

# Problem Solved

CHARLES ARNOLDI'S INTRICATE CAREER IS TRACED IN AN EXHIBITION AT THE BAKERSFIELD MUSEUM OF ART. BY SARAH E. FENSOM



Charles Arnoldi, *Group Think*, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 120 in.

THROUGHOUT his five-decade career, celebrated Southern California artist Charles Arnoldi has approached abstraction from seemingly innumerable angles. He has experimented with line, shape, and color through wood and sticks, through acrylic and oil paint on canvas and linen, through copper and aluminum, through ink, gouache, pencil, charcoal and tape on paper. He has based series around potatoes, windows, and eclipses; he has created non-representational work inspired by Hawaii and the 15th-century rock formations of Machu Picchu—and this list doesn't approach being exhaustive. And yet, regardless of the various elements that come and go in his work, Arnoldi's series lead into one another like stops on a languid train ride—in order for the train to

move forward it must pull through each successive, scenic station. In an interview with the *Santa Fe Arts Journal* last year, Arnoldi touched on his evolution elegantly, saying, "In abstract painting, an artist invents a problem and solves it." For Arnoldi, just as one problem is seemingly solved, another becomes apparent, necessitating and inevitably leading to a new technique for visual problem-solving.

Part of what can make a museum retrospective so powerful is its ability to provide a bird's-eye view of an artist's metamorphosis. "Charles Arnoldi: Form, A Fifty Year Survey," a current show at the Bakersfield Museum of Art in Bakersfield, Calif., does just that. The show, on view through January 5, 2019, includes over 50 works, includ-



ing more than 20 large-scale paintings and sculptures. Each of these larger pieces represents a unique body of work, beginning with Arnoldi's celebrated stick constructions and chainsaw wood relief paintings of the 1970s, and leading up to his most recent work, the aforementioned Machu Picchu series. Works on paper make up the difference; this section of Arnoldi's oeuvre includes drawings and prints that are highly experimental, complete works in their own right, and preliminary sketches that served as exercises for larger pieces. It is through the works on paper that the viewer feels the machinations of both Arnoldi's problems and his solutions.

Arnoldi was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1946, but he arrived in Southern California—the region with which he is most closely identified—in 1965. A stint at the Art Center in Los Angeles ended quickly, the environment far squarer than one might expect of California in the late '60s (the male students, it turned out, had to wear ties). After transferring to the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles in 1968

and spending eight months there, Arnoldi decided he was done with formal education. The dress code at the Art Center notwithstanding, this period was an extremely exciting time for California art. Minimalism and the Light and Space and Finish Fetish movements were challenging postwar art's definition of abstraction. Artists such as Larry Bell, John McCracken, and Robert Irwin were creating works that manipulated the onlooker's point of view through light, mass, and, in many cases, the use of plastics and industrial materials. Arnoldi got in on the act, using lacquer and Plexiglas to create *Untitled* (1969), one of his earliest works. However, his breakthrough involved a much older, more natural, yet still revolutionary material: wood.

In the 1970s, Arnoldi began creating wall-mounted works in

Clockwise from top left: *Untitled*, 2018, oil on linen, 82 x 72 in.; *Untitled*, 2015, gouache on paper, 14 x 10.25 in.; *Second Chance*, 1980, acrylic on sticks, 115 x 134 x 27 in.





Clockwise from top left: *White Knuckles*, 1987, acrylic on plywood, 40 x 36 x 3 in.; *Welfare*, 2011, acrylic on plywood, 52 x 48 x 3 in.; *Untitled*, 1981, acrylic on wood block, .5 x 10.5 x 12 in.

which he essentially drew with sticks. Found in the woods and stripped of their bark, the sticks were pieced together by Arnoldi on his studio floor. The stick drawings, such as the sparse *Untitled* (1971) and the denser, diamond-like *Untitled* (1973), though largely flat, suggested three-dimensionality through their composition, not unlike Cubism. Several drawings in the show, rendered in gouache, watercolor, and pencil, show Arnoldi playing with the possibilities of the sticks as clean, rigid lines.

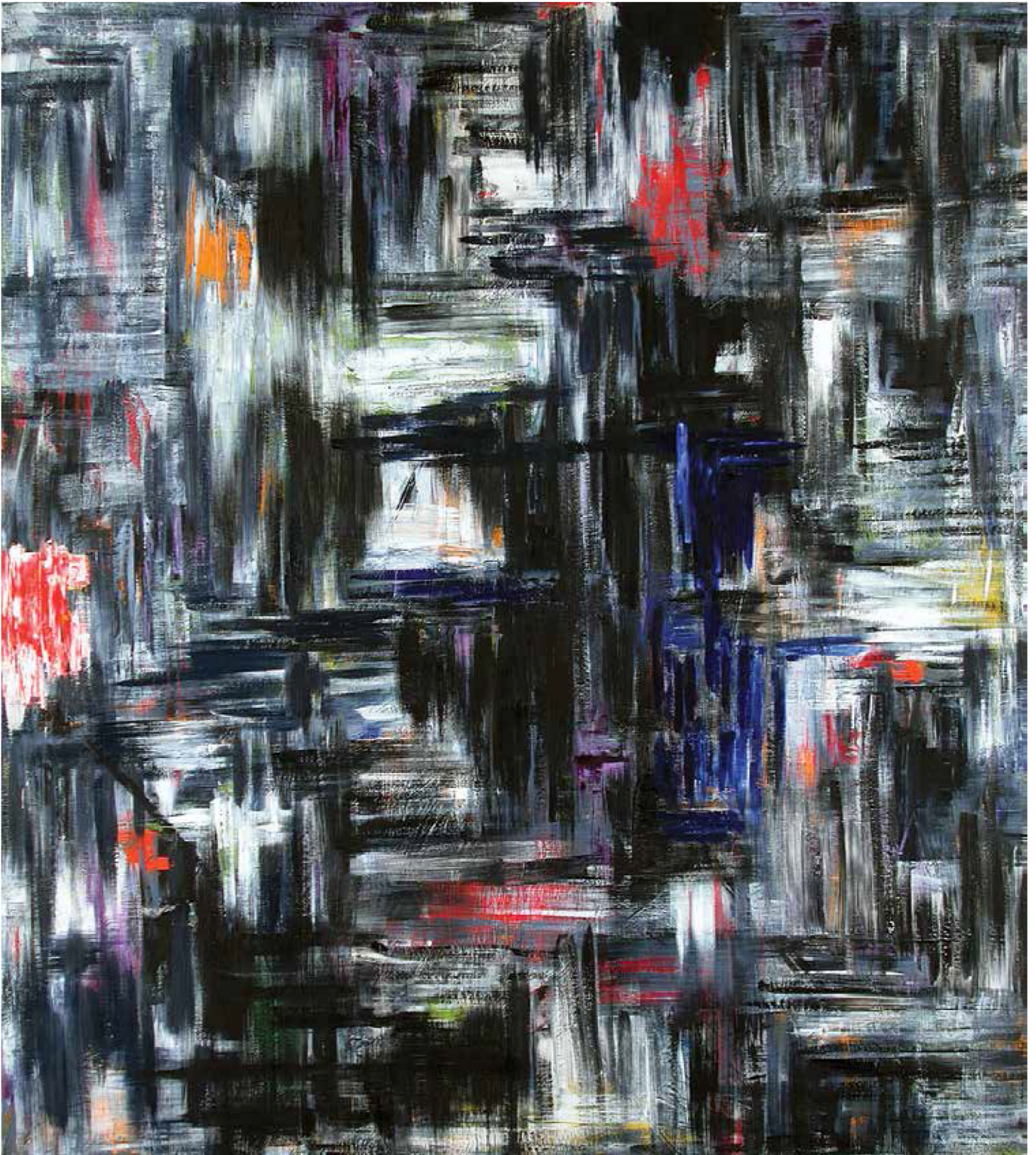
As Arnoldi began experimenting with painting the sticks various colors, the sense of depth only increased. He also began liberating the already-sculptural works from the wall, creating full-fledged sculpture, as with the minimal *Television* (1971, enamel on sticks). With the colorful and cacophonous 1980 sculpture *Second Chance*, a highlight of the show, Arnoldi captures the rambunctious energy of Jackson Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists (not surprisingly, viewing this work in New York inspired Arnoldi to go to art school).

Arnoldi's work was guided into the '80s

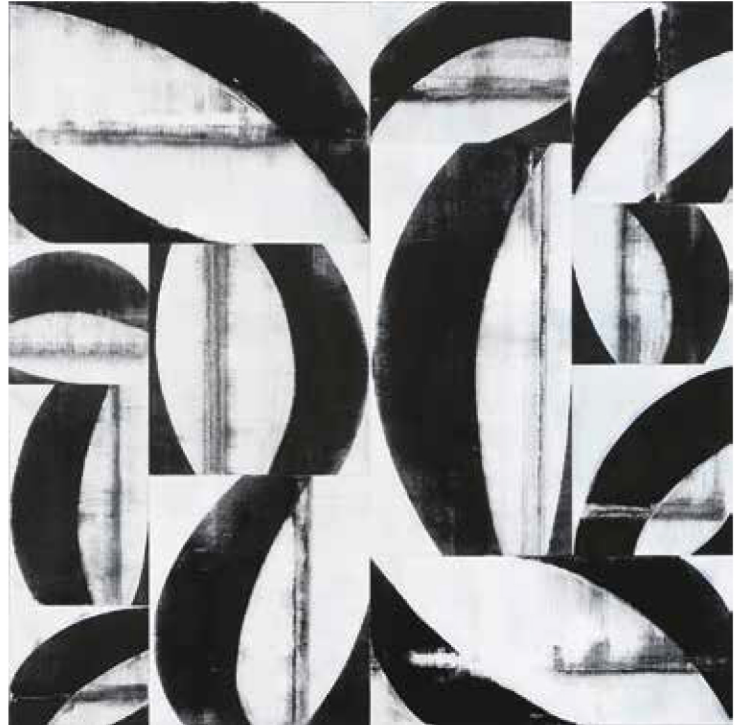
by happenstance: when foraging for sticks, he came across discarded pieces of wood that had been cut by a chainsaw. Inspired, he picked up the chainsaw himself, carving texture and line into small blocks of wood. These carvings became wall-mounted wood sculptures that were painted with tonal passages of hotly colored acrylic paint. In *Untitled* (1982) and *Untitled* (1981) of this period, a totemic, almost ancient quality in form and texture meets the distinctive geometric lines and day-glow coloration prevalent throughout the visual culture of the '80s.

As the decade went on, Arnoldi went bigger in scale and experimentation. The show features many sterling examples of large-scale chainsaw-carved works, achieved by layering several sheets of plywood and strategically cutting into them. In these pieces, Arnoldi really plays with negative space, creating cut-out passages in the wood and around its edges. Here, paint is also a casualty of the chainsaw, and it seems to seep from the wood and bleed into it. *White Knuckles* (1987), though one piece, feels like a Pangaea of disparately colored, geometric shards of wood. Arnoldi's "Sticks II" series





*Soft Ice*, 1989-90, oil on canvas, 84 x 76 in.



Clockwise from top left: *Static*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 58 x 50 in.; *Backbone*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in.; *Untitled*, 1973, acrylic on sticks, 24 x 24 in.

saw a return of his sticks, but not to the minimalism of his earlier work with them. These decidedly maximalist works were as dense as any Ed Moses grid painting, featuring passages of sticks thickly layered on plywood to form shapes and patterns. The result was work that seemed rustic, yet cleanly abstract, with the textural dimensionality of sculpture and the presence of a large-scale oil on canvas. The sticks suggest vibrant action and seem to leap off the wall, and in *Scorched Pistons* (1988, acrylic, modeling paste and sticks on plywood) Arnoldi creates movement with both passages of sticks and bright color, in a work that is so electric it seems to have its own force field.

Works like *Soft Ice* (1989–90, oil on canvas) mark Arnoldi's jump headlong into painting at the end of the '80s. Like the "Sticks II" works, *Soft Ice* seems to pulse with a current of energy. Arnoldi's brushstrokes also seem to take on the thin, piecemeal nature of his sticks, an

effect that in turn elucidates how apt a conduit the sticks truly were for paint. But *Soft Ice*, with its blurred quality, seems to find Arnoldi reveling in the use of pigment on canvas. Free from the straight lines and angles of the chainsaw and sticks, Arnoldi uses curvilinear forms for the first time during this period, creating works such as *Deep Breath* (1990, oil on canvas) and *Miracle Spread* (1992) that, like de Kooning's late work, feature thick, gestural curves. Throughout the '90s, Arnoldi spent time in Hawaii, creating richly hued works that push the curved forms of tropical flora and fauna into abstraction. *Group Think* (1996), a highlight of the exhibition, pivots into his "Organics" series and seems almost to zoom into the Hawaii pictures, enlarging their bulbous, colorful shapes and piling them on top of one another.

Since the turn of the century, Arnoldi has created nearly 15 series of work. Some, like "Ellipses" and "Windows," have a similar zoomed-in look, with form and color stretching in large, sometimes layered, swaths across the canvas. The "Arcs" series, made towards the end of the 2010s, features half-ovals in rectangular fields. Arnoldi pulls and drags the paint, seeming to create distinct views of the same image. In *Backbone* (2007, acrylic on canvas), a dynamic curve of black paint on stark white seems to be





Clockwise from top left: *Untitled*, 1982, gouache on paper, 7 x 5 in.; *Slide Bite*, 2016, oil on linen, 84 x 72 in.;  
*Untitled*, 2015, oil on aluminum, 8.5 x 6.25 in.

examined at different angles, as if looking at a disorienting collage of photographs from the same shoot. In “Medals,” a simultaneous series, the artist harkens back to the ’60s, with an updated look at Minimalism and experimentation with materials. Various shapes in aluminum or copper are joined together to create sculptural wall-mounted pieces. The results, as with *Untitled* (2005), are vibrant works that seem at once deconstructed and like combinations of blocks.

Throughout the 2010s, Arnoldi’s series took him in all different directions: he returned to chainsaw works, made paintings that recreate the hectic, linear patterns of “Sticks II,” and delved into entirely new series. Works from a 2013 painting series simply titled “Paintings” are densely packed with layers of straight, multicolored strokes, mimicking his sticks in paint. In a 2015 series, also under the moniker “Paintings,” geometric shapes in solid colors seem to pop out from the canvas. In *Victory* (2015, oil on

linen), a standout of that series, thin, colored lines form a sort of support system for blocks of color, producing an illusionistic three-dimensional effect. In “String Theory,” a 2016 series, the artist returns to curvilinear forms. He paints continuous loops of color charged by the movement of his wrist, elbow, and shoulder. In these paintings, the whirling dervish-like energy of Arnoldi’s gestures jumps out at the viewer immediately. But as in works like, *Slide Bite* (2016, oil on linen) with its hot oranges and reds and cool blues, color is of paramount importance. As with all of Arnoldi’s works, his facility with color generates pieces that set a mood, having almost a mind-controlling effect. Struck by the intensity of his work, the viewer is often lulled into Arnoldi’s illusionary abstracts, not realizing how the artist’s control over line, shape, and color is controlling his or her point of view. 