

Chester Arnold

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Chester Arnold subject of career-spanning exhibit



The small sign over the entrance to Chester Arnolds Sonoma studio reads Enter des Artistes on Thursday, April 28, 2022. (Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune)

Sonoma artist Chester Arnold smiles when considering his work is being shown this spring in a museum alongside exhibits honoring Andy Warhol and Ansel Adams.

“We’re a great combination,” he said of his current show running simultaneously with works by those legendary artists at the Fresno Art Museum.

But, taking a more seriously tone, Arnold added, “To have a show at any museum is a great thing, and the opportunity to do that with artists you admire and respect is an added bonus.”

Arnold’s latest exhibit isn’t just any show. On display through June 26 at the Fresno Art Museum, “Reports to the Contrary, A Persistent Vision, Paintings 1971 – 2021,” is the first career-spanning gallery retrospective of works by Arnold, 70, who’s enjoyed more than 40 solo exhibitions – and taken part in more than 50 group shows — at galleries throughout the Bay Area and the greater West Coast over the course of his 50-year career.

While Sonoma fans are encouraged to check out the Fresno show during its run, those who can’t make the trek will have a chance to experience the retrospective through “Chester Arnold: Reports to the Contrary,” an 82-page catalog of the exhibition chalk full of personally selected images and commentary from Arnold, tracing his work – and some of the thought and influences that went into them – decade by decade. The catalog and exhibit display 20 large works and over 18 small paintings, according to exhibit curator Michele Ellis Pracy, including some pieces rarely, or never-before exhibited since their creation and sale decades ago. The catalog will be available beginning in May at the museum’s online store at fresnoartmuseum.org, and at Readers’ Books in Sonoma.

Arnold is also hosting a presentation and catalog signing event May 18 at 6 p.m. at the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, 551 Broadway.

At first describing the feeling of having a career retrospective as “surreal,” Arnold pauses and then puts it into context.

“Our first grandchild arrived last year, so this now seems *less* surreal,” he says about he and wife Frances welcoming daughter Lily’s first child, Rocco, in 2021. “But

I feel like I'm still having as much fun today as when I started – when I go out to the studio, I never know what's going to happen, but something always happens."

Perhaps what's even more surreal is that, given Arnold's stature in Bay Area art circles, the Fresno show is only his *first* career-spanning exhibition.

Arnold's work has long been admired by some of the most respected names in Bay Area art criticism.

"The value of his work, beyond its pleasures and diversions, is to prove that the images of personal and social calamity the times stimulate in us are not beyond redemption," the late San Francisco Chronicle art critic Kenneth Baker wrote of Arnold's work in 1994. "Arnold's skill as a painter is a visible record and a warning of the discipline it takes to work with such images inwardly." (Arnold and Baker became good friends over the years; the "Reports to the Contrary" catalog is dedicated to the late arts writer, who died in 2021.)

In a review of a 1987 exhibit at the William Sawyer Gallery in San Francisco, Rebecca Solnit wrote: "Chester Arnold has made a wonderful series of paintings in a vein that might be called surrealist if it were not down-to-earth in a way that contemporary surrealism seldom is."

Accolades from renowned arts writers aside, Arnold said the time frame represented in "Reports to the Contrary" dates back to works from his first public show that was reviewed in the local press. "It was in March of 1972, (art critic) Ada Garfinkel reviewed in the Marin Independent Journal my show at the Mill Valley Public Library gallery," said Arnold. "I thought fame and fortune were surely on the way."

The seeds of the Santa Monica-native's passion were sown as a child growing up in 1950s Munich, Germany where his father worked as a linguist and field agent for a United States intelligence unit. It was this post-war atmosphere "that profoundly affected his ideas about humankind and the world-forging sense of social responsibility that has seldom escaped expression in his paintings," according to the Fresno Art Museum's description of the exhibit. "It was exposure to the great

museums of Munich and Vienna that shaped (his) belief in the power of painting to communicate beyond words.”

“It’s a serious attitude in looking at humankind,” Arnold said about embarking on a life in art. “I thought I could make the world a better place through painting.”

Arnold studied art at the College of Marin in the early 1970s and went on to earn an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1988. In addition to his studio work, he has taught art classes at the San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco State University, Sonoma State University and, perhaps most notably, spent 20 years as a senior fine arts faculty member at the College of Marin. He retired from COM in 2018.

He fully expected to miss teaching, but has found staying in contact with former students and other passionate artists has filled the gaps of the “intellectual stimulation” that used to come through preparing discussions and talking about people’s work in class.

Arnold’s work is vivid, dense and detailed. Along the way, his perceived style has picked up such labels as realism, surreal and the oft-used “narrative.”

“In the mid-’80s ‘narrative’ was attached to a lot of art,” he said. “And it was attached to me.”

At one point, he started referring to his work as “psychorealism,” recalled Arnold.

But a colleague said, “artists can’t name their own genres of painting,” so he was left with other people’s labels. And Arnold is OK with that.

“If the emotional energy is there (for however a viewer described his style), I just went along with it,” he said. “As long as people respond with interest.”

As to his artistic origin story: Does Arnold still believe one can make the world a better place through painting?

“I do,” he said without reservation.

“What kind of confirmed that and informed me, is the way teaching can get people to tell the stories they we’re going to tell.”

Many of his students over the years have been people who have left other careers in order to rediscover what it is they’ve always wanted to do.

“Which was to paint,” he said. “A lot of these former students are now showing in galleries - and making more than I make on my work.”

He compares art to “spreading the gospel.”

“Music, literature or poetry, it allows us to communicate with our fellow man about what it is in the world that concerns us,” said Arnold.

“The world is an extremely interesting place. As citizens living on the planet, art is an invitation to engage with it to whatever degree we can.”

More of Chester Arnold’s work can be seen at chesterarnold.com.

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<https://www.sonomanews.com/article/entertainment/chester-arnold-subject-of-career-spanning-exhibit/?artslide=3>