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Art City

Art and architecture critic Mary Louise Schumacher explores Milwaukee's creative endeavors

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's moment

By Mary Louise Schumacher of the Journal Sentinel

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In 1910, Earth's orbit passed through the tail of Halley's comet—an auspicious, cosmic moment that captured the world's imagination.

That same year, Eugene von Bruenchenhein was born in Wisconsin. A lot of folks were, of course. But Von Bruenchenhein always believed this coincidence of timing was proof that he'd been touched by the heavens and given a profound gift—artistic genius.

Von Bruenchenhein died in 1983 in abject poverty, his tiny Milwaukee home literally falling down and overrun with sweetly erotic photographs of his wife, apocalyptic paintings and towering sculptures delicately constructed from chicken bones.

Now, a full century after his birth, Von Bruenchenhein's star is on the rise almost as if by some cosmological appointment.

He's just had an art world coming out, of sorts. His first major museum show in the center of the art world – New York – opened and received a major review in the New York Times. And his work seems to be more frequently compared to and shown alongside some of the best artists of our time.

What may be most remarkable about this is that Von Bruenchenhein, whose work was discovered and publicly recognized not long after his death, is no longer being recognized primarily as "outsider" or "visionary" artist, but simply as an important artist of the 20th century.

He's shedding those awkward and flawed mantles, which often lead to an undue emphasis on his life story and the perceived strangeness of an artist who created work from the remnants of chicken dinners. More than ever, his work stands on its own.

"He just happens to strike a chord right now," said Brett Littman, director of New York's Drawing Center and guest curator for the current New York show at the American Folk Art Museum. "It is his moment."

There are a number of possible explanations for this moment of resonance.

First, EVB – as he's known in the art world – was forced to use what materials he could lay his hands on, including clay dug up near State Fair Park, paintbrushes made with his wife's hair, salvaged car paints and, most famously, the poultry bones. That spirit of self sufficiency may appeal to artists who work with degraded materials or who work in a DIY mode, things that are prevalent in the art world today.

There is also a sophistication in the paintings, which he sometimes scratched with twigs or smudged with fingers, or the ceramic forms that he made by pressing his thumbs and fingernails into bits of clay and layering them up, that may appeal to

artists working in a sort of faux naïve mode, another recent art-world trope.

Still, I can't help but wonder if one reason that scholars, artists and curators have been able to move beyond the narrative for a closer look at the work itself is the fact that the story has been so completely and beautifully told – by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

Without the guidance of the art center's director Ruth Kohler, EVB may have been all but forgotten. After the artist's death, Daniel Nycz, a friend and West Allis cop, brought the work to the attention of Russell Bowman, then the chief curator at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Neither Bowman nor MAM were directly interested in the work, but Bowman contacted Kohler. The entire collection was removed from the dilapidated home, brought to the art center in Sheboygan, cleaned and conserved. The most exemplary works across all of EVB's mediums as well personal effects such as notebooks, audio tapes, poetry and prose were then acquired from the artist's estate. The Kohler owns some 2,000 works of art and more than 10,000 objects if you include negatives and color transparencies.

A few years later, the Kohler Center organized the artist's first solo museum show, which traveled to MAM in 1988. During those years, my predecessors, James Auer and Dean Jensen, at the Milwaukee Journal and Milwaukee Sentinel, respectively, wrote eloquent, essay-length pieces about the artist, a baker by day and an artist into the wee hours.

He "loved the night," Jensen wrote, continuing:

"It was then, after the reality of the world outside...was blocked out in inky darkness, that dragons, serpents and other chimeras slithered from their hiding places and appeared before him. Von Bruenchenhein did not shrink back in terror at the sight of

monsters that were in all colors of hell and looked like escapees from a nightmare. He made portraits of the monsters as though he considered them to be every bit as beautiful as the full-thighed Venuses that Rubens painted. He struggled mightily to record faithfully every detail of their scaly, bulging eyes and tangled tentacles."

More recently, the Kohler mounted the seminal and internationally recognized "Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds" show, the largest exhibit of artist-created environments ever staged. Curated by Leslie Umberger, the 2007 show is the most important exhibit the Kohler has ever done, the culmination of decades of championing, studying, protecting and collecting the kind of work that was often dismissed as the ravings of eccentrics.

The "Sublime Spaces" show included the work of 22 artists and, in effect, a mini retrospective of Von Bruenchenhein's work. The catalogue essay remains the most definitive research on the artist to date.

It is no wonder, then, that Littman, while not turning his back on the essential nature of EVB's story, felt free to focus on the formal qualities of the work for the current New York show (which I have not yet seen). He created a tightly focused thesis about the artist's botanic and architectural impulses.

On view at the American Folk Art Museum through Oct. 9, 2011, the exhibit traces the floral patterns that dominate the pin-up-like photographs of his wife Marie in the layers of wallpaper, draped backdrops and Marie's dresses and sarongs. The botanic motifs are then picked up in the ceramic pieces, the sculpted florets, foliate vessels, crowns and headdresses.

The new show also tracks how this impulse took on an architectural flair in the bone sculptures and the rhythmic paintings of citadels and towers. In a phone interview,

Littman also raised entirely new questions about EVB's Milwaukee-based influences, such as whether Eero Saarinen's 1957 War Memorial building or Donald Grieb's Mitchell Park Domes, started in 1959, might have been some kind of an inspiration.

In her Times review of the New York show, art critic Roberta Smith places the photographs, in which Marie assumes various starlet-like roles, in the tradition of set-up photographers such as Cindy Sherman, and compares a group of drawings to Frank Stella's painted relief series from the 1970s.

And, in truth, the artist has been placed in a contemporary context a great deal of late. In August, Von Bruenchenhein's paintings were shown alongside those of Detroit-based artist Dana Schutz at Trinity College in Dublin. The deliberate awkwardness of the two artists was compared, as were their DIY attitudes toward art and theoretical science.

EVB was also included in last year's critically acclaimed "Dirt on Delight" exhibit at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania. The show featured significant work in clay by 22 artists across four generations, many avant-gardists in their time.

His apocalyptic works were also included in "After Nature" another critically acclaimed group show, this time at the New Museum in 2008. A multigenerational show with a considerable line-up of contemporary artists, it showcased dark, ecological visions.

The New York show was initially going to be a much larger, two-institution affair, but those plans were downsized for timing and budgetary reasons. The works, numbering about 100, are primarily gathered from private collections, works that were distributed commercially after the Kohler made its initial acquisitions. The show includes one piece from the Kohler's collection, a plaque that gives the show its title, and only a small handful of the quintessential bone sculptures.

In truth, while a serious and focused consideration like this seems worthwhile, seeing EVB's work in some volume and diversity seems critical to understanding his overall oeuvre. The 1988 exhibit, which featured more than 400 works, and “Sublime Spaces,” with more than 300, featured some of the artist's strongest works. And a show at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore earlier this year was also was important in presenting the breadth of the artworks.

All that seems missing at this point is a major retrospective -- something this artist seems ripe for at this point. Nothing specific is in the works at present, but the stars seem aligned for it.

Places to see EVB's work in Milwaukee: There are currently seven works of Von Bruenchenhein's work on view in the permanent collection galleries at the Milwaukee Art Museum. And up at the Kohler, one of his early bird drawings is on view as part of the "Wild Kingdom" show. He didn't create a lot of these. The piece, recently given to the Kohler, is the only one Umberger has ever seen, she said. Intuit in Chicago will also stage a show in Sept. 2011 to mark that institution's 20th anniversary.

Images from top: "The Pile of Andrius," 1954 painting, photo by John Parnell, courtesy the American Folk Art Museum; untitled double exposure photograph of Marie Von Bruenchenhein, courtesy the John Michael Kohler Arts Center; Posed in Von Bruenchenhein's home, not long after his death in 1983 are, from left, his widow Marie, Ruth Kohler and Phil Martin, then director of the Wisconsin Arts Board, from the Journal Sentinel archives; untitled ballpoint pen on paper drawing, 1965, photo by Emily Poole, courtesy the American Folk Art Museum; Vessel, photo by Gavin Ashworth, courtesy the American Folk Art Museum.