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Sesow in "Faces of Folk"

Exhibition from the Hurn Museum
Savannah, GA 2006

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Face dances

A dozen portraits by contemporary folk artists showcased in "The Many Faces of Folk Art" at the Hurn Museum

Allison Hersh
For the Savannah Morning News

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In its latest exhibit, the Hurn Museum of Contemporary Folk Art has put the focus on faces.

This small show, titled "The Many Faces of Folk Art," showcases 12 portraits by a range of contemporary folk artists through the end of February. Co-curated by Michael and Valerie Sottile, the exhibit continues the museum's ongoing fascination with the underlying connection between folk art and fine art, invoking portraiture as one way of understanding that connection.

Stylistic elements which recall paintings by Pablo Picasso, Henri Rousseau and even Francis Bacon recur throughout "The Many Faces of Folk Art," demonstrating the degree to which contemporary folk artists have been inspired by art history. This exhibit suggests that the old-fashioned notion of the naïve, self-taught artist who creates inspired work in a history-free vacuum is nothing but a romanticized fantasy, as many of these twenty-first-century folk artists draw freely, and often quite self-consciously, from earlier masters.



Click to view the Slideshow "Good Boy, Bad Boy" by Michael Banks Special to the Morning News

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"The new generation of folk artists is not doing Clementine Hunter stuff," said Michael Sottile, curator of the Hurn Museum of Contemporary Folk Art. "Their work has greater depth, more technique and more meaning."

The exhibit offers a relatively understated sampling of portraiture created between 1975 and 2005, with the majority of the work having been created in the last several years. From the Zen-like beauty of Carrie Knowles's golden-hued serigraph "Morning Tea" to the diorama jungle effect of Harriet McGee's "Eve in the Big Garden," the artists on display use a range of techniques to represent the human figure.

Matt Sesow's "Father of the Bride" threatens to steal the show with its irrepressible expressionistic angst. This 2001 acrylic painting on cardboard is defined by the remarkable violence of its brush strokes, which recall the kinetic force of Jack the Ripper with their razor-sharp slashes and blade-like shredding effect. These kinetic linear forms combine to create a grotesque portrait of an imposing man in a blue blazer and orange tie, dried white mounds of paint forming his monstrous teeth.

Sesow's composition is even more impressive with the knowledge that he had one hand amputated in a freak childhood accident. At the age of eight, this self-taught artist was struck by a landing airplane whose propeller severed his arm and resulted in the loss of his dominant hand.

Other highlights in "The Many Faces of Folk Art" include three portraits by revered Savannah folk artist Rudolph Bostic. "Green Lady," a 1975 portrait of a woman crafted from food coloring and enamel on cardboard, has a surprisingly elegant effect with its thick brush strokes and dramatic use of contrast.

Alabama outsider artist Michael Banks's mixed media painting "Good Boy, Bad Boy" offers insight into his creative use of form and color to create offbeat portraits of wide-eyed figures. This portrait, which complements his retrospective which occupies the Hurn Museum's main galleries, focuses upon a swollen-faced, green-eyed figure with a suspended yellow halo dripping, like melted butter, above his head.

For each of the artists on display, the human face serves as a pliable canvas upon which they can freely experiment, projecting emotions and exploring the depth of the human condition. From self-conscious self-portraiture to African-inspired, mask-like faces, "The Many Faces of Folk Art" offers a tantalizing glimpse of a growing subgenre of folk art.

Museum director Valerie Sottile says that she is impressed by the sincerity and authenticity of the portraits on display. "This work comes from the soul," she said. "Folk art is really emerging into fine art."

IF YOU GO

What: "The Many Faces of Folk Art: Folk Art in Transition"

Where: Hurn Museum of Contemporary Folk Art, 1015 Whitaker St.

When: through Feb. 28, 2006

Cost: Adults $4, Students $3

Museum hours: Tues. - Sat. 11 a.m.- 4 p.m., Sun. 12 - 4 p.m., closed Mondays, Christmas Day and New Year's Day

For more information: (912) 234-7322 or www.hurnmuseum.org

from the Hurn Museum Webite:

HURN MUSEUM
Contemporary Folk Art

THE HURN MUSEUM
CONTEMPORARY FOLK ART



"Father of the Bride"
by Matt Sesow

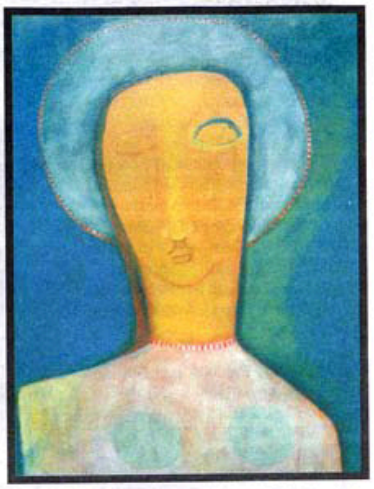
Matt Sesow
Regarded as an "outsider" artist, Matt Sesow's imagery is derived from events in his life and the lives of others in various stages of trauma, hope, hopelessness and healing. Sesow was born in Omaha, Nebraska. At 8 years of age, he was struck by a landing airplane near his home and his arm was severed by the propeller. Though Matt's arm was re-attached by surgeons, his dominant hand was amputated. Six years later, he traveled to Newcastle, England and participated in the Disabled Olympics on the United States team. Matt attended college in Oklahoma and received a scholarship from the Mensa Society. He achieved a B.S. degree in computer/software engineering. He began to make drawings in 1988 and began painting in oils in 1993. Matt has traveled the world and has painted in of the countries he has visited.

REVIEW of Sesow at Hurn Museum... from the "Faces of Folk" exhibit in "Connect Savannah" . Feb 2006 by Bertha Husband.

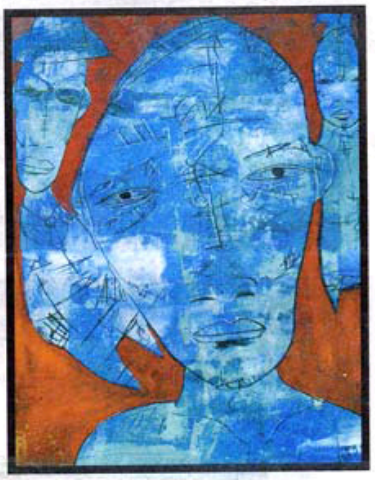
'Faces of Folk'

Through Feb. 28@The Hurn Museum









Some work from 'Faces of Folk,' clockwise from upper left: Matt Sesow's 'Father of the Bride'; Rose Walton's 'Saint Lucy'; Gabriel Shaffer's 'Three Souls'; and mixed media by Cher Shaffer

IN ONE OF THE SMALL galleries reserved for intimate, temporary exhibitions at the Hurn Museum, there are currently showing twelve works by nine artists under the title of "Faces of Folk."

In a variety of sizes, styles and media the viewer is confronted with the theme of portraiture. The works have been carefully chosen from emerging artists in the Museum's collection, and what initially stood out for me was the overall painterly accomplishment, experimentation with media and clearly modernist influences that were apparent, and that we generally do not expect from artists labeled, "folk."

For instance, Rose Walton's acrylic portrait of St. Lucy recalls the stylized faces of early Modernism's famous outsider, Modigliani: oval, melancholy, elongated faces, long necks, small mouths and empty pupil-less eyes. This saint's story is that she removed her eyes and presented them to an aggressive suitor who wouldn't take "no" for an answer. In Walton's complex vision, the two eye pupils have been removed and yet seem to reappear on the chest. A strange doubling of eyes/breasts that seem to be a recurring theme in Walton's work.

And something of Van Gogh's portraits comes to mind in front of Della Well's pastel, "Yes, Mama. I'm Being a Good Girl", particularly in the attention to face and patterned sweater and in the crude drawing of the hands resting in the subject's lap.

A hint of De Kooning's series of women from the 1940s is evident in the violent slashing and impasto of Matt Sesow's "The Father of the Bride." Here the subject glares out at the viewer through grinding teeth in a gashed mouth that extends beyond the contours of the face.

In fact, the painterly, expressionistic gesture dominates this show. It is there in the scrubbing paint application of Cher Shaffer's mixed media, "Self Portrait (Looking into the Light)" and in the few disciplined, Chinese-like brush strokes that make up Carrie Knowles, serigraph "Morning Tea"; it is there in the mass of ballpoint pen graffiti marks that cover the forms in Gabriel Schaffer's mixed media, three-headed portrait, "Man With Three Souls", and in the multitude of fine brush strokes that build up Eric Legge's grinning "Portrait of a Friend"; again, in the looser brush strokes of Rudolf Bostik's enamel and food coloring portrait, "Green Lady."

There are, in fact, only two works here that seem to display no discernible influences or interest in flick-of-the-wrist paint handling: Michael Banks, "Good Boy, Bad Boy," a large, flat face with a halo and protruding tongue, and Harriet McGee's very strange shadow box, "Eve in the Big Garden", in which the naked Eve, a bird in her hand and accompanied by a tiger is partially buried by a mass of carefully cut out, three dimensional layers of paper grass and leaves.

Influences and painterly skills are not what one expects from folk artists, usually thought of as untaught in the arts and generally uneducated. In the past, they were left alone with only their internal vision as inspiration, and they created artworks from their special place "outside" the mainstream culture, which dealt with the human condition in vital and serious ways.

Early Modernism broke with the European Fine Art tradition by consciously borrowing from the arts of other cultures, from Asia and from African tribal art and then from the marginal works of the rural poor and the institutionalized.

But influences abound now for the folk artist too, and are mostly unavoidable and always reciprocal. All visual information circulates freely, whether we want it or not, and is picked up and used by all artists, sometimes unconsciously.

I have googled all nine artists and with the exception of two, they appear on folk art gallery websites. All of them belong to two post-war generations. Half are now in their fifties, and half are in their thirties.

They are all literate, educated, and have been exposed to mass media – magazines, books, TV and film. And since at least two of them have degrees in non-art subjects, the folk artist criteria of "self-taught" must here be merely defined as not having attended art school.

In contrast to this story, there are works on display in another gallery at the Hurn, by three classical American folk artist outsiders, Clementine Hunter, born 1886; Sam Doyle, born 1906, and Howard Finster, born 1916. Each started painting in old age and worked in isolation, as if they were the only artists in the world. At least in the paintings on view, they all paint by filling in their figures with flat color, a naive style.

I have a controversial opinion that work done in secret, not originally intended for exhibition or sale should probably remain that way. Looking at these works, one can't help feeling that something of their meaning has been destroyed by overexposure, publicity and market speculation.

Even before he died, Finster was referred to as "Folk art's first superstar," a death-knell if ever I heard one. As Michel Thévoz has written of outsider art, "It really seems as if, like Orpheus, Western culture is doomed to destroy whatever is -- or rather whatever was – strange, merely by gazing at it."

If, in these times, the real outsider is normalized out of existence, perhaps it is painting itself that is being marginalized. Looking at the folk art websites, it is incredible how much painting is being done by those termed "folk artists", and dipping into the glossy art magazines, it is interesting how very little painting is being done by those in the so-called Fine Art category.

The mainstream of contemporary art is now dominated by technological art that is very expensive to produce. So perhaps those who continue to want to daub canvas with colored mud need to be sidelined into the lesser market of folk art. ◗

The Hurn Museum is at 1015 Whitaker St. Call them at 234-7322. Our resident art critic Bertha Husband is a native of Scotland who has studied art at Oxford University and Ruskin School of Fine Art. She has an MFA from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago.



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