

Jeremy Anderson: "Taking the World Apart is Easy, It is Getting it Back Together in an Acceptable Form That is Difficult."

by Dan Nadel, August 2017

Arguably one of the two founding figures in Northern California sculpture (the other being Peter Voulkos), Jeremy Anderson (1921-1982) was the first sculptor in the region to seamlessly combine biomorphic abstraction, Surrealist literary allusion and modernist world-play in the form of meticulously crafted objects. He was, like his teacher, Clyfford Still, and students such as William T. Wiley and Robert Hudson, a one-man movement whose solitary work and aversion to groups has kept him from widespread recognition. His sculptures ranged from intimate erotic figures to epic totemic forms, to wittily abstract landscape, all masterfully executed in, variously, magnesite, redwood, and polychrome. This exhibition, the largest survey of his work in over 20 years, presents sculptures and drawings from 1950 to 1982.

Born and raised in Northern California, Anderson served in the US Navy from 1941 until the war's end. In 1946 he enrolled in the California School of Fine Arts, where he studied with Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, David Park, Clay Spohn and Robert Howard. At the time, Still and Rothko were advancing both the formal and spiritual agendas of abstraction, while Spohn and Howard were experimenting with irreverent approaches to materiality in sculpture. As one of twelve founding members (all fellow CSFA students) of the Metart cooperative gallery in San Francisco, Anderson mounted his first solo show there in 1949. And while CSFA was a bastion of modernism in those years, importantly for Anderson, San Francisco was also highly receptive to Surrealism: copies of *View* magazine and *VVV* had been available earlier in the decade, and Gordon Onslow Ford's Surrealist painting collection was frequently on view at the San Francisco Museum of Art. Moreover, the De Young Museum was a favorite haunt for Anderson, who was fascinated by the ancient weapons collection, as well its collection of Oceanic and African statuary -- an interest shared by many of the Surrealist painters. A six-month CSFA travel fellowship to France also proved transformative. Anderson settled in Carnac-Plage in order to study the area's Neolithic stones. These mysterious and ritualistic stones dovetailed with his experiences at the De Young and his education at CSFA, and by 1951 Anderson had a developed sense of his influences and interests: Surrealism, mythopoetic abstraction, wordplay, weaponry, worship objects, psychiatry, and sex. These interests fueled the creation of objects that have a profound sense of touch (whether his own or thousands of years of human contact), hold meaning within them, and suggest ideas to the viewer both functional and spiritual.

By 1952, Anderson was notable enough that he was tapped for a two-person exhibition with Louise Bourgeois at the Allan Frumkin Gallery in Chicago. This was followed by solo exhibitions in 1954 at Frumkin and at The Stable Gallery, New York. About the latter show, Fairfield Porter noted, "the sacredness of human life has rubbed off on [the sculptures]."¹ The search for the mystic and the sacred (and later, the cosmic humor of it all) is what propelled Anderson's work

¹ Fairfield Porter, "Jeremy Anderson" *Art News* Volume 53, number 6, October, 1954.

along a steady progression. The earliest works in the present exhibition are plaster and magnesite, and in their globular and cage-like forms resemble Giacometti and Miro's work. By the early 1950s, Anderson had settled on redwood -- the most readily available material around his studio, but also one with a deep, ruddy coloration that became a hallmark of Anderson's work. And these pieces can be broken down into two categories: the horizontal planes, a la Noguchi and Giacometti, which nod at topographical maps of landscapes (which would become the artist's primary mode of drawing in the 1960s), boats, and chess games; and complex vertical totems that twist, protrude bulbous masses, and house other boxes --these come very close to the worship objects Anderson loved.

The 1960s were perhaps Anderson's most fertile decade. Anderson began a fruitful relationship with the Dilexi Gallery and was the subject of museum retrospectives in 1966-67 at the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Pasadena Art Museum. In works like *Between*, *Source*, and *Altar*, he finally combined horizontal and vertical, and made objects of profound strangeness. *Between* resembles a the interior of a boat, with two levels. It holds forms inside it and *is* those forms. It manages to be object and container all at once. *Source* resembles an imagined worktable for the artist at work and at contemplation -- if the table was also the work itself. And *Altar* is one of Anderson's earliest nods at figuration. Upon two legs is a table and corresponding leaf. Below the table hangs what Anderson's notes refer to as "a garden enclosed". On top are: "volcano-breast", "horns", "containers", and "maces". One note refers to a "fantom filled with blood." *Altar* embodies what Anderson sought for sculpture: "Sculpture is concerned with experience quite similar to what could be called everyday mystical experience: the contemplation of nature or of a wrestling bout, the experience that come with boats and sports cars, or gambling, hunting and many similar seemingly irrational pursuits that, once experienced, lead the individual back for more."²

In the mid-1960s, Anderson turned not just to the figure, but to color, with a vengeance, and made work that synthesized the mystical vibes and formal mastery of his earlier sculptures with the bright Pop of that decade. *Toys of a Prince*, based on Giorgio De Chirico's *Playthings of a Prince*, 1915, physically catalogs De Chirico's "playthings" as though the painter had absurdly suggested they might need to exist one day as oversized polychrome objects set carefully on an enormous tabletop.

In 1967 Peter Selz included Anderson in his *Funk* exhibition, where the artist was, like Voukos, viewed as an elder statesman. About Funk, Anderson wrote: "As Zen becomes a warm puppy, and science is a no go, and politics and evasion of reality, Funk becomes the only manner of thinking. [It is] a traditional revolt against the noble subjects, in noble materials, and noble motive idea"³ James Monte, writing about Funk for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's *American Sculpture in the Sixties*, saw Anderson as having been the only artist of the time to combine the "mythic, abstract surrealism of Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko... with the funk,

² Jeremy Anderson "A Few Thoughts on Sculpture and Related Subjects" in *Jeremy Anderson The Critical Link: A Quiet Revolution*. Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art, 1995.

³ Jeremy Anderson, Funk Questionnaire, 1967.

Dadasitic attitude of... Wally Hedrick and Bruce Conner.”⁴ A major presence in both of these exhibitions, as well as Anderson’s galleries, was H.C. Westermann. The two men were born only a year apart, both served in World War II, and shared many of the same influences, and yet they seem to have developed independently of one another. Anderson preceded Westerman at both Frumkin and Dilexi. They did not correspond, and didn’t even meet until 1971, at which point Anderson declared himself unimpressed.⁵ This is not too surprising. Westermann was far more boisterous and catholic in his work -- whereas Anderson was more restrained and allusive. If one was to put it simply -- Westermann was combining Surrealism to explore and reformulate the American vernacular in order to understand his, and his country’s spiritual condition. Anderson, on the other hand, was Surrealism to achieve a kind of escape velocity to get at the mystical and the universal.

Which is not to say that Anderson didn’t dip into the irreverent and, importantly, the erotic. *Lotus Eaters*, is a hallucinatory symphony of sex-like forms -- doing everything Anderson wanted to suggest about the pleasures of the flesh but not show. When Anderson was explicitly erotic, he made *Belladonna Amarillyis*, a life sized female figure made of pine and posing atop a fake tiger skin surface. She might be related to Anderson’s miniature series, *Mrs. Allfours* -- small bronzes of a woman in various poses and vignettes. These small works, along with Anderson’s much later *Heart* and *Souls* serieses are among the artist’s most playful. This was a man whose favorite book was *Finnegan’s Wake*, and he revelled in ribald puns.

Anderson’s love of wordplay is very much on display in his drawings, which range from his Map works, which identify places and ideas equally -- from “A BEWILDERING VISIT TO THE SEASIDE” to “A NEW KIND OF LOVE” to “NEW KIND OF LOVE” to “DOWN EAST.” These works call to mind Anderson’s younger peers, Wiley and Roy De Forest, as well a the Surrealist vistas of Max Ernst. The artist’s drawing activity included this and, of course, copious expressive drawings for sculptures -- here Anderson seems to be finding form through lines, and often drawing the air around the form, as well. The maps, and drawing itself, amply displayed here, is the surest way to track Anderson’s thoughts -- as he might have put it, his entire artistic life was as a cartographer of the unconscious.

⁴ James Monte, “Bagless Funk”, *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, Los Angeles Counu Museum of Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1967.

⁵ Jo Farb Hernandez in *Jeremy Anderson The Critical Link: A Quiet Revolution*. Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art, 1995.