

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein

Born 1910, Marinette, WI; died 1983, Milwaukee, WI.

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein was a prolific creator of a diverse range of distinctive images and sculptural objects, who produced his art in private over a period of about fifty years at his home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His large and unusual body of work was not discovered until after he died.

In 1939, at the age of 29, Von Bruenchenhein met Evelyn Kalka. She became his wife and muse. Eugene worked at a bakery, and Evelyn, who was nicknamed "Marie," served as his model. She was the subject of thousands of erotic photo-portraits, which he shot and printed himself in a darkroom he had installed in their home. For these photo images, which emulated girlie-magazine pin-ups with an offbeat air, Von Bruenchenhein designed and created his own background set-ups and costumes for his wife and muse Marie.

Around the mid-1950s, the artist began to make abstract paintings using his fingers, sticks, combs, leaves and other makeshift utensils to push oil paint around the surfaces of Masonite boards or pieces of cardboard taken from packing boxes at the bakery where he worked. Von Bruenchenhein's hallucinatory, abstract images offer explosions of vibrant color and evoke the forms of strange plants or fantasy creatures and architectural structures. Later in his art career, Von Bruenchenhein used clay to produce home-fired crowns and vases. He used chicken and turkey bones to create mysterious sculptures resembling towers or thrones. During his lifetime, only his closest family members and friends knew anything about his artistic pursuits and the works he had conjured up in private. In 1983, after the artist's death, one of his friends called the attention of the Milwaukee Art Museum to Von Bruenchenhein's extraordinary oeuvre. Later that same year, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, began to document Von Bruenchenhein's, at that point, sizable body of work.

On the occasion of a survey of his work, which opened at the American Folk Art Museum in New York in 2010, New York Times art critic Roberta Smith wrote:

"Von Bruenchenhein belongs among the great American outsider artists whose work came to light or resurfaced in the last three decades of the 20th century..."

Smith placed Von Bruenchenhein's unusual art in the company of that of Henry Darger, Martin Ramírez, Bill Traylor, James Castle and Morton Bartlett.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2026

Outside, curated by Matthew Higgs, Karma, Thomaston, ME

2024

Healing Machine, curated by Hayley Barker and Scott Ogden, SHRINE Gallery, New York, NY

The Way I See It: Selections from the KAWS Collection, The Drawing Center, New York, NY

2022

I Wish I Could Speak in Technicolor: Visions of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, curated by Maurizio Cattelan & Marta Papini, Outsider Art Fair, Paris, FR

Psychedelic Landscape, Eric Firestone Gallery, New York, NY

2021

Emblazoned World, curated by Lucy Bull, Bel Ami, Los Angeles, CA

Super-Rough, guest curated by Takashi Murakami, Outsider Art Fair special exhibition, New York, NY

PHOTO | BRUT: Collection Bruno Decharme & Compagnie, American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY (forthcoming)

Figure Out: Abstraction in Self-Taught Art, Outsider Art Fair New York, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY

Small World, Outsider Art Fair New York, Shin Gallery, New York, NY

To Be Human: The Figure in Self-Taught Art, Outsider Art Fair New York, Hirsch & Adler, New York, NY

2020

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Phantasmagorical Paintings 1957-61, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY

American Perspectives: Stories from the American Folk Art Museum Collection, curated by Stacy C. Hollander, American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY

Sexual Personae, curated by Alison M. Gingeras, Hôtel Drouot, Outsider Art Fair, Paris, France

An Alternative Canon: Art Dealers Collecting Outsider Art, curated by Paul Laster, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY

New Images of Man, curated by Alison M. Gingeras, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, CA

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Drawings 1964-67, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY

2019

Memory Palaces: Inside the Collection of Audrey B. Heckler, American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY

PHOTO | BRUT: Collection Bruno Decharme & Compagnie, La Mécanique Générale, Les Rencontres d'Arles, Arles, FR

La 4ème biennale de l'Art Brut: Théâtres, Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, FR

Doors of Perception, curated by Javier Téllez in collaboration with the Outsider Art Fair, Frieze, New York, NY

2018

Outliers and American Vanguard Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

La 3ème biennale de l'Art Brut: Corps, Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, FR

2017

Mythologies: Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI

2016

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: King of Lesser Lands, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY

Brut Now: L'Art Brut au Temps Des Technologies, Espace multimédia Ganter, Bourgne, FR

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Marie! Marie! I long for you, Delmes & Zander, Berlin, DE

2015

When the Curtain Never Comes Down: Performance Art and the Alter Ego, American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY

2014

Raw Vision: 25 Years of Art Brut, Halle Saint Pierre, Paris, France

Uncommon Folk: Traditions in American Art, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI

2013

Alternative Guide to the Universe, Hayward Gallery, London, UK

The Encyclopedic Palace, 55th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy

Great and Mighty Things: Outsider Art from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein:: American Beauty, Christian Berst Art Brut Gallery, Paris, FR

2011

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: From the Wand of the Genii, Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago, IL

Inova/Kennilworth, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Gallery, Milwaukee, WI

2010

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Freelance Artist-Poet and Sculptor-Innovator-Arrow Maker and Plant Man-Bone Artifacts Constructor-Photographer and Architect-Philosopher, American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY

Out of this World, American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, MD

2008

After Nature, New Museum, New York, NY

2007

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Feigen Contemporary, New York, NY

2004

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Feigen Contemporary, New York, NY

2001

American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum, American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY

1999

Obsession, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein Photography, Aurel Scheibler Gallery, Cologne, Germany

Self-Taught Artists of the 20th Century, traveling exhibition sponsored by the Museum of American Folk Art, New York, NY

1998

Ceramic Sculptures: Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia, PA

Naked, Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York, NY

1997

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Works in Clay, Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia, PA

1996

Biennale de Lyon, Lyon, France

Looking Beyond the Mirror, Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, IL

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Paintings, Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York, NY

1995

A World of their Own: Twentieth-Century American Folk Art, Newark Museum, Newark, NJ

Obsession: Photographs by E. V. B., Michael Lord Gallery, Milwaukee, WI

1994

Experience the Fantasy, Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, IL

Marie, Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York, NY

1993

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Fotografien, Galerie Susanne Zander, Cologne, Germany

E. Von Bruenchenhein Photographs, Edward Thorp Gallery, New York, NY

1992

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Utopic Dreams, Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, IL

1991

Dreams, Lies and Exaggerations: Photomontage in America, traveling exhibition:
The Art

Gallery of the University of Maryland at College Park; John M. Kohler Arts Center,
Sheboygan, WI

1990

Outsiders: Artists Outside the Mainstream, Octagon Center for the Arts, Ames, IA
Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, IL
Visions: Expressions Beyond the Mainstream, Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago, IL
E. V. B.: Paintings and Photographs, Edward Thorp Gallery, Chicago, IL

1989

Departures: Photography 1924-1989, Hirschl and Adler Modern, New York, NY
Paintings of Utopic Vision, Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, IL

1988

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Obsessive Visionary, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI
Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, IL
Chicago International Art Exposition, Chicago, IL
Chicago New Art Forms Exposition, Chicago, IL

1987

Material Obsessions, Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, IL
A Thousand and One Nights, Landmark Gallery, Milwaukee, WI
Chairs, Expressways Children's Museum, Chicago, IL
Chicago International Art Exposition, Chicago, IL
Chicago New Art Forms Exposition, Chicago, IL

1986

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, IL

1984

Von Bruenchenhein: A Retrospective, Landmark Gallery, Milwaukee, WI
Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Wisconsin Visionary, John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI

1983

Remains To Be Seen, John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2016

March Jones, Phillip, ed. and Cubbs, Joanne, "Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: King of Lesser Lands," Andrew Edlin Gallery, 2016.
Johnson, Ken, Review: Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, 'King of Lesser Lands', The New York Times, April 28.
Angeleti, Gabriella, Defining a King of Lesser of Lands, Brut Force, April 18.
Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: King of Lesser Lands, TimeOut New York, April 11.

Ebony, David, "David Ebony's Top 10 New York Gallery Shows for April," Artnet news, April 8.

2014

Anderson, Lamar, "Where Folk Art Meets High Fashion," Art News, January 13.

Heinrich, Will, "'Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Bits from First World' at Maccarone," Observer, March 26.

Wiley, Chris, "Maccarone's first exhibition of the work of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein opens in New York," Art Daily, March 5.

2013

Carroll, Brendan S., "Four Shows to See in Philadelphia: Mario Ybarra Jr, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, KAWS, The Barnes," Hyperallergic, October 24.

Prentnieks, Anne, "Eugene Von Bruenchenhein," Artforum, October 10.

Rugoff, Ralph, ed., The Alternative Guide to the Universe, exhibition catalogue, Hayward Publishing, London.

Wiley, Chris, "Outside In," Mousse Contemporary Art Magazine, No. 40, September.

2011

"Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: From the Wand of the Genii," Intuit, September 16.

Gardner, James, "Eugene Von Bruenchenhein," Antiques Magazine, October 9.

Jones, Kristin M., "Eugene Von Bruenchenhein," Frieze, May 1.

Littman, Brett, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Freelance Artist–Poet and Sculptor–Innovator–Arrow maker and Plant man–Bone artifacts constructor–Photographer and Architect–Philosopher, exhibition catalogue, American Folk Art Museum, New York.

2010

Lowenstein, Kate, "An Outsider who was a Jack-of-many-trades, but Mastered only a Few," TimeOut, November 19.

Schumacher, Mary Louise, "Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's Moment," Journal Sentinel, November 12.

Smith, Roberta, "Meager Means, Rich Imagination," New York Times, November 4, 2010.

2004

Glueck, Grace, "Eugene Von Bruenchenhein at Feigen Contemporary through Oct. 23," New York Times, October 23.

2002

Swislow, William, "Three Outsider Photographers: Lee Godie, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein and Morton Bartlett," Folk Art Messenger, Winter.

2000

Squires, Carol, "King of Hearts," American Photography, May-June.

1994

Stone, Lisa, "Eugene Von Bruenchenhein," Raw Vision, No. 10, Winter.

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Abcd collection, Montreuil, FR

Akron Art Museum, Akron, OH

American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA

Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago, IL

John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA

Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Missouri, MO

New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC