

Chester Arnold



ART PRACTICAL

Mad Abundance

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“Whereas the beautiful is limited, the sublime is limitless, so that the mind in the presence of the sublime, attempting to imagine what it cannot, has pain in the failure but pleasure in contemplating the immensity of the attempt.”

— Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781

In *Mad Abundance*, his latest solo show at Catharine Clark Gallery, the painter Chester Arnold continues the project to which he has devoted much of his distinguished career: portraying, both literally and metaphorically, the sublime immensity of nature and humanity’s often-ruinous exploitation of it. Some works feature cataclysmic natural events (lightning storms, volcanic eruptions), while others depict vast mines that deconstruct wilderness into wasteland in the process of extracting resources.



Chester Arnold. *At the Bottom of the World*, 2014; oil on linen; 60 x 72 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

A parallel theme in Arnold's work, the loss of society's moral compass, manifests in images that hint at apocalypse, or at the very least the approaching end of all that is good and civilized. Many of these could be described as modern-day genre paintings—a kind of art whose heyday was in northern Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, and which has never completely gone away. Defined broadly as scenes from everyday life, sometimes with a moral spin, its more recent practitioners arguably include Edward Hopper, Kerry James Marshall, and Eric Fischl.

Though the issues with which he grapples are contemporary, Arnold's approaches to composition are traditional. One of the most interesting aspects of this exhibition is the inclusion of several studies, many of them fully realized paintings in their own right, often alongside the larger pictures they preceded. The studies reveal otherwise-hidden aspects of the artist's thoughts and ideas—primarily how shifts in composition or lighting refine and enhance the impact of the final image. What they also make clear is that, like the Old Masters, Arnold does not work from photographs, but instead employs a combination of observation and imagination, developing his complex compositions from sketches and smaller studies, telling us stories through an astonishing accumulation of detail.

In *At the Bottom of the World* (2014), we are the omniscient viewers of the depths of a mine's pit, a scene that suggests a high-rise building project in reverse: like deconstruction workers, the miners are engaged in a continuous (and seemingly precarious) process of making negative space. Under a green tarpaulin at right, a man leans over a massive block of stone. (Arnold has cleverly situated his signature and the date in an inscription carved on the side of the block.) Improbably, a rat skulks nearby as other workers eat, smoke, hammer at the walls of rock, or perch on ladders and scaffolding, their Bruegel-esque ballet of activities orbiting around a deep, black, seemingly bottomless hole. A wisp of smoke emerging from the depths hints at the unseen, hellish world far below.



Chester Arnold. *A Hawk's Attention*, 2015; oil on linen; 46 x 54 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

Any reading of a picture such as this depends at least in part on what the viewer thinks of pit/strip mining—or, say, book burnings, dystopically enormous garbage dumps, random prison-yard violence, or terrorism in public places (all subjects of earlier works by the artist). If the sight of an entire mountain valley hacked into successive barren levels strikes one as a necessary evil, then Arnold's messages about the terrors of despoiled nature and the end of civilization as we know it will not strike a chord. For most, though, half-submerged trash in an otherwise pristine, watery forest landscape, as in *Possessions* (2014), or spiraling pit mines so large that immense trucks look like tiny insects, as in sub specie *Aeternitatis* (2014), serve as a reminder of the unpleasant consequences of “mad abundance”: of the follow-on from overconsumption of too much of everything except planning and prudence.

The title of the exhibition comes from a poem by Arnold that is inscribed on the back of one of the paintings. Several works apparently bear such writing, though most viewers are not privy to these texts. Having seen a picture of the verso of *A Hawk's Attention* (2015), a spectacular vision of forked lightning silhouetted against roiling clouds, I can suggest an interpretation of the title's meaning. The poem reads: “Blinding lines of / Lightning strikes / marked steadily across the plains, / and with their strobing, / Thunder. / We knew it all would pass, as weather will. / But knowing this could not subtract / a watt of thrill from what made watching wondrous. / Now, / A fact finds meaning in a flash— / and if one doesn't pay a hawk's attention / nothing will be gained or learned / In dark's descent.” This text suggests that the violent lightning storm depicted is both a natural phenomenon and an allegory for how closely we must pay attention to both the startling spectacle of modern life and its shadow side.



Chester Arnold. *The Thirteen Steps*, 2015; oil on linen; 60 x 72 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

The poet Samuel Butler once said that every man's artwork is a portrait of himself. *The Thirteen Steps* (2015) can be understood as such a self-portrait, even as it delivers an ominous message regarding the historical moment in which we presently find ourselves. A flight of stone stairs leads up to red doors in the facade of a fortress-like stone building. The doors are slightly open, as if someone has forgotten to close them, or, perhaps, as if no one remains to do so. Everything in the picture is gray except for the doors and a scattering of objects: a few artist's tools (including a palette, a couple of paint tubes, a can of spray paint, and three pencil stubs), a work boot, a canvas turned to the wall, an empty frame, a wallet, and half a set of false teeth. Are these possessions abandoned in a frantic attempt to reach sanctuary? Or are they memento mori: reminders of the transient nature of life and of things, even of art itself, punctuating the final approach to whatever lies through those red doors?

Now in his sixties, Arnold has clearly considered these questions. But there is another level of meaning here. "The thirteen steps" also describes a set of practical actions outlined in 2000 in the nuclear nonproliferation treaty for the implementation of disarmament. To date, the treaty is not in effect—in other words, the steps have not been taken. As he has in other works, Arnold seems to be asking us to consider what the consequences of a failure to act might be, for all of us. Chester Arnold depicts, both literally and metaphorically, the sublime immensity of nature and humanity's often-ruinous exploitation of it.