LOOK AT THAT!

A Personal View of Outsider Art in the American South in the Last Half of the 20th Century (1991)

I was growing up in Georgia in the 1950s and ‘60s when I first encountered what many people later came to call outsider art. Road trips that I made with my parents and siblings in the family station wagon typically provided the context for those early encounters. I spent much of my time on those journeys gazing out the car windows in search of anything out of the ordinary, and I was especially drawn to objects or places that had been elaborately and unusually decorated.

Some of my earliest such memories involve the junk-festooned covered wagon with which a scraggly-bearded itinerant preacher named Charles “Chess McCartney” regularly crisscrossed the country. Most of the people who knew of McCartney referred to him as the “Goat Man,” because he used a team of more than a dozen goats to haul his attention-grabbing gypsy wagon from place to place. When he wasn’t on the move, he could be found at his modest home alongside U.S. Highway 80 near Jeffersonville, Georgia, thirty miles from my hometown of Dublin. Although he wasn’t an artist in the usual sense, his wagon was an eye-catching mobile assemblage, encrusted with hubcaps, old car license plates, hand-painted religious messages, and faded pictures of himself and his goats--postcard versions of which he sold to pay for his regular cross-country treks. As a child, I was far more impressed by the Goat Man--at a distance at least--than by most of the adults I encountered. My interest in him marked the beginning of a life-long respect and fascination for eccentrics and willful non-conformists.

One day in the summer of 1958 or ‘59, when I was six or seven, I was traveling through northeast Mississippi in the back seat of the family car. As we headed into the small town of Aberdeen to visit relatives there, I spied one of the most amazing things I’d ever seen in my young life. Looming over the west side of the highway was a ramshackle, three-story scaffold structure built of long wooden poles, lengths of steel reinforcement bar, and sheets of rusted tin, and decorated with old auto parts, bleached animal skulls, salvaged road signs, and other miscellaneous objects. My eyes widened and my jaw dropped as I pointed out the window and yelled, “Look at that!” I pleaded with my father to steer the car off the road so we could get a good look at the thing, but he kept driving and said we didn’t have time to stop.

Later that summer, traveling with my paternal grandparents on that same stretch of rural highway, I managed to negotiate a quick stop at the astonishing junk palace so that I could inspect it up close. Within a minute or two after we got out of the car and started tentatively looking around, a dark-skinned gentleman whose appearance I only recall in rough outline emerged from a small, white clapboard house on a nearby hill and walked down to greet us. He introduced himself as Sykes--I would later learn that his first named was Stephen--and indicated that he had built this thing, then he told us a little about it and pointed out some of its special features. There was a network of rickety stairs and homemade ladders that wound their way through the interior of the precariously towering structure, in the upper reaches of which was strung a sheltered hammock where Mr. Sykes said he liked to sleep on hot summer nights. I also recall a wooden rain barrel perched atop the whole structure, with pipes leading from it to a water faucet near ground level.

Although I didn't know enough to mentally classify Mr. Sykes' open-air tower as art--never mind assign it an even more specialized term like folk or outsider art--I found it so inspirational that I adopted him as a role model. In the weeks after I returned to Georgia , I began to collect junk that I found near my family's home--wood scraps, bones, a rusted-out car muffler and other discarded machine parts, etc.--and attach them to the swing set in the back yard. I was actively searching for more stuff to add to my growing outdoor assemblage when my parents noticed what I was doing and called a halt to the whole endeavor. They ordered me to dismantle it, and my dad helped me dispose of the remnants, thus ending my own brief career as an aspiring builder of folk-art environments.

*

Some years later--in Atlanta in the late 1970s--I was working as a magazine journalist when personal interests and other circumstances prompted me to gravitate increasingly toward writing about contemporary art and artists. By that time I had met poet-publisher Jonathan Williams, pioneer art dealer Judith Alexander, and a few others who shared my interest in idiosyncratic environmental marvels like Stephen Sykes' place. I had also meanwhile been alerted to other such creations, courtesy of a small but growing network of fellow enthusiasts for this material, in those days most often referred to as contemporary folk art. It was an exciting time, and in 1980 I launched a more focused, personal investigation into this relatively fresh field--an endeavor that was to keep me intensely occupied through the following decade and well beyond.

Early in that year I made contact with two artists who would occupy central places in my research and advocacy efforts for several years to come--Howard Finster

and Eddie Owens Martin. Finster (b. 1915) was an Alabama-born Baptist preacher who had retired from the pulpit to build a three-acre “Paradise Garden” in the swamp behind his house in northwest Georgia. More recently, he had begun what became an extensive series of narrative paintings based in part on his frequent visionary experiences. Martin (1908-1986) was a flamboyant old gay fortune-teller who dressed like a hippie priest and had spent half his life creating an environment of rainbow-colored, painted-concrete sculptures and exotic-looking buildings on his four-acre homeplace in west central Georgia. He called himself “Saint EOM” (pronounced “om”) and had named his monumental creation “Pasaquan.” The audiotaped interviews and other material that I gathered during frequent visits with Finster and EOM over a period of six to eight years formed the basis for the illustrated biographies of both artists that I wrote and saw published in the late 1980s.

A comparison of the two men and their work highlights some of the problems involved in the ongoing attempt to classify and categorize this non-academic art and its makers. Aside from their rural upbringings, limited formal educations, and propensities for art-making, Finster and EOM had little in common. Finster spent his entire life in the relatively isolated vicinity where he was born, and despite his legendary eccentricities, his life and work remained firmly rooted in the religious and folk traditions with which he grew up. St. EOM, by contrast, lived a highly unconventional life, especially for someone of his generation and with his early history. Born into a family of poor sharecroppers in a remote rural area, he ran away from home In 1922, when he was fourteen, and made his way to New York, where he spent the next three and a half decades working as a prostitute, selling small quantities of cannabis, gambling, and

telling fortunes in a tea room. In the process he was exposed to the entire spectrum of life in the nation's cultural capital. The paintings and drawings he began making in the 1930s were heavily influenced by the traditional African, Asian, and PreColumbian American art he researched in the New York Public Library and saw during frequent visits to the Museum of Natural History. These same influences can be seen in the phantasmagorical environment he began constructing in the 1950s. Even though he had no formal art education, he was a worldly, sophisticated artist, particularly in comparison to someone like Finster, and his brand of visionary art strikes a sharp contrast with Finster's preachy, hyperactively cartoonish paintings and unwieldy environmental assemblages.

And yet EOM and Finster are lumped together in the same broadly specialized but loosely defined art category, along with a few hundred other largely self-taught individuals, each of whom creates in his or her own unique style. In the early 1970s, a British publisher coined the term *Outsider Art* as a title for Roger Cardinal's landmark book on non-academic art in Europe, and by the late 1980s, this catchy designation had come to be applied with increasing frequency to works made in the United States by individuals with little or no formal art education. Others who took a special interest in this art preferred to call it contemporary folk, grassroots, vernacular, idiosyncratic, and/or visionary art, and persistent debates about which term is most appropriate have been an inevitable but unfortunately distracting byproduct of its growing popularity

None of these designations ultimately tells us very much about the nature of the art and its cultural significance. They refer not to a particular style, movement, or genre, but rather to a very broad range of visual expression. The common element has less to

do with art than it does with the artists themselves, and particularly the fact that they're unschooled in artistic matters but devoted nonetheless to making art, whatever it might look like.

Whatever you choose to call them, these exceptionally creative, highly driven women and men have earned a wide audience for their efforts in the years since I first encountered Stephen Sykes in rural Mississippi, and their work has played an increasingly important role in the contemporary art world. Controversies over terminology, marketing tactics, dealer ethics, and the most appropriate means of exhibiting this art will continue to occupy the curators, collectors, scholars, and interested critics. But the artists themselves tend to be little affected by these controversies.

*

Many of the self-taught artists whose work has become widely known in recent years are from the American South, prompting the question of what it is about the region that stimulates so much of this independent, non-academic art activity. Why have so many people in this part of the country been inspired to pursue such ambitious creative endeavors despite their lack of formal training or other institutional encouragement? I don't know that there are definitive, across-the-board answers to those questions, but serious consideration of them can yield insight into the relationship between the individual and the larger regional culture in the South.

Many of the region's self-taught artists are elderly and retired or disabled individuals who turned to art as a means of staying busy and productive in a culture steeped in the Protestant work ethic. The region's climate, too, probably plays a role in

encouraging the substantial numbers of ambitiously conceived outdoor environments that have been created by some of its self-taught artists. Relatively warm weather in this part of the country is conducive to the extended periods of outdoor labor required to create and maintain these sites.

Even more important in nurturing such creative projects is southern culture's deeply rooted preoccupation with the supernatural. In some parts of the world the kinds of unofficial public creativity demonstrated by these yard artists might be viewed as symptoms of madness. But in the South, and particularly its rural areas, they're more apt to be regarded as demonstrations of intense religious faith or evidence that their builders have been touched by spiritual forces.

To a large extent the spiritual streak in southern culture is a product of Christian traditions rooted in Europe, but it's also strongly influenced by the region's African-derived black cultural traditions, which have been preserved and passed down almost entirely outside the institutions of the dominant white culture. Robert Farris Thompson, Judith McWillie and others have written informatively about the influence of African ritual and decorative traditions on certain self-taught African-American artists in the South.

Shaped by both Christian and African sources, the region's religious heritage encompasses beliefs in faith healing, miracles, glossolalia, and prophetic powers, and in that respect it encourages idiosyncratic attempts to communicate with the non-corporeal entities. When those attempts take highly visible artistic form, as in the case of many Southern yard-art environments, they're generally respected, despite the inevitable jokes about "the crazy man down the road." In cases where there was no overt religious

motivation, the places tend to get left alone maybe *just in case* tampering with them might prompt some form of spiritually empowered vengeance.

Howard Finster's neighbors knew him as a roving evangelist long before they knew him as an artist, and they maintained an air of amused tolerance when he turned his immense energies to creating his "garden for the end of the world" and painting his "visions from beyond the light of the sun." St. EOM, a much more reclusive figure, was regarded by many of his neighbors with a mixture of awe and fear, known for mysterious ways that gave rise to local legends, such as the story that trained rattlesnakes lurked in the bamboo thickets on his property, awaiting his command to attack unwanted intruders.

To those who haven't grown up in the South or lived here for a long time, this talk of supernatural occupations, extraterrestrial visions, and trained rattlesnakes probably sounds bizarre, lending support to the romantic mystique that currently pervades the field of southern outsider art and its public presentation. My intent here isn't to further reinforce the latter stereotype, but to emphasize the meaningful and invigorating contributions these artists have made to the sprawling, pluralistic, multicultural field of art in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Some of their work is like that of academically trained contemporaries to the extent that it addresses contemporary social and political issues, while some of it explores non-rational realms that otherwise remain largely uncharted in current art practice. And much of this art embodies a highly experimental approach to materials, form, and content. If you buy the notion that outsider art is simple, humble, naive, and unsophisticated, take a corrective look at the sculptural tableaux and big relief paintings of Thornton Dial; or consider the complex

semiotics manifested in Holley's environmental installations, found-object assemblages, figural-abstract paintings, and ancient-looking sandstone sculptures. Then think again.

I offer these observations in response to what I've witnessed on this front in my lifetime to date, and as food for further thought and discussion among the artists and their audiences. But I'd like to yield the final word here to the late Juanita Rogers, whom I never had the honor of meeting but whose work perplexed and amazed me from the moment I first encountered it in an Atlanta art gallery around 1980, five years before her death. Rogers made spooky creatures of mud sculpted around armatures fashioned from cow vertebrae. She also worked in watercolor, painting farm landscapes populated by merry-making cone-heads and watched over by hovering spaceships. Her inspiration and muse was a mysterious entity known as "Stonefish." In a statement on her work that her friend and patron Anton Haardt recorded a few years before Rogers' death, the artist offered a cryptic commentary on her endeavors, and one that serves as an idiosyncratically poetic expression of deeply felt artistic inspiration:

"I didn't sign up to work on these pieces, but I had my hands washed in the holy water by the sister at the Mission to handle that mud. This is secret-service work....Stonefish, he can tell you more about it than me, 'cause I don't know too much about it. I just makes it. I been making it for quite a long time. I ain't in this 'cause of who I am. It's cause of WHAT I am. What am I?....I don't know.....I don't know."

Originally published in a different form in Outsider Artists in Alabama*, a catalog for a 1991-1992 exhibition organized by the Alabama State Council on the Arts, Montgomery*.