PARADISE BEFORE AND AFTER THE FALL:

Revisiting Howard Finster's Celebrated Georgia Yard Show

Howard Finster--the self-taught artist who brought the world to his doorstep by creating a junk-sculpture yard show in his backyard swamp and making thousands of visionary paintings--was in his sixty-fifth year when I first met him. Sixty-five is the traditional age of retirement in the United States, but it was apparent to me from the moment we shook hands that the Reverend Howard Finster was a man of boundless energy, nowhere near ready to retire. Confirming evidence was everywhere as he led me and a couple of poets--Jonathan Williams and Tom Meyer--through his labyrinthine, two-and-a-half-acre "Plant Farm Museum" and "Inventions of Mankind" display, as he originally called his environment in northwest Georgia. It was late in March 1980, and all three of us were having our first look at the place. It had been a constantly expanding work-in-progress for almost twenty years by that time, and it was the most highly energized landscape I'd ever seen--a dizzying, dazzling maze of sculptural monuments, heavily embellished outbuildings, found-object assemblages, elaborately painted signs, and flowering plants, interconnected by a series of inlaid concrete walkways and subdivided by meandering streams of manually channeled swamp water, all under the shade of large native pine and hardwood trees. It had only been four years since Finster made his first painting, but he was already a nationally known artist as a result of exhibits at a few prominent East Coast galleries and several museums and universities. After forty years as a preacher at Baptist churches and tent revivals across northeast Alabama, northwest Georgia, and southeast Tennessee, he had recently resigned his

last formal ministerial position to devote more energy to his “sermons in paint.” As an indoor showcase for his unique brand of visual preaching, he was preparing to buy a small, one-story building adjoining his place and start converting it into the four-tiered, steeple-crowned structure that he would call the World’s Folk Art Church. Most of his neighbors thought he was nuts, but by 1980, Finster was poised on the verge of becoming one of the U.S.A.’s most celebrated artists--no small feat for a man who had begun his life (December 2, 1915) as one of thirteen children in a virtually penniless family on a hardscrabble farm in the Alabama hills and who had no formal education beyond grammar school.

My initial visit to Finsterland was the beginning of a decade-long collaborative relationship in which I returned frequently to the place and recorded extensive interviews with the artist. Some of that material found its way into several magazine articles and a poem, but much of it was reserved for the profusely illustrated book, *Howard Finster, Stranger from Another World*, which Abbeville Press published in 1989. **(1)** By the time it appeared, Finster was an international celebrity, and his place had become a magnet for art pilgrims, curiosity seekers, and rock-music fans (thanks, in the latter case, to his album covers for R.E.M. and Talking Heads). He was constantly besieged by demands for his time and his art, and I felt that my work with him was completed--not to mention the fact that I had moved from nearby Atlanta to North Carolina--so I stopped visiting so often and resorted to keeping up with him mainly through mutual friends and articles in the press. I saw him only five or six times during the 1990s, and he was reportedly too ill to see me when I made a rare trip to his territory in the Summer of 2000.

The experience that Finster cites as the foundation for his art, his religious vocation, and his understanding of the universe was a vision he recalls having when he was only three years old. As he tells it, he saw an apparition of his recently deceased sister, walking on a stairway mysteriously suspended in the sky over a tomato patch on his family's farm. Just as he was an early-blooming visionary, Finster was also still a child when his strong creative drive began to manifest itself--in activities such as making cornstalk dolls and lathe-turned woodcraft objects. In the late 1940s, he created his first large-scale project--a collection of miniature buildings, religious monuments, and the beginnings of his "Inventions of Mankind" display--in the yard of his house in the small town of Trion, Georgia. In 1961, he brought some of those things with him when the he moved to the nearby Pennville community, on the northern outskirts of Summerville, where they formed the nucleus of the "Plant Farm Museum." He commenced work on the latter project the same year, according to his own account, in response to a vision in which a fifteen-foot-tall man materialized before him and admonished him to "get on the altar." Finster's "Paradise Garden," as it became popularly known, was to be his masterwork, and he had spent fifteen years developing it by the time it began to attract widespread attention, around the same time another visionary experience--a tiny human face that spoke to him from a paint-smudge on his fingertip--prompted him to start painting "sacred art."**(2)**

Finster has often been presented by the mass media as a hillbilly rustic who was "discovered" and promoted to stardom by a few well-placed figures in the art world, but that vast oversimplification--like his designation as an "outsider"--denies his work's artistic validity and his garden's intended function as a public attraction, for which he

actively sought recognition from far and wide. His motivations for building his art environment undoubtedly had much to do with his belief that he was under divine guidance, but they also had a lot to do with his desire to draw a crowd. For more than a decade the site was seen primarily by local people and occasional visitors from nearby cities and towns, most of whom seemed to consider it either a puzzling curiosity or an eyesore. Then an article in the December 1975 issue of *Esquire* magazine introduced it to a national audience. A few weeks later, in January of '76--as if timed to ride the attendant wave of publicity and increased visitation--Finster began creating a body of work as a painter.**(3)**

To some extent, Finster's popular appeal can be attributed to his role as an exotic, eccentric "character" who, in those days, seemed to be always "on"--probably because he drank prodigious amounts of coffee and caffeine-charged soft drinks night and day. Highly approachable--and very entertaining in his virtually non-stop commentary on his art, his religious convictions, the state of the world, and his visions--he was everybody's affable, lovable, oddball grandfather tinkering around in the garage, and he was always happy to talk with you at length without interrupting his activities. His disarming amiability and jocular charm were irresistable, but his art was immediately compelling on its own terms, and largely responsible for fueling all the interest. In many ways, his paintings were directly relevant to developments in the so-called mainstream contemporary art world in the United States during the late '70s and ealy '80s. His bold, urgent, vividly imaginative brand of figuration paralleled the work of several of that era's important emerging painters in New York, Chicago, and California. The work was stylistically naive, but it was also passionate, content-charged, sometimes

cataclysmically violent, and often evocative of altered-consciousness states like those familiar to consumers of mind-altering drugs. It incorporated seductive, comic-book colors, lots of text, and frequent political and historical references. There was typically an urgent, compulsive tone to its treatment of Finster's generally large, main themes--history, biography, autobiography, divine power, worldly calamity, human sinfulness, spiritual salvation, steadfast faith, heavenly reward, and extraterrestrial life. The paintings expanded on his impressive, idiosyncratic body of work as a sculptor, landscape architect, builder, and assemblage artist, and the whole package was undeniably, mind-blowingly impressive.

A notebook of Finster's drawings and writings from the early 1930s, when he was about sixteen, has recently turned up in a private collection, confirming that it was actually more than seventy years ago when Finster began to develop the pictorial style for which he would later become widely known.(**4**) There's no evidence that he was working with paint and brushes nearly that early, but when he began painting on a programmatic basis almost fifty years later, he was simply continuing a longstanding practice, albeit in a new medium and with a new, extreme sense of dedication. From the beginning of his turn to painting and with increasing skill through the 1980s, he employed a flat, non-painterly, comic-book style, using the "tractor enamel" he favors in much the same way that he used pencils, pens, and crayons in that early notebook. The vast majority of his paintings and painted cutouts are either portraits of people he admires, images of wild animals such as the cheetah, or fanciful landscapes. The landscapes usually feature examples of his elaborate, multi-story architectural structures or idiosyncratic landforms, and they're often criss-crossed by roadways and

crowded with simply articulated figures whose hands are raised in prayer. Interspersed with generous amounts of his ubiquitous, hand-lettered, sermonizing text, these pictorial elements typically appear under blue skies occupied by anthropomorphized clouds, flying angels and hovering spacecraft. After he had been painting for a few years, Finster began experimenting with random paint patterns in works such as his “captured vision” paintings, in which he intermingled linseed oil and paint on a board to produce fields of chaotically swirling colors, then lets the paint dry before using a fine brush to add texts and articulate myriad tiny faces and figures within these otherwise densely abstract compositions. And around 1990 he began a series of paintings that he called “wipe-rag art,” in which he applied the same kinds of finishing touches to flattened rags that he had repeatedly used to wipe his wet paintbrushes, then framed them. Among the other significant developments in Finster’s work during the early 1980s--as he became more famous and, at the same time, more familiar with the art world that had embraced him--was the beginning of his practice of occasionally making art-historical references in his paintings, creating his own versions of works such as Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa and other Renaissance artworks. Here again, his art was running parallel to that of his academically trained contemporaries, artists known for their more ironically motivated, consciously postmodern appropriations from art history.

Several family members--most promisingly his grandsons, Michael Finster and Allen Wilson--have made attempts to follow in Finster’s artistic footsteps, and he has encouraged them, but none has come close to creating anything as forceful as the elder Finster’s best work, nor has any of them attracted such widespread attention. Finster has handled his fame and the financial rewards of his work gracefully, as has his wife,

Pauline, but that hasn't been the case with everyone within his most immediate sphere of influence. His extended family has become increasingly embroiled in acrimonious, money-related family squabbles, not unlike those that often surround lottery winners. There were signs of such developments by the late 1980s, but they emerged full-blown over the course of the '90s, frustrating Finster to the point that he moved, with his wife, into the upscale section of Summerville, and turned his garden over to his five offspring. One of them--son, Roy Gene--struck an apparently unilateral deal, subsequently approved by his father, to sell a number of Finster's major on-site works and most of his remaining archives to a picker, who, in turn, sold the most significant material to Atlanta's High Museum of Art.**(5)**

Even though I was unable to see Finster during my visit to Chattooga County, Georgia, last summer, I did visit his "Paradise Gardens," as I discovered the place had been plurally renamed, according to a big, simply painted sign in the front yard of the incongruously ordinary-looking corner house that now serves as sales gallery, gift shop, and gateway to the American South's most famous yard show. Finster's youngest daughter, Beverly Finster, bought out her siblings' shares in this art landmark a few years ago, reportedly for $125,000, and had it designated a non-profit, tax-exempt corporation, with admission fees financing its upkeep, but the Finster Folk Art Gallery is a separately incorporated, for-profit venture.**(6)** Among the items on sale in the potpourri-scented shop are plaid-clad teddy-bears, snowman coffee cups, cutesy country crafts, Finster t-shirts, recent cutouts by the man himself, a few interesting pieces by grandson Michael Finster, and more than a few of Roy Gene Finster's formulaic, pastel-hued imitations of his father's small painted cutouts. The shop accepts

all major credit cards, not to mention telephone orders through its toll-free number (1-800-FINSTER). This longtime admirer of Finster and his work found it sad--and ludicrous--to see Paradise so cheapened and flagrantly commercialized: The garden after the fall.

First-time visitors to Finster's garden will still find plenty to marvel at, but in its present state it's a mere shadow of what it was twenty years ago. The major site pieces acquired by the High Museum include the often-photographed cement sculpture known as "TV Woman and Child"; several other encrusted cement sculptures; important sections of an inlaid concrete walkway; an elaborately painted, 53-foot-tall Coke bottle; the entire one-room building known as the "Bible House"; and a number of the large paintings and hand-lettered signs that were formerly displayed in the garden. His life-size cement self-portrait holding a cornucopia and encrusted with coins and other metal objects--often referred to as the "Coin Man" and for many years a prominent fixture in the center of Finster's environment, is among several garden sculptures that have found their way into private collections. Veteran visitors will find these very conspicuous in their absence. Much as I missed them, I took some consolation in the fact that most of the more significant ones are at least safely installed in an appropriate museum, because eventually they would have been lost to the elements in this humid swamp setting. The latter alternative was exemplified by much of what I saw as I surveyed the place anew. Objects whose painted surfaces I recalled had been flaking off a dozen years ago, or otherwise succumbing to irreversible damage at that time, had undergone a lot more deterioration, and several of the garden's small buildings were in serious disrepair. Despite these inevitable organic losses, I have to say that I've always found a

kind of Southern Gothic beauty in the ongoing process of decay I've witnessed at the site over the last two decades, and much of it remains beautiful in its decline. Some sections of the garden had been cleared of thick underbrush since my last visit, and a new chain-link fence had been installed around the periphery. Also new to me was a large, black-outlined, cartoon-style chipboard cutout, instantly recognizable as the work of the late contemporary artist Keith Haring, installed on a cement base near the northeast corner of the site, a stone's throw from the World's Folk Art Church, which was closed due to structural damage.

Not long after he started painting, claiming the usual motivation of divine guidance, Finster vowed to create 5,000 works of art, each individually numbered and dated. Having fulfilled that goal late in 1985, he continued to produce, attempting to keep up with the public's seemingly insatiable demand for his art, and he's still at it fifteen years later. There's no denying, though, that the recent pieces--mostly small cutouts--are generally far inferior to those he made in the 1970s and '80s. Almost all of them repeat familiar motifs from earlier paintings, and their often shaky lines and texts show the unfortunate effects of arthritis, which, several years ago, restricted Finster to working with felt-tip markers instead of paint. At last count, he had created upwards of 46,000 pieces, although his system of numbering them has proven to be anything but infallible. The Finster Folk Art Gallery's late-summer 2000 inventory included several cutouts that were clearly either misnumbered or misdated. (For example, one dated Jan. 17, 2000, was numbered 46,270, while another, dated Feb. 1, was numbered only 46,251.) One gets the distinct feeling that Finster's heart's not in it anymore--that he's just making these things out of his seemingly limitless generosity, to please his

innumerable admirers. And he'll probably keep doing so for as long as he remains alive, alert, and able to use his eyes and hands. A dozen years ago, he said to me, "As far as finishin' up my work here on this planet, I don't reckon I'll ever know it's finished until God closes the door on it and sends me to another place."

Despite the deterioration of "Paradise Gardens" and the declining quality of his art, Finster seems to be assured a permanent place of some prominence in American art history. Art dealers, scholars, collectors, curators, and critics will continue to work at sorting out his artistic legacy for some time to come, but he couldn't care less about any of that. The "Stranger from Another World" has long had his mind fixed on eternity and been ready to return to where he came from. As he wrote more than twenty years ago on a metal sign that used to be posted at the western edge of his garden:
"I AM CHOSEN OF GOD TO WARN THIS WORLD OF THE UNBELIEVABLE CONSUMING OF ITS DESTINATION, THE VERY END OF EVERY SPECK OF DUST, GONE FOREVER MORE. I HAVE SEEN IT ALLREADY AND AWAIT MY CHANGE OF TIMES TO A PLANET BEYOND THE LIGHT OF THE SUN."

#

NOTES:

1. Howard Finster and Tom Patterson, *Howard Finster, Stranger from Another World: Man of Visions Now on This Earth* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989).

2. For an extensive photographic and textual treatment of Finster's yard show, see Robert Peacock with Annibel Jenkins, *Paradise Garden: A Trip Through Howard Finster's Visionary World* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996).

3. Barbara Damrosch, “Backyards: The Garden of Paradise,” *Esquire*, December 1975, p. 162.

4. Recently examined by the author, who is convinced of its authenticity, the notebook belongs to an early collector of Finster’s work who acquired it with a group of other works in the late 1970s, then stored it and forgot about it until he rediscovered it late last year.

5. For details on interfamilial politics among the Finsters and the High Museum of Art’s acquisition of the material covered in the 1994 sale, see Catherine Fox, “High on Finster,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 4, 1994, p.E1, and Howard Pousner, “Howard Finster: Ready for Heaven,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 25, 2000, pp. M2-4.

6. Pousner, p. M-2.