

Inside the Yurt

In 2012 archeologist Larry Desmond shot this short video of Arlo Acton working inside of his yurt studio. This unique video shows the artist's incredible workspace and you can hear him talk about some of his fascinating sculptures. The video was crucial to our decision to visit the farm, it inspired us to get to know Arlo and Robyn and to learn more about their exciting life. From Ana and Aero, who we interviewed during our visit in 2015, we learned that Arlo wasn't doing any art for a considerable amount of time after he and Robyn had bought the property in 1974. They both mainly remember Robyn doing artwork and Arlo being busy farming. However, before moving to the Ridge to live off the land, Arlo was a well-known artist of the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1950s and 1960s. After earning his BA from the Washington State University, Arlo enrolled at the California Institute of Arts in 1959 (which is now called the San Francisco Art Institute). He was one of the first people to ever receive a Master's Degree in Sculpture. In the beginning of his career, Arlo worked primarily on wooden sculptures. Thomas Albright, a distinguished art critic and leading authority of the Bay Area's contributions to contemporary art, was the first to fully illustrate the Bay Area's contributions in his book 'Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980: An Illustrated History', released in 1985. Arlo Acton is one of the artists included in the book. Albright writes the following about Arlo's sculptures and his way of working in the 1950s and the 1960s:

[H]e developed a form of sculpture that coupled Alvin Light's approach to shaping and assembling wood with the cartoon humor of Robert Hudson. Like Light, Arlo relied principally on the natural colors and textures of his materials, but his materials included everything from roughly chiseled chunks of raw eucalyptus to old toilet seats, shoe lasts, and sections of wine barrels. They were pieced and joined together in the manner of early funky assemblage. In structure however, they were more closely related to traditional Cubist sculpture, with smaller pieces clustering around big timbers in sequence of massive planes and staccato extensions.

(Albright 1985, 150-151)

Alvin Banfield Light (1931-1980) was an artist active in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1960s and is known for sculpture-modernism. Robert H. Hudson (born 1938) is five years younger than Arlo and enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1963 to receive his Master's Degree in Fine Arts, the same institute Arlo attended. Inspired by Alvin Light, most of Arlo's early sculptures were made from different kinds of wood, relying on natural

colors and textures (as seen, for example, in Arlo's piece 'Hipster' from 1961, illustrated in Albright's book).

Arlo and Robert H. Hudson, who is mainly known for his funk art assemblages of the late 1950s and 1960s, both belonged to the Funk art movement: "The Funk art movement was a regional art movement, most predominant in Northern California. Some notable cities where the Funk movement was concentrated consisted of Berkeley, Marin County, Big Sur, and North Beach. [...] During the 1960s, the Bay Area, specifically San Francisco, was a free and spiritual environment due to its beatnik art culture and the youth political activism reacting against the Vietnam War going on at the time" (Wikipedia 2017). Arlo, who was also part of the Beat Generation in the 1950s, "had done his most innovative and influential work before the 1960s had ended" (Albright 1985, 151). The literary movement of the Beat Generation was started by a group of authors including Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac, as well as Gary Snyder (born 1930). Snyder, a poet and important member of the Beat Generation, left San Francisco around the same time Arlo and Robyn did, also to live on the Ridge in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. They have been friends ever since.

As mentioned above, Arlo was also part of the Funk art movement of the 1950s, as he attended the California School of Fine Arts together with Robert Hudson. In an article written in 1967, the author and first director of the University of Berkeley Art Museum, Peter Selz, writes about the Beat Generation's involvement in the Funk movement in San Francisco: "Many of the Funk artists began as painters, and much of Funk art, although three-dimensional, remains more closely related to recent traditions in painting than in sculpture. [...] In the fifties the beat poets, with their vociferous disregard of social mores and taboos, were very much on the scene" (Selz 1967, 5). He explains that "in San Francisco it [the movement] was new and full of excitement, and helped bring about a kind of free environment in which Funk, itself a combination of sculpture and painting, could flourish. [...] [T]here is a general trend toward greater care in execution and more precision, partly due to a limited amount of recognition enjoyed by the artists, and partly facilitated by the use of new materials - all kinds of plastics, including fiberglas, vinyl, epoxy, and the polyester resins. [...] Arlo Acton uses shiny metal instead of old pieces of lumber" (Selz 1967, 6). Arlo's connection to the Funk art movement inspired him to work with other materials than wood, such as different kinds of metals or later on with titanium balls that he bought from Mars Aviation (see Music with Balls).

Arlo has also taught Sculpture at the Art Institute of the University of California, Berkeley in 1963 and is one of the founders of the Berkeley sculptors' movement. His sculptors have been exhibited in various museums and he has won several prizes (See: Painting and sculpture in California: The Modern Era: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, September 1976, page 196 to read about Arlo C. Acton).

The list below summarizes some of the exhibitions and art shows Arlo was part of, and some of the prizes he won:

- San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) in 1961; Edgar Walter Prize (won) in 1961
- Richmond Art Association in 1961 (won, second prize)
- First one-man exhibition held at the Holies Gallery in San Francisco in 1962
- 'Some Points of View' exhibition in 1962 at the Stanford University in Palo Alto
- 'The Artist's Environment: The West Coast' exhibition in Fort Worth, Texas in 1962
- 'Fifty California Artists' Exhibition in the Whitney Museum of American Art (WMAA), 1962-1963
- Group exhibition at the 'Troisieme Biennale de Paris' in the 'Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris' in 1963
- 'Funk' exhibition at the University Art Museum, UC, Berkeley in 1967, curated by Peter Selz
- 'American Sculpture of the Sixties' in the Los Angeles 'County Museum of Art' in 1967
- Esther Robles Gallery in Los Angeles in 1969
- 'Sound Sculpture As' at the 'Museum of Conceptual Art' (MOCA) in San Francisco in 1970

The 'Sound Sculpture As' exhibition was curated by Tom Marioni, who invited nine sculptors to make sound works for his show. "Each artist produced sounds by manipulating a material. [...] For the finale, Arlo Acton distributed several hundred metal crickets and the loft began to ring with chirping sounds. Then he released a polished metal ball hung from the ceiling which smashed into a heavy glass plate" (Exhibition: Sound Sculpture As 1970). The 'Sound Sculpture As' exhibition has been recorded and you can listen to a 38 minute audio file by MOCA/FM to get an impression of the sounds produced: 'MOCA/FM: Sound Sculptures As'.

In the early 1970s Arlo and Robyn decided to leave their city life behind, and moved to Hopland, CA. Their first son Aero was born soon after leaving the city, in 1972. In 1974 the little family moved to the San Juan Ridge to settle down and bought the land of today's Olala Farms. After moving to the Ridge, Arlo, who grew up on a farm in Knoxville, Iowa, wanted to go back to farming and abandoned his career of being an artist. Robyn, who also studied to become an artist and has a Master's Degree of Arts in Sculpture and Fine Arts from UC Davis, mentioned in a short video from 2013, to the question of how she and

Arlo ended up on the Ridge, that "you have to have a job as well, you know. You have to have something that generates income as well. At least I did, because I wasn't gonna be making something that necessarily wanted to be on somebody's wall. Maybe the idea of making art for me was not about where I was going to go, but that I have made it and it made me feel good to make it" (see 'Trailer' ca. 2013). While Arlo almost completely stopped making artwork and solely focused on farming, Robyn continued to paint and became a teacher of herbs, homeopathy, and flower essences. To see some of Robyn's art and see examples of Arlo's early paintings, watch 'Art in the Livingroom'.

Only after Jeremy took over the farm and Arlo retired from farming around 2011/12, he started working on his sculptures again, spending up to 15 hours a day in his yurt studio. He usually got up early in the morning and went straight up into his studio to make sketches of his dreams. By means of this 'dream therapy' Arlo finds the inspiration and ideas that help him create his sculptures.

In the video by Larry Desmond from 2012, you can see how Arlo's sculptures have changed and evolved (not only in the sense of the materials used but also in the messages conveyed). Also, Arlo talks about his intention of putting wings on all of his sculptures, turning them into angels - you can see some of these sculptures in the gallery below. Many of his pieces are inspired by environmental issues such as being actively against 'GMOs' (genetically modified organisms) and hoping for a greener future. These environmental issues are represented by the usage of green marbles, green balls, and earth figurines.

References:

- Albright, Thomas. 1985. *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area. 1945-1980. An Illustrated History*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Hopkins, Henry T. 1977. *Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era*. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art & Hudson Hills Press.
- Selz, Peter. 1967. *Funk*. Berkeley: The regents of the University of California.
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