## ADRIAN ARLEO METAPHORS FOR INTERDEPENDENCE

## BY RICK NEWBY . PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS AUTIO

Rearly a decade ago, the ceramic sculptor Adrian Arleo happened upon—in an exhibition of Egyptian art in Phoenix, Ari zona—an arresting image. The tiny figure, half human, half bird, was at most eight inches tall. Carved of wood and painted white, the little bird-person possessed, in Arleo's words, an "endearing" quality. Like much Egyptian art, it stood rigidly erect, and its face offered little expression, but despite this, it "felt whimsical." Arleo loved the scale of the work, and the image lingered in her mind for years. The exhibition labels failed to identify the intriguing creature, and she hoped to learn more.

Then in 2005, during a visit to the Guggenheim Hermitage Museum at the Venetian Resort Hotel in Las Vegas, she encountered another Egyptian show. This one, "small but very good," included a miniature black stone sarcophagus and, at its side, another bird-person, this one truly tiny at one-and-a-half inches. It stood resting its little hands on the sarcophagus, seeming to caress the burnished stone. It was, says Arleo, "so tiny and so powerful," offering up "more emotion and gesture" than most Egyptian figures.

The Hermitage's labels noted that this creature is known as Ba, and that it represents not the physical aspects of an individual, but rather the personality or soul. The Ba lives on in the tomb of the deceased after the physical body expires, and it possesses the uncanny ability to leave the body and then return. Because it moves regularly between the underworld and the world of the living, the Ba traditionally appeared as a bird with a human head.

Arleo had combined human and bird imagery in earlier works, often to suggest fragility and vulnerability and the impermanence of life. In her encounter with the two Egyptian Bas, she felt a powerful sense of recognition—"they seemed so familiar." For her, these frail bird-people underscored, with their whimsicality and tenderness, the resilience of the human spirit. She especially responded to the "strange" bringing together of the Bas' wings, their human forearms and their "expressive little hands." Birds and hands have been key images for Arleo in recent years, even before she encountered the Phoenix Ba. But it was not until she began her own Ba series that the melding of human and avian qualities reached such a marvelous apotheosis.

When she began creating her own bird-people, Arleo was already known for haunting clay sculptures that suggest mythologies of transformation and metamorphosis. Most often, her figures have been metaphors for interdependence among species, celebrations of our closeness to profound natural rhythms. Her wasps' nests may host human figures [Wasp Nest—Three Figures, 2004]; the flesh of her men, women and infants is literally honeycombed [Honey Child-Baby, 2006]; a pair of birds build their nest on a young girl's folded hands [Nest Arms, 2004]; more hands—hundreds of them—lovingly encase a horse or a crouching woman [Horse of 1,000 Hands, 2005].

From her home and studio below Lolo Pass in Montana, on the verge of a great wilderness, Arleo has long been drawn to "movement, sensuality and . . . the figure." She is a figurative sculptor, but not simply content with mimesis. Rather she seeks to embody, with her complex images and startling juxtapositions, truths about our richly conflicted existence in the material







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world. There is a quietness, sometimes serene, sometimes melancholy, in the faces of her humans. In older works, their eyes are often closed or downcast. Perhaps this reflects her desire to capture inward states of feeling and cognition. She notes, too, in an artist statement, that her faces sometimes lack specificity because a "work of art can tap more deeply into us when it has no specific feature, and so resonates as an archetype."

Over time, though, she has turned away from this absence of the particular. As she notes, "The eyes, when I was starting out, were undefined; they have since evolved from being closed, to being downward turned, to being open and forthrightly gazing." And with her forthright bird-people, Arleo finds herself crafting faces with truly distinctive qualities. Just as the Egyptian Ba is the embodiment of personality, so these new figures—in face and body—radiate character.

Always a student of art history, Arleo models each face as distinct from the next. Some are tranquil or pensive (Ba as Raven, Shy Ba, both 2005), others appear aloof (Dove Ba, 2006), and still others seem bemused or slightly alarmed (Two Owl Bas, 2006). For the face of Dove Ba, for example, she has combined elements from a statue of the Buddha and a 15th-century portrait of the Virgin Mary. Occasionally her Bas flock together, as in Girl with Many Bas, 2005 (this is a band of female Bas, unusual thus far in the series); sometimes her Bas watch over the vulnerable, as with Ba for Conan, 2006, in which a black Ba protects the human infant at his feet.

It has been said that hands express character, and in the case of Arleo's Bas, this is certainly the case. One Ba underscores a point with a sweep of the hand; another folds his hands across his belly (as a sign of contentment or self-protection?); yet another seems on the verge of making a small but significant gesture. These delicate (and articulate) hands assert an undeniable connection to the human.

In almost every instance, despite their apparent seriousness, her little bird-people elicit a smile or a chuckle. This quality of humor, absent from much of her work (in which important themes are treated with appropriate gravity), may be what Arleo identified as "endearing" about that first Egyptian Ba. In fact, when she looks at the Bas in her studio, she sees "slightly eerie" works of art that are, at the same time, "like having a pet." A sense of delight, of play and wit, inevitably lingers after we encounter an Arleo Ba.

For this remarkable sculptor, the discovery of an ancient emblem of the Egyptian belief in immortality has led to the creation of some of her most memorable works. Adrian Arleo's small figures seem preternaturally alive, loveable and eerie, melancholy but good company, downright humorous and spiritually resonant.

A poet and critic, Rick Newby writes frequently about ceramic artists. He is editor-in-chief of the online journal Drumlummon Views (www.drumlummon.org).

 $<sup>1</sup>_*$  All quotations from Adrian Arleo, unless otherwise noted, are drawn from a telephone interview with the author, June 8, 2006.

<sup>2.</sup> Adrian Arleo, "Body Language" in *The Figure in Clay*, ed. Suzanne J. E. Tourtillott (New York: Lark Books, 2005), 18. 3. Adrian Arleo, artist statement for September 2004 exhibition, Snyderman-Works Gallery, Philadelphia. 4. Arleo, "Body Language," *The Figure in Clay*, 21.