

I have an idea than an "I" is composed in large part of representations of the important "Yous." There is a sameness about "us" within communities, which makes a "we" out of "you" and "me". We assume that what we are is what others are, and our outlook on things follows that experience. But our sense of "community" is threatened when we meet someone from outside our experience and sameness is interpreted as difference.

The ensuing loss of "normal – ordinary" – is horrifying to witness. We are watching this occur all over our world. Sameness to difference. Normal to extreme.

From An Artist Statement written by Tré Arenz, circa 1995ⁱ

For us, différance remains a metaphysical name, and all the names that it receives in our language are still, as names, metaphysical. And this is particularly the case when these names state the determination of différance as the difference between presence and the present (Anwesen/Anwesend), ...of Being, and beings...

"Older" than Being itself, such a différance has no name in our language. But we "already know " that it is unnameable....

There will be no unique name, even if it were the name of Being. And we must think this without nostalgia, that is, outside the myth of a purely maternal or paternal language, a lost native country of thought. On the contrary, we must affirm this, in the sense in which Nietzsche puts affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance...

From "Différance" by Jacques Derrida (trans. Alan Bass)ⁱⁱ

Form is a trace of the formless; it is the formless that produces form, not form the formless; and matter is needed for the producing; matter, in the nature of things is the furthest away, since itself it has not even the lowest degree of form. Thus loveableness does not belong to matter but to that which draws upon form: the form upon matter comes by way of soul; soul is more nearly form and therefore more lovable; Intellectual Principle, nearer still, is even more to be loved: by these steps we are led to know that the primary nature of Beauty must be formless.

Plotinus, Enneads, VI, 7, 33, trans. D. MacKenna
(Translation modified)ⁱⁱⁱ

I open this essay, written on the occasion of Tré Arenz' retrospective exhibition, organized by the Center for Women & Their Work, with a series of quotations from writings by the artist herself, as well as from seminal philosophical writings by Plotinus and Jacques Derrida that I hope further illuminate Arenz' principal obsession with the nature of being(s) and of Being and her investigation of individual and societal definitions of "sameness" and "difference." Like Derrida, who brought attention to that which lies at the "margins" of interpretation as well as that which lies beyond marginality in his seminal writing titled "différance" cited above, Arenz was similarly engaged with marginality and difference. Her art succeeded at "(putting an) affirmation (of these concepts) into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance...."¹

The loss of Tré Arenz is much lamented across the artistic communities of Texas, California, and the broader art-worlds through which she traveled. As a visual artist, who lived primarily in Austin, Texas throughout the 1990's until her untimely death in 2003, she also exhibited, worked, and taught nationally and internationally, during residencies at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena Montana, the Arts/Industry Residency Program at the Kohler Co., in Kohler, Wisconsin, the Djerassi Foundation in Woodside, California and a Rockefeller Residency in Bellagio, Italy. She also taught at the University of California at Davis and exhibited regularly in Houston, Dallas, Austin and abroad. Tré Arenz had a unique knack for addressing lofty subjects through accessible and playful visual forms, which on the surface often appeared light-hearted, but which succeeded at casting powerful spells upon their viewers. Arenz enchanted many viewers with her distinctively formed ceramic flowers, dogs, balls, toys, and fruits which addressed philosophical concepts such as the "sameness" and "difference" of both form and the formless, across categories of race, culture, and gender. Throughout her lifework, Arenz was compelled to investigate these important notions from multiple perspectives ranging from the individual/autobiographical to the societal/cultural/political, and the transcendental/metaphysical.

As a highly engaged artist and intellectual, Tré Arenz was also known for her exuberant personality and tireless poetic humor. She was always creating and always writing. Though her greatest love was for creating visual form, she was constantly pointing to the formless, to what Plotinus above calls the "soul" and the "Intellectual principle." It is this deep engagement with the soul of the object or the form, which made Arenz' work so beloved and enigmatic. She was able to imbue her visual tracings of objects even as simple as that of a pear (a favorite form) with a distinct touch. Re-engaging with the objects of the everyday, Arenz breathed life and humor into the visual forms of the domestic, while also layering her works with many witty references to art and literary history. She tirelessly wrote down her thoughts in journals and on scraps of paper, incorporating her quirky poetic sensibility into the titles of her installations and artworks and allowing these thoughts also to guide her in experimental directions ranging from installation to collaborative performance. Not surprisingly, an abundance of papers imbued with her written thoughts were discovered in her studio after her death.²

Arenz' sensibility could be described art-historically as second generation figurative funk, though her works range from provocative individual objects— complex amalgams in the form of piles, mounds and arrangements of objects on tables or shelves— to major installations and collaborative performances. Her exhibitions represented in this catalogue, created over a period of approximately twelve years, fused a highly accessible narrative trajectory with a philosophical bent that often confounded viewers and created an art-viewing experience of pleasure and play combined with enigma and paradox. This strategy is in keeping with the funk movement that refocused art on images drawn from the everyday and from popular culture, and in which wit and humor were used to address social reality. However, as a second-generation feminist artist as well, Arenz was also keenly aware of how process itself informs a vital aspect of the meaning

of the art object in society. Often thought of primarily as a ceramic artist, Arenz' ambitious life work did indeed investigate the process and history of ceramics as an art-craft continuum, and she often embedded layers of references to ceramic history throughout her work. Arenz also created complex wall assemblages composed of ceramic elements combined with photographs, and ambitious installation projects comprised of numerous materials. She also undertook several major collaborative projects, most notably with the internationally known dancer and choreographer, Deborah Hay, during a joint Rockefeller Residency in Bellagio, Italy. Her collaboration with Hay involved the creation of full-fledged performances for which Arenz not only co-developed the thematic direction, but also created enigmatic props, sets and costumes that were central to the works, blurring the notion of installation, performance, and theater. Thus, it might be more accurate to describe Tré Arenz as a sculptor, often engaged with ceramics, but like Robert Arneson, ultimately engaged with life, philosophy, art, and visual form, as a painter is engaged with paint and that which lies beyond paint as well.

Tré Arenz, born in Oregon in 1953, was raised as a child in a rural/agricultural setting, which continued to inform her subject matter throughout her life. She began her study of art at the influential California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, California in the 1970's under the tutelage of Bay Area ceramist, figurationist and feminist, Viola Frey. While there is a strong connection in the work of Arenz with other key figures of Bay Area figuration and Funk, such as Robert Arneson, Roy DeForest, William T. Wiley, Robert Hudson, Richard Shaw, and others, her work is most closely linked with the women artists of this movement and its ensuing second generation perhaps best represented by artists such as Squeak Carnwath, also a student of Viola Frey, who extended the narrative funk strategy with a focus on both the public and private lives of women in contemporary society. In fact, Tré Arenz and Squeak Carnwath were friends and contemporaries and Arenz was on her way to teach alongside Carnwath at the University of California, Berkeley, before her untimely and unexpected death at the age of 49 in the summer of 2003. Like DeForest and Arneson, Arenz had a love of animals and used the motif of the dog and horse or pony throughout her career. But while for DeForest the dog is often a symbol of insatiable male sexual desire, for Arenz, the dog is generally a steadfast companion, or a creature of knowledge or wisdom. From Viola Frey, Arenz was encouraged to look at popular and domestic culture as a source of imagery for her artwork. This is particularly evident in her use of motifs such as brooms, cups and saucers, flowers, and toy-like representations of cars, airplanes, and other gendered toy imagery that Arenz used to speak to gender differences in contemporary culture. In an artist statement written in the mid-90s, Tré Arenz states:

(My) work involves a celebration of obsessive behavior through the use of multiple objects and/or repeated activity in relation to ordinary domestic routine or ritual. Mindless activity is often called women's work, and for many of us is very provocative. This is different from the routinization/standardization encouraged by our marketplace, which seeks a Sameness through loss of self and actual mindlessness. Acknowledgement of the absurdity of my routines allows me to recognize them – acquiescence to the predictable tedious nature of life deadens one into accepting “things as they are.” I believe this acquiescence can fester and infect one's spirit, leaving them empty and hopeless. It is only through an understanding of self, (“I”) that one can maintain the “We” of which I speak.”³

In addition to the recurrent motifs of animals, of toys, and of the domestic everyday, Arenz regularly employed the motif of stripes as a method of both obliterating and illuminating the images and subjects to which she gave form. The motif of the striped, obscured image appears in a major series of works entitled *Sameness* created between 1994 and 1996. Arenz first presented these works as ceramic wall sculptures consisting of small cartoon-like white ceramic objects such as dogs, pears, airplanes, and heads, arranged and placed on white shelves in

provocative groupings, with blue and white stripes covering the entirety of the shelf and all of the objects. The heads, dogs, fruit and airplanes are carefully crafted by Arenz to convey psychic and emotional content, though they are purged of almost all detail. The cartoon-like simplification of the forms, including the dogs, heads, and airplanes, is similar to the strategy of another seminal California artist who foreshadows California Funk, Phillip Guston, and like Guston, Arenz succeeds in these evocative works in capturing powerful emotional and psychic states through her sensitive touch and delineation of gestural form. The thick, white majolica glaze and the blue lines covering the objects and supporting shelves, nearly obliterate the forms to create dazzling, eye-popping patterns of blue and white, which demand that the viewer closely observe the expressions and gestures of the forms that are nearly obscured. Arenz states: "the stripes serve both to neutralize and reveal idiosyncrasies. Further, within the ceramic tradition, the use of blue and white as a decorative element has appeared laterally throughout diverse cultures."⁴ Indeed the blue and white decorative motif of ceramics originated in Chinese pottery traditions and is emulated and adapted into new forms throughout all of Europe from Italian majolica-ware to British willow-ware to Dutch delft. It also appears in Mexican tile and pottery traditions traveling with the Europeans to Mexico, where it further evolves. Thus Arenz was interested in taking this quasi-universal motif and unexpectedly applying it to sculptural arrangements, blurring distinctions between the decorative and the sculptural. But Arenz' reductive strategy of blue and white lines, rather than floral motifs, also echoes strongly with Japanese pattern and shows an affinity with the work of the pattern-painters of Southern California as well as with the influential Japanese-born ceramic artist, Jun Kaneko, who has created large scale sculptures and platter-shapes entirely covered in stripes.

In ensuing works such as *Sameness-Belief*, Arenz paints her characteristically expressive uneven blue-lines across enlarged and cropped 55" square portraits photographed by Phyllis Finley. Between and behind the stripes, the viewer struggles to discern details about the individual of the portrait such as the age, gender, race, etc. of the subject, and is unable to determine these attributes definitively, though they are commonly the first categories used to decipher a subject. Instead, the obfuscation of the image by the blue lines, focuses our attention on that which lies beneath the surface of the uncategorizable differences between each portrait and points us to consider the universal experiences and expressions captured in the portraits accompanied by titles such as *Sameness - Belief*; *Sameness - Breath*, *Sameness - Patience*. In a related work titled *Sameness - Touch* composed of a table of blue and white striped heads separated by cups and saucers, Arenz juxtaposes anonymity with the art historical concept of the bust as a form associated with the memorialization of wealthy or powerful individuals. However, like Giacommetti, who replaced the specific memorial figure with an abstracted "everyman," Arenz' heads or busts also depict "everyman" or "everywoman" (indeed the gender is intentionally androgynous) and are played off against the most mundane of objects, the coffee cup, associated with the realm of the decorative and the domestic to memorialize the rituals of the everyday. In a related but distinct installation, titled *Sameness - Distractions*, Arenz places blue and white painted brooms with heads mounted on the handles across a gallery floor covered in an oval configuration of blue and white stripes. Transforming the entire gallery space into a striped reality, she creates an Oz-like world in which everyday rituals are elevated to the realm of the archetypal.

During an artist residency in the Arts/Industry program at Kohler Co. in Wisconsin, in which she was able to explore cast ceramic form, Arenz created numerous works that continue the theme of the striped. Her work created during the residency used discarded cast sinks filled with piles of cast-porcelain rubber duckies, all painted in blue and white. Here the rubber ducky toy, with its reference to childhood bathing, conjures both playful memories and ominous fears of water and of the fragility of the innocence associated with childhood and its inevitable passing.

Embedded within these works is, however, a deeper autobiographical reference to Arenz' infertility caused by an experimental form of birth control she was given as a young woman, which left her scarred and unable to have children. Though the viewer would not be aware of this reality directly, as is the case of all art, the work is inevitably infused with the autobiographical. It is a testament to the potency of Arenz' work that she was able to create sculptural assemblages rich with numerous psycho-visual associations, thus transcending the particularity of any one interpretation. Her piles of poignantly placed, discarded rubber duckies become stand-ins for various types of loss, ranging from the loss of innocence to the loss of love or of a loved one.

As mentioned earlier, the motif of the dog appears throughout Arenz' work of the 1990s. Arenz was deeply interested in and enamored of her dogs and for Arenz, dogs were the beloved children of her life. Perhaps inspired by her residency in Italy, in which she began to investigate the motif of the "wolf" (the symbol of Rome), and, of course, a near relative of the dog, Arenz created an important body of work in 1997 in which she replaces the photographic portraits of human faces of her earlier work with those of various types of dogs. Arenz' photographs of dogs are large and closely cropped with eyes that piercingly stare out at the viewer. In a particularly powerful work of this series titled *Voyeur*, a shelf holds a small ceramic teddy bear riding on the back of a she-wolf with visibly exaggerated teats, both covered in Arenz' signature stripes. The teddy bear looks up at a huge photograph of the gleaming eyes and well-formed snout of a large fair-haired dog. The dog in turn, stares penetratingly at the viewer to form a voyeuristic triangulation. In a related work titled *Idol (God-Dog)*, Arenz fashioned a gold-leafed dog that looks up at the much larger portrait of a magnificent black dog. This work obviously plays with the linguistic phenomena of the word "Dog" as "God" spelled backwards, reconfiguring the mythological hierarchies of the Judeo-Christian traditions, in which God is generally given a human form, if a form at all. The reference to the she-dog in *Voyeur* is foreshadowed by a work Arenz completed in 1995 titled *Civilized*. In this piece, a cartoon-like car is being suckled by the mythic Roman twins, Remus and Romulus (who were raised by a she-wolf) and these are placed beneath a photograph of an Italian ball court. In Arenz' characteristically witty funk-influenced style, *Civilized* addresses the gendered cultural division of traditional and contemporary Italian and American society, likening the she-car to a she-wolf and juxtaposing the exclusively masculine realm of play connoted by the ball-court with the idea of the she-wolf or she-car as the ultimate boy-toy. Arenz' pun can ultimately be interpreted as a biting condemnation of so-called patriarchal civility, in which the realm of the feminine is conflated with the suckling mother and the toy. In a work titled *She-Dress*, created in 1998, Arenz takes the motif one step further by creating a ceramic dress with eight teats. An alternative interpretation would give more affirmative potency to the maternal image which Arenz conjures, and would consider Arenz' use of the image of the suckling she-wolf as a celebratory evocation of the feminine and its generative potential. Perhaps Arenz intended both interpretations to create works that would address the complexity of the female experience.

In work created between 1999 and 2002, Tré Arenz returned to sculptural ceramic figuration with a renewed enthusiasm to address themes referenced earlier in her career, but with a decidedly darker edge. In this period, she created a series of unglazed terra-cotta figures with blue and white striped clown-like heads each posed provocatively to evoke a specific message through hand gestures and body pose with titles such as *Witness* and *One of Us*. Between 1999 and 2002, she created a work titled *Beuy Toy* or *Boy Toy* (she used both titles for the piece on different occasions) in which she juxtaposes the blue hat of Joseph Beuys, next to a distressed female figure dressed in a short pink dress. The dress is ominously ornamented with repeated outlines of a man's hand in the shape of a gun. This confounding work obviously focuses on the ongoing problem of sexual violence and oppression of women. Yet the meaning of the Beuysian

hat is harder to ascribe. Was Arenz referencing Joseph Beuys in an affirmative sense, as a politically engaged artist, who co-founded the Green Party and led the way for social and political change in society? Or was she alluding to the continued oppression of women in society and the continued idolization of “the male artist” typified by a figure such as Joseph Beuys? Or was she making an oblique reference to Joseph Beuys’ performances in which he precariously isolated himself in a gallery for long periods of time with a live coyote? In one exhibition, she exhibited this work along side a composite drawing she created as a response to the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center tragedy. Perhaps both the drawing and the Beuysian hat placed next to the victimized figure is an attempt to give voice to the societal complexity of the victim/perpetrator relationships unleashed in the psyche of all of society by the horrible events of September 11th and its possible causes and aftermath.

Until her untimely passing, it is clear that Arenz was engaged with the world and its current complexities, struggling to make visible both joy and beauty, as well as the darker sides of reality. The affirmative spirit of Arenz’ work lies not in a refusal to acknowledge pain, suffering, or injustice, but in her ability to manifest such realities in tangible and emotive visual form. Arenz’ work gave form to the formless, making visible both archetypes and marginalities, and those of us that were fortunate to have seen her work and to know her, will remember her for this gift.

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¹ Jacques Derrida in “Différance”, p. 27.

² From a telephone conversation with Chris Cowden, Fall 2003.

³ Artist Statement, circa 1995 (precise date unknown)

⁴ Ibid.