

ART

Found art, found life

Portland artist Paul Arensmeyer discovered a way to make his living in unexpected places
BY MARC ACITO

According to the Bible, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own land"—a reference that could apply to artists in Portland, says local sculptor and curator Paul Arensmeyer.

"There's a huge element in the gay population who have no idea there's good art in Portland," he says. "They have this mentality that good things don't come out of the place they live."

So Arensmeyer, like so many artists (and Biblical prophets) before him, will have to leave his hometown, if only for a while, in order to enhance his reputation.

This summer Arensmeyer begins a six-month National Endowment for the Arts grant-funded fellowship in Houston with Diverse Works, a leading art facility dedicated to cutting-edge visual and performance arts. Arensmeyer will be working directly with the visual arts curator setting up programs to increase cooperation between regional art facilities.

"I love promoting other artists' work," he says. "I really believe the more we can support each other, the farther we can go, both as a group and as individuals. And that's across genres, as well. Dancers need to support visual artists, visual artists need to support musicians, etc. It's all the same creative pool."

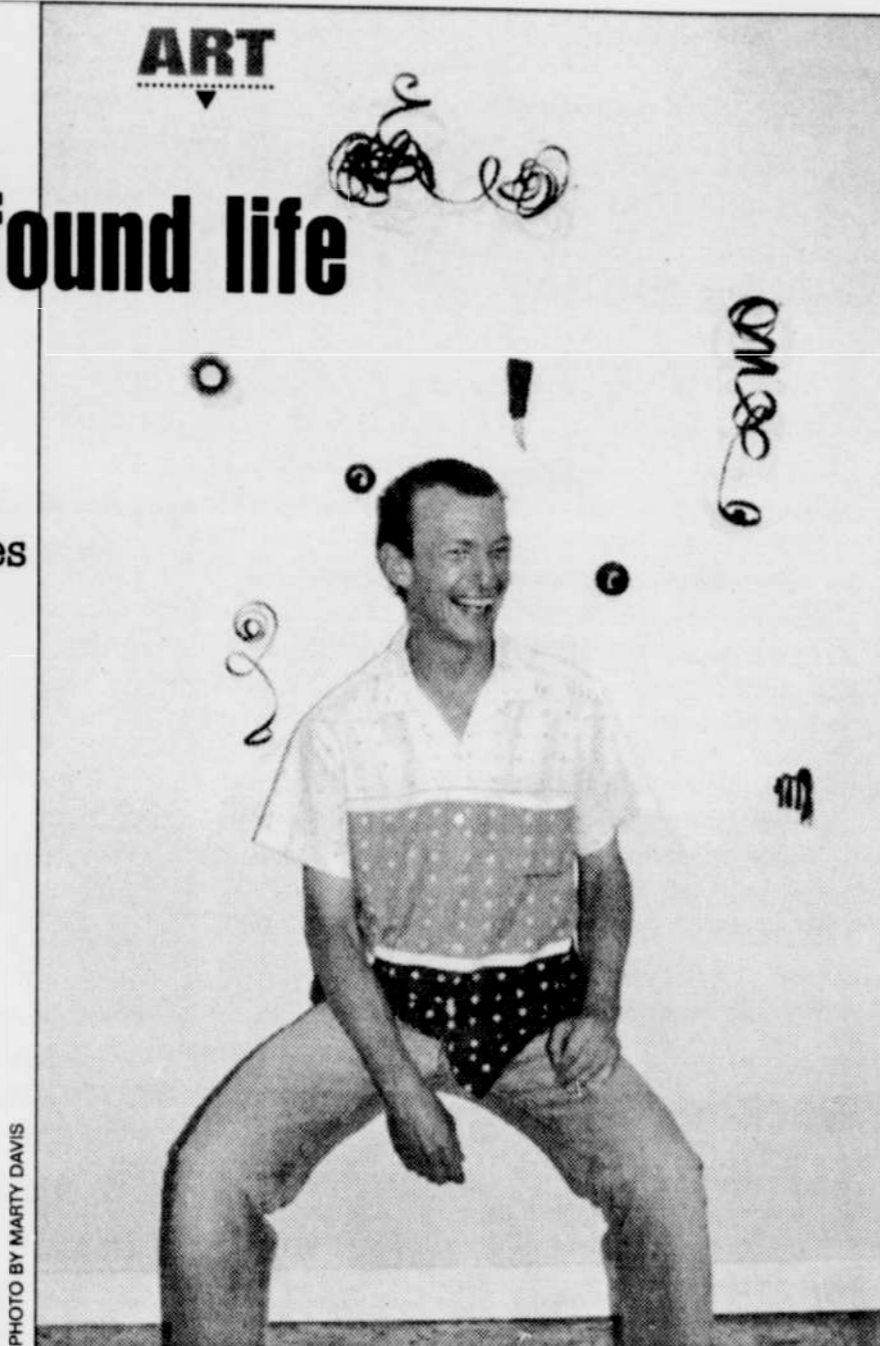
When asked if his perspective is unique, Arensmeyer admits: "Sure, there are a lot of artists who don't even go out and see other artists' shows, but I think for the most part artists in Portland are really supportive of each other. Hey, I don't make much money, but I'm always willing to shell out fifteen bucks to try something new."

It's fairly unusual for a working visual artist also to curate art shows. A curator is to a collection of visual artworks what an editor is to a collection of written works, and much in the same way that writers and editors don't frequently overlap, neither do artists and curators.

However, Arensmeyer sees curating as another form of expression and an opportunity to explore an artistic vision beyond his own personal minimalist aesthetic. Two of the shows he's curated, "Boy Mechanic" at the Quartersaw Gallery and "The Tool Show" at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, expanded on his fascination with how things work.

Arensmeyer himself makes found-object sculptures—which is an artsy-fartsy way of saying that where others might see junk, he sees art. From industrial castoffs found in scrap yards and foundries, Arensmeyer creates sculptures that are abstract, but with titles that invite the viewer to explore the psychological meaning of the work. (Those titles go a long way in helping the uninitiated, by the way.)

With its fanciful and sometimes disturbing assortment of widgets and gadgets, Arensmeyer's most recent exhibition at the Froelick Adelhart Gallery may leave one with more questions than answers, but that suits him just fine. "Otherwise, there'd be no reason to look at the work again," he says.



Paul Arensmeyer at his recent show

PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS

His work wasn't always so enigmatic. A former yuppie, Arensmeyer actually got a business degree in college. "That's what smart kids did," he says, but he was introduced to the art world when he became infatuated with a straight art major. Inspired, or perhaps just frustrated, Arensmeyer began making jewelry—"really horrid, impractical jewelry"—which led to making sculptures in the storage space of his apartment building.

When asked how his sexuality influences his work, Arensmeyer laughs. "My work used to be terribly phallic," he explains, "but it was entirely subconscious. I guess a shrink would say, 'Well, that's the shape you're basically attracted to.'"

In 1991, as "a committee of one" he successfully revived Cascade AIDS Project's annual art auction, which raised \$5,000 in its first year back in business. A year and a half later, he had his first solo exhibition of his own work at Jamison Thomas Gallery. Since then his work has been seen at numerous galleries, including Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Quartersaw Gallery, Pacific Northwest College of Art and the Vita Gallery.

Arensmeyer also sits on the committee that oversees the Percent for Art Program, which requires any building built in the Portland metro area with public money to use a portion of its total budget for public art. He uses the position as a means of encouraging innovation. When asked to cite examples of successful public art, he mentions the fountain at the Rose Garden Arena.

"It has great patterns, great sounds—the piece sucks you in and invites interpretation," he says.

He also appreciates the provocative and much-derided "bound trees" at the ODS Building—"a good, bold step and a nice contrast to a feature-free building. I think good public art is something where the public can't walk by without noticing there's art there," he explains.

There are many in Portland's art community who will certainly notice when Arensmeyer is gone this year, but we can only hope that our hometown artists, just like Biblical prophets, return to us.

■ MARC ACITO's most profound artistic expression is his comic strip, "The Boys Next Door," which must mean he's a very shallow person.

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