PAINTBRUSH PEOPLE AND BOTTLE-CAP THRONES:

The Regenerative Art of "Mr. Imagination"

Prominent among the distinctions that mark Chicago as a unique center of American culture is the rich tradition of resourceful improvisation that infuses and enlivens its African American community. This tradition is manifested in a variety of forms, ranging from the city's native versions of jazz and blues to the popular outdoor murals that adorn its South Side, and it has blossomed in the years since the mass migration of southern blacks to Chicago in the early twentieth century. But it can ultimately traced back more than 200 years, to Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, the first non-indigenous inhabitant of this site on the southern shore of Lake Michigan. A frontiersman and trader, du Sable was a Haitian-born mulatto whose mother had been a slave, and his success in this then-remote locale was a direct result of his abilitity to improvise with available resources--to make ingenious use of what he found immediately at hand.

Surviving descriptions of du Sable suggest that he may have borne some resemblance to Gregory Warmack, the contemporary Chicagoan more widely known as "Mr. Imagination." A self-taught African American artist whose reputation has grown steadily since the early 1980s, Warmack also embodies the same spirit of resourcefulness that allowed du Sable to thrive in the rugged territory that was the Upper Midwest in the late 18th century. Warmack's primary art materials are castoff utilitarian objects and the byproducts of industrial production--items that can be found in abundance in the streets and alleys of urban neighborhoods like those he has inhabited

all his life. His figural sculptures and other artworks are made of buttons, broomsticks, keys, wire, cardboard, scrap lumber, glass shards, dead batteries, aluminum cans, copper pipe fittings, fragments of sheet metal, and parts from broken television sets, not to mention his most oft-used materials--bottlecaps, used paintbrushes, and stonelike hunks of fused sand left over from the manufacture of industrial steel in Chicago foundries.

Most of Warmack's friends and acquaintances call him "Mr. I," and his personal trademark is a disembodied eye. He has adopted this ancient, cross-cultural symbol because of the homophonic relationship between the words "eye" and the letter "I," and because this traditional sign of omniscience and visionary consciousness also serves as a fitting emblem of the visual acuity that enables him to continually find stray bits of detritus that he can use in his work. His habit of creatively recycling thrown-away materials originated during his teen years in the late 1960s, when he began to make earrings and decorative pins from beads and broken costume jewelry that he found in a trash can in the south-side neighborhood where he lived a the time. As one of nine children raised by a single mother, he was accustomed to economic deprivation and the resultant need to "make do" with hand-me-down clothing, secondhand toys, and other previously used necessities or luxury items--a common practice among the materially disadvantaged--so his scavenger's instincts were learned early on. He absorbed himself in the practice of combing the streets and sidewalks for castoffs, unusual-looking rocks, and anything else that caught his eye, and he became something of a pack-rat, eventually building a collection that filled his bedroom and left no space for him to sleep there.

According to his own testimony, Warmack also developed a sense of himself as an artist at a young age. He has made drawings for as long as he can remember, and he saw his youthful foray into crafting homemade jewelry as an extension of that creative activity. Among the other outlets he found for his artistic inclinations during his teens and early twenties were painting rocks, carving wooden canes and miniature tree-bark masks, and making decorative clothes. In the late 1960s and throughout the '70s he supplemented his income from various menial jobs by selling his creations on the Chicago streets and in neighborhood bars and restaurants. During part of that period, when the weather was warm enough, he used the porch of his mother's apartment on 61st Street as an open-air studio, where his activities evolved into informal art-making workshops for neighborhood children, with whom he generously shared his supplies and materials.

Warmack came perilously close to losing his life before the end of the decade. In 1978, a few months after his thirtieth birthday, he fell victim to a violent assault of the kind that's all too common in low-income urban districts like the South Side's Englewood neighborhood, where he made his home in those days. One night as he was making his rounds with a bag of his handmade items for sale, an armed man suddenly emerged from an alleyway and demanded money from him. When he resisted the robbery attempt, he was shot twice in the stomach, and he might have bled to death had it not been for a bystander who, fortunately, called the police. While undergoing emergency surgery at St. Bernard Hospital, Warmack entered a comatose state that lasted for six weeks.

The attack seemed to fulfill an unsettling premonition Warmack remembers having only a few days earlier, and during his extended period of unconsciousness he claims to have undergone a series of transformative out-of-body experiences that included a vague sensation of time-travel into the distant past. Once he regained full consciousness and was able to leave the hospital, it took him the better part of a year to recover from his injuries and the trauma associated with them, and only then did he return to his creative endeavors.

Soon after he resumed his practice of scavenging the streets and making things, he discovered a vacant lot where truckloads of industrial sandstone were occasionally dumped. He retrieved some pieces of this malleable substance and began experimenting with them, and he quickly realized that it made a convenient sculptural material--one that was easily carved and shaped to suggest figures and other three-dimensional images, as well as low-relief renditions of fluid cartoon-style script. As he immersed himself in this activity, he discovered that the evolving sculpturqal forms often evoked fantasies of ancient artworks and stimulated thoughts that he associated with the sensations of time travel he had experienced while in a coma.

Within a year or two after he began working in this new medium, Warmack began to consider how he might expand the audience for his sculptures and other works, and in a spirit of good-natured audacity, he adopted the moniker “Mr. Imagination.” As a sort of self-advertisement, he attached a handle to a large, fish-like sculpture he had made from a partly burned tree trunk--a piece he called his Prehistoric Alligator--and began carrying it around the city with him, almost as if it were a bizarrely zoomorphic briefcase. This eccentric accoutrement attracted the bemused attention of many pedestrians,

public-transportation passengers and passersby in street traffic, but it failed to generate the kind of notice that might have helped him gain artistic notoriety.

During the period when he was regularly roaming Chicago's streets with his unusual sculpture, tragedy struck Warmack's life again, this time in the form of a fire that severely damaged an apartment where he had been living and destroyed many of his artworks that were stored there. But within a few months of that disaster, his fortunes took a significant turn for the better when he made a contact that would have a life-changing impact on him. A mutual friend put him in touch with Carl Hammer, a Chicago art dealer, whom Warmack invited to visit his new apartment in the same south-side neighborhood where he had lived for most of his life.

Hammer immediately recognized the potential appeal that Mr. Imagination's work could have among the growing audience for vernacular art--more commonly termed contemporary folk or "outsider" art--and he set about organizing the artist's first formal exhibition at Carl Hammer Gallery. In the nearly sixteen years since that show opened, Mr. I has become a well-known Chicago personality, and his distinctive artworks have earned him an international reputation through scores of exhibits in prominent museums and galleries across the United States and in Europe, not to mention the site-specific works he has built on commission for urban playgrounds and popular-entertainment venues, such as Florida's Disneyworld and the House of Blues nightclub chain. But his fame hasn't distanced him from the streets, the source of his primary art materials and much of his inspiration. Now living on Chicago's North Side, only a few blocks from Wrigley Field, he continues to explore his neighborhood and other parts of the city, ever alert for discarded items that he might use for artistic purposes.

Mr. I's art has also continued to evolve in the wake of his initiation into the gallery system. some of the materials whith which he is now most closely identified--namely bottle caps and the castoff paintbrushes he uses to create his "paintbrush people"--have been added to his repertoire since the mid-1980s, and his sculptural work has shown substantial development in that interval. During this prolific createive period he has forged a signature style of heavily encrusted figural sculpture that is simultaneously whimsical and spiritually charged, festive and richly metaphorical. Singular as it is, though, his art has definite affinities with particular art traditions and the work of some of his contemporaries. He employs bottlecaps, for example, in much the same way that Nigeria's Yoruba people use beads in their traditional artwork. His first bottle-cap-studded works were a coat, hat, mask, and staff that he made in 1988. These and other bottle-cap-covered articles of clothing he has made for himslef seem to serve as lighthearted emblems of special status--flashy visual declarations of his artistic vocation, if nothing else--and in that sense they're analogous to the beaded garments worn by members of the priestly and noble classes in Yoruba society. His use of bottle caps in figural sculpture and functional works such as his tghronelike chairs also has precedents in traditional American folk art, where bottle caps have been used to decorate handmade furniture and have been stacked on wire armatures to form the arms and legs of figurines with wooden cutout heads and torsos.

It's worth noting, in this connection, the relationship of Mr. I's bottle-cap surfaces to the objects that his late brother, William Warmack, wove from flattened and tightly folded cigarett packs. "Junior," as William was known to his friends and family, used these commonly discarded paper packaging materials to craft whimsical animal figures,

miniature furniture, and even brassieres. This practice of tight, rhythmic paper-braiding has been widespread in this country at least since the Great Depression, and is often taken up by prison inmates as a means of passing the time during their incarceration. Those examples of William's cigarette-pack creations that he didn't sell filled his bedroom in the apartment he and Mr. I shared until William's tragic death in a freak accident in the fall of 1997. (A heavy window fell on him and killed him as he was climbing into the apartment after accidentally locking himself out.)

Some of Mr. I's work with found materials is reminiscent of the memory-jug tradition, another folk-art form, in which the exterior surfaces of jugs or other vessels are encrusted with a variety of small objects, such as seashells, stones, coins, and buttons. Although he denies having had any knowledge of this tradition until it was called to his attention in very recent years, he has made similar pieces by embedding such objects in the putty- or plaster-coated surfaces of bottles, jugs, and, in one case, a pair of gym shoes. He has employed the same technique to wet cement when creating the site-specific grottoes and related structures he has built during the 1990s. He even applies the term "memory wall" to his most recently completed work of this kind--a sixty-foot-long *Wall for Humanitas, Hands and Spirit*, at the House of Blues in Las Vegas.

More generally, in his use of found materials to create animated figural sculpture, Mr. I demonstrates a strong kinship with a number of other African American vernacular artists who have emerged into the so-called mainstream of American art during the late 20th century. In that respecdt, his work can be seen as part of a loosely defined, culturally based improvisational visual tradition whose other prominent exponents have included Thornton Dial, Bessie Harvey, Lonnie Holley, Charlie Lucas, Nellie Mae Rowe,

and Mr. I's fellow Chicagoans David Philpot and Derek Webster. Like those artists, he recycles the detritus of contemporary society to create resonant sculptural celebrations of black identity.

Mr. I's favored subject matter--noble-looking, dark-skinned figures, often attired in sparkling ceremonial regalia--might seem wholly unrelated to his contemporary urban environment. Unlike some of his self-taught and academically trained counterparts, he doesn't take a critical stance toward the times, and his is not an art of overt social commentary. Nonetheless, the transformational approach that characterizes his work has meaningful applications within the tough urban milieu in which he lives. On one level, it can be seen as an ongoing object lesson in personal redemption and ecological responsibility, and as a testimony to the possibility of surviving adverse circumstances and overcoming seemingly insurmountable social obstacles. His practice of creatively reusing discarded, defunct or broken objects is a form of metaphorically raising the dead and generating new life. In an era of disenchantment, cynicism, and biter irony, Mr. Imagination's art stands out brightly and boldly for its spirit of affirmation, exultation, and cultural pride.

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