

Art: Elephant in the Room

By Jonathan Curiel

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Liam Everett jokes about all the behind-the-scenes "neuroses" that go into making his otherworldly paintings. During the many months it takes to complete a series of works, Everett never sits down — there's no place to sit in his studio, anyway — as he puts things on wheels, and prods, chafes, scrapes, sands, and dabs his linen canvases over and over again. When the process is complete, Everett has someone else stretch his canvases into the finished versions that show up in galleries — which deliberately distorts the paintings in ways that will shock Everett.

Then there are the paintings' names, like *Untitled (Tikal)* and *Untitled (Mitla)*, that suggest tangible connections to historic geographies but are chosen randomly and designed to play with art-goers' imaginations — and with Everett's. What you think you see with Liam Everett's painting is not quite what you get. The works are both complete and *incomplete* — inhabiting a state of existential limbo that borrows from Everett's theater background, which includes a childhood stint where he performed in Samuel Beckett's most famous play, *Waiting for Godot*.

"I'm very interested in the possibility of a work that's always working, instead of a work that's been worked," says Everett, who's also a playwright, and whose father produced theater in Ireland and in the United States. "My studio looks like a theater set, with everything in motion. The performance and the painting are completely integrated — one leads to the other, in this kind of self-generative form of practice."

Everett's latest exhibit at Altman Siegel gallery, "The Elephant Calf," which references an absurdist Bertolt Brecht play about law, features some nine large-scale paintings, each one a multitude of overlapping, crisscrossing layers that let you peer into the tiniest recesses and come away with something enthralling: blotches, fragments, lines that fade here and there, particles that circle each other. None of the paintings has a recognizable center. And that's exactly what Everett wants.

"A lot of 'The Elephant Calf' paintings spent time with mini-stages that I built in front of the paintings," he says. "I put contents from my studio, like buckets and sticks and lamps and stools, on top of these mini-stages, as props — really crude, agitprop theater sets. And then I'd reflect light on these objects, and they'd cast shadows on the paintings. And then I'd use these shadows to direct my gestures — another elaborate, neurotic way so I don't allow myself to make a gestural, emotional mark. They're led by the content of the space."

Each canvas in Everett's new exhibit has what he describes as "movement" that can take the eye in any direction, and which "implicates" the art-goer in a kind of participatory experience.



LIAM EVERETT

Liam Everett: *The Elephant Calf* Through April 23 at Altman Siegel, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. Free; 415-576-9300 or altmansiegel.com. Robert Arneson: *Guardians of the Secret II* Through May 7 at Brian Gross Fine Art, 248 Utah St., San Francisco. Free; 415-788-1050 or briangrossfineart.com.

This involvement also borrows from the theater works Everett loves, where actors speak directly to audiences and break down the barrier between stage and seating. One of Everett's most recent performance works, *On the Wall*, showcases an actor (sometimes Everett) who drags himself by his forearms on a public street before entering the art space and the waiting audience. He admits his methods are unusual, as with having a framer-carpenter stretch his canvases into shape.

"They show up foreign, and it's very unsettling," Everett says. "It's not this kind of self-flagellation or self-destructive force. As idealistic as it sounds, I grow from this experience — that there is this deeper evolution that occurs in the practice when I'm confronted. That's really what it is — especially with this group called 'The Elephant Calf.' They went straight to the gallery, and to see them in this presentable condition, I found really intimidating. I was very anxious. I had a few weeks of high anxiety. I'm *still* having trouble reading them and figuring them out. When I see a painting, things like velocity and direction are the first things I think about. What is the pace at which the painting is moving? Which direction is it moving? Is it right to left? Is it a diagonal or vertical? Every time I've gone back to the gallery, they present themselves in a different condition."

Then, chuckling, Everett adds: "I probably spend a little too much time looking at paintings."

Next year marks the 25th anniversary of Robert Arneson's death — a quarter-century since the Bay Area artist made the last of his large sculptures which, typical of Arneson, were unconventionally funny. To say that Arneson was obsessed with his own balding, bearded visage is an understatement, given all the selfie-like works that he made. But in the last decade or so of his life, Arneson was also fixated on another hair-challenged artist: Jackson Pollock.

Arneson created a series of Pollock busts and drawings, and he created a gigantic tribute sculpture to *Guardians of the Secret*, Pollock's 1943 painting that's in SFMOMA's collection.

Arneson's *Guardians of the Secret II*, made between 1989 and 1990, is on display for the first time on the West Coast, at Brian Gross Fine Art, and its resurrection here is a reminder of just how funny and unconventional Arneson could be. Measuring seven by 12 feet, Arneson's version is a wild interpretation of an already-wild original that delved into everything from primitivism to Native American symbols. In Arneson's redoing, which is comprised of 18 pieces, the center is a lighter version of Pollock's center, except that Arneson has scribbled his own phone number, and such KPFA radio announcements as "Coming to You Live." And in his take, there is a backside with a reliquary that contains a sculptured version of Pollock's head, a small penis sculpture, and boots. At the base, instead of a single dog that could be stand-in for the ancient Egyptian god Anubis, there is a monkey who looks to be having intercourse "doggie-style" with the Anubis figure. Sacrilegious?

With Arneson, nothing was off-limits. The art world has always known that, though Arneson caused controversy in 1981 when he sculpted a ceramic bust of assassinated San Francisco Mayor George Moscone, with bullet holes, faux blood, the words "Bang, Bang, Bang," and a Twinkie image that referenced Moscone's 1978 murder by Supervisor Dan White. The San Francisco Arts Commission, which commissioned Arneson to do the sculpture, rejected *Portrait of George (Moscone)* after a public outcry. The work disappeared from public view for 30 years, until SFMOMA purchased the work and devoted a gallery to Arneson's work in 2012. Brian Gross Fine Art is exhibiting *Guardians of the Secret II* in a similar way, with many Arneson companion pieces — including the sculpture's gigantic 1990 working drawing, and several Pollock heads — sharing the space. At the exhibit's recent opening, art-goers crowded into the gallery, drinks in hand, to see the work first-hand and to laugh and smile in a way that Arneson would have absolutely loved.