DAVIS HISTORY TODAY

On this blog, I -- John Lofland, jlofland@dcn.org -- seek to expand our understanding of the history of Davis, California.

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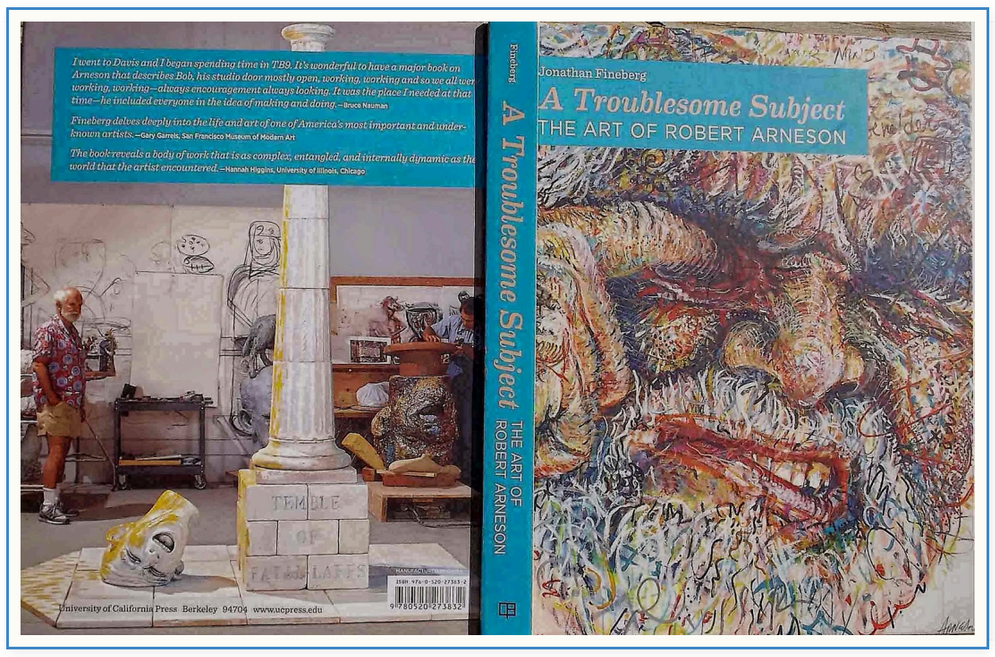
Tuesday, October 28, 2014

1303 Alice Street as a Candidate for Davis, CA Historical Resource Designation: Post II of III, Psychology (187)

***Review and revision draft*. Please send suggestions to me, John Lofland, at jlofland@dcn.org**



PSYCHOLOGY

Arneson art and psychology expert Professor Jonathan Fineberg--introduced in the previous post--documents how Arneson was a talented artist, but when he arrived in Davis in 1962 his work was not especially distinctive or noteworthy. It was UCD art department organizer Richard Nelson who apparently saw potential in him that some others did not.

Arneson was not himself happy with his art, nor was he pleased to be living in a tract home next to an open, dusty field across which intensely hot winds sometimes blew. After all, he was born and raised in the bucolic river-oriented village of Benicia and had never lived outside the Bay Area (Fineberg, 68).

The challenge for any artist, we are told, is to identify for her or himself a distinctive motif--a something that both expresses that person and prompts others to respond to her or him as an artist. For Arneson, an answer to this challenge started with depictions of everyday objects in his 1303 Alice Street home treated with an ironic twist.

The viewer knew that the object was not merely a toaster, a typewriter, or a toilet--three topics of his more successful early ceramic sculptures--but something also more troubling (e. g. image 1).

1.

EARLIER AND MIDDLE 1960S. According to Fineberg, a piece called "Funk John" done in 1963 created key events that Arneson perceived as telling him he had started on his right path.

Events involving the Funk John sculpture include it being banned from an art exhibit and the person in charge of the venue denouncing him as a communist enemy of capitalism. Arneson was delighted.

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Timeline

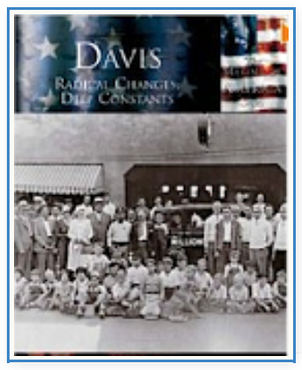
One page timeline of key changes in Davis over 16 decades

Creating Davis, Jan-Dec 1968

Waking Davis, 1905

G.W. Pierce leads UC Farm campaign.

Davis: Radical Changes, Deep Constants



Davis, 1910s-1940s

The piece was then sold to a wealthy private collector whose husband destroyed it. Arneson glued it back together for her only to have the husband destroy it again. (Legendary among Arneson aficionados, Funk John exists only in photographs, as seen in image 2.)

2.

If one starts down the path of unfamiliar treatments of familiar objects, it does not take long to notice the house in which one is living. As reported by Fineberg:

In 1966, Arneson shifted his attention from the household things to the house itself. He had made a plate in 1965 with a simple portrait of his three bedroom tract house at 1303 Alice Street in Davis, but in 1966 he turned to the house in earnest and began to focus on it obsessively . . . . (Fineberg, 67)*

In reading the above passage one needs to know that in addition to being an expert on the history of art, Professor FIneberg is a trained and serious lay psychoanalyst--a status a "lay person" (a non-M.D.) can earn through study with medically trained psychoanalysts. Therefore, his use of the word "obsessively" is not simply a colorful throwaway expression of a fancy-pants art professor. Instead, it is a technical assessment from the psychoanalytic point of view.

If a large number of art products on a single topic produced in a short period of time (which was the case with Arneson) suggests obsessiveness, then the term seems to me fitting.

According to Fineberg, this obsessiveness was related to the fact that although Arneson did not like the house, he nonetheless used it as a vehicle--a surrogate--for expressing himself.

He had left Oakland in 1962 to move into this house and he never liked it. In 1966 he used his imagination to transform the house into a surrogate for himself and for the ongoing narrative of his inner life. The personified house would have moments filled with bright color . . . , dark moments. . . , and occasionally "dreams of a better world," as he wrote on one of the Alice Street sculptures . . . . "The spirit of the house got to me . . ." [he said] , and as a subject matter it began to carry more and more meaning. (Fineberg, 68)

Fineberg stresses that Arneson had not previously made much connection between his art and his inner life. But the Alice work began to change that.

. . . The ungainliness of the Funk work [of 1960 to 1963] looked like he looked to himself--as a father, and as a husband. He wasn't happy with all the anger he felt and especially regretted the way it came out with his kids . . . In the *Alice Street* works, Arneson took an introspective turn and realized that his work and his life were connected. (Fineberg, 84)

By end of the 1960s, or close to it:

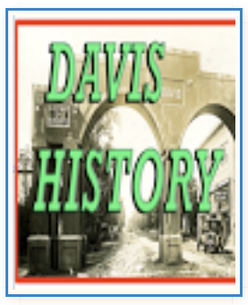
The Alice works had fundamentally reoriented Arneson's subject matter, providing a diary and at the same time bringing him to the intuitive realization that his work had to connect to his psychic life in a meaningful way. (Fineberg, 85)

TURNING POINTS. Recall from the chronology in the previous post that the family spent the academic year 1967-68 in Pennsylvania and New York. That period away from Davis and the Alice house appears to have set the stage for crisis in the Arneson family. Fineberg reports:

. . . Almost as soon they returned home, life at Alice Street became untenable. He and Jeanette had both grown out of their marriage and they had four wildly active young boys to raise. "Fourteen years ago she was somebody else and so was I," he wrote, finally, in a letter of November 1969. Arneson had always focused on his work to the point that it

Researching Davis History Website

Davis History Website



Davis History Archives

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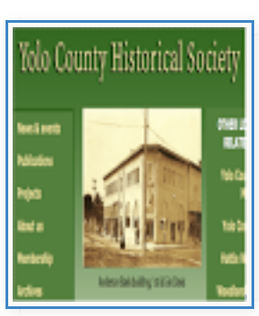
- Hattie Weber Museum of Davis
- Lofland YouTube channel
- UC Davis, Special Collections
- Yolo County Archives

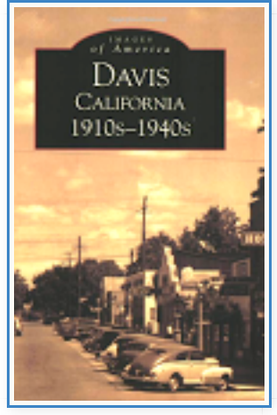
HW Museum of Davis

Yolo County Historical Society



City Historical Preservation

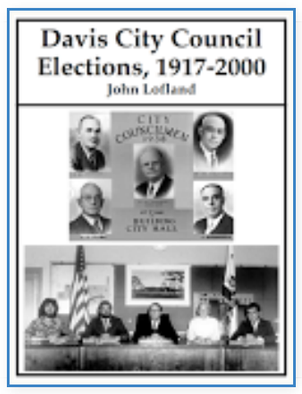
Historical Resources Management Comm.



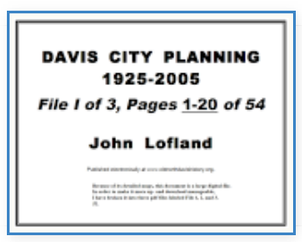
Pre-WWII Tiny Davis

Post-WWII Demolition

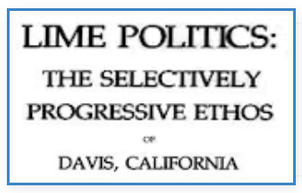
Council Elections 1917- - -



Planning 1925-2005



Lime Politics

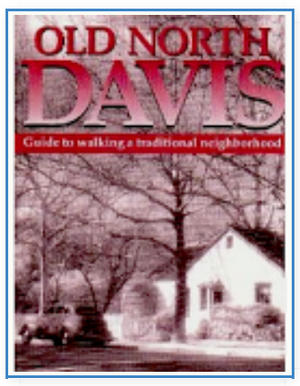


2nd St. 600s

The amazing transformation of the 2nd Street 600s block.

About

Old North Davis



compromised his family life, especially his relationships with his kids. He just wasn't around enough for them, and he was too much like a tough football coach when he was; his interactions with his kids may have unintentionally expressed his frustration with his marriage. He and Jeanette could not even establish a stable pattern of managing the household, and stress was showing up in the boys. (Fineberg, 79-80)

In addition, in October of 1968, he began an intimate relationship with Sandra Shannonhouse. Fineberg regards this relationship as a signal feature and turning point in Arneson's life.

. . . In 1970, as the relationship with Shannonhouse developed, Arneson began to find a different image of himself mirrored in her. It's impossible to know whether to attribute the dramatic change in his work at that moment to the relationship or to conclude that he was to have that relationship because of a fundamental change in his self-image, but a big change undeniably took place. (Fineberg, 84)

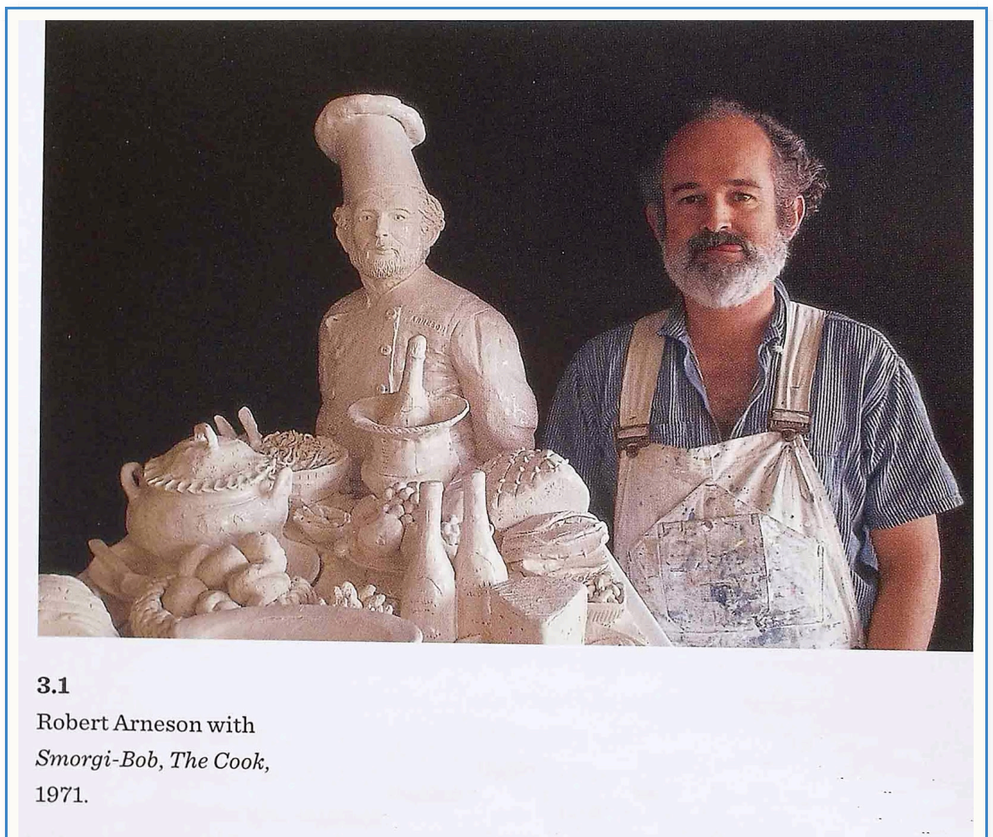
From here, Fineberg reckons, Arneson began to become a very different person and artist:

Arneson crossed a threshold in 1971-72. Despite the turmoil in his personal life or perhaps because of it, his work developed seriousness in its subject matter and a technical virtuosity that dramatically set the work of the 1970s apart from the work that preceded it. (Fineberg, 100)

Specifically:

. . . the introspective mood of the Alice house works and the spontaneity of assembling [images in porcelain] . . . coalesced into a preoccupation with self-analysis through free association. He also seems to have recognized that in self-portraiture he could parse broader issues. (Fineberg, 233)

The images of the Alice Street house had been transitional in directing him inward, but with the heads of 1970-71 Arneson put explicit self-portraiture at the center of his art. (Fineberg, 98 and image 3 in this post)



3.1
Robert Arneson with
Smorgi-Bob, The Cook,
1971.

3.

This transition was a very serious psychological process in which Arneson's art itself was a fundamental refuge for him:

Both his life and his art were unsteady. Yet he knew that his art was "the one thing in my life that has kept me sane--I enter into it--my private world--it's the place I go to find me . . . " (Fineberg, 84)

The deep turns in his inner life, in his family relations, and, as an upshot, in his art set him on a new path:

Arneson's life had changed dramatically by 1974. He was happily remarried, his career was taking off . . . , and he and Sandra were looking to move to Benicia. (Fineberg, 114)

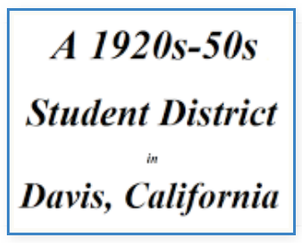
* * *

Because this three-post series focuses only on the Alice house as a possible City of Davis historic resource, my Arneson chronology and psychology ends here.

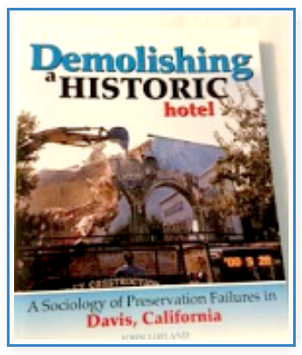
Let me, though, conclude this post with two observations.

First, the generic story told here is a familiar one. Its title might be: *"Talented, Obsessive, Self-Destructive Man Meets Good Woman Who Inspires and Supports Him in Recognizing and Realizing His Talent."*

20s-'50s Student District



Demolishing a Historic Hotel



Major Shapers

One page timeline of major "shapers" in 16 decades

Remembering the Terminal Hotel Building

Indeed, this story is a staple of Hollywood biopics. Think, for example, of Johnny Cash and June Carter. Think, also, of such pairs as George Bush and Laura Welch and Jerry Brown and Anne Gust. In pop culture and elsewhere the numbers of such pairs go on and on.

I mention this generic story and its popular culture status not to belittle the phenomenon, but to draw attention to the possibility that it so frequent that it might actually be true and a significant type of human story.

Second, aspects of Arneson's art and psychology suggest to some observers that he was less than serious about his art and even frivolous.

I would point out that while one can see whimsy, cynicism and related qualities in much of his art, these features nonetheless **also** express very serious and deep dealings with "a troublesome subject"--the title of Fineberg's Arneson book.

To me, Fineberg nails at least one main form of "troublesome subject" when he observes about a well-known Arneson sculpture:

The *Search for Significant Subject Matter* spells out an important issue that had troubled Arneson since the 1960s and would continue to plague him until the end of his life. "SO WHAT?" he wrote on a speech balloon on the front of the piece. (Fineberg, 115-116)

Image 4 is a photograph of that sculpture.

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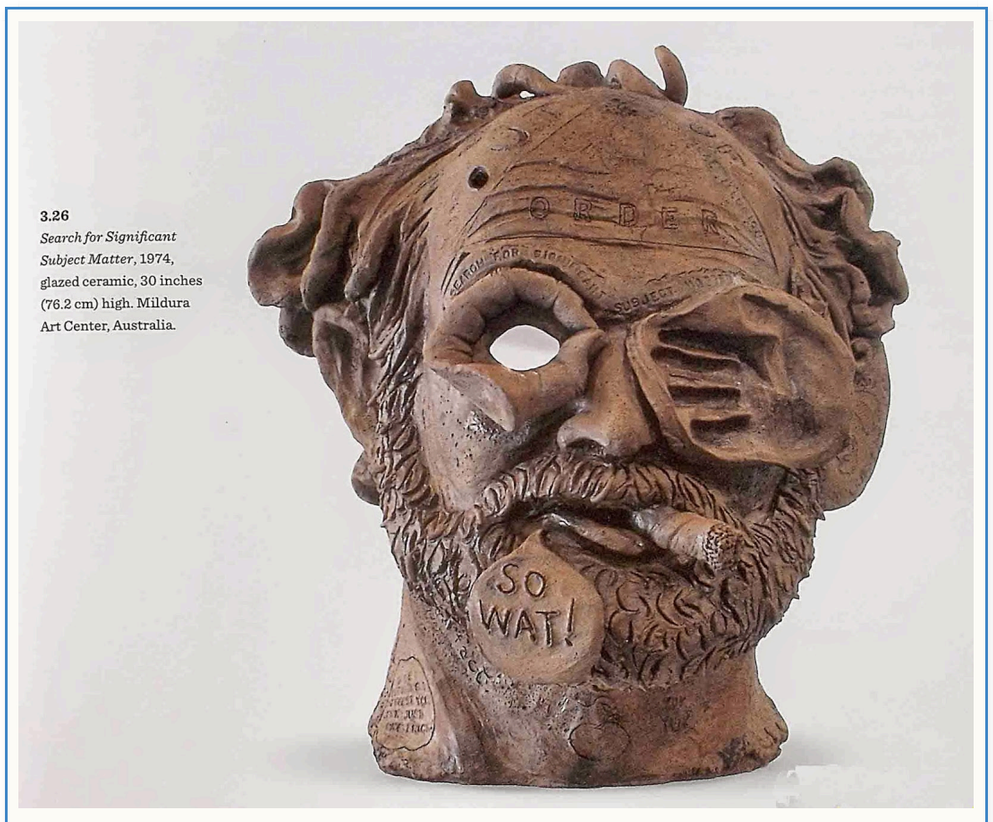
* Paragraphs in bold face type in this post are quotes from Jonathan Fineberg, *A Troublesome Subject: The Art of Robert Arneson*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013. The page number of a quoted passage appears in parentheses following the quote.



4.

Posted by John Lofland at 8:13 AM

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