it. We're talking about 1969 again. That year my marriage started to get real rocky, so I went into a therapeutic process. This entailed making tiles for my house on Alice Street. At first I was just going to make a few ceramic tiles for the entryway. After I completed those I thought it might be nice if I just continued these all the way into the living room. So I proceeded to make 3,000 tiles. The entire summer, I made these tiles that looked like antique sixteenth-century tiles, copied actually from a linoleum pattern that was a replica of those tiles. I had a mold. I could make sixty tiles a day. So it was a lot of work. That took care of my mind while I was having some difficulties. I was then seeing Sandy Shannonhouse. That was a kind of awkward thing to be doing, but I guess I'm not the first artist. But I was a family man with kids. So I'm making tiles for Alice. I'm having to remove the vinyl tile that's here on the concrete slab. As I finished the living room, I moved into the dining room. When I finished the dining room I decided I'll do the kitchen. I'm not real smart because I'm using gasoline to take up the mastic that was holding down the vinyl tile. So here I am mopping it up in the kitchen, using gasoline, what happens? The place goes off. Boom! Explodes, blows out the windows, knocks me over. My graduate student helping me is smart. He races outside. I never experienced a fire like that where the chemical attraction of the wall paint and the gasoline fumes buildup, the combustible material, the grease on the wall, they're just licking, and the walls just were licking with flames. We got the garden hose and my neighbor called another assistant, a grad, who ran across the street to the neighbor and got a phone. I don't know why we didn't use our own—oh, the house was on fire! The fire department got there in about ten minutes. By then the fire sort of licked all the living room walls, burned all the paintings off the stretcher bars, and mostly made a hell of a mess. But by the time the fire department started spraying all that water, I got all that black smoke. So I got smoke damage to the rest of that house. There I was, on December 17th, and the interior of my house looks like a Bruce Conner, all blackened. I remember having Bob Bechtle and Dick McLain up for a little snack. I was doing a seminar, and I thought they would like to come over and see the project I had just done on Alice, a black period. Eventually it was all restored and remodeled. A few years later, I'm divorced.

MS. JONES: In 1970 you also were in a show at the Moore College of Art in Philadelphia, "Teacups, Teapots, and Gorillas." You were exhibiting with Ron Nagle, David Gilhooly, and Michael Frimkess.

MR. ARNESON: Yes, what did I show? Teapots. Right. Allan Stone simply lent the teapot he owned now. So Allan rigged that exhibit, or at least when I was asked to be in it, I called up Allan to have him send the works down. It seemed okay to have a show of teapots, and Ron had those funky cups of his. Gilhooly had all his animals probably.

MS. JONES: The gorillas.

MR. ARNESON: Oh, they were terrific, nice works. Those were papier-mâché. Those were really fine things he

did. David had taken a job at San Jose State teaching watercolor. I remember Herb Saunders wouldn't let David down into the ceramic shop because he was from Davis. "You guys do all that wild stuff. We can't have that, we can't have that disrupting. We have a real system here. We're learning to make good pots." So David switched to papier-maché. He did some wonderful animals. Just terrific, the best things he's done.

MS. JONES: Before he had gone to San Jose, David had been pretty close to you. Hadn't he been babysitting your kids?

MR. ARNESON: David was my first [sculpture] student. He went to Davis in 1962 in the first ceramics class I had. There were all these nice little girls, and I had this big hulking guy, sophomore David Gilhooly. I had to have somebody around to lift all those clay bags and mix the clay and do all the dirty work. David became, right away, a teaching assistant. I had gotten ill that year. I was out of school for a few weeks with a bad cold. Caught it in the valley, I guess. I got valley frost. David took care of the place. He was very good. Dave was also my babysitter. He'd baby-sit for food. We'd feed him well. I also had as a graduate student Peter Vandenberg. He was terrific too. We were very close. They helped me with my yard. We'd go to all the shows in the city. I could check out a University vehicle so we kept in touch with everything and maintain our friendships. We all showed at the Candy Store Gallery. We became the Davis group. It was a nice socializing- and partying-it-up. I was young, thirty-two. I was pretty close to their age, and it was very spirited. Davis was terrific then. Far enough away from the Bay Area. I could grow flowers. I formed pretty close relationships with the students.

MS. JONES: Also in 1970 you worked on a series of assembled cast porcelain forms with printed letters based on the astrology chart machine at Grand Central Station. What were those?

MR. ARNESON: Oh yes, astrology was getting big in those days. Grand Central Station had a big computer. You could just feed in a punch a card out with all the data, date of birth, place of birth and everything. It gave you five, six, seven pages of information about what was going on in your crystal. It was heavy into astrology, and it gave you a reading of what was going to happen to you and what you were doing.

MS. JONES: Wasn't Gilhooly's mother-in-law a psychic?

MR. ARNESON: She was a psychic. And along with that, an ex-student of mine, David King, came up with a truckload of old molds from Duncan Ceramic Company down in Fresno. It was terrific. God, a whole truckload. So we all sat around slip casting. A couple of students that were working then, I think John Roloff and Lucian Pompili were there. We had a good time slip casting. We would just pour mold, take them out. It would be like making a lot of junk and then assembling them at random. Whatever would go together, just working without thinking. Prior to that I really couldn't conceptualize what I was doing in the Alice House series. With the toilets I was doing a lot of drawings, making models, thinking it out, figuring it out, getting myself organized. But with these it was just kind of free play association. After I finished a body of work I would read my astrology chart and try to see if there was anything in the printout that related to the objects. I would then use little cast dies and print into the clay whatever I felt was appropriate based on my astrology.

MS. JONES: How accurate was it?

MR. ARNESON: What do you mean, accurate? I don't know if it was accurate. It was just silly notions. Maybe at the time I might have believed in some of that stuff. I'm agnostic in my belief. But it added an element of spirit to the pieces. These were all very small works, cast in porcelain and glazed in celadon glaze. I had my next show at the Hansen Fuller Gallery. They were like small precious objects. I painted the gallery black. I put little lights right down on the objects. The works looked like fragments from a lost civilization. They were strange. They had this ancient Sung Dynasty glaze on them. Why did I make them out of porcelain glaze, a Sung Dynasty celadon? I know why. Because everybody was into low fire ceramics then, making all this hot brightly color. When everyone is there, you better decide to make a quick detour and see if you can shake them off your back. I was probing another aspect of these ceramic peerage that I certainly enjoyed. I was looking then at the Brundage Collection, some of the exquisite celadons there. That Brundage Collection at the Asian Arts Museum is certainly a very important collection that we have in the Bay Area. I've always taken my students there. I've made a lot of works from that collection. I can remember one of my Alice House jars was based upon a Han Dynasty mountain jar. A very famous work that sits on three little feet. The lid of the jar is a mountain. I redid it with a lid as my house. It's a beautiful piece.

MS. JONES: Where is that now?

MR. ARNESON: It's in a collection. I believe in Sacramento. It'll turn up when we do the "Alice House" show.

MS. JONES: Also in 1970 you were in a show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, "Recent Acquisitions." What did they buy from you?

MR. ARNESON: The museum bought an early Abstract Expressionist ceramic. I did it in 1963, the same time I

was doing the toilets. They weren't going to buy a toilet so they bought this work that reflected back. I think I called it *Sketch for a Gargoyle*. It was quasi-Voukos and a surrealist work done in stoneware, a nice piece.

MS. JONES: And also in 1970 you have a show at the Hansen Fuller Gallery, "Recent Art Work in Porcelain." That was the Sung Dynasty. You made a statement on Sung Dynasty porcelains at that time. You have it in your file. That same year you were in another show at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York, called "Coffee, Tea and other Cups."

MR. ARNESON: Right, all us ceramicists do cups. I guess Kenny Price is the top man in that. I've done a series of cups. Originally I was doing my funky, sexy goblets in the early sixties. Then I did the Alice House cups. I'd done sinking cups, where the cups sink into the saucer. There's a sequential series of those. Various mountain cups, cups that were little miniature mountains with handles on them, sitting in a saucer. I continually do cups. It's a metaphor for a guy being a ceramicist. I used to give a problem every year to my students. I would introduce it like, "Let's make an object about no bigger than four inches. It should have an appendage. This object should be able to contain a liquid. This liquid should be conveyed into the lips by the use of the appendage. This object must be an object that you've never seen before." Terrific. They're just making a cup. But you can't make a cup. You've got to do this thing. So it's all about craft, it's all about the parts, it's all about personal vision, you get all that together. A lot of artists have done that with cups. We never called them cups.

MS. JONES: You were also in the Annual Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art?

MR. ARNESON: That was my first time I was ever in the Whitney Annual. I did a series of five large plates about nineteen inches in diameter with my famous Arneson brick slowly sinking into the plate. What on earth are five dishes doing in a sculpture show? Well, that was a breakthrough. I'm sure. These five plates were in a sequential work showing the famous Arneson brick sinking into a puddle of water which was contained inside of a plate. You would see the first plate. It would have the brick floating very beautifully. One the last plate, you'd just see the little swirl of water and the brick entirely gone. Actually there was a little mention of that work in some review in *Artforum*. It was very significant that that was the first year the Whitney actually exhibited ceramics. Gilhooly was also in that show.

MS. JONES: That year you were in the San Francisco Art Institute Centennial Exhibition. That was at the de Young Museum in San Francisco.

MR. ARNESON: It was? Or was it the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art? I think I showed the big Alice painting again that year at the San Francisco Museum. It was Alice, the billboard painting was Alice. I think I got a sabbatical that year. I had a whole year off from the university. I moved to Benicia, my old home town, and rented a house.

MS. JONES: The same house you're in now, or a different one?

MR. ARNESON: No, I rented a house in "I" Street because some guy was going off to Mexico, a teacher. I rented the house. I built a small studio inside of an old kind of warehouse down by the bay that was used for antique storage. I just built a room inside and set up an electric kiln. I put some wiring in so the kiln would work and proceeded to do a body of work in Benicia that was, again, a new direction. I would say it was based on dinner. I made a series of dishes that were based upon the dinner that I ate. Actually I constructed a dinner based on colorful objects on my plate. I wanted to have a beet red, so naturally I had to have a beet. There was some meat, red meat. There had to be something green. It must have been a pickle. There had to be another kind of green so it was probably a little lettuce. There had to be a baked potato, that's a classic form, so I could have yellow butter melting in the baked potato. I ate this dinner and I photographed it as I ate it. I'd shoot a shot, eat some more, shoot a shot, eat, and after thirty-six slides I'd consumed the dinner. I made drawings based on the slide of just that dinner being eaten. Then I developed it into a series of ceramic works that were illusionistic. They were like those sorts of things in drugstore windows that are foreshortened. I was into illusion and foreshortening. These works were really a testimonial to Pop art, particularly to Wayne Thiebaud's luscious paintings of food. I sort of saw my work as post-Pop art. Here were the dirty dishes; the dinner has been consumed. I did these dishes. They could even be hung on the wall. They were all glazed white. I was going into china paint which was a very technical process, using china paints over white glaze, low fired, so you get a very rich range of color, maybe 500 colors possible. These works were very painterly. That's what they were about, paintings. Some of the colors, Thiebaud blue, I'm sure I used. After I finished these works I constructed a tableau of a dinner, a gourmet table set with a whole bunch of delicious goods. This was also constructed illusionistically, foreshortened, based upon photographs and collages. There was an ad in one of the magazine for United Airlines that showed a chef and a big table setting. I guess from a flight to Hawaii. I used that as an initial source. I built upon this plywood table six feet high at the back and maybe only four feet, the table height in the front and the table width in the front. Highly foreshortened as it goes back, and with a supporting rim in the front. I would make each of these dishes in units. Ever since I did the *Alice House* I developed a process of working like a puzzle. I made all these works based on the same principle as what I'd done with the dirty dishes. But this was a

tableau. After I finished it [*Smorgi-Bob The Cook*], I could see that if I only added another element in the background I could have this triangle. I put myself as a chef. This was honoring myself as a ceramicist, man of baked good and all those things. I did this portrait of myself with a chef's hat sitting at the far end of the table, which was only six feet away physically, but illusionistically it might look ten or fifteen feet. It was all glazed in white and I was going to eventually china paint it all like I was doing the dirty dishes, but an exhibit came along, again, at the Craft Museum in New York. This piece was one of the works that was going to be shown, so I didn't get to go around to china painting it. It became the featured work in that show in 1971.

MS. JONES: The title of the show was "Clay Works: Twenty Americans."

MR. ARNESON: "Twenty Americans." A very nice show in New York. I think ten of them were my students and the others were influenced by me.

MS. JONES: Well, definitely Richard Shaw, Chris Unterseher, Peter Vandenberg, Clayton Bailey.

MR. ARNESON: Clayton was never a student of mine.

MS. JONES: No, he wasn't. Marilyn Levine was in that show, Gilhooly.

MR. ARNESON: David, yes. So that was a nice show. We were all doing objects then. Foods and whatnot. I had the chance to show a big tableau. I thought it was, again, a very didactic piece, like the toilets, like the brick, like everything else, about the ceramicist and the crock art. I think that show got a little mention in *Newsweek*, too. So here was crafts being written up as art. Right after I finished making that tableau I did a portrait of myself eating. No, I did a portrait of myself with my tongue out, sort of like overextending myself. How do you capture your tongue far out? Then I'm working from mirrors. I just had to hold my tongue out, becoming more classical. Slowly becoming more classical. It began with the chef, but certainly with the next portrait of the artist with his tongue hanging out, I titled that work a number of titles. What did I title that piece? It was only going to be a portrait. But ever since that has evolved in the most obsessive body of work I've ever done because ten years have passed and I'm still involved with the self-portrait. I've altered the scale considerably. The original head was slightly larger than life-size. I've gone considerably bigger since then, [I] branched out into doing portraits of everybody, people, artists.

MS. JONES: Where is that head now, do you know?

MR. ARNESON: Well that head was shown, with the tongue out, along with the dirty dishes and the big tableau of the smorgasbord, the chef, in the Hansen Fuller exhibit of 1971, I believe. That head particularly was singled out in the exhibit and reviewed by Alfred Frankenstein. Joseph Monsen of Seattle was still assembling his collection of ceramics. He purchased that. He finally got beyond the dishes and decided he'd better get on with the ceramic sculptors. He purchased that piece along with the dirty dishes and a few other works of mine. He has collected a number of works of mine since then.

MS. JONES: And *Smorgi-Bob* was bought by the San Francisco Museum.

MR. ARNESON: *Smorgi-Bob* was bought by the museum that year.

MS. JONES: And that's really the only major -

MR. ARNESON: That's the last purchase of any work of mine. It's time they got another piece.

MS. JONES: You also had a one-man show at The Candy Gallery in Folsom.

MR. ARNESON: Oh, every year I had a show at The Candy Store Gallery. I have no idea what I showed. I showed dirty dishes. I even had a couple of foods that were prior to the dirty dishes. Hamburgers which were really Thiebaudian. Hamburgers, shrimp salad, brioche, baked fish—that one I traded Clayton Bailey for. That was a nice piece. Actually, I did a whole body of work. Sandy, we weren't married then, but she was certainly getting into really nice ceramics. She had bought a cookbook. It was a nineteenth-century cookbook that had great color reproductions which were made in the lithographic process, which were truly works of art. She started making some works from that cookbook. I looked over her shoulder and made myself a few myself.

MS. JONES: Those were pastries she was doing.

MR. ARNESON: She did pastries. I did the fish. We were both working out of the same book. Originally I was going to have a show in New York of those at Allan Frumkin—Allan Stone, pardon me. I sent all the works to him and I thought, "Hey man, you'd better be careful of your reputation. Those are a rip-off of Thiebaud." But that's absurd, they were three-dimensional. They would have been a wonderful little show. But I got tight ass and called him up and had him send all the works back. And Allan Stone sent all the works back. I went through them all. I took some of them down to my studio and threw them off the rocks into the Bay.

MS. JONES: Really?

MR. ARNESON: Others I kept and showed at the Candy Store Gallery. They were purchased by local people in the Sacramento area. I've always had a good following when I showed at the Candy Store Gallery. None of those works were shown at Hansen Fuller. The only works at Hansen Fuller were the dirty dishes. I thought they were a little more brilliant. Conceptually it was post-Pop. Who else was going to make post-Pop art? Then I got into the heads and that's taken me ever since.

MS. JONES: In 1971 also you got an Artist's Fellowship Grant from the N.E.A.

MR. ARNESON: I got an Artist Fellowship Grant, and I got a divorce. That fellowship grant helped with the settlement.

MS. JONES: Slice of life.

MR. ARNESON: I kept the house. I kept the kids and sort of released my wife from all obligations. She was able to pursue her career as an art historian and study. She went back to school for a couple of years. The following year I had another show at Hansen Fuller.

MS. JONES: In 1971-72 there was a Contemporary Ceramic Art Canada, U.S.A., Mexico and Japan, and that was in the Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto.

MR. ARNESON: Is that right? Oh yes. I can remember a Japanese curator coming out to my studio when I was in Benicia and bought a couple of pieces. I had sent away a photograph of myself and had it printed on canvas. Then they sent me a palette and the colors. The canvas had stamped on it the colors to fill in. You know the color-by-number paintings? What you could do, you could get a painter-by-number portrait. I don't know where. I saw that ad in, of all places, probably *Sunset* magazine.

MS. JONES: I'm sure that's exactly where it was.

MR. ARNESON: So I took a slide and sent it off. They sent me back this little stretched canvas on a board with a stamped image of my face. Then it was all fragmented out with all the colors. They sent me a little palette with all the colors to put on it. So I painted myself, but I only did it kind of sketchily. Just a few colors.

MS. JONES: -- leaving some of the number showing.

MR. ARNESON: I did it real sloppy-like. It was all in fun. And then I glued the palette with the brushes and the rest of the paint below the canvas. That wasn't quite enough, so I took one of my foods and I made this gorgeous dish of sliced ham which was from a reproduction, probably *Sunset*, too, a Hormel ham. It was a beautifully baked ham, and I did it illusionistically again with china paint.

MS. JONES: -- with pineapples, I hope.

MR. ARNESON: I had pineapples, yes. Sliced ham and with the spices, the cloves stuck in the ham and the texture of the ham. I attached that piece to the bottom of that construction. I made a construction of the canvas and everything, and then with that ceramic attached to the bottom. So that's somewhere in some museum in Japan.

MS. JONES: Did they buy it?

MR. ARNESON: Yes, they bought it. They bought the works from the show. That's the only way to be in those Asian or European shows. You don't have to worry about the pieces coming back. And they bought a series of sinking cups. Just like the brick sinking on the plate. Five cups sequentially sinking into the saucer, spilling the coffee. The cup is sinking down through the coffee. I did that actually as a series of works with a model from a mold. I had been in a show in Japan also in 1964. They didn't buy the piece, they just exhibited it. It was also an international ceramic exhibit and I showed a case of 7-Up. That was all hand-thrown 7-Up bottles in a stoneware case. They were all open, I think. Twenty-three stoneware bottles and one real 7-Up bottle [the stoneware bottles in this piece are actually all labeled "Pepsi"]. Really a nice piece. That piece is now in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

MS. JONES: In 1972 you were in a "White on White" show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. You exhibited *Smorgi-Bob*.

MR. ARNESON: I exhibited *Smorgi-Bob* white on white. That went to a lot of exhibits.

MS. JONES: And you also were in a Nut Art art gallery at the California State University at Hayward.

MR. ARNESON: Yes, well, the Nut Art show was really based on a group of us from the Candy Store Gallery because we had done a Nut Art show. Clayton Bailey I'm sure was the—remember, Clayton came west. Let's go back a little bit. When I went to New York in 1967, I had to find a number of artists to come out and teach ceramics to replace me. Clayton at the time was teaching in South Dakota. He was sending postcards to me. He was obviously a nutty funk artist from out of the Midwest. So I wrote Clayton. "How would you like to come teach at Davis for one quarter while I'm gone?" He came, and he said sure. I had never met him. I never met him until I came back. After he taught ten weeks at Davis, he went back to South Dakota and quit his job at the University of South Dakota. He moved west, in fact, he moved to Crockett, California. He struggled around a little bit but eventually got himself a nice position at the California State University at Hayward. But Clayton certainly joined us. He was a like-minded soul, and certainly fell right into the Candy Store Gallery with all his zonked out creatures. So that's a little bit about that. So Clayton, in 1972, we were together in that art show, which was really the Candy Store Gallery for the most part. Jim Nutt from Chicago had come out to teach at Sacramento State, and Gladys Nilsson. They were certainly part of the stable at the Candy Store. Anybody who was nutty in their art spirit, high spirited, was part of that show.

MS. JONES: Also in 1972 you were in a show at the E.B. Crocker Art Gallery in Sacramento. It was called the "Sacramento Sampler One."

MR. ARNESON: Again, there's *Smorgi-Bob*, *The Cook*,.

MS. JONES: The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has gotten a lot of mileage out of the one piece.

MR. ARNESON: They bought the piece just then, when it was shown in Sacramento, because the Sacramento Crocker Art Gallery was also contemplating buying the piece.

MS. JONES: Do you remember what you sold it for?

MR. ARNESON: Yes, \$5,000.

MS. JONES: And also that year you were in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art show of "Decorative Ceramic Art, 1962-1972," from the collection of Professor and Mrs. Joseph R. Monsen.

MR. ARNESON: Monsen got his whole collection together and a big catalog. He had really cornered the market on all those crazy ceramic objects. Those collectors really buy in depth. I think he must have had six or seven of my pieces and a lot of my students'. Sandy and a lot of the other Bay Area ceramicists, Voulkos, Mason, Kenny Price.

MS. JONES: Suzanne Foley curated that show, didn't she?

MR. ARNESON: She curated it.

MS. JONES: Had you known her before that?

MR. ARNESON: Sure, I met her in 1967 when I was in the summer exhibit show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

MS. JONES: You also had a one-man show at the Hansen Fuller Gallery. You exhibited eighteen self-portrait busts.

MR. ARNESON: Oh, that was a big show. That was a blockbuster. That's where my obsessiveness really came through, in those self-portraits. All kinds of gestural efforts. Some of them resembled remotely the German eighteenth-century artist, Messerschmidt, who did those psychotic self-portraits of himself screaming and grimacing. With mine being in clay, I could get that full, robust color. They really came off. They really were lively works. I had a few, one or two, large works, too. A portrait of the artist exhibiting himself. I had my head on a pedestal. In the middle of the pedestal, a penis. So, what was the title of that? Oh, *Classical Exposure*, of course. I did a large work. *Fragment of Western Civilization* was the title. It was a whole bunch of bricks crumbling down, and a self-portrait of the artist being overwhelmed by permanence.

MS. JONES: You also had *Kiln Man* and *Delta Bob*, and *Assassination of a Famous Nut Artist*, *Doyen Crazed*, *Snack*, *Pic*. What was the response to that show?

MR. ARNESON: Well, it was terrific. It was a sold out show. The critical acclaim, the press, *The Chronicle*. It really brought forth myself as a major sculptor. It was lingering, of course, out there. But it also brought me into a classical structure, portraiture, self-portraiture. They were good works. Everything has been rosy since. I followed it the following year with another show of self-portraits, in 1973. I don't recall exactly. Maybe the '73 one I had *Fragment of Western Civilization*. Then, in 1974 I had a retrospective in which a good body of those pieces could be shown in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Steve Prokopoff, my old friend from Philadelphia, was very interested in my work and felt it should be seen in depth. We organized a retrospective of

my work, starting from 1962, which was the piece owned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It was the surrealist abstract *Study for a Gargoyle*. And then into the toilets, urinals, trophies, bottles, foods, first self-portraits, flowers, and then the self-portraits. And that was a very good show.

MS. JONES: Did that have *Alice Street* in it, too?

MR. ARNESON: A couple of Alice's, some RoyBobs, and with follow-up drawings that I had. I did a lot of drawings, sketches of the works. I thought it was a terrific show. It came to San Francisco. I think it was a very popular show. People all liked it. It was all high-spirited work. Everyone laughed and had a good time. I always felt my work should bring laughter and joy and high-spirited—that's what my art's about. You don't have to be a student of art history to get through my stuff at all. It's all out front, it's all up front as well. I want to leave you with a belly laugh. It's got to be serious, too. You kind of straddle the line there. You don't want to be a cornball guy. I want to bring joy and happiness into the works. That's the nature of ceramics, it just comes natural to me.

MS. JONES: Still back in 1972 you had a two-man show with William Wiley at the Manolides Gallery in Seattle.

MR. ARNESON: Yes, Jim Manolides sort of liked my funky stuff. He showed Roy De Forest and myself and Wiley. I don't know what became of that. I don't really recall the show very much. Poor guy, I mean he was a poor artist who had a gallery. He'd drive down, get the work, show it, try to sell it. If he sold it, okay, if not, he'd drive it back.

MS. JONES: Then in 1973 you had another show doing the self-portrait bust. The Joseph Mosen collection show went to Seattle from San Francisco. There was a "Painting and Sculpture by Young American Artists" show at the Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills.

MR. ARNESON: Painting and sculpture, right. Hey, how neat, I was a young American artist. Some other artist could recommend you. William King, the sculptor, recommended me for the show. I show a urinal.

MS. JONES: With female parts.

MR. ARNESON: With female parts. It was a nasty piece. It was so nasty that Cranbrook Academy installed the piece in the basement behind a locked door. In the gallery there was only a little piece of paper: "If you really want to see this work, get in touch with the guard. He will take you down in the elevator and unlock the door and show you the urinal."

MS. JONES: How many people do you think made the trip down?

MR. ARNESON: I don't know. But I did get a letter from a psychiatrist who took a psychotic patient of his, a suicidal psychotic patient. He was, I guess, enmeshed in there. He would take his patients to the Cranbrook Academy of Art gallery to see these exhibits. He was totally intrigued that to see mine, you had to go down the stairs. He took this manic depressive patient with him. So he went up to the guard and asked the guard, he'd like to see the Arneson piece down in the basement. The guard took the psychiatrist and his patient down. I got this letter. He unlocked the door. When he went in, "My patient broke out in hilarity with laughter. I think we've cured him, Bob. Thank you very much."

MS. JONES: Oh, that's terrific.

MR. ARNESON: Yes, I thought it was one of the great letters I've ever received about my work.

MS. JONES: You may be the only artist who has ever cured a psychotic.

MR. ARNESON: God, wouldn't it be wonderful. This was a urinal, ordinary urinal, based upon the urinal in "TB9." Except I had where the—now again with a fingernail, with hand-painted nail polish on, it was sitting on a big tile floor that had the primitive shape of a big puddle. But it was of white tiles. Straddling the urinal was the imprint of big heavy boots. A nasty—but, you know, I'm not creating that syndrome. I mean that's always been in male psychology.

MS. JONES: Also, you were in a "Plastic Earth" show at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

MR. ARNESON: Yes, it was *Self-Portrait of the Artist Picking His Nose*, done in porcelain. They bought the piece. That was one of the works that had not been sold from the show at the Hansen Fuller Gallery. I like to catch the artist in his off moments, with finger rammed up the nostril. I've done that in a number of versions.

MS. JONES: You received a promotion to Professor of Art at the University of California, Davis.

MR. ARNESON: Despite doing all that bad taste art, I finally made Professor. Security of employment and all the

wonderful things that go along with that honor.

MS. JONES: And you married Sandy Shannonhouse.

MR. ARNESON: Yes, we decided to make it legal. She was helping me out with raising my kids, cooking dinners. She was also doing her art and getting her master's degree in Design for theatre in the Drama Department.

MS. JONES: The Crocker Art Gallery in Sacramento bought *Overcooked, a Self-Portrait*?

MR. ARNESON: That's a portrait of the artist done in terra-cotta based on a variation on *Smorgi-Bob* Chef. This is a just larger than life-sized bust of myself, with a chef's hat on. But the chef's hat is—I really overcooked it, so it got really nice and dark and brown. *Portrait of the Artist Overcooked*. Didactic.

MS. JONES: And in 1974 -- we mentioned this before -- there was a retrospective, "Robert Arneson, Exhibition of Ceramics and Drawings from 1962 to 1973." It was at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. You had a one-man show at the Daison Sec Gallery in Chicago.

MR. ARNESON: Daison Sec Gallery was right across the street from the Contemporary Art Museum. We had a show there at the same time. Chicago has really been terrific for me. That show was again a group of recent self-portraits and drawings. A whole bunch of drawings, small little works. I think it must have sold out. Chicago likes artists that deal with people. I sure was doing it, wasn't I?

MS. JONES: You had another one-man show at the Hansen Fuller Gallery.

MR. ARNESON: I probably did not show any self-portraits then. I think I decided to do another modular large scale sculpture. I showed *Mountain*. I did this thing of a mountain about fourteen feet long, eight feet high, only about two feet wide. I made about fifty or sixty modular units. Then I did a lake reflecting the image of the mountain. It was real wet. I like to deal with wetness.

MS. JONES: But these were really large scale.

MR. ARNESON: Large scale. Every so often I do modular large scale work. Every year or so.

MS. JONES: You were in another show, "Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture," at the University of Illinois, Champagne, Illinois. You had a large floor piece of the artist swimming, called *Current Event*. It was fourteen feet long.

MR. ARNESON: That was a nice work. About 200 modular elements of highly glazed wet chunks with a rock-like rendering of my head with an outstretched arm, swimming. I called it *Current Event*. It was fourteen feet long, a terrific work. Eventually I joined the Allan Frumkin Gallery that year.

MS. JONES: What happened with you and Allan Stone?

MR. ARNESON: My last show was in '70. Remember, I had all the works sent back. I always thought Allan Stone was more of a collector. He [didn't feed] the old artist's ego trip. You weren't getting any notice. So Allan Frumkin was interested in ceramics. He actually contacted me when I was in Chicago having my retrospective. He was interested in having a group ceramic show in his New York gallery. I contributed a couple of self-portraits. Shortly after, I thought it was 1974, along with Gilhooly and Peter Vandenberg, I met and talked to Allan [Frumkin]. He wanted to know what my relationship was with Allan Stone. I said I was no longer involved with the gallery. He was anxious to show my work, so in '75 I had my first show in New York of significance. I did show the piece, *Current Event*. I had remade *Alice House* in 1974. I could not get part of my retrospective when it came to San Francisco. The Metromedia Corporation would not loan the big Alice out. I said fuck them. I'll make them another one. I did another version of Alice, kind of illusionistically. Allan also had *Classical Exposure*. I really got terrific press in New York in 1975. It just changed everything around. It was really weird. The show opened. I came down with cancer and had an operation. I couldn't go to New York. It got to the end of the show and I had to go to the hospital. But it had all the press, and it was terrific. The whole scene, everything, changed for me. The works were all sold. They got a terrific review in the *New York Times*.

MS. JONES: Was that Hilton Kramer?

MR. ARNESON: The Hilton Kramer review called me "brilliant." And, you know, you get somebody calling you a brilliant sculptor -

MS. JONES: It goes to your head.

MR. ARNESON: It goes to your head. It helps you along. And he's done the same for me again, two years later, in 1977. I had a show of very large portraits of other artists and friends of mine. Gilhooly, a lot of myself, too. I did a

big bust of Roy De Forest, Mike Henderson, Peter Voulkos. These were all big busts about thirty inches in size. Most of them were purchased by major museums in the United States and Europe. The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam bought a couple of pieces and the Hirshhorn Museum.

MS. JONES: Which ones did they buy? Did they buy *Van Gogh*?

MR. ARNESON: I didn't have *Van Gogh* there. They [the Stedelijk Museum] bought a bust of Peter Voulkos. Hirshhorn bought the bust of Mike Henderson. The Whitney Museum purchased *Portrait of the Artists Whistling in the Dark*. The Philadelphia Museum purchased *Portrait of David Gilhooly*. That's all significant. It changes your career.

MS. JONES: Also in '74 you were in another show, "Clay," at the Whitney Museum of American Art, at the downtown branch?

MR. ARNESON: Downtown center. That was old works again that they collected from Allan Stone and a young curator who was them working the downtown center.

MS. JONES: Who was that? Do you remember?

MR. ARNESON: He's now with the main museum. It would be Richard Marshall. Now Richard is organizing a show that will open in December, "Six Ceramic Artists." Myself, John Mason, Peter Voulkos, Richard Shaw, Gilhooly, Kenny Price. We're hoping this will be an in-depth show of the development of ceramic art on the West Coast. It will come to the San Francisco Museum after that.

MS. JONES: That was also the year, 1974, that you did the first color lithograph with Jack Lemon at Landfall Press in Chicago.

MR. ARNESON: Yes, I have been doing lithographs there. Jack saw my show in Chicago. He liked my drawings and invited me shortly after to come to Chicago to try lithography. My first lithograph was based upon my dirty dishes. I did a last slice of cherry pie. It's in a dish and there's cherries, juice and fingerprints of cherries all over the paper. A nice, loose, juicy rendering of the last slice of cherry pie. I've gone back every year or so and done a series of etchings. Lithographs of my bricks—brick floating, brick cracking—then a number of self-portraits. About five big lithographs of the artist.

MS. JONES: In 1975 you have a one-man show at the Ruth Schaffner Gallery in Los Angeles?

MR. ARNESON: Yes. I showed assorted works. It was a show organized by the Hansen Fully Gallery. Some bricks, some self-portraits, assorted things. Los Angeles was not very receptive.

MS. JONES: We already talked about the one-man show at the Allan Frumkin Gallery. You were in the "Clay U.S.A." show at the Fendrick Gallery in Washington.

MR. ARNESON: Yes, I don't know what I had, but Barbara Fendrick was getting involved with ceramics. Actually, she bought the piece from Allan Frumkin of *Classical Exposure*. That was the first piece of sculpture she ever bought in her life. It's in her house. And I've had several exhibits there over the years. She's been a loyal supporter of my work.

MS. JONES: You also had a one-man show at the Dootson/Calderhead Gallery in Seattle, Washington.

MR. ARNESON: That gallery folded. But, yes, I seem to go everywhere. We had a good time in Seattle. That's no art capital by any means. But there was one man up there who liked my work.

MS. JONES: You were in a group show, "Sculpture, American Directions, 1945-75" at the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

MR. ARNESON: Right, one of my big heads, probably balancing a rock on its head—nice, big, robust. It was kind of a series, like the emotion of the artist in a balancing act. That head toured in the show and eventually was purchased by a collector in Chicago.

MS. JONES: You were also in a "California Gold" group show at the J.P.L. Fine Arts Gallery in London, England.

MR. ARNESON: I don't know anything about that. The gallery did something in London, drawings or something. You get in so many shows; you don't know what you're in. Once you get a New York gallery, and you have a San Francisco gallery, you're in shows everywhere.

MS. JONES: I'm not going to read all these into it, but in 1976 you had another one-man at Hansen Fuller. And a one-man show at the Fendrick Gallery of Washington that showed *Local Mine Disaster* and *Fragment of Western*

Civilization and I'm the One.

MR. ARNESON: I can't remember.

MS. JONES: You were in the Bicentennial Show at the Allan Frumkin Gallery in New York.

MR. ARNESON: Allan Frumkin Gallery? Oh, you bet. Allan has a wonderful sense of humor. He will ask the gallery artists, he'll say, "Look, it's bicentennial year. Can you come up with bicentennial work that will fit in?" I said, "You bet I can. I've got something in mind." I did this piece which was a portrait of George Washington which I did right from the dollar bill. I had it blown up with all the etching marks, and glazed with that particular kind of green color. I did the Mona Lisa and the title of the piece was *George and Mona in the Baths of Coloma*. There was a little water around them. That had to do with the declining value of the dollar.

MS. JONES: It was a great piece.

MR. ARNESON: It was shown in New York. It was purchased by the Director of the Stedelijk Museum. That's one of the first museums that's been seriously collecting a body of ceramics, particularly California ceramics. They had about six or seven major works of mines. That got some press in the *New York Times*.

MS. JONES: You made the Biennial in Sydney, Australia.

MR. ARNESON: Oh yes. Australia has some fine works. What do they have? They have the *Fragment of Western Civilization*, along with one of my big heads. They would come to San Francisco and buy works.

MS. JONES: You were also in the "Soup Tureens 1976 Invitational."

MR. ARNESON: Campbell Soup Museum? I did a portrait of the artist as a soup tureen sitting in a plate, or actually a bowl of tomato soup. It's real ghastly looking. My head lifts off, of course. It's really not very functional although I understand somebody used it once. Barbara Fendrick bought the piece. She really liked it. I told her, "Please don't use it as a soup tureen. The clay body is too porous. It will get stinking and smelling and start rotting out inside."

MS. JONES: That was the same year you moved to Benicia and set up your studio in the old saloon.

MR. ARNESON: 1975. Sandy and I bought this old saloon bordello on old downtown First Street. The artist moves. I set up a studio there. We built a kiln shed out back. We converted the bordello rooms upstairs into a big studio, sort of like a New York loft with a gorgeous view looking out on the Carquinez Straits and the Carquinez Bridge. I operate down on the first floor with the bar. It's a terrific building. We're building another studio next door. Right now we're doing a very big effort—3400 cubic feet replace the kilns. We just started a studio a month ago. We've made a lot of noise around there. I guess by December we'll be in the new studio and rent out the 440 First Street.

MS. JONES: In 1976 and '77 you were in the "Painting and Sculpture in California, The Modern Era" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. That went to the National Gallery in Washington, too.

MR. ARNESON: Right. I showed some of the early works. *The Kiln Man* was borrowed. I think they even have one of my dirty dishes, and maybe some other object. There were the self-portraits, dirty dish, something else.

MS. JONES: In 1977 you had, of all things, another one-man show at the Hansen Fuller Gallery.

MR. ARNESON: Every other year. I showed a swimming pool with a big splash in it. There I am again doing things that deal with water. These are very didactic works. You glaze a piece of ceramic. Already you're making it look wet. I've been really impressed by that notion of glaze looking wet. I've done a large number of works dealing with the wetness effect that you can achieve with glaze. I did this standard pool. I went out to a pool company in the Benicia industrial park and got a catalog of Anthony Pools. They do all the pools. I did their standard kidney shaped swimming pool. I'd do water edging the pool, with a splash in the middle. Then I built around that. That would be the feature work in the show, a series of portraits of the artist getting wet, mask-like forms hanging on the wall. A lot of drawings too of myself swimming, getting wet, getting dunked, and wearing goggles. I did one portrait, the one of Hansen, with a snorkel outfit on. Wanda had just left the gallery and this was the most appropriate piece I had done.

MS. JONES: When you had first taken the picture she had just taken up snorkeling, right?

MR. ARNESON: She was seriously into snorkeling. She thought I was doing one thing. I just wanted to create this other illusion and snorkel it all up with the goggles, and fish swimming by. It's a nice piece, glazed all in deep see green.

MS. JONES: That year, 1977, you had another one-man show at the Allan Frumkin Gallery in New York. That was the year you exhibited portraits of *Roy, Allan, David Gilhooly, Peter Voukos*, and all the ones that we talked about.

MR. ARNESON: I got a brilliant review in the *New York Times* Sunday edition. What else can you want?

MS. JONES: That's right.

MR. ARNESON: So the next show I had in New York, which I thought was even better, was in 1979. I got no review at all. The theory is, "You've had more than your share, Bob," Allan told me. This last show of 1981, just this last May, I did very well again with three or four reviews. Twice in the *New York Times*. What else can you want?

MS. JONES: That was the year that a lot of museums were buying you works.

MR. ARNESON: 1977.

MS. JONES: The Museum of Contemporary Crafts bought *Portrait of the Artist Losing his Marbles*.

MR. ARNESON: No, not in 1977. That was purchased by Johnson Wax as part of the "Objects U.S.A." show of 1969. They gave a large body of that collection to the Museum of Contemporary Crafts.

MS. JONES: And your *Search for Significant Subject Matter* enters the permanent collection of the Mildura Art Center in Mildura, Australia.

MR. ARNESON: Yes, the guy's got his hand over one eye. He's peeking out and trying to figure out what he's looking at. They purchased that.

MS. JONES: Which brings us up to 1978. There was a show, "Landscapes, Not Views" at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University. You had *Mountain and Lake* in that one.

MR. ARNESON: The big mountain and lake, right. Eventually that was purchased by the museum and it's now part of the permanent collection.

MS. JONES: You had another show with Allan Frumkin, and you had *Captain Ace*.

MR. ARNESON: 1979. *Captain Ace*, which was purchased by the Stedelijk Museum, *Portrait of Bill Wiley as Mr. Unnatural, Van Gogh*. I did a lot of my heroes. I'm into my heroes now. Whenever you borrow, if you borrow any color, or borrow any techniques, my attitude now is to pay it back. So you've got to deal back with the artist. So I did Marcel Duchamp, of course, in drag.

MS. JONES: As Dürer's mother?

MR. ARNESON: Well, I did Dürer's mother. But Marcel Duchamp is in drag, dressed—remember the famous photograph Man Ray, and they did, and they came out with a perfume that was called—oh well, it [the show] was titled *Heroes and Clowns*. I was now doing all my friends. Some of them I certainly didn't know. Certain heroes like Elvis in a full armor that was really based upon Cosimo de' Medici's portrait done by Cellini. This piece, the marble version, is in the de Young Museum. I changed some of the features, put the guitar with wings, [which] crosses the breastplate, and otherwise Elvis is in full glory there with his cowlick. He has the kind of rock holding up his tunic on a corner. Then I've got Van Gogh at the moment that he cut off his ear. On his shoulder is a big red pile of blood, and a fragment of his ear is resting on the pedestal base. That was a funny thing, nice work. On the back side of Van Gogh I have a slot for used razor blades. I've got an image of a straight razor. Then I did a version of the artist as a clown again. It's kind of the artists being a mask. Bill Wiley as *Mr. Unnatural*, with his dunce cap on and his chop board with the figure eight across the front. Then a portrait of Albrecht Dürer's mother, called *Mother Dürer*. She's really a mean little lady. But I really liked the wrinkles on her brow. That was a show of high-spirited work. She people like it, some people hate it. That's how I go. I don't think I leave anybody neutral. You just like the stuff, or you're going to hate it. And then a current show we had this May featured probably the biggest head I've ever made, over three feet high, of the artist being hard pressed. The nose deals with the picture plane. Where the nose is flattened out. I remember one time the picture plane was everything as a work of art. Here my nose is flattened all over my face. Then a portrait of Picasso on a pedestal, called *Pablo Ruiz With Itch*. This is based upon a famous painting Picasso did of the ladies of Avignon. They're kind of classically reaching back; it looks like they're scratching their back. I rendered Picasso scratching his back. I think he did quite a bit of that. The pedestal that he rests upon is done in a number of Picasso styles. His cubistic and—the top of the pedestal based on the double eye portrait on the same side of the nose. I did a wonderful portrait, I thought, of Francis Bacon. Okay, why am I doing these guys? Well, I borrowed from them. I certainly borrowed from Picasso. I think I'd been borrowing from Francis Bacon. I thought I'd better do some

Bacon. I'd better pay homage to them. I did an homage to Francis. We see Francis on top of this pedestal, one half of his face. And the other half we see only the shadow or reflection of his face. That leads us around to the back where we see the monster. So much of his paintings are the screaming, grimacing head. The pedestal is based upon the coloring, blues and oranges that deal with predominant colors so much in his paintings. I did a work, *Homage to Philip Guston*. I had seen the show at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. I felt very in harmony with his work. The obsessiveness of his work. The spirit of it I felt at home with. It seemed like it resembled early works of mine. So I did a pedestal with a pair of shoes on it. Upside down glazed kind of pinky. Around the base of the pedestal were crumbled brushes. Then I did a portrait of the artist coming out of water, though the pedestal becomes the truncated form for the head, and the pedestal's half glazed and dripping with water running down to the bottom. And a portrait, *Pursuit of the Asian Gilda*. This is kind of an image of a dear collector of mine in Chicago, Gilda Buchbinder, on her way to China. I've done her all in yellow. She's holding her fingers to the corners of her eyes, stretching them out orientally. And then the artist is squinting on a pedestal under the heat of the sun. I guess, too much spotlight. I'm grimacing. I call it *Squint*, because I'm squinting.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]