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Two of Sesow's paintings in "Revelations and Reflections"

3 Years, 11 venues at galleries and museums across America
Sept. 2002 through June 2005

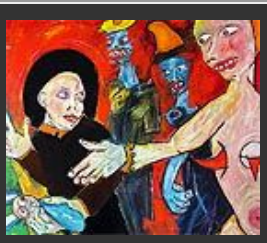
3 Years, 11 venues at galleries and museums across America:
"Hell Bound" and "Bunny Collector" in "Revelations and Reflections of American Self-Taught Artists"

ExhibitsUSA museum exhibit, April 2002 thru May 2005

* Sept 01, 2002 - Oct 20, 2002: The Arkansas Arts Center (Little Rock, AK)
* Nov 10, 2002 - Jan7, 2003: Stedman Art Gallery (Camden, New Jersey)
* Jan 28, 2003 - Mar 16, 2003: Southern Ohio Museum (Portsmouth, Ohio)
* June 16, 2003 - Aug 11, 2003: Union College (Schenectady, NY)
* Sept 1, 2003 - Oct 20, 2003: UNLV Barrick Museum (Las Vegas, NV)
* Feb 1, 2004 - Mar 20, 2004: Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art (Great Falls, Montana)
* Apr 6, 2004 - Aug 11, 2004: The Middlebury College Museum of Art (Middlebury, Vermont)
* Sept 01, 2004 - Oct 20, 2004: Hearst Art Gallery (Moraga, CA)
* Nov 10, 2004 - Jan 07, 2005: Loveland Museum and Gallery (Loveland, Colorado)
* Apr 06, 2005 - May 25, 2005: Museum of the Southwest (Midland, TX)
* Jun 16, 2005 - Aug 14, 2005: Art Museum of Southwest Texas (Beaumont, TX)



"Hellbound3"
30" x 40"
oil on chipboard
*SOLD



"Bunny Collector"
48" x 36"
oil on stretched canvas
*SOLD
DETAIL

Review of the show by "Las Vegas Mercury" newspaper
September 11, 2003:

LAS VEGAS
MERCURY
NEVADA'S LARGEST ALTERNATIVE NEWSWEEKLY

Thursday, September 11, 2003
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Art: Revelations and reflections

By Gregory Crosby


Michael Finster's "Lake of Hellfire on Brimstone"

Two thoughts come to mind while viewing Revelations and Reflections of American Self-Taught Artists, on display in UNLV's Marjorie Barrick Museum through Oct. 17. First, the talent, range and visionary power of artists now described under the rubric of "self-taught" and once referred to as "folk," "outsider" and "art brut" is not only remarkably vibrant and distinctive, but often more engaging and full-blooded than artists who've had the benefit of a graduate school education.

Second, it's clear that without the Book of Revelation, the majority of these artists would have absolutely nothing to put on canvas, metal or wood. Move over, baby, there's a whole lotta apocalypse going on in these imaginations, sometimes to powerful or amusing effect, but often to the sort of mind-numbing didactic purposes that a tent-dwelling evangelist might use to bolster a weary crowd wilting in midsummer heat.

It's that second thought that renders many of these artists sociologically interesting but aesthetically predictable. The greatest charge to be had out of all these lakes of fire and numbered beasts is felt in total. Hanging together, many of these works give you the feeling of what it would have been like if pictorial Christianity had swung with the feverish, nightmarish hellscapes of Hieronymous Bosch rather than all those sensuous Italians. The specifically End of Days imaginations on view in paintings like Michael Finster's "Lake of Hellfire on Brimstone," Myrtice West's "White Throne Judgment," Frank Bruno's "The Man, From Hell" and William Thomas Thompson's "The Sea Beast of Revelation" (which resembles a child's painting of Japanese movie monster King Ghidorah) give a glimpse at what the art of the Reformation might have been like if a Baptist from Georgia had gotten the ball rolling instead of that dour, image-hating John Calvin. Viewed thus, the bulk of the show offers a glimpse of a parallel universe where the Book of Revelation is pretty much the only scripture that survived.

The reasons for this are simple. As Stephen King once remarked about Tolkien, "He's a lot better at evoking the dread of Mordor than the goodness of Gandalf." Hell, as usual, is a lot more fun to depict than heaven, and devils are always more fascinating than Jesus (who only has a few odd cameos in this show), though a few artists pitch the sweetness of salvation rather than the terror of damnation: Wanda Teel's joyous uplifting hands in "I'll Fly Away Some Day," Mary Proctor's shiny found objects recast as "Heavenly Choir in Gold" and Woodie Long's delicate, wave-like swirl of celestials, "The Angels Heard the Music." But it's Old Scratch who, just like in Paradise Lost, gets pride of place, along with all his progeny: O.L. Samuels' "Devil Dog," a glittering pit bull with greyhound legs, or Lorenzo Scott's "Devil Family at Art Gallery," where a thin family of rather nondemonic devils tours a museum filled with paintings of other nice, respectable-looking devils. Only Hope Atkinson's "One Day at a Time" seems to strike the right balance: A set-upon woman is harried by far more tiny devils than attended by angels that hover, eyes closed, above her head.

A viewer might think this effusion of religious artwork denotes some cultural divide, the regular folk clinging to a Deep South Protestant way of being in the world that's far removed from the secular art world that dumped Christian-themed art around a century ago in favor of the brittle branches of modernity. There's some truth to that, but the real answer lies in the artist biographies that accompany each piece. Again and again, according to the wall texts, it's a wound that has made an artist: sickness, injury and sorrow, followed by a revelatory vision that leads the person to paint or sculpt.

The theme is so prevalent, so tidy, that one begins to distrust these bios as somehow eliding the truth in favor of making these "outsiders" even more so. But the proof of this seeming cliché is in the art itself. No one viewing the serpentine, text-laden self-portraits of Jane "in Vain" Winkleman as she wrestles with Death and Evil is likely to doubt the truth of her story of homelessness and survival. In the handful of artists represented here who did not turn to a specifically Christian context, there some truly fascinating examples of where an avoidance of the academy can take an artist; Matt Sesow, whose "Bunny Collector" could hold its own with Grosz, and whose "Hellbound III" posits a universe where Francis Bacon and Edvard Munch are the same. Or Mose Tolliver, whose "Self-Portrait" is an abstracted, strange creature, part hippo and part lamprey. Or Anne Marie Grgich, whose "Chimera Spirits," with its dense, colorful faces painted on a school globe, speaks best to the spirit of the self-taught: creative individuals remaking the world with the tools and talent at hand.

Review from the show visiting the Mandeville Gallery at the Nott Memorial (Schenectady, NY) June 26 - August 11, 2003:



Mandeville Gallery Past Exhibits

This Is Not the Academy
By David Brickman

Revelations and Reflections of American Self-Taught Artists
Mandeville Gallery, Union College, through Aug. 11

It used to be called folk art, then it was naive art and it's now more often referred to as outsider art, but, by any name, the work of self-taught artists is fresh, unpretentious and charming. It is also a large and growing part of a very lucrative market for art and collectibles fueled by the current millennial nostalgia craze.



Look at me, look at me: Ruby Williams' *Let Us Have Your Attention Now, Baby*.

So it comes as no surprise that a show like *Revelations and Reflections of American Self-Taught Artists*, now on view at Union College's Mandeville Gallery, is making the rounds of the nation in a slickly produced package tour under the auspices of a generously funded entity called Exhibits usa.

Featuring about 60 pieces by nearly as many artists, *Revelations and Reflections* demonstrates just why this category of art is so popular, with a freewheeling cross-section of media by outstanding creators from around the country (the show was organized by a gallery in Kansas). It also amply supports my personal suspicion that an inordinate number of these artists are complete religious nuts.

Take, for example, a few of the titles of the works on display: *These Three Kings: Satan, Death and Hell! All for One!* by Xmeah ShaElaRe'El; *The Sea Beast of Revelation* by William Thomas Thompson; *Devil With Angels Flying Around His Teeth* by Alyne Harris; *Angels Holding Back the Four Corners of Heaven* by Annie Lucas; *Hell It Is Heaven* by Ronald and Jesse Cooper; *The Millennium (Rev. 22:15 1-5 & Isa. 11:69)* by Georgina Orr; *Lake of Hellfire on Brimstone* by Michael Finster; and so on.

While a couple of the works (and titles) are clearly tongue-in-cheek, most of the biblically themed work in this show (and that is the great majority) is as serious as a black-coated friar and bears the same message as a Sunday sermon. The best of these, from my point of view at least, retain an element of the joy that presumably comes from religious feeling; many of those also deliver the good news with a welcome sense of humor.

Aside from the problem of being overbearingly Christian, some of the art in *Revelations and Reflections* falls into the rut of most nonacademic art (including that made by the average person who isn't an artist), in that the lack of training makes for a style we can all recognize as "late kindergarten."

Though a few of the artists show true originality and/or virtuosity, many of the rest resemble each other a bit too much. In fact, I bet it would be possible to select a half-dozen of these pieces by as many artists, hang them together with signatures obscured, and easily pass the group off as the work of a single outsider.

On the other hand, there's work in this show that bears a distinct whiff of too-great sophistication, in some cases appearing to have been self-consciously created to meet collector demand (it is notable that a significant number of the works are on loan from galleries and dealers).

All that said, there's plenty here to enjoy, by viewers both educated and self-taught. Among the standouts are a number of three-dimensional pieces (perhaps the greater technical challenge of working with the third dimension is something of a weeding-out factor for mediocrity), including a lavishly painted globe by Anne Marie Grgich (titled *Chimera Spirits*); allegorical toylike carvings by Kathy Ruth Neal; Frank Pickle's whimsically irresistible *Tree of Horrow*; and the life-size *Devil Dog* by O.L. Samuels.

Painters in the show who transcend the childlike to create styles all their own include Paul Gasoi, Jane "in Vain" Winkelman, Brian Dowdale and Matt Sesow. These four in particular would not be out of place in a gallery or museum collection of academically trained contemporaries, though their work does connect with the other work in this show through its visionary content and, in Winkelman's case, wordiness.

Of the more "traditional" outsiders, the show includes very fine examples of work by James Harold Jennings (a naive-yet-mystical wood construction), Ruby C. Williams (the delightfully deadpan *Let Us Have Your Attention Now, Baby*), Howard Finster (the best-known American artist in this category, thanks in part to his Talking Heads album-cover work), Mose Tolliver (a mesmerizingly odd self-portrait), Annie Tolliver (Mose's daughter) and Mary Proctor (whose *Heavenly Choir in Gold* consists of about 75 figures constructed mostly of costume jewelry mounted to a door, complete with knob).

Also fun are some of the works by artists who gleefully mix media—Eddie Breen, whose *Wooden Head Lamp* may or may not be an intentional play on words; Ronald Cooper, perhaps the only person to create art from old gas heaters; and Roy Minshew, whose *Angel Dog* is a museumworthy piece of Americana, and a fine example of what is still referred to as folk art.

If you're tired of postmodernism, this may be just the show you need to help you kick back into summer and leave all the vices of the academy far behind.

Quotes from the show catalog:

Slide #10
Matt Sesow
Bunny Collector
2001
Oil on canvas

Click to enlarge image



Matt Sesow grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. When Sesow was eight years old, a landing airplane hit and severed his left arm, forcing him to become right-handed. The physical and emotional pain of that trauma has left a clear mark on his art. In 1994, at the age of twenty-eight, he began painting. Blood red backgrounds, orange averted eyes, and heavily outlined figures are his hallmark. He paints all day, using oil on canvas and cardboard. His subject matter is always the human form in some sort of sorrowful state. Says Sesow, "I like intense colors and sharp lines to tell a moving story. I like the way cardboard holds oil paint and the way canvas burns my fingers and sands my nails as I scratch its surface. I enjoy the smell of linseed oil and turpentine as they fill my studio space. Painting takes all my energy and effort. It is the most important thing I do."

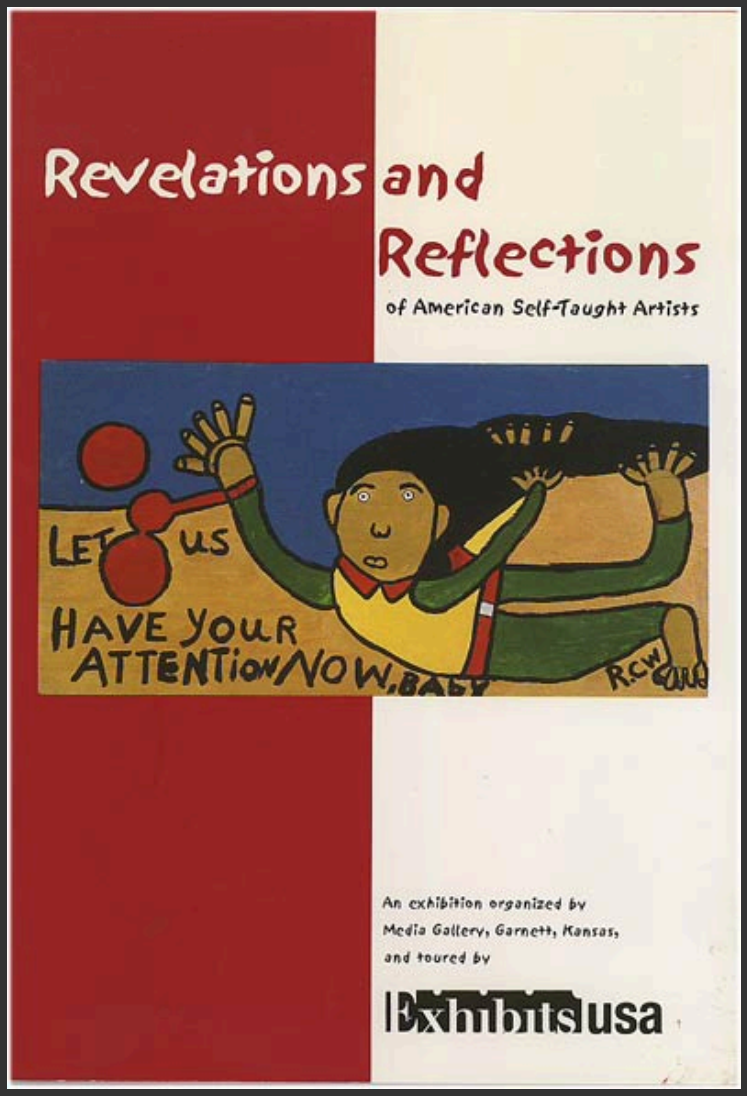
Sesow says of *Bunny Collector,* "[This painting] portrays a young girl/emerging woman being asked to give up her childhood faith, naïveté, and belief structure (represented by the bunny). The woman attempting to grab the bunny represents the pressure of conformity, organized religion, knowledge, and the path to adulthood. The three figures in the back represent society: the preceding generation, the nude woman, and the little girl's future. The little girl is dressed in black because she hasn't attained knowledge (yellow) nor enlightenment (orange) through life experiences. The painting is from the perspective of the girl, as she sees the others with orange eyes (ill intent) and is resisting giving up the bunny (although society, in the background, will make an easy grab for the bunny while her attention is on the naked figure)."

Matt Sesow
Hellbound III
2001
Oil on heavy-duty watercolor board
Courtesy the artist

When Matt Sesow was eight years old, a landing airplane hit his left arm, mangling it beyond repair. In addition to the trauma and pain of this accident, the left-handed child was forced to become right-handed. In 1994, at age twenty-eight, he began to paint. The dreadful events of his childhood seem to permeate his wrenching imagery, full of violent color contrasts and tormented visages. The artist uses heavy black outlines to emphasize forms and employs a complex symbolic visual vocabulary in choosing colors and characters for his compositions. Sesow also makes short films but considers himself primarily a painter, declaring, "It is the most important thing I do."

Matt Sesow
Bunny Collector
2001
Oil on canvas
Courtesy the artist

A violent childhood accident changed Matt Sesow's life and forever affected the way he would view the world. Sesow is a full-time painter whose disturbing, expressionistic canvases are populated by anguished faces and contorted forms. Every color, gesture, and figure in his work has a specific symbolic meaning. *Bunny Collector* tells the story of a child's loss of innocence when confronted by adult issues of conformity, organized religion, and repressive society, related through an extraordinary vocabulary of visual symbols peculiar to the artist. A young girl is shown being robbed of her "bunny" (representing naïveté and guileless faith) by a naked woman signifying the rude path to adulthood. "The little girl is dressed in black," explains Sesow, "because she hasn't attained knowledge (yellow) or enlightenment (orange) through life experience." Three menacing figures in the background represent society, which, the artist asserts, will make a grab for the bunny while the little girl's attention is diverted.



Revelations and Reflections of American Self-Taught Artists



Kathy Ruth Neal, *The Slippery Slope*, 1999, wood, metal, newsprint, acrylic, 7 x 20 x 5 1/2 inches; courtesy the artist

Heaven, hell, purgatory, angels, devils, demons–these are among the subjects and images depicted in *Revelations and Reflections of American Self-Taught Artists*, an exciting exhibition that surveys the work of both established and emerging American self-taught artists. These artists, who come from all walks of life and from all regions of the country, give vibrant expression to the monumental theme of spirituality, a theme central to art for as long as humans have been engaged in the creative process.

Religious themes and imagery are plentiful in the work of a large number of self-taught artists. Indeed, for many of them, it is religious fervor that compels them to create. The Reverend Howard Finster, undoubtedly America's best-known self-taught artist, is one who took up art as a result of a religious impulse. Finster began creating religious paintings on found materials at the age of 60 and has since created thousands of works.

Many self-taught artists have a profound influence on family members, who also take up the making of art. Finster's grandson, Michael Finster, makes wood cutouts of Biblical scenes and paintings with moral themes. Mose Tolliver and his daughter, Annie Tolliver, are another such family group who will be represented in the exhibition. Other artists on view will include Ronald and Jesse Cooper and Matryce West.

Revelations and Reflections of American Self-Taught Artists is curated by Robert Cugno and Robert Logan, directors of Media Gallery in Garnett, Kansas, and the organizers of some of ExhibitsUSA's most successful exhibitions.



Anne Grgrich, *Chesapeake*, 1997, mixed media collage, 36 x 36 inches; courtesy Modern Primitive Gallery

Subsidized Rental fee: * $5,400 for seven-week display
Membership rental fee:* $4,050 for seven-week display
Number of works: Approximately 60
Media: Paintings, works on paper, sculpture, mixed media
Curators: Robert Cugno and Robert Logan, Directors, Media Gallery, Garnett, Kansas
Essayist: TBD
Organized by: Media Gallery
Security: Moderate A
Shipping: Van line
Running feet required: 100
Square feet required: 1,500–2,000
Available dates: January 2002–January 2005
Fee includes:

- Brochures
- Educational Materials:
  - Text panels
  - Identification labels
  - Programming guide
  - Teacher/Docent guide
  - Other materials to be determined
- Publicity packet
- Registrar's packet
- Full insurance
- Installation instructions
- Custom designed and built crates

Decorative Art, Craft, and Folk Art

*Please see page 69 for information about exhibition rental fees.

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