Art in America

FROM THE ARCHIVES: CHICAGO ORIGINALS

By Michael Bonesteel
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Henry Darger: Untitled (She Got to Sit on Ringo's Lap), ca. 1966-67, mixed media on paper, 18 by 24 inches.
COURTESY ANDREW EDLIN GALLERY, NEW YORK/ © KIYOKO LERNER

Reclusive artist Henry Darger died in 1973, leaving behind a Chicago apartment full of his work. In light of a recent legal dispute between the building's landlords and the late artist's relatives over the contents, A.i.A. revisits Michael Bonesteel's essay from our February 1985 issue on the work of three notable Chicago outsider artists, including Darger. —Eds.

Chicago Outsider artists Henry Darger, Lee Godie and Joseph Yoakum gave free rein to personal fantasies that utterly transformed their realities, both on and off the canvas. In many respects, these artists may be distinguished by an inability to differentiate between art and life. Their absolute belief in the artistic fictions they created—not just in the ideas or concepts behind them—resulted in a conviction that lent psychological power to their work.

Jean Dubuffet, Roger Cardinal and Michel Thevos have argued elsewhere that Outsider art is more than the product of a delusional personality. The fantasies of delusional personalities are normally unrealized, whereas Outsider artists document and thus affirm their fantasies by creating "proof" of their existence. Such proofs reinforce the absolute nature of their beliefs. Making matters more complex is the notion—a necessary corollary of any serious treatment of Outsider artists—that their artistic production consists of almost everything they do, from the pictures they paint to the clothes they wear, from their habits of speech to their obviously embroidered life histories. In a most unconventional and literal sense, they live their art. Consequently, and despite the evident contradictions, biographers tend to take Outsider artists at their word: black artist Yoakum claimed to be a full-blooded Navajo Indian; Darger, the son of a Chicago tailor, said he was born in Brazil; bag-lady artist Godie reported that she came from a wealthy family. Disputing these claims would be as futile as disputing the "truth" of an expressionist painter's interpretation of the human figure. For many an Outsider artist, it's all art. The acceptance of so-called primitive, naive and Outsider artists by Chicago's art world cognoscenti was well underway by World War II. Long before several generations of Chicago Imagists in search of inspiration began their pilgrimages to the Field Museum of Natural History or to the haunts of contemporary self-taught and itinerant Outsider artists, local naives such as Jennie Siporin and Thorvald Hoyer were familiar names in Chicago's small art community. In fact, Siporin and Hoyer were exhibiting at the Art Institute's annual "Chicago and Vicinity" shows as early as 1940. Professors at the School of the Art Institute, beginning with Kathleen Blackshear, later followed by Whitney Halstead and continuing into the present with Ray Yoshida, insinuated the work of ethnic primitive and modern naive artists into the curriculums of Chicago's future artists, historians and critics. By the time Dubuffet gave his famous "Anti-Cultural Positions" lecture at the Arts Club in 1951, the groundwork had already been laid for Chicago's enduring receptivity to and affection for what Dubuffet termed *L'Art Brut*—the "raw art" of untaught artists who were for the most part isolated from mainstream art-world influences. More recently, the Museum of Contemporary Art's seminal 1979 exhibition, "Outsider Art in Chicago," grouped Darger, Godie and Yoakum rather indiscriminately with William Dawson, Aldobrando Piacenza and Pauline Simon. Although the latter three were certainly inventive within the contexts of broader folk and naive traditions, Darger, Godie and Yoakum stand apart as true Outsider artists, unparalleled originals working out of their own idiosyncratic frameworks.

When bag-lady artist Godie was picked up for vagrancy, taken to court and asked her occupation, she explained: "I'm a famous artist." Noting the elderly woman standing before him wrapped in bolt-ends of cheap fabric—her self-styled version of an East Indian Sari—the judge assumed she was suffering from delusions of grandeur and sent her off for a stay at a psychiatric hospital. Notwithstanding her own inflated view of herself as a latter-day French Impressionist, the fact is that she *is* a famous artist. She has supported herself making art for more than a decade—few local artists can boast a similar professional accomplishment. She was as much a fixture as the two bronze lions on the front steps of the Art Institute, where for years she would hawk her paintings and brag toothlessly but in an undeniably engaging way, "I'm much better than Cezanne." Her name is recognized beyond local art circles, and her work is probably in more Chicago collections than that of any other area artist. If all that doesn't amount to a kind of fame, nothing does. Godie could be found in the late '60s painting big orange circles on her own cheeks, eyeshadow over her eyes and thick, black eyebrows above her natural ones—all from the same paint box she used to make her pictures. She has told people that her father shot guns with

Marshall Field Sr. and that her sister took piano lessons from Ignace Jan Paderewski. It is uncertain whether Godie (which she pronounces “Go-day”) is her real name or a fabrication suited to fit her identity as a self-proclaimed French Impressionist. It matters little, of course, that she is no more an Impressionist than she is a Cubist. What matters is that she has transfigured her life with the palette of her imagination.

She paints portraits of glamorous, vivacious women with huge, staring eyes and bushy eyelashes—renderings somewhat reminiscent of Inez Nathaniel-Walker’s portraits. Godie’s women, however, have an intensity and strangeness more akin to an Art Brut artist such as Aloise. Godie’s works, with titles like *Flaming Youth*, *Sweet Sixteen* and *Gibson Girl*, recall a world of innocence that ended with the Great Depression. She herself still lives in such a world, for she always wears her makeshift dresses without slacks no matter how cold the weather and insists that her male visitors remain in the downstairs lobbies of the fleabag hotels where she stays—if she allows callers at all. She occasionally does portraits of famous personalities like Princess Margaret or James Dean, but usually she paints liv:e sitters on the street. On separate occasions, she has identified *Girl in the Mirror* as either a self-portrait or a portrait of her daughter, whom she said was “as beautiful as Shirley Temple,” and who supposedly died at an early age of diphtheria. Her canvases range from roll-ends of primed burlap to window shades, often unevenly cut to odd proportions. Before switching to watercolor and ballpoint pen, she used to paint in heavy layers of tempera straight from the bottle, with the unfortunate result that these early works suffered from considerable flaking, despite repeated coats. of thick brown woodworking varnish. Some paintings have never completely dried and feel tacky even today. Affixed to a number of paintings are hand-colored photobooth photographs of herself holding up fans of money. Among her various inventions are: painting “books” (sheaves of canvases bound on one side with shoelaces), “pillow paintings” (two painted canvases sewn back to back and stuffed with wadded newsprint), and a pre-made ongoing series of traced hands floating above black and white keyboards which she cut to order at different lengths. For more than a decade, her work has sold for $5 or $50 depending on her mood—prices that reflect not only pre-inflation, but pre-Depression standards.

Henry Darger: At Jennie Richee Still Pursued Along the Aronburgs Run in the Storm by the Enemy (recto), n.d., 2-panel double-sided watercolor, graphite and carbon tracing on paper, 19 by 47 inches.
COURTESY ANDREW EDLIN GALLERY, NEW YORK/ © KIYOKO LERNER

But to reiterate, Godie's paintings are only the tip of an artistic iceberg known as the Lee Godie phenomenon. Her eccentric and unpredictable behavior, her bizarre habits and perceptions, her considerable charm and wit—all must be included in the oeuvre of this Outsider artist who has been known to attack anyone bringing a camera within whacking distance of her portfolio, who is given to observing that one's eyesight improves as one removes constricting layers of clothing, or who may suddenly dash off in the middle of a conversation with the words, "I've got to go, my hair's on fire."

Henry Darger's belief in the world he had created was so strong that his epic masterwork, *In the Realms of the Unreal*, converged with aspects of his ordinary, day-to-day life. His real and unreal realms were all of a piece, and actions in one had repercussions in the other. He was a motherless child whose father died when Darger was still young. According to his 2,631-page autobiography, he was cruelly mistreated by nuns as he was shuttled from one Catholic orphanage to another and ended up in a home for "feeble-minded" boys from which, he finally ran away. Darger's *Realms* would seem to be a fantastic and fearful projection of his own childhood memories and experiences. He complained that he never wanted to grow up, and one suspects that, in certain ways, he never really did; although his creative vision was cosmic in scope, his perception of reality appears to have been arrested in a preadolescent phase. Given a strict Catholic upbringing and sheltered among exclusively male companions, Darger may not have known that girls without clothes looked any different from boys. As improbable as this state of affairs sounds, it seems to be the simplest explanation as to why Darger the man—a man who apparently didn't like women and never had a girlfriend—populated his artistic compositions with hermaphrodites: little girls with penises.

He began composing the story that was to occupy him for more than half a century sometime between 1911 and 1916. His monumental life's work was not discovered until after his death in 1972. Another landlord might have taken one look at Darger's work and relegated the entire effort to the garbage heap. But Nathan Lerner, an artist/photographer in his own right, immediately grasped the importance of his tenant's output when he discovered it hidden away in old trunks and buried beneath the piles of broken toys, religious kitsch and assorted bric-a-brac that filled Darger's one and-a-half-room apartment on Chicago's North Side. In the *Realms of the Unreal* was comprised of approximately 19,000 single-spaced, legal-sized pages divided in to 12 to 13 bound and unbound volumes. Lerner also found a number of journals, ledgers and diaries. More astounding, however, were the 87 large (8- to 10-foot-long) watercolored murals stitched together into three gigantic "books" (Godie wasn't the first to come up with the idea), plus 67 smaller drawings, all separate illustrations for his *Realms* saga.

Darger was essentially a collage artist who, both as writer and illustrator, worked in a patchwork fashion. His often accomplished, sometimes awkward styles of writing could have been amalgamated from Booth Tarkington's stories for children, Civil War histories and detailed weather reports from the newspaper. In a similar manner, the accompanying visual material was derived from popular pulp book, magazine and newspaper graphics, which he cut out and took to a local drugstore to have reduced or enlarged according to his specifications. He then arranged and traced the images into his incredible scenes, altering or embellishing them as he saw fit with watercolor and pencil.

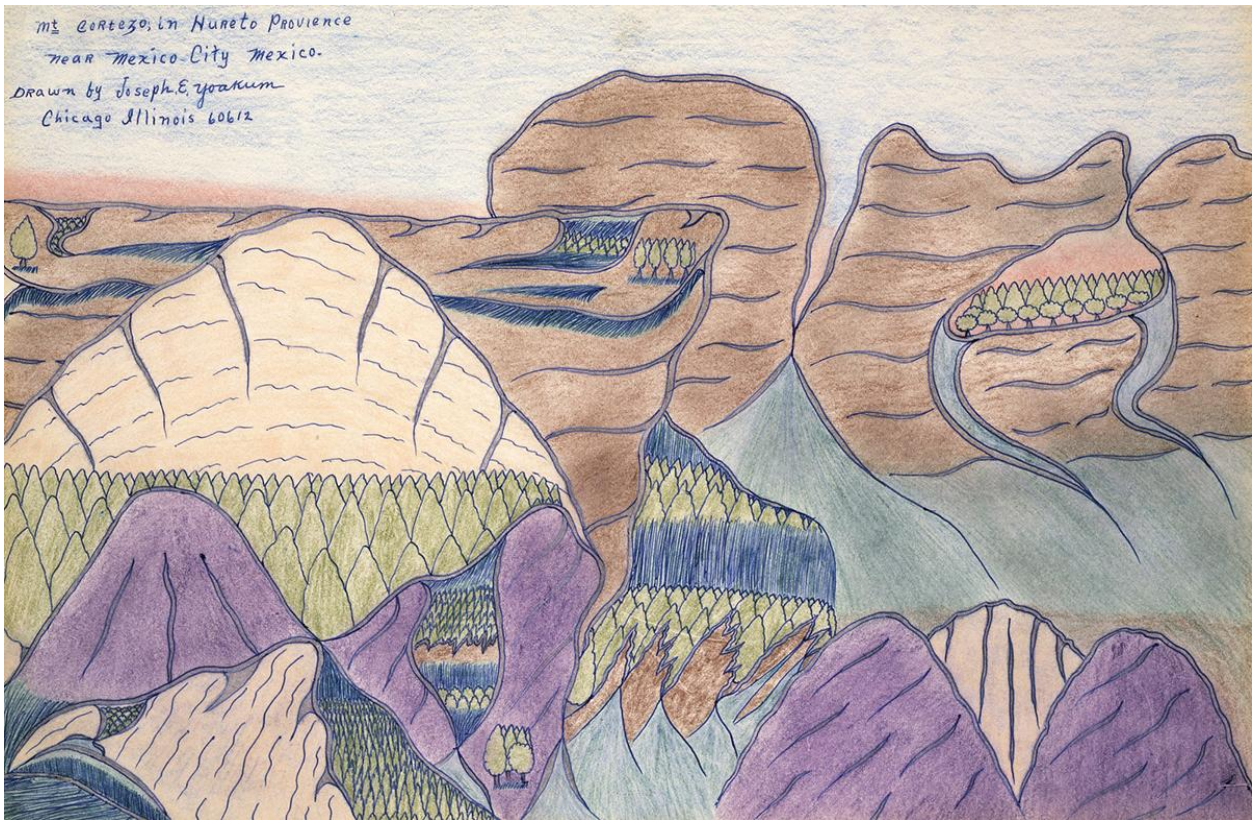
View of the exhibition “The Double-Sided Dominions of Henry Darger,” 2020, at Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York. PHOTO OLYA VYSOTSKAYA

In a repetitious, long-winded manner, *In the Realms of the Unreal* tells of an imaginary world, a sort of parallel planet to our own, made up of all-Catholic nations and of one particularly evil country called Glandelinia, which chose to enslave and persecute its own children as well as those of the countries it conquered. Other nations, led by Abbieannia, attempted to alleviate this barbarism, and a long war ensued, punctuated by supernatural storms and unearthly earthquakes. *Realms* is populated almost exclusively by male adults, female children and fairy-winged creatures called “blengins.” Women and boys are rarely mentioned or depicted. The heroines of the tale are the seven brave and beautiful Vivian sisters, who led the child-slave uprising that eventually turned the tide of the war in their favor. However, a major real-life incident identified in the story as “the Aronburg mystery” prolonged the war for many years.

It seems that Darger had read about the murder of a little girl in the newspaper and cut her photograph out. He dubbed her “Annie Aronburg,” but she is probably based in reality upon the unfortunate five-year-old Elsie Paroubek, whose photograph appeared on the front page of the May 9, 1911, edition of the *Chicago Daily News*. (By removing the P, then substituting an n for the u in Paroubek, Darger could have come up with “aronbek” and easily converted it to “Aronburg. “) He kept her photograph on the wall among his holy pictures of Catholic martyrs and saints, next to those of other children whom he used as models for his characters. Then he lost her picture. This loss frustrated and enraged Darger to such a degree that, after praying unavailingly to God for its return, he threatened ·that the obedient Christian nations in his *Realms* would start losing battles and that even he—who had written himself into the story, transformed into a tall (he was actually five-foot-three), dashing Captain Henry Darger wearing a black turban—would join the Glandelinian forces if the picture wasn’t recovered. Blissful,

fairyland depictions of happy children gave way, more and more, to horrific scenes of carnage and crucifixion. The photograph never turned up, and Darger finally relented. There was ultimately a Christian victory, yet the Aronburg mystery remained a dual one that profoundly penetrated Darger's inseparable realities.

Darger once asked, in an anguished letter written around 1929, why he was not granted permission to adopt a child of his own. Despite his going to church daily, saying the rosary and offering novenas, his prayers had not been answered. He even founded "The Children's Protective Society"; he and his sole friend, William Schloder, were the only members. He blamed himself for sins of blasphemy and doubting God's holy will, and felt tremendous guilt over having delayed the Christian's victory in his *Realms*. It's possible that the loss of Annie Aronburg's picture became a symbol of the child denied him. A single, reclusive man of dubious mental stability who could barely eke out a living as a hospital janitor, Darger was not the most likely candidate as an adopting parent. So to assuage the loneliness of his sad life, he created for himself a world of substitute children who depended on him for their existence and salvation.



Joseph E. Yoakum: Mt. Cortezo; in Hureto Provience near Mexico City Mexico., ca. 1960-70, crayon and ballpoint pen and ink on paper, 12 by 18 inches. SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Chicago's most visible Outsider artist, Joseph Yoakum, was not as dramatic as Darger nor as flamboyant as Godie when it came to cross-pollinating his life with his art. Nevertheless, he insisted that every one of his wildly convoluted landscapes was based on his travels while in the employment of Buffalo Bill, the Ringling Brothers or some other circus. His globe-trotting purportedly encompassed every continent and country in the world, except, he said, Antarctica. He must have forgotten that he hadn't visited Antarctica, however, because he wound up producing a drawing from that trip too. The late Whitney Halstead, who frequently brought

visitors to Yoakum's South Side storefront, wrote in an unpublished manuscript (collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, Department of Prints and Drawings) that Yoakum would invent often-repeated "tall tales" around each drawing and relate them to potential buyers perusing his work. He executed a number of drawings of flying saucers, for example. It's ironic that Yoakum thought the 1969 moon landing was a government hoax (obviously, he thought, such a space apparatus would be burned up by the sun), yet he firmly believed in the existence of UFOs. He related a story about how, during a flight from Los Angeles to Chicago, his airplane had been "buzzed" by a flying saucer, the pilot forced to land and himself left with no choice but to travel the rest of the way by train. It was because of that experience, Yoakum claimed, that he never again would go up in a plane. It's reasonable to believe Yoakum might have done fuis share of traveling, but there's little doubt that he extended the memory of his journeys through what he described as "spiritual unfoldment"—that is, sheer imagination, amply supplemented by his assortment of travel books and, Halstead suggests, by picture postcards. Halstead once remarked to Yoakum that he had never seen mountains in Iowa such as the ones Yoakum drew. Not about to be tripped up, the artist admonished the professor, "Well, that was just because you never looked."

Unlike Darger, Yoakum never had to leave the earth to locate his realms. He just "looked" hard enough, and the world yielded up its lyrical, undulating vision to him. Another time, Halstead questioned Yoakum about his apparent anthropomorphization of nature, implanting faces in the landscape (a trait Darger exhibited as well, also known as "physiognomicization"). When Halstead pointed out what looked like a bird's head and asked, "A bird?" Yoakum replied equivocally, "If you say so." Before Yoakum died in 1972, he found himself inadvertently playing le Douanier to the Hairy Who Imagists of Chicago, who collected his work and arranged some of his shows. The most recent homage to date has been the Carl Hammer Gallery's "Joseph Yoakum: His Influence on Contemporary Art and Artists" in 1984.

Alas, Darger and Godie have not received the attention Yoakum has. After years of cranking it out, Godie no longer makes work of the caliber she once did, but her creative personality remains undiminished. She is still alive, painting and hustling along Chicago's Michigan A venue. Meanwhile, Darger's work faces the danger of extinction within the next ten to 20 years if steps aren't taken to de-acidify and otherwise preserve it. Purists of opposing viewpoints would have us believe that, for such Outsider artists, this fate might in fact be the proper one.
In the view of most art historians, Outsider art without the stamp of academic approval is not really art in the true sense, and wouldn't be missed; for certain reactionary, self-appointed defenders of l'Art Brut, to sanitize, institutionalize and thus remove it from its natural habitat would constitute such blasphemy that they'd probably prefer it to crumble to dust rather than see it so desecrated. But there is a sensible middle path. The Museum of Modern Art's recent "Primitivism" exhibition, while somewhat cosmetic, suggested that the higher bastions of official modernist taste may be willing to reconsider the relationship between the art heroes of this century and those less self-conscious, unschooled practitioners whose contributions have come from a whole range of other contexts.

Outsider art, in its many manifestations, deserves to be seen, preserved and passed down to future generations. Its legacy is this: human ingenuity and imagination know no bounds, styles or special training. Be it the product of Yoakum the wanderer, Darger the warrior or Godie the would-be French Impressionist, Outsider art by any other name is still art.