

Chester Arnold

# San Francisco Chronicle

**ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT**

KENNETH BAKER *Galleries*

## Mining the artistic life for metaphors

In new work at Catharine Clark's, Sonoma painter Chester Arnold unfurls further his metaphors for the artistic life: prospecting, mining and survivalism.

"60 Years in the Forest" (2012) suggests the self-portrait of a temperament, though not even Arnold's friends will recognize him in the glum figure nursing a campfire — and perhaps some grudges — at the edge of a woodland clearing.

"A Game of Bones" (2012) insinuates a more macabre self-reference with its vision of a miner and his worldly goods reduced to skeletal remains and a dispersed, desert floor still-life: pistol, liquor bottles, pickax, hat, dynamite and whatnot.

"A game of bones" is also a crapshoot, of course, like the making of a painting. Allusions to James Ensor's visionary posthumous self-portraits and to Stéphane Mallarmé, who conceived of a poem as a roll of the dice, clatter out of Arnold's picture.

The specter of Gustave Courbet's still controversial "Origin of the World" (1866) comically haunts some of Arnold's mineshaft pictures. But the largest of them, "Small Time Operation" (2012), confronts us with the abyss — the pit mine as mouth of hell and symbol of greed and ambition digging their



Hosfelt Gallery

**Jay DeFeo: Mechanics:** Photographs, drawings and photo collage.  
**Jim Campbell: Screen Obscura:** Video. Through Dec. 8. Hosfelt Gallery, 260 Utah St., S.F. (415) 495-5454. www.hosfeltgallery.com.

**"Untitled (for B.C.)," 1973-74** photo collage by Jay DeFeo at Hosfelt Gallery.

own grave.

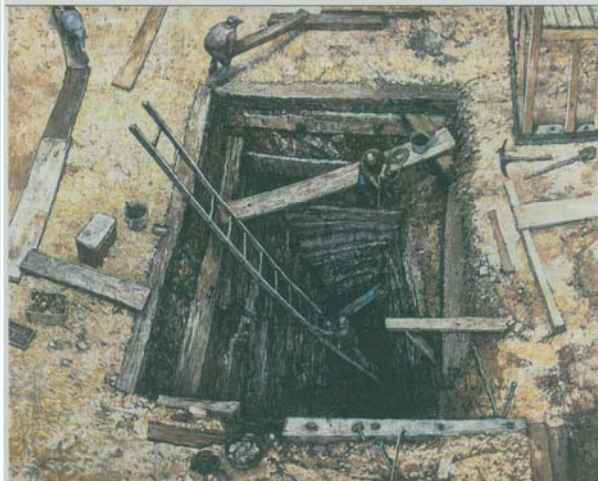
The mine's square spiral of timbers also puts a twist on the perspective construction of spatial illusion that sustained Western painting for 500-odd years.

How much more treasure can that vein still

hold?, Arnold seems to ask.

Deep ravines with colorful strata in pictures such as "Grubstake" (2012) and "Blasting" (2012) let Arnold connect with the Western sublime lineage of Thomas Moran (1837-

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Catharine Clark Gallery

**Chester Arnold: A Pilgrim's Progress:** Paintings. Through Jan. 12. Catharine Clark Gallery, 150 Minna St., S.F. (415) 399-1439. www.cclarkgallery.com.

**"Small Time Operation," (2012)** oil on linen by Chester Arnold, 46 inches by 56 inches.

1926) and make his own sort of stripe paintings along the way.

A muffled lament over art as a wasteful process dovetails in Arnold's work with his long-standing disgust at society's waste mismanagement, explicitly in "The Dump at S-Creek" (2012).

The variety of pictures exhibited once again seems to show Arnold trying his hand at painting whatever comes to mind. Painting hands and minds seldom connect in contemporary art as impressively and divertingly as we see here.

**DeFeo sidelight:** Anyone impressed by "Jay DeFeo: A Retrospective" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art will not want to overlook "Jay DeFeo: Mechanics" at Hosfelt.

It consists of drawings and photo collages from the 1970s in which

DeFeo (1929-1989) mused upon bits of mechanism and of human anatomy as though they might be interchangeable. These works have something of the flavor of J.G. Ballard's vision, hinting at prostheses for injuries no one has yet experienced.

That aspect also gives them a creepy, unsought currency. They can make us think of the advances in prosthetic treatment of 21st century war veterans, and a corresponding lag in psychological focus.

Occasionally a DeFeo insinuates a derangement of the senses, as in the one that fits a candlestick telephone with a flame-shaped bulb as a receiver, mounted atop a camera tripod with a side tilt lock.

DeFeo's images frequently owe their power to her dodging our desire and reflexive capacity to name what we see. A different sort of

slackening of words' grip on the visible occurs in two recent pieces at Hosfelt by Jim Campbell. Both use custom electronics to pixelate found black and white home movie footage almost to the point of abstraction.

In their onrushing vagueness, they seem to test the analogy between home movies' banality and memory's dubious truth to the reality of the past, whatever it was.

In "Home Movies (1040-1)" (2008), we can make out passages of pet and child cuteness, car travel and not a little gunplay. Yet the very unknowability of the people involved has a fateful quality: They could have been anyone, and so could we have.

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