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Visionaries, Charmers and Demons

By KEN JOHNSON

The near death of the American Folk Art Museum was one of the more alarming events in the New York art world last year. So it is heartening to see this irreplaceable institution rising from the grave with "Jubilation/Rumination: Life, Real and Imagined," a wonderful exhibition of works from the permanent collection.

Having escaped the ugly 53rd Street tomb of a building it inhabited from 2001 to 2011, the museum has reoccupied its old space near Lincoln Center. It is not a lovely place for displaying art, but is not so self-important as to trump what matters: It's the collection, stupid!

Organized by Stacy C. Hollander, the museum's curator, the show samples all the varieties of artistic expression under the institution's purview, from traditional genres like portraits and quilts; sculptures made of bottle caps and similarly curious materials; and otherworldly fantasies drawn and painted by so-called Outsiders.

The show includes works by famous visionaries like Henry Darger and Adolf Wölfli and Martín Ramírez, whose boldly linear drawing of two trains running along cliffs and into tunnels is as mysterious as it is stylish. But the beauty of the museum's approach to art is that it focuses on singularly striking objects rather than on academically certified reputations or institutionalized versions of art history.

You have probably never heard of Marino Auriti, but you won't soon forget his "Encyclopedic Palace of the World." An Italian immigrant and auto body mechanic who lived in Pennsylvania, Auriti created this 11-foot-tall architectural model of a 136-story, stepped-back cylindrical skyscraper he proposal for the Washington Mall in the 1950s. He wanted it to exhibit examples of human ingenuity from the wheel to the space satellite. Neatly made of metal, wood, plastic and celluloid, mostly in shades of gray and white, the model is an inspiring monument to eccentric grandiosity.

At the opposite end of the size spectrum are two miniature ship's figureheads carved from

cherry wood by an unknown 19th-century artisan, probably from Salem, Mass. One represents a mermaid, the other a woman proudly blowing a trumpet. At once robust and exquisitely delicate, they will make your hands itch to pick them up and fondle them.

Nearby is another, funkier miniature — a tramp-art-style baby-grand piano by an unidentified late-19th-century craftsman. Made of darkly stained wood with chip-carved decoration, this knee-high, nonplayable instrument has a sculptural presence bigger than its diminutive size.

A number of three-dimensional works favor the demonic. Made of painted wood by a Mexican artist in the 1950s, a frightening yet comical Day of the Dead skeleton with long, wild black hair operating a backstrap loom would make a fine prop for a grisly horror movie. With an ominously grinning dark face painted onto a bulbous form at the center of a radiating tree root, “Faces of Africa II” by Bessie Harvey from 1994 exudes a devilish menace.

There are celestial beings too. The angelic winged and trumpet-blowing figure of Fame in a swirling dress graces a weather vane made of zinc and copper from around 1890. In “Aurora,” a watercolor by an early-19th-century New Englander, an angel in a gold dress rides in a red carriage with gold stars pulled by a pair of eagles over a decidedly cooler land and seascape. The leap between down-to-earth sobriety and the zany neo-Classical vision speaks volumes about psychic tensions roiling the Puritan soul of America.

There are plenty of people to behold too, though they often appear less than fully natural. The early American portrait painter Sheldon Peck might have been aiming for strict realism in his double portrait of David and Catherine Stolp Crane (around 1854) stiffly seated in their spare parlor, but their oddly doll-like heads make them resemble weirdly inanimate, oversize puppets. A watercolor by an unknown Baltimore artist portrays a woman named Mrs. Keyser holding a yellow cat in her lap. Her extravagantly lacy bonnet and collar and billowing black dress create a formally dynamic, Cubist-like setting for her enigmatic, generically pretty face.

A small, finely worked painting by James Bard, the artist best known for portraits of mid-19th-century steamboats, pictures a man and his enormous horse in rigid profile. You feel something of what horses once meant to people. Today it would be a man and his car.

Twentieth-century influences are muted over all; this is mostly a show of antique Americana. But there are a few artists who ventured into abstraction with Modernist spirit.

One was Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, whose two-foot-square painting from 1958 suggests a gaseous explosion in outer space. Von Bruenchenhein also made hundreds of erotic photographs of his wife in exotic, skin-revealing costumes, three of which are here. They prompt an intriguing question: Is there such a thing as folk or Outsider photography, and if so, what would earn it such a designation?

While Von Bruenchenhein considered himself a great artist and wanted the world to know it, another abstract painter, Eugene Andolsek, produced thousands of jewel-like, dazzlingly complex compositions in ink on paper during his lifetime — 1921-2008 — and never sought to exhibit them. The three here are among the most beautiful works in the show.

Might there be other offbeat isolates like Andolsek out there producing art of similarly astounding originality? Or will the Web so thoroughly connect and homogenize the minds of everyone that his kind of idiosyncratic genius will trend toward extinction? These are questions that the rejuvenated museum might fruitfully explore in the future.

“Jubilation/Rumination: Life, Real and Imagined” continues through Sept. 2 at the American Folk Art Museum, 2 Lincoln Square, Columbus Avenue at 66th Street, (212) 595-9533, folkartmuseum.org.