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Poke in the Eye: Art of the West Coast Counterculture

Curated by: Carrie Dedon, Seattle Art Museum

Exhibition schedule: Seattle Art Museum, June 21–September 2, 2024

Reviewed by: Jacqueline Witkowski

From ceramic toasters to plaster clowns, the exhibition *Poke in the Eye: Art of the West Coast Counterculture* challenged the traditional expectations of artistic media and conveyed the radicality of the 1960s and '70s Bay Area that would inform the approach of many artists up and down the West Coast, from San Diego to Seattle (fig. 1). The exhibition was the first curated solely by Carrie Dedon, associate curator of modern and contemporary art at the Seattle Art Museum. Dedon worked exclusively with the museum's collection to pull together the most exciting examples of objects from various West Coast–specific art movements.

Fig. 1. Installation view of *Poke in the Eye: Art of the West Coast Counterculture*, Seattle Art Museum, June 21–September 2, 2024. Photo: Scott Leen

The galleries were filled with work in a variety of mediums, although the focus was on experimental practices that defied current painting and sculptural norms—practices that would become more prevalent in the subsequent years. Beyond form, their content was often whimsical, playful, and eccentric, abandoning the more "serious" ideas of the 1960s, such as those that inspired Donald Judd's "Specific Objects" (1964) or Robert Morris's "Notes on Sculpture" (1966)—two foundational Minimalist texts by New York artists. While

the reflexivity articulated in these writings surrounded the delineation of the art object on the East Coast, the exhibition argued that the West Coast went a decidedly different direction.

Poke in the Eye offered a glimpse into the Funk movement started by art historian Peter Selz in the mid-1960s. Selz and the artists he inspired had held a symposium in 1967 at the University of California, Berkeley, in order to define the movement's impetus. However, Funk evaded such efforts at codification, and Selz notoriously kept the rubric open-ended and amorphous. Exactly this lack of congruency is evident in the art shown in the galleries but in a manner that shed light on the historically marginalized coastal movement. In "Notes on Funk" (1966), Selz wrote that Funk is precisely the "opposite extreme" of the famed *Primary Structures* exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York of that same year. That is, *Primary Structures* artists emphasized the physical presence of the object, often through large-scale voluminous forms that relied on industrial materials such as brick, metal, and fluorescent-tube lights. Selz described the Funk movement with language such as "hot," "bizarre," and "frequently ugly and ungainly," a far cry from the "cool" Minimalist objects of *Primary Structures*. "When you see it, you know it"—a line taken from in Selz's manifesto—is how participants at the UC Berkely conference defined Funk. Text panels at the Seattle Art Museum exhibition offered in-depth information about the complicated nature of using this term to define a movement that featured a majority of white, male artists but borrowed from African American vernacular and music.

Poke in the Eye particularly stressed that Funk allowed space for all mediums. The exhibition revealed it as a catalyst to many ceramic and mixed-media artists, such as the Figurative Movement painters in the Bay Area and Northwest Studio ceramicists in Seattle. The show included the works of many artists who were faculty at the University of Washington to foreground the local context. Beyond the main exhibition spaces, annexed galleries included works by contemporary artists who engaged with the ideas put forward by Funk.

Upon entering the galleries, visitors were met immediately with ceramic toilets, outlines of silhouettes flashing in neon lights, and groups of metal, modular animal shapes. In addition to Funk, the concepts of Pop Art, such as the deployment of bold colors and the representation of everyday mass-produced objects, were evident in the assembled works. However, many artists also embraced the handmade, as seen in the large number of ceramics, while they continued to dapple in the tongue-in-cheek humor of the moment. Bruce Naumann's *Double Poke in the Eye II* (1985)—a flashing neon installation of two human faces turned toward one another as they jab each other in the eye—served as the titular work for the exhibition. Naumann's characters encapsulate how Funk reflected on the new utilizations of media but always with a consistent layer of irreverence.

Robert Arneson's ceramic works exemplify the absurdist qualities that the exhibition showcased and further underscored the deep connections in the art world, as Naumann had studied with Arneson. Arriving at the University of California, Davis, in 1962, Arneson initially faced attitudes toward ceramics that limited its shapes to traditional vessels, tiles, and plates. *Poke in the Eye* included some of his unusual forms with which he countered this limitation. The most striking piece was centered in the second room: *Pool with Splash* (1977; fig. 2). From afar, the installation resembles its title: stoneware mimics a rocky border surrounding a small glimmering pond. To capture the effect of light reflecting on

the water, Arneson variously shaped rounded and oblong tiles with deep grooves that, through the variety of teal and turquoise glazes, produce an effect of lilypads on water. Yet, in the center is the splash—a body of clay that reaches up from the tiles in an abstracted form and conveys the shift in colors as the water seems to careen upward. Indeed, Arneson's splash is the like a sculptural version of the well-known pool paintings of David Hockney, where the sharp lines and geometric forms of the pool are interrupted by the white gestural paint of the splash.

Fig. 2. Installation view of Robert Arneson, *Pool with Splash* (1977; foreground), in *Poke in the Eye: Art of the West Coast Counterculture*, Seattle Art Museum, June 21–September 2, 2024. Photo: Scott Leen

Other works that challenge the assumed hierarchy of painting above ceramics are Arneson's depictions of plateware. Hung on the wall, *Dish with Drowning Fork* (1970) and *Dirty Dish with Peas* (1970) were two drawings of shallow plates with food remains inside, angled in the illusory perspective of depth. Exhibited on a plinth below were a stoneware cup and ceramic dish, *Dirty Dish* (1971) and *Steaming Cup* (1974), which mimic the drawings and capture the sense of depth through devices such as shadows that make the works resemble drawings. Not only do these pieces showcase Arneson's skills with the medium, but the dialogue he explored between drawings and their ceramic counterparts indicates how ceramists in the 1960s and '70s pushed the medium forward. Other standout works fall under the "Nut Art" rubric, an open-ended approach adopted by Roy de Forest, an artist who moved to Yakima, Washington, at a young age. The fantastical images in his brightly colored acrylic paintings include mythical beasts and humans. For example, *Life of a Sportsman* (1989–90) features found objects that recreate three-dimensional counterparts to those showcased in the painting.

The exhibition showcased artwork that countered canonical imagery. Robert Colescott's paintings, *Susanna and the Elders (Novelty Hotel)* (1980), is a variation on the Old Testament story, while *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama: Vestidas* (1985) challenges Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907; Museum of Modern Art). Both paintings engage contemporary subject matter by depicting visibly racialized characters who become implicated in the voyeurism of the female figure. More recent absurdist images come from Seattle-based Jeffry Mitchell, who honored figurative Christian imagery but with a twist in

Jesus in a Crowd (after Ensor) from 1991 (fig. 3). The installation showed a large plaster-faced clown clad in a red-and-white-striped turtleneck who stretches his arms, with wildly ill-proportioned hands, wide. The work reimagines a late nineteenth-century painting by James Ensor, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888; J. Paul Getty Museum), which depicts a series of wildly smiling clownlike faces leering at their leader. Mitchell's work, like the Ensor that inspired it, is not a scene of devotion but reveals the role of irreverence in the arts.

Fig. 3. Installation view of Jeffry Mitchell, *Jesus in a Crowd (after Ensor)* (1991), in *Poke in the Eye: Art of the West Coast Counterculture*, Seattle Art Museum, June 21–September 2, 2024. Photo: Scott Leen

Poke in the Eye featured a group of artists who worked to counter and upend the seriousness of the art and art theory that was produced on the East Coast. It also connected the art of the 1960s and '70s with more contemporary artists who continued their counterculture ideals into the 1980s and '90s, highlighting many beyond the Bay Area and into Seattle and Portland, such as distinguished professors at the University of Washington, Howard Kottler and Patti Warashina. The didactic material provided excellent explanations of this art-historical lineage, detailing the function of Funk in a moment seemingly stifled by Abstract Expressionism's resistance to figuration, Minimalism's heavy materials, and an overall avoidance of identity politics, which would soon become a pertinent part of mainstream art-historical discourse. Certainly, artists in New York also considered these limitations, especially as Pop Art made its way from the United Kingdom and artists like Claus Oldenberg and Yayoi Kusama used new materials to reanalyze the nature of the readymade and the multiple.

In its insistence on including forms of craft—such as ceramics and textiles—alongside traditional media—such as painting and drawing—*Poke in the Eye* offered a capacious view of how artists set out to challenge the hierarchies of media. The West Coast would become a new breeding ground for alternative media in the 1960s—exemplified by Allan Kaprow's participatory works at CalArts and by Womanhouse, a space founded in Los Angeles in 1972 to foreground women's experiences primarily through performance. The Funk movement, or perhaps *moment*, invited everything and allowed for a spirit of experimentation that would unfold alongside a larger interest in countercultural

movements. In its juxtaposition of media, *Poke in the Eye* proved the proclivity for and staying power of such experimentation up and down the West Coast, emphasizing the role that often-overlooked cities like Seattle would play in larger artistic conversations.

Jacqueline Witkowski is assistant professor of art history at Western Washington University.