HYPERALLERGIC

An Artist Couple's Domestic Gesamtkunstwerk

The outsider artist Eugene Von Bruenchenhein and his wife, Marie, created a miniature universe in their bungalow in a Milwaukee suburb.

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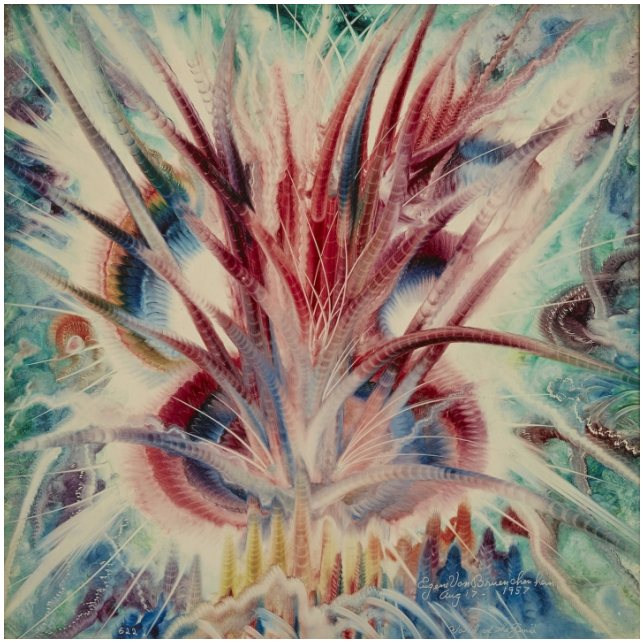


Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, "Wand of the Genii, No. 622" (1957), oil on fiberboard, 25 x 25 1/8 inches (photo by Rich Maciejewski, courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

SHEBOYGAN, Wisconsin — *Mythologies: Eugene Von Bruenchenhein,* a new exhibition at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin (on view through January 14, 2018), showcases one of the most intriguing bodies of work by an artist of the modern era to be found anywhere today.

The way an artist conjures up a universe of his own, and how his aesthetic vision informs such creativity, are as much the subjects of this compelling survey as any of the peculiar paintings, photographs, and objects on display.

Mythologies is one in a series of exhibitions collectively titled *The Road Less Traveled* that the museum is mounting this year to commemorate its 50th anniversary. The JMKAC is one of the best-known museums in the world specializing in the study and presentation of works, many of which are site-specific environments, made by self-taught artists. *Mythologies* traces the development of a clever autodidact whose creative audacity appeared to have been his saving grace: despite the humbleness and hardships of Von Bruenchenhein's life circumstances, he dared to think big — about himself and his art.

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, "Untitled (Eugene)" (circa 1943-60), gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 inches (photo by Rich Maciejewski, courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

Perhaps it's that whiff of grandiloquence in Von Bruenchenhein's sense of himself as a thinker and creative agent, which comes across in his writings and to varying degrees in his art, that have endeared his multifaceted oeuvre to aficionados of outsider art. At the same time, now that the unbridled energy and weirdness of much of what he crafted appear to have been postmodernist *avant la lettre*, Von Bruenchenhein's work has earned critical, crossover praise and won many admirers in the mainstream,

contemporary-art establishment. The eccentric from Wisconsin who made sculptures with chicken bones and nudie-fantasy photos of his wife is now a bonafide art-world star.

Edward Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910–1983) was born in northeastern Wisconsin, on Lake Michigan's western shore. (Later his family moved south to the Milwaukee suburbs.) The second of three sons, Eugene was seven when his mother died. His father remarried, and his stepmother, whose interests were artistic, literary and intellectual, provided inspiration for the boy's creative pursuits.

After graduating from high school, Eugene found employment in a florist's shop and later worked for many years in a commercial bakery. In 1943, he married the former Eveline Kalka (whom he renamed "Marie"), but even though his father gave his son and his new bride the Von Bruenchenhein family's small house, the couple remained chronically poor. It was in their nondescript bungalow in a Milwaukee suburb that Eugene spent decades developing a rich, imaginary realm of larger-than-life self-expression over which he and Marie presided.

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, assorted ceramic works, exact dates unknown, variable dimensions (photo by Rich Maciejewski, courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

Shortly after Von Bruenchenhein died, Dan Nycz, a retired policeman who had befriended the artist and his wife in 1959 after spotting some concrete sculptures outside their house, brought Eugene's work to the attention of the Milwaukee Art

Museum. Years later, in a 1983 interview with the John Michael Kohler Arts Center's curators, Nycz recalled that the sculptures had looked to him "like Mayans or Aztecs" and that entering the artist's home for the first time was "like walking into King Tut's tomb — there was art all over the place."

Karen Patterson, the JMKAC's curator of exhibitions and collections, who oversaw the organization of *Mythologies*, notes in its catalogue that, although the Milwaukee Art Museum could not undertake the huge task of conserving and documenting Von Bruenchenhein's large body of work, Russell Bowman, its chief curator in the early 1980s, recognized its significance. In an interview, he told Patterson that he asked Nycz to take him to the artist's house. There, Bowman recalled, he, too, found "paintings hung everywhere, with bone thrones suspended on wires and groupings of bone towers." In a basement "dripping with water from the cold outside," he saw "shelves [filled with] clay crowns and vessels, a veritable Aladdin's cave of treasures from a mystical world."

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, assorted chair sculptures made of painted poultry bones, with adhesive and varnish, variable dimensions (photo by Rich Maciejewski, courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

Bowman contacted Ruth DeYoung Kohler II, the director of the JMKAC at that time, who had close ties to the Kohler Foundation, a separate organization that had long been active in historic preservation in Wisconsin and had worked with artist-made

environments. Buoyed by her enthusiasm for the Von Bruenchenhein discovery, the JMKAC was able to acquire and conserve much of the artist's work. The remaining portion of his oeuvre made its way to market, at first primarily through the Chicago-based dealer Carl Hammer's gallery.

Over the years, as the JMKAC's staff and other researchers have examined Von Bruenchenhein's art, poetry, and other writings, a sense of his creative trajectory has emerged. During the 1930s and 1940s, he made some conventional-looking floral still lifes as well as small landscape paintings to accompany the poems he wrote and kept in scrapbooks. By the 1950s, he had begun producing abstract paintings in oil on fiberboard using his fingers and makeshift tools. These methods allowed him to create surprisingly expressive images whose stringy tangles of acidic blues, greens, reds, yellows, and black resemble everything from jelly-fish and reptile skins to swirling galaxies and mutant, otherworldly plants.

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Liberty Complex in the Clouds, 1978, oil on cardboard, 39 3/4 x 28 1/2 inches (photo by Rich Maciejewski, courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

At some point he began posing Marie in jewels and costumes, semi-nude or stripped down to her panties, often set against patterned-fabric backdrops, to shoot his own

black-and-white girlie pix. He processed his film in a darkroom in the couple's bathroom; sometimes Marie hand-tinted the prints that showed her looking past the camera or sometimes staring directly but absently into its inquisitive lens.

Patterson contributes a provocative essay to the exhibition's catalogue. Written in the form of a letter to Marie, it summarizes what little is known about her life and poses some urgent questions about it in an effort to pull the enigmatic woman who became Eugene's vixen-muse out of his shadow and begin examining what appears to have been her more active but overlooked role as his creative collaborator.

Patterson writes, "How did it feel to be renamed? Was this when your identity began to become subsumed by his? […] As viewers, we are struck with conflicting feelings: we are awestruck, we smile with admiration, but we also wince, we feel empathy, we wonder." Eugene's photos, she tells Marie, "were a way of altering the reality of your humble home." In them, "husband and wife were reborn as king and queen residing in a castle" to "represent an integral element of the world as he wished it to be, a tangible connection to his belief in his distant royal lineage."

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Untitled (Marie, double exposure), circa 1943-60; gelatin silver print; 10 x 8 inches (photo by Rich Maciejewski, courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

On display in one of the show's vitrines is a small, government-issued form from 1945 indicating that Von Bruenchenhein had been rejected as physically unfit to join the armed forces. However, he seemed deeply concerned about humankind's Cold War follies and its ability to destroy the planet, as evidenced in an unusual group of paintings from the 1950s of hydrogen-bomb mushroom clouds.

Writing about these works in the catalogue, the artist Michelle Grabner, who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, notes that Von Bruenchenhein "struggled to understand the destructive forces of thermonuclear weaponry (and the normalizing of doomsday scenarios in everyday life)" in the post-World War II period. "Entangled with a crude and even clichéd understanding of the modern artistic genius and his own hypermasculine ego," she notes, "Von Bruenchenhein created paintings in the decade between 1954 and 1964 that epitomize a remarkable engagement in the aestheticization of his personal mythology with new universal fears of planetary catastrophe." This section of the exhibition features audio recordings the artist made as he read his own texts, in which he advises, "War is not good for man or economy! Fighters of a useless war dwell behind ramparts of a flaming hell!"

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, assorted, untitled ceramic works and, in the foreground, two painted-chicken-bone sculptures, circa 1940-80, variable dimensions (photo by Rich Maciejewski, courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

Von Bruenchenhein crafted painted-metal crowns for Marie to wear during their photo sessions as well as other, delicate ceramic crowns and vessels fashioned from small, leaf-shaped elements (resembling, in structure, the layered-leaf forms of artichokes). In

the 1960s, he used chicken bones to make small throne sculptures, which he painted, and, later, tall, slender towers.

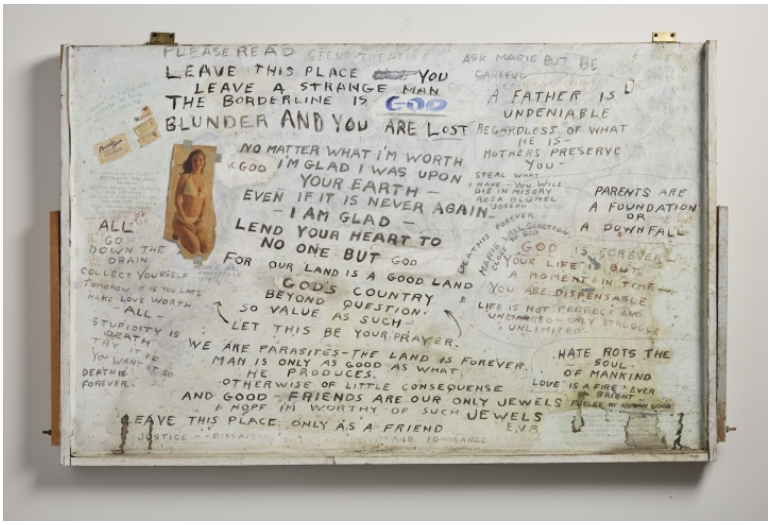
Brett Littman, executive director of the Drawing Center in New York, who curated a 2010 Von Bruenchenhein show at the American Folk Art Museum, observes in the exhibition's catalogue that many of the artist's works may be seen as reflecting his interests in both botany — as a young man, Von Bruenchenhein had called himself a "horticulturist"; he kept greenhouses filled with cacti and succulents — and in architectonic forms. Littman calls attention to the "often geometric, organic, mathematical, or process-based" manner in which Von Bruenchenhein generated his images or sculptural structures.

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's paintings of "towers" on cardboard or Masonite from the 1970s and 1980s, on view in the current exhibition in Sheboygan, Wisconsin (photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

Similarly, Lisa Stone, the director of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's Roger Brown Study Collection and a teacher at SAIC who focuses on self-taught and outsider artists' works, writes in the catalogue about the "tower" paintings Von Bruenchenhein made in the 1970s and early 1980s of futuristic skyscrapers.

Noting that these images depict high-rise structures that appear "[m]ore grown than constructed," Stone explains that he produced them by "dipp[ing] the edges of pieces of corrugated cardboard — the open sides that reveal the inner, wavy support layer — in paint" and then dragging them in across "enameled sheets of corrugated cardboard." In

these pictures, she observes, Von Bruenchenhein's "masses of upright forms display a lacy gridwork that emulates building blocks, a pleasing solution for creating the illusion of the complexes of his new architectural age."



Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Untitled (bulletin board), no date, metal, wood, paint, graphite, ink, paper, and mixed media; 35 3/8 x 58 1/8 x 3 inches (photo by Rich Maciejewski, courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

In one of Von Bruenchenhein's handwritten texts, he stated, with self-awareness, "The real artist, one who comes from nothing, like I did, with no art schooling necessary, has to live in two worlds. I have to remain on my side of life, while the great majority live on their side. When they ask, how did you come by all the things you paint and form in clay, and since there is no answer for such things, I just have to live in my own little world."

In 1970, Von Bruenchenhein's application for a National Endowment for the Arts grant was rejected. Apparently, he was devastated by that news but, in response, he produced a "Rejection Phase" series of paintings and then moved on. As the current exhibition suggests, as much as he might have dreamed of being recognized, despite his isolation and anonymity, his sense of his art's value was strong. He really did regard himself, as he noted on an inscribed-metal plaque in his kitchen, as a "Freelance Artist — Poet and Sculptor — Inovator [*sic*] — Arrow maker and Plant man — Bone artifacts constructor — Photographer and Architect — Philosopher."

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, archival photo of the artist's handmade plaque in the kitchen of his home, early 1980s (photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

As *Mythologies* makes clear, Von Bruenchenhein's sense of potency as an artist coursed through his entire oeuvre, fueling its evolution even as, in his mind, it pulled together and unified its seemingly disparate parts. To feel that creative energy pulsing through this grand exhibition is to be rewarded with a special frisson of a reminder of how alluring that force can be to art-maker and viewer alike.

"I am from another world, I always felt so," Von Bruenchenhein wrote. Fortunately for the rest of us, he made — and left — his remarkable art here, in this one.

Mythologies: Eugene Von Bruenchenhein *continues at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (608 New York Avenue, Sheboygan, Wisconsin) through January 14.*