VISIONS, DREAMS AND PROPHECIES:
TEN INTUITIVE CHICAGO ARTISTS

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College of Lake County
Community Gallery of Art
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Trying to define the boundaries of the term “art” is a difficult task. Many things influence our definition: what we are used to seeing, our convictions and opinions about certain subjects, the familiar and the unfamiliar and our selective tastes. In other words, what we like or do not like. Often we are confronted by work that is difficult to understand, work that challenges us by rearranging our comfortable view of the world. This work forces us to expand our definitions of art.

Terms like intuitive (creating on intuition alone), visionary (art generated through visions or prophetic dreams), and self-taught become difficult concepts to pin down, they intertwine and become lost in the melange that is Outsider Art. Even the term outsider is speculative at best. Officially, this term implies an existence outside the boundaries of societies influences, or “innocent of pictorial influences and perfectly untutored.” The word is a derivative of the French term l’Art Brut, (literally “raw art”) coined by Jean Dubuffet in 1949. This definition does not apply here totally. Most of the works in this exhibition were influenced by the world, indeed, comment on its present state.

The ten artists in this exhibition fall somewhere between the definitions of visionary, intuitive, or self-taught. Each person shares the common thread of being very uncommon, of seeing the world in a way that is very different from our own. Their impulse to create is compelled by sickness or psychosis, a commandment of God, visions, dreams, humor or allegory. The resulting work of these ten artists expands our notion of the parameters of art and by extension our humanity.

Amy Ortiz
Guest Curator

Ms. Ortiz holds an M.A. in Contemporary Art History, Theory and Criticism from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1996.
**STEPHEN WARDE ANDERSON**

*Born July 16, 1953, Rockford, Illinois.*

Stephen Anderson always had the feeling that he was destined to be a painter. Although he has never been formally trained in the arts, he cites his experiences in the United States Navy as an influence for his sometimes exotic subject matter. He was stationed in Athens, Greece for a short time, and he was taken with the history so evident in the region.

The subjects he paints are mostly women, goddesses or historical figures that are ideal in their representation. His subject matter has a definite lean toward the romantic, with paintings that recall Victorian sentimentality and an age when subjects such as death and colonialism were idealized.

Stephen Anderson has developed an unusual pointillistic style of painting. His canvases are made up of thousands of tiny dots of brilliant color, a technique which takes many hours to complete. He paints with a liquid tempera which is first allowed to harden, and then is mixed with the artist’s saliva to achieve the proper consistency. “I have found,” he says, “that my saliva mixed with the hardened paint makes a paste that is just right.”

**Selected Exhibitions:**

**WILLIAM DAWSON**

*Born October 20, near Huntsville, Alabama.*

William Dawson is now recognized as one of the country's most important untrained African-American artists. He carved obsessive personal images; his figures, both male and female, are accentuated by their flat, block-like bodies and prominently outlined facial features. Dawson’s early works were heavily influenced by the bible, but later pieces show the influence of television and popular culture with recognizable characters such as “Chicken George” from Alex Haley’s epic *Roots*, and political icons like Uncle Sam. He began making art after his retirement from the Water Street Market in Chicago, where he had been employed for many years. William Dawson’s works reflect his own personal memories of growing up in the rural south, and also his hope for a better future.

**Selected Exhibitions:**
*Passionate Visions of the American South, 1993.*
Lee Godie

Born September 1, 1908, Mudgetown, Illinois.
Died March 2, 1994, Chicago.

Lee Godie was homeless and lived on the streets of Chicago for most of her life. She is probably one of the city's most collected artists, and many collectors can remember buying paintings from Lee on the steps of the Art Institute of Chicago, her favorite haunt. She referred to herself as a "French Impressionist," and claimed that Renoir had personally advised her to "paint beauty." Subsequently, most of her work is based on self-portraiture. Godie painted startling girl in the mirror pictures that sometimes included a photo of herself in the composition. Another favorite subject was a male figure she referred to as Prince Charming, whom Godie claimed was a friend of Picasso's. Both Prince Charming and the girl in the mirror appeared on many canvases together.4 Lee Godie used whatever materials she could find to create these masterpieces. The patrons who purchased her work were also very generous in supplying her with art materials whenever she ran low. Her canvases are usually double-sided, and signed. Signatures ranged from simply "Lee Godie," to "Artist Lee Godie," an outline of her hand, or a combination of all three.

Selected Exhibitions:

Gregory Warmack "Mr. Imagination"


Mr. Imagination’s bottle cap encrusted staffs and totems are delightful glimpses into the artist’s past. However, he is not drawing upon his past experiences, rather, he is delving into a past incarnation. During a near-death experience after being shot in the stomach during the summer of 1978, Gregory Warmack had a vision of himself as an African King. "I was reborn into Mr. Imagination, and I began to make art that reflects my ancient tribal position in life."5 Mr. Imagination finds society’s castoffs and transforms them into sculptures with a life of their own. The work is ironic: discarded bottle caps, old paint brushes, brooms, industrial waste, and wood become the medium through which he rediscovers his African ancestry, and grapples with the realities of having grown up in the inner city.

Selected Exhibitions:
Gregory Warmack / Mr. Imagination, Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, 1996.
The Intuitive Edge: Midwest Outsider and Folk Art, South Bend Regional Museum of Art, South Bend, Indiana, 1996.
Recycled-Reseen: Folk Art from the Global Scrapheap, Traveling show through spring, 1999.
Henry J. Darger

Born April 12, 1892, probably Chicago, Illinois.

Henry Darger’s fantasy world took written form in an epic of more than fifteen thousand pages entitled In the Realms of the Unreal. In this gargantuan work, the forces of good and evil do battle. Good is represented by seven little girls known as the Vivian sisters and evil is represented by storm troopers called “Glandelinians.” Darger’s psyche is so complex, and his oeuvre so extensive, that it defies any categorization. He was reclusive, and had no family nor friends. He spent most of his life in psychiatric institutions, and most of his time trying to escape from them. This background, which had completely marginalized him from society, and his strong religious convictions were the foundation on which this epic was written.6

The volumes that constitute In the Realms of the Unreal were discovered in Henry Darger’s apartment after his death in 1973. They had taken more than twenty years to write, and there is nothing to indicate that the text was complete when he died.

Selected Exhibitions:
DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH unknown.

The most intriguing aspect of Vincent Jón-És's sculpture is his intricate involvement in the minutia. Painted Martian skies, electrode skyscrapers, and towering dinosaurs poised to eat the inhabitants draw one into a child-like world. Just for spice, add blinking lights, whirring sounds, music, and moving parts. It's a sensory feast in the palms of one's hands. Calling his artistic style "envisioneering," Vincent Jón-És is successfully bridging the gaps between art, science and whimsey. His boxes are compelling microcosms, whole worlds contained in a watch box. In Jón-És' words, "When you look at my work, first all you see is the sculpture. On closer inspection you discover all this high-tech junk. Each sculpture is a historical continuum made up of these artifacts that not only reflect our past and current state of society, but that defines the course we've chosen for our ecological future." 7

Born August 18, 1948, Nevada, Missouri.
Now resides in Chicago.

James Mesple's ethereal paintings contain both biblical and mythical references. His imagery recalls various ancient cultures, the relevancy of which are put into focus by juxtaposing them in a present day context. One is reminded that ancient references are still germane by the inclusion of the Chicago skyline in most of the artist's work. In the painting Unknown Lady, an ancient sculptural figure (from the Oriental Institute) is crowned with Chicago landmarks.

Mesple is a visionary, carrying on the age-old tradition of an artist as storyteller. He says that his paintings "speak to us, through the millennia, about the human condition; our weaknesses and strength -both of body and spirit... I am a contemporary artist who wants to pull into the present the understanding that each stream is sacred, and that each man and woman granted life is responsible for maintaining and balancing that life in reaction to one's personal cosmos." Time Consuming the Millennium, for example, moralizes that the passage of time and our own compulsive excesses inevitably leads to our own debasement and demise. 8

Selected Exhibitions:
Jamie Lynn Nathenson


Jamie Nathenson has been producing her intricate drawings since the diagnosis of her manic depression at the age of nineteen. Nathenson’s work centers around the way she views herself in relationship to her environment. Her work “fills every inch of her paper with compulsive designs and drawings (horror vacui, or fear of empty spaces, is the phrase sometimes used for this compulsion), faces and designs that come from a soul tormented by manic depression. The world as seen through this artist’s eyes is intensified with the colors of brightness and the energy generated by her illness.”

The faces seen in Nathenson’s work began as self-portraiture, but later began to incorporate the expressions of people around her. However, vivid color is the key to her drawing; bright, fluid colors reflect her hopes for happier times, as well as, hope for the realization of her dreams.

Selected Exhibitions:

Kevin Orth


Kevin Orth metamorphoses matter into spirit. With his brightly colored paints and sparkling found objects, he literally transforms refuse into works of great visual power. Ordinary articles transcend their familiar trappings and become the medium through which higher emotions are emitted. His bottles and mirrors trap reflection and light, metaphors for the inner self. Orth’s lack of formal art training has allowed a more intuitive thought process to take over, resulting in an incredible simplicity in communicating this spiritual realm. Although he does not adhere to any religious affiliation, he cites God as the driving influence behind his creativity.

Humor is also an important aspect to Orth’s work. He believes that laughter can be the doorway to a higher state of consciousness. As a child, Orth would “tell jokes, do contortions, make faces . . . anything to get them laughing hysterically. Later, when I read about shamans, I realized that when I had done that really crazy stuff for my friends, I was entering into the realm of ecstasy . . . the joyous madness that you have in shamanism or in gospel singing, and I really loved it when I could enter that state.”

Selected Exhibitions:
Joseph Elmer Yoakum

Born February 20, 1886 or 1888, place unknown.

Mystery surrounds the life and art of Joseph Yoakum. There are no records to substantiate his place of birth, and because he was itinerant, little is known about his life through middle age. He was alternately self-described as an "old black man" and a "full-blooded Nava-joe indian," and was commanded by God to begin drawing. Yoakum's drawings are usually categorized as "memory" drawings, reminiscences of places the artist has been. In some works, however, flights of imagination transport the artist to new and exotic places. Mystery permeates his work, as well as, a peculiar sense of unreality. We may never know whether the places depicted with such detail were actually visited by Mr. Yoakum.

Whitney Halstead, a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, once said, "it is clear that Yoakum's imagination extended the geography of his experience further still."

Joseph Yoakum is most generally known for his ethereal dreamscape drawings, but some portraits are known to exist. Most of his works carry some description of the scene depicted, and at least one - if not all - of the following details: signature, date completed, and sometimes a copyright notice.

Selected Exhibitions:

Works Cited

1. Tully, Judd. *Outside, Inside, or Somewhere in-Between?* Art News, Vol. 95, Number 5, May, 1996, p. 120.
2. Courtesy of Phyllis Kind Gallery, Biographical Material.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
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