JAMES B. LEMMING: A Live Wire and his Yard Show

(1992)

In the summer of 1986, when I was working with photographer Roger Manley on a book about visionary artist Howard Finster, I got word of another "local character" in the same corner of northwest Georgia where Finster lives--a man who reportedly decorated his house and yard in an eccentric style vaguely similar to that of Finster's famous "Paradise Garden." I decided to investigate, and thus it was that Roger and I found ourselves on a steaming-hot morning in the unusually distinctive front yard of one James B. Lemming.

Lemming lived in a run-down little log cabin at the end of a dirt driveway off a desolate stretch of blacktop road about five miles outside the small town of Trion. Just as we'd been told, you couldn't miss the place. The cabin itself, elevated three feet off the ground on stacks of concrete blocks, had been painted in alternating red, white, and blue stripes, dots, and diamond shapes, and was festooned with a variety of modified household objects and dozens of crudely made wood-panel targets, most of them also painted red, white and/or blue. This decorative scheme extended out beyond the house and into the spacious surrounding yard, and even into the woods out back, where the trunks of a dozen or more tall pine trees had been painted a bright, fresh-blood red as high up as Lemming could reach from the top rung of his stepladder.

Although the yard and house were anything but tidy, the configurations of painted objects and geometric designs were consistently symmetrical. A target on the cabin's exterior wall to the left of the central front door was balanced by an identically painted target to the door's right. A pile of cinderblocks surmounted by a plastic gallon jug on the

left side of the porch was mirrored by a plastic milk jug atop an equal number of cinderblocks stacked on the right side of the porch. A red-painted aluminum barbeque-grill rack was nailed to a tree trunk on one side of the front yard, and a red-painted aluminum refrigerator rack was nailed to a corresponding tree trunk on the front yard's opposite side. And so on and so on, dozens of pairs of similarly ordinary objects thus displayed and arranged.

Three or four sickly-looking hound dogs peered at us and growled from under the house as we stood in the sandy, weed-clogged front yard, sweating in the humid, ninety-eight-degree heat and marveling at this loudly adorned rustic hideaway. It bore little resemblance to Finster's two-acre junk-sculpture garden in nearby Pennville, and it turned out that the two local yard-art masters had never met or heard of each other.

We had been standing there for a few minutes when Lemming emerged from his front door. A short, thickly built, tough-looking, older white man with a few days' growth of gray facial stubble and tobacco juice dribbling down his chin, he wore only jockey shorts, a soiled white t-shirt, a filthy red baseball cap, and no shoes. He was friendly in a distracted sort of way as we exchanged introductions, and he mumbled through his plug of chewing tobacco that we were welcome to shoot all the pictures we wanted. After a few minutes of chit-chat, he invited us inside.

Sure enough, the cabin's interior was decorated with colors, patterns and objects much like those on the porch and in the yard. A red-and-blue target was painted around the bare light bulb in the center of the living-room ceiling, and a huge red disk was painted on the front of the refrigerator in the kitchen. I surveyed the premises while Lemming showed off the homemade weights that he said he lifted every day to keep his

arms in shape--a couple of cinderblocks with makeshift steel-chain handles. Using a black punching bag that hung from the ceiling in one corner of the living room, he gave us a demonstration of his pugilistic skills.

On one wall of the living room, symmetrically arranged over the fireplace, were three nearly identical generic landscape paintings that were darkened by a heavy accumulation of dust and soot, indicating that they'd been hanging there for many years. They might have escaped my attention had it not been for the big, fire-engine-red disk that had been freshly painted in the center of each one, and the white plastic picnic fork glued horizontally in place across the center of each disk. After inspecting these curiously altered decorative artworks, I noticed more forks on a low table against the wall opposite the fireplace--a pair of them, made of metal, not plastic. Then I noticed the nearby outlet on that wall, and the electrical cord that was plugged into it. Whatever appliance had once been connected to the other end of this four-foot-long cord had been cut loose from it, and an inch or two of rubber insulation had been stripped away from that end to expose the two internal copper wires, which had been loosely hung over two small nails in the wall at about chest height above the outlet. It looked dangerous to me, so I asked Lemming about it.

He explained that he used it to charge himself up. Then, without waiting to be asked what he meant, he proceeded to give us a demonstration. Dusting his hands with flour to neutralize any moisture on them, he faced the wall, picked up one of the metal forks in each hand and, with his thumbs on the tines, pressed them down on the two bare wires and held them there, just below the pair of nails in the wall. Vibrating ever so slightly with the 115 volts of electricity coursing through his body, he looked back at me

over his right shoulder and continued to talk and to chew his wad of tobacco and dribble brown juice. The power in them wires, he said, was good for charging up his bloodstream. He said he liked to get a good jolt of electricity at least two or three times a day, and it made more sense to do it himself than to pay some doctor twenty-five or thirty dollars for the same treatment in a hospital. I tried to get him to supply more details about the procedure's specific benefits, but all he would say that "It makes you stouter and ever'thing." After a few minutes, he apparently felt sufficiently charged-up, and he put the forks back on the table after I declined his offer to let me try out his auto-electrocution system.

We spent about an hour with Lemming that day, and I wasn't able to get much coherent information out of him. Of course I wondered about his past and how he had come to be living in this garishly adorned shack out in the middle of nowhere, spending his days painting geometric designs, lifting cinderblocks, beating on a punching bag, and self-administering electroshock therapy every few hours. But he ignored many of my questions and only mumbled brief, semi-intelligible responses to others. I did find out that he claimed to be fifty-nine years old--he looked much older--and said he had once been married. He said his wife went crazy and had been incarcerated in the state mental hospital in Milledgeville for years.

A few years later I learned that Lemming had made up the story about his wife's going crazy, and I also came by some interesting facts about his background. It turns out that in his younger days he was a fast-living moonshine-maker, but in the early 1960s a near-deadly auto accident that ended a high-speed chase by law-enforcement agents had left him partially brain-damaged and unable to earn a living, illicit or

otherwise. The latter information came by way of Jodi Willie, who located and interviewed Lemming's mother and other members of his family for a documentary film about him. One relative told her that when he was released from the hospital after his accident, he demanded to be taken back, because, he said, the doctors had taken his eyes out and put them in backwards, and he wanted to have them fixed.

I never saw Lemming again after that memorable dog-day afternoon. About two years later, he was found dead in his cabin, reportedly of natural causes. I haven't returned to those parts since then, but I doubt there's much left of the funky little homemade world of boldly colored designs and slapdash symmetries that Lemming created on that lonesome road in Chattooga County, Georgia.

We'll never know what Lemming had in mind in ordering and ornamenting his little world the way he did. Maybe this was his way of visually representing what he saw when he had his eyeballs taken out and put in backwards, or when he pressed the forks down on those live wires to charge himself up.

(Adapted from an essay in Public Art Review*, September 1992)*