

ARTFORUM

Steven Arnold

ONE ARCHIVES GALLERY & MUSEUM

626 North Robertson Boulevard

October 27–January 13

Steven Arnold is remembered—if maybe only dimly—for his 1970 psychedelic film *Luminous Procureess* and photographed tableaux vivants of the 1980s and '90s. The former, one of a handful of films Arnold made in the late '60s and early '70s, became an underground hit, and its hour-plus procession of orgiastic vignettes delighted Dalí. Collected in three now out-of-print books, the tableaux issue intricate little operas, drawing on folk art, sci-fi, and the fin de siècle. The small but welcome survey "Steven Arnold: Cabinet of Curiosities" is meant to shed light on a manifold career cut short by AIDS in 1994, supplementing the films and photos with examples of Arnold's drawing, painting, and poster art.

Transfigurations abound—those of drag and of alchemy. With blithe perversity, sweet line drawings feature characters of cartoonish affect entwined in a jumble of deformity and contortion, S&M posturing and tortured genitals, high heels and cloven hooves. The tableaux, while suggestive of familiar critical procedures under the banners of performativity or theatricality, owe their fascination as much to the prankish and handcrafted world of make-believe as it meshes with almost shamanic eroticism. They evoke in equal measure Jean Cocteau's oneiric classicism and the private pageantry of Claude Cahun.

Some of the work struggles to stand on its own, but that's of little consequence, as each piece serves as a reflection of a hermetic sum. Arnold's prodigiousness extended not only to makeup, set design, and every facet of staging his intricate tableaux, but to the staging of his own life—the extravagant decoration of his home and Zanzibar, his Los Angeles studio, and the elaboration of his sorcerous, foppish persona. With a cast of frequent collaborators drawn from the California underground—the Cockettes, fashion designer Kaisik Wong, aging Beat poet ruth weiss, and his spindly muse Pandora—Arnold sought not only to create but to inhabit an idiosyncratic *Gesamtkunstwerk* steeped in the erotic and the sublime.

— Eli Diner



Steven Arnold, *The Advantages of a Newer Social Structure*, ca. 1980s, silver gelatin print, 13 1/2 x 13 1/2".