Art in Review

Robert Arneson

‘Founding Funk: Sculpture and Drawing 1956-1966’

George Adams Gallery
525 West 26th Street
Chelsea
Through May 15

Any attempt to reduce New York’s ignorance of serious post-war art elsewhere should be applauded, especially a glimpse of the influential ceramic sculptor Robert Arneson (1930-92) working toward maturity. This applies even if, like me, you’re not crazy about mature Arneson.

Before he got there, Arneson was adept at rough-surfaced stoneware pots and wine jugs influenced by 20th-century Japanese potters like Shoji Hamada. They became progressively sculptural, nonfunctional and humorously self-aware. Raku-like vases from 1959, thrown on the wheel, are carefully sketched to resemble eggs.

“Coiled Pot,” also from 1961, exaggerates a traditional hand-building technique by not smoothing over its components. The resulting vessel is an unpretentiously gregarious tower of coils (sometimes spiraled) and overemphatic finger grooves. It is wonderful, with a nasty laugh behind it.

In these works Arneson considers an array of options, always with a humorous edge, discerning most. “Large Black Organic Vase No. 2,” a marvelously vandalized pot, looks as if a mad man might have hammered and chiseled it out of a bed of lava. From 1962, “Vase With Creatures” pays homage to Gauguin’s ceramics, while two smoldering collages nod to the Abstract Expressionists with a glazed-ceramic roughness that is mostly paper and enamel. “Untitled (Trophy),” from around 1964, contains the germ of Adrian Saxe’s entire career.

By then, Arneson had taken Pop Art to heart, and the jokes came fast and furious. “Klick” — a hysteric camera with eyeball — is a reprise of the toothy eyeglasses of Jasper Johns’s acerbic sculpture “The Critic Sees.” “Hydro” is a giant cookie indebted to Claes Oldenburg.

Sanctioning representation, these works revolutionized ceramics and swamped it in a deluge of visual puns and trompe l’oeil that remains unabated. They fix Arneson’s place in history. What I think of them matters little. ROBERTA SMITH

Lucio Fontana

‘Paintings 1956-68’

Robert Beck and Donald Moffett

‘Range’

Marianne Boesky Gallery
116 East 64th Street
Manhattan
Through May 15

That the New York gallery world may enter the phase of the ostentatious “project space” is signaled by the narrow, beautifully restored Victorian house on East 64th Street that Marianne Boesky has rented for exhibitions that juxtapose older art work by artists she represents. Obviously, this may further sales, but the endeavor has benefits, like the chance to see more of the Argentine-born Italian modernist Lucio Fontana, and in a setting that is itself worth a visit.

Outstanding among the Fontanas are two works from 1960 that consist of raw linen whose constellations of punctures, varying in diameter, have the prancing energy of Miró. Also good, and less familiar, is a 1961 canvas roughly sketched with a diagonal downward of green and brown paint and completed with a single, clean, vertical cut. The vigorous paint is especially aggressive. No wonder later Fontanas, with clean cuts in clean, monochrome fields, often look overly elegant and inert, like the three examples here.

“Range” is a 1997 collaboration between the Conceptualist Robert Beck and the painter Donald Moffett; it combines Mr. Beck’s preoccupation with mysterious crimes and Mr. Moffett’s interest in painting as abstraction, decoration and material fact. Mr. Beck gave Mr. Moffett a pad of drawing paper through which he had fired a .22-caliber bullet. Mr. Moffett took each of the pad’s 20 sheets and its back and front covered and encircled each gunpowder-dering bullet hole with a delicate, tattoo-like symmetrical motif, variously floral or geometric, made of graphite, ink and fudge.

Poignantly beautiful, if a little precious, the results contrast male and female, hunting and cooking, destruction and creation, death and commemoration. They commute with and hold their own against the Fontanas surprisingly well. ROBERTA SMITH

Mark Ryden

‘The Gay 90s: Old Tyme Art Show’

Paul Kasmin
293 10th Avenue, at 27th Street
Chelsea
Through June 5

Fathered by figures like Big Daddy Roth and Robert Williams, a movement affectionately called Lowbrow by its adherents has been percolating out of the quasi-underground pop culture of Southern California since the 1970s. Lowbrow paintings typically feature illustrative technique and comically weird imagery.

Mark Ryden’s style. Part child, part automaton, his figures come to life in the dreamy, incongruous situations that surround them.

The large feet, portly baby doll, baring a pink finger, are made of soft materials. In the foreground, looking at a luscious cake, the man serves a raw ham breaded with the word “EGGS.”

Jesus puts览 “The Piattos” on a table as if they caress each other, while the man on the floor plays with a baby doll. The man wearing a bonnet and holding a bird serves a cake with a skull.

Such zany, creepy pastiche lets conservative nostalgia for modern kitsch.

Leslie Katz

‘On Beauty and Disaster’

The Kitchen
512 West 19th Street
Chelsea
Through June 15

Leslie Katz photographs ordinary and extraordinary, personal and public, cultural, architectural and contemporary, with the eye of a tightrope walker. From the Kitchen, from the living room, finding her own line.

The most impressive work is called “Midnight.” It is a portrait of a man standing next to a wall, surrounded by books, a statue, and snapshots of his family and himself. The sculptures and paintings of plywood and wood take on a life of their own.