IRREPRESSIBLE VISIONARY:

Tracking the multi-faceted, fifty-year career of Bernard G. Schatz

The art of Bernard G. Schatz first crossed my radar screen a little more than twenty years ago, when I was powerfully drawn to a couple of small, painted figural sculptures that I happened to see in the home of Ray Kass, an artist and art professor at Virginia Polytechnic University (a.k.a. Virginia Tech) in Blacksburg, Virginia. Kass told me who the artist was and, at my request, directed me soon afterward to the dilapidated farmhouse where Schatz then lived with his wife and young daughter on fifty wooded acres in the mountains of southern West Virginia. His studio and showroom was an unheated, tarpaper-covered outbuilding whose windows were draped with black curtains that shielded its contents from external view. Schatz ushered me into that humble little shack one Saturday afternoon, and for the first time I beheld the bulk of the work that had by then occupied him for about thirty years.

In sharp contrast to the rustic setting, the sculptural pieces that filled most of the wall and floor space were finely crafted, brightly painted and thematically sophisticated. Varying widely in size and ingenious in their use of materials, these were singular works indeed--distinctively stylized, amusingly grotesque figures, masks, sculpted body parts and other forms whose surfaces were mostly painted with elaborately concentric patterns in high-key colors. My inspection of and inquiries about these works yielded the information that many of them were intended as portraits of historical and mythological figures, some were sexual in nature, and others--including a series from the 1960s dealing with the Vietnam War--were politically motivated. Many of them had a satirical edge, but the initial and primary appeal in all cases was visual, and the cumulative

impact of all this art in the densely configured installation Schatz had orchestrated there in his wilderness hut was electrifying.

This was certainly not contemporary folk art--the term then most commonly applied to the art on which I was beginning to focus my attention as a writer. But neither did it have much in common with what passed as “mainstream” contemporary art. It was unlike anything I’d ever seen--clearly the work of an intensely driven individual inspired by a strong personal vision.

In the ensuing years I came to know Schatz’s work well, and my initial strong appreciation for it only deepened with further exposure. In the process of acquainting myself with his art, I also came to know some of the particulars of his life and the multi-pronged career path that he had pursued in the two decades before he secluded himself and his family in the Southern Appalachians.

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Born in Baltimore on November 21, 1931, Schatz was an only child who, at four or five, moved with his mother to Los Angeles, where he was raised largely by an aunt and uncle. He says that from his earliest years he has maintained a three-track identity--as visual artist, theatrical performer and healer. He was initially inspired to become an artist by the example of Benvenuto Cellini, whose *Autobiography* he recalls reading at twelve. His parallel fascination with theatre manifested itself early on in his voracious reading of plays and related books, and later in his decision to major in theatre when he entered Los Angeles City College (LACC) in 1950. After his first year there, his interest in medicine emerged into the foreground, and he changed his major, devoting the next seven years largely to medical studies at LACC, the University of Southern California

and the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA), as well as related work supervising the cardiovascular and renal-dialysis laboratory at the Cedars of Lebanon Hospital.

While at UCLA, Schatz enrolled in several art courses and began rethinking his medical ambitions due to what he describes as a growing discomfiture with medical professionals and students--"predominantly aggressive, power-seeking individuals," in his estimation. No sooner had he withdrawn his medical-school applications than he grew similarly frustrated with the regimen of art-department classes, as a result of which he abandoned academic art training. Thereafter he made art on his own schedule and exclusively according to his own inclinations, meanwhile channeling his interest in the healing arts in the direction of physical therapy, in which field he earned a bachelor's degree in 1957.

Through the late 1950s and into the '60s Schatz continued to earn a living as a medical researcher while making art and teaching himself to play the banjo. He involved himself in the popular American folk-music revival of those years and created a new stage persona, Cheyanne Schatz, under which billing he musically accompanied himself as he sang his distinctive variations on traditional folk songs at private parties and other venues. By 1963 he had expanded on the latter activity and reinvented himself as "Cheyanne Schatz, World's Greatest One-Man Band." He began traveling around the greater L.A. area in a flamboyantly hand-painted and sculpture-embellished 1950 Chrysler New Yorker full of his musical instruments, artworks and props, and he developed a sophisticated, free-form act that combined elements of folk music, stand-up comedy, dada theatre and vaudeville shtick. For a while he was booked for regular

weekly performances at the Ash Grove, a popular L.A. nightclub where his appreciative audiences included the iconoclastic comedian Lenny Bruce and the talent coordinator for the *Steve Allen Show*, a nationally syndicated television variety program. The latter connection led to Schatz's first appearance on the show, during which host Steve Allen found his eccentrically improvised performance so entertaining that Schatz was invited back for six more appearances. It wasn't long before he was mischievously billing himself as "the Star of the Steve Allen Show."

Despite the repeated national TV exposure, Schatz found himself unable to earn a living from his one-man-band act, and in 1964 he abandoned it. For his next venture he opened the Cheyanne Schatz Store, an exuberant parody of American commerce, in the Venice Beach district of Santa Monica. There he greeted customers at an "interrogation booth" and, if cooperative under questioning, they were allowed inside to browse among the claustrophobic displays of commercial artifacts and Schatz's art (some of which he sold by the pound). The store also served as an outlet for his self-published books, such as "Schatz's Monster," and "How to Slaughter Cattle for Profit," and as headquarters for fictional businesses including the Byworth Talent Agency and the Barger Decorated Horse Factory, which he advertised with commercially printed calling cards.

After the store failed commercially, like the act before it, Schatz fell back on his medical-research and physical-therapy skills to earn a living, and by 1970 he was director of his own physical-therapy clinic. Nonetheless, he continued to make art, and in 1974 he resigned his job in order to devote his full attention to artistic pursuits. Seeking a change from the urban setting where he had grown up, he moved across the

country and invested his savings in the small West Virginia farm where I would find him and his family about ten years later. Shortly before I first encountered his art, Schatz had rather tentatively emerged from the hills in 1983, at Ray Kass' invitation, to mount a solo sculpture exhibition at Virginia Tech.

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Schatz's work retained something of a public profile through the remainder of the 1980s, with examples of his work included in group exhibitions in scattered locales from North Carolina to Arizona. He spent a year in Roswell, New Mexico, after he was selected to participate in an artists' residency program at the Roswell Museum of Art. Before making that move, he sublet his farm, as he has continued to do in the years since then. Toward the end of the decade, when he and his wife and daughter moved back east, they settled in the college town of Charlottesville, Virginia.

Schatz divorced a few years later, and in more recent years has seen his daughter Anna off to college, but he continues to live in Charlottesville, where he has divided his time and energies between creating art and administering physical therapy. His accumulated expertise in the latter field is distilled in his recently authored book, *The Schatz Technique: Real Treatments for Chronic Pain*, published under the title *Soft Tissue Massage for Pain Relief* (Hampton Roads, 2001).

In addition to his Cheyanne Schatz persona and his professional identity as an innovative physical therapist, Schatz has over the last forty years occasionally assumed other imaginative identities. He has alternately styled himself, for example, as inspirational singer Obediah Klowder and romantic crooner Romeo Legois. At other times he's been scientific lecturer Hiram L. Bangelor, author and slaughterhouse owner

Kenneth Barger and, more recently, L-15, or sometimes, more grandiosely, Master Artist L-15. (He refuses to comment on the significance of the L-15 designation.) Throughout all these years, his art career has oscillated between periods of exposure and sometimes-prolonged periods of retreat from exhibiting or performing, which have been invariably followed by his "comebacks," as he likes to call his re-emergences into the public arena.

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Since 1990 Schatz' visual art has been exhibited sporadically, and occasionally at high-profile venues including the Outsider Art Fair in New York and the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. With its frequent references to history, world mythology and his own self-created mythology, his engagingly expressive work addresses a wide range of human concerns and tends to prompt a similarly wide range of viewer responses, from wonder to hilarity to horror, depending on the viewer's mindset and the particular work under scrutiny. Although he occasionally ventures into abstraction--as in his painted wood-grain panels and a series of large, black-on-white drawings--his work is predominantly figural, and boldly so. His palette runs a gamut from the restrained cream colors and earth tones of his ceramic sculptures to the comic-book hues of his stretched-fabric masks, compressed-cellulose sculptures and panel paintings.

The largest and most comprehensive exhibition to date by this enigmatic, irrepressible artist took place early this year at the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Art's Anderson Gallery in Richmond, Virginia ("The Wondrous World of L-15: The multiple arts and personae of Bernard G. Schatz," January 23-March 7, 2004).

There, in four adjoining, second-floor galleries, I curated a selection that surveyed fifty years of Schatz's visual art and related items. Among the show's more than 500 individual components were "Hex Blocks" that he made during the early 1960s from painted wood scraps embedded with nails; handmade signs and props that he employed during his appearances on the *Steve Allen Show*; several of the sculptures and other works from his "Vietnam" series; a multitude of the boldly painted masks that he has made since the 1970s; a large display of his decoratively painted, tubular objects presented as the "Aortas" of famous historical and mythological figures; figural sculptures of wire, porcelain, velvet and other materials, from his "L-15 Intergalactic Angels" series; painted sculptural objects presented as "Inquisition Interrogation Instruments"; text paintings from his "Jew" and "Female Kali Yuga" series; humorously grotesque figural sculptures from his "Former Wife" series; and a videotape recording of selected Schatz performances from the *Steve Allen Show*, as well as filmmaker Michael Vidor's half-hour documentary film about the Cheyanne Schatz Store, which aired on public TV stations in California during the mid-1960s. To open the exhibition, Schatz gave his first performance in ten years, presenting his *Danse du Mort* and other vignettes during "An Evening with Bernard G. Schatz," at a nearby theater.

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Over twenty years of closely following Schatz's career, I've been consistently amazed at the volume, vitality and singularity of his artistic output, not to mention the dedication with which he has pursued his art in the face of apparent public indifference--or perhaps it's just bafflement. To be sure, several of the more adventurous collectors who specialize in outsider art have acquired examples of his work, but he seems to be

regarded primarily as a curiosity whose work is peripheral to the field. In his work's ambiguous relationship to the outsider/insider dichotomy, Schatz is one of those liminal artists about whom I recently wrote for *Raw Vision* ('Art Along the Boundaries,' *RV* #46). The more conservative elements on both sides of the Great Divide evidently can't figure out what to make of his art or how to categorize it, so they tend to give it the ultimate short-sell by ignoring it.

Such a refusal of response to Schatz' art is not a new phenomenon, by his account. In Michael Vidor's previously mentioned documentary film, made 40 years ago, Schatz tells a story that I'll paraphrase in closing, since it exemplifies a stubbornly enduring reality that confronts any artist who creates or accomplishes something original and challenging in the midst of a society such as ours:

Schatz is driving along a street in Los Angeles one day at the wheel of his outrageously painted, sculpture-festooned Chrysler New Yorker, and he stops at a traffic light glowing red. On the nearest corner, waiting to cross the street in the same direction, stands a conservatively attired man alongside his young son. The boy immediately spies Schatz' car and responds excitedly, attempting to call it to his father's attention before the light changes. He repeatedly cries out, "Dad, Dad! Look at that car!"

Finally, the boy's father deigns to turn his gaze in the direction of his son's enthusiastic gesticulations.

Looking directly and without expression at Schatz and his fancifully tricked-out automobile, the man asks, "What car?"

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