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Sesow at "OUTSIDE/IN: Visionary Artists and Virginia Collectors"

Contemporary Art Center of Virginia
(Virginia Beach) **Nov 2003 - Dec 2004**



photos from the opening reception:



Untitled by Thornton Dial, Barry M. Cohen collection.

Few states, perhaps none, can boast having more private and public folk and visionary art collections than does Virginia—what with your marvelous Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, legendary collectors Baron and Ellin Gordon, Folk Art Society of America co-founders "Boo" and Ann Oppenheimer, et al. Perhaps such a taste for quirky, rugged individualism is what made Virginia the birthplace of so many presidents, as well as the official headquarters for America's number one mystic, Edgar Cayce. How could I possibly resist the seduction of diving in to mine personal treasures so beloved and tenderly offered for rare public perusal by many different impassioned Virginian art collectors?

All real art collectors share some key underlying characteristics. They possess a certain "they gotta have it" kind of passion and obsession fueled by a never-ending quest for completion via new acquisition. The promise of a new find is an addiction to delight. But if you are a collector of say, the Ash Can School, or of French Impressionists or German Expressionists, your hunting grounds are highly proscribed by the limitations of both the market and the size of your bankroll. Yet, the pure adrenaline of being a visionary or folk art collector is that every venture outside your door is enlivened by the possibility of spotting a new beloved just around the bend, and one you most likely can afford. The eyes of such collectors become attuned in near constant scanning for that raw expression of something deeply personal. Sunday drives are not mere seasonal nature forays, but brake-screeching quests aimed laser-like at scouring garage sales, uncovering graffiti, and investigating homemade backyard gardens expressive of some personal Eden. Theirs is a hunt for works of art that once found will deliver a shiver of wonder, invoke a laugh, or ignite a tear.

Visionary artist Lonnie Holley said it so well: "Just let it leak from your heart and soul through your eyes and hands and then it IS art."
Term warfare has never been my turn-on but alas, I was assigned both the exhibition title and subject, "OUTSIDE/IN" and the responsibility of supplying definitions. Rebellious by nature, I chose to skip an intellectual take on classification of insider or outsider art and seize the opportunity to interpret outside/in with a more literal interpretation-identifying and grouping art that deals with the outside such as that produced by the great master whirligig genius Vollis Simpson as well as all the beastie animals, landscapes, and angels, and then massing all the more inside stuff, i.e. delicate embroideries and works on cardboard created for indoors with work which tends to explore one's fellow human and inner life.

Perhaps the best interpretation of the subject outside/in contained in one collection is that of Lee E. and Kathleen H. Battaglia. Battaglia is a Virginia resident with a life-long professional career in science and the space industry whose collecting is fueled by gathering unto himself global visions of space and air travel- both fantastic and real.

But who can deny Cameron Kitchin anything? He asked that I please share our American Visionary Art Museum (America's official national museum and education center for original intuitive self-taught artistry located in Baltimore's Inner Harbor) definition of folk art and how it differs from visionary art.
So here it goes: the National Endowment for the Arts defines folk art as art whose creation comes from a tradition—"learned at the knee"—and passed from generation to generation, or through some established cultural community tradition, like Hopi Native Americans making Kachina dolls; sailors making macramé; or the Amish making hex signs. Our mission statement defines visionary art as "the art produced by self-taught, intuitive individuals usually without any formal training, whose works arise from an innate personal vision that revels foremost in the creative act itself." In short, visionary art begins with listening within, and may not even be thought of as "art" by its creator. It often occurs when the life experience becomes too big for mere words.

A poet born in the year 1207 gave excellent advice when it comes to gaining a better understanding of the heart of my smitten visionary art collector. Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi advised simply, "Sell your cleverness and purchase wonder." The very first museums were even called "cabinets of wonder." Their birth was the direct result of exploration and the wonder of discovering the new. Those first museum wonders were filled with never-before-seen handcraft hauled back form exotic cultures and the shock of new types of flora and fauna—even big-arsed Hottentot women. Museums were born to be places to inspire wonder and the best continue in this sacred tradition.

For their capacity to find wonder in the work of the inspired self-taught, I give my deepest appreciation to all the Virginia collectors who graciously permitted us to raid their homes of personal treasures to permit you, the public, to glimpse a bit of their personal wonder in all this delight-filled art.

It was both great fun and privilege to work with the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia's Executive Director Cameron Kitchin and with Brenda LaBier, a one-woman band who picks the art up, acts as a registrar, then designs and installs everything to its best advantage. As there are still so many untapped collections right here in ole Virginie I'd love to explore, please invite me to return to do this again and again.

It was the trained artist Jean Dubuffet who, disgusted with the commercialism of his contemporary art circle, found inspiration in the raw works of art created by unlikely artists and concluded, "These works are charged with everything that can be asked of a work of art: burning mental tension, uncurbed invention, and ecstasy of intoxication, complete liberty."

And liberty is precisely what Virginians have always treasured most.

Rebecca A. Hoffberger
Guest Curator
Founder/Director of the
American Visionary Art Museum
in Baltimore

Special thanks to Brenda LaBier, Suzanne Mastracco, Rod Rodriguez and the CAC staff.



Rebecca A. Hoffberger (Founder/Director of the American Visionary Art Museum) and Matt Sesow
From 'OUTSIDE/IN' (Visionary Artists and Virginia Collectors) show at Contemporary Art Center of Virginia (Virginia Beach, VA) Nov. 2002 - March 2003



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