



Print Article



Henry Darger

At Sunbeam Creek, Are with Little Girl Refugees Again in Peril from Forest Fires but Escape This Also, but Half Naked and in Burned Rags / At Torrington. Are Persued by a Storm of Fire but Save Themselves by Jumping into a Stream and Swim Across as Seen in Next Picture / Their Red Color is Caused by Glare of Flames. At Torrington. They Reach the River Just in the Nick of Time.

Mid-20th century
American Folk Art Museum
Photo by James Prinz



Henry Darger

At Battle of Drosabellamaximillan. Seeing Glandelinians Retreating Vivian Girls Grasp Christian Banners, and Lead Charge Against Foe

Mid-20th Century
American Folk Art Museum
Photo by James Prinz



Henry Darger

At Phelantonburg. They raid a guardhouse / At Calmanrina Escape Through City Tunnel./ Last at Phelantonberg. They Witness a Massacre of Children.

Mid-20th century
American Folk Art Museum
Photo by James Prinz

THE INSIDER'S OUTSIDER by Ben Davis

"Dargerism: Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger," Apr. 15-Sept. 21, 2008, at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10019

What's so fascinating about Henry Darger? More than anything else, this is the question that circles beneath the surface of "Henry Darger and Contemporary Art" at the American Folk Art Museum, which devotes four floors of exhibition space to a selection of 12 watercolors by the celebrated "outsider" artist along with works by a dozen other figures whose esthetic draws on his work.

Few visual artists of the last half century have quite the same popular currency as Darger. He is the subject of an ever-expanding literature and endless exhibitions. He's celebrated in popular song, in comic books, in poetry. The decision to organize a show about his influence on visual art is overdue, then, and curator Brooke Davis Anderson has focused her attention -- and her lengthy wall texts -- on figures who remember their first encounter with the master.

The problem, however, is this: Contemporary artists cannibalizing Darger's work for themes or miming his stylistic tics cannot hope to live up to the lyrical strangeness of the original. In this show, this is most obviously true of Michael St. John, who creates a small, totem-like sculpture of a creature from Darger's unique universe, or Justin Lieberman, who collages the heads of JonBenét Ramsey-esque prepubescent beauties onto bodies floating in Darger landscapes, a bit of throwaway irony.

Darger's work has the cockeyed cosmic vision of William Blake and the inventive perversity of Pablo Picasso. That's a lot to live up to. Comparing him to contemporary artists makes for a show that is less about Darger as an artistic "influence" and more about him as a vaguely traumatic presence, in the sense that he is a reference artists are compelled to return to, but can't quite integrate in a productive way.

By now, his story is well known: An introverted, intensely Catholic hospital janitor from Chicago's North Side with a childhood that involved time spent in a group home and as a runaway, he spent his life making art that was discovered by his landlords only three months before his death in 1973. It consists of an enormous typewritten manuscript, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*, and about 300 accompanying watercolor illustrations.

The narrative tells the tale of a magical planet, where a nation of saintly Catholic girls is locked in Manichean battle with the rampaging "Glandelinians," brutal soldiers who resemble the Confederate army



Michael St. John
Blengin
 2002-2003
 Private collection
 Photo courtesy Marvelli Gallery



Justin Lieberman
Thank Heaven for Little Girls
 2004
 Collection of Sue and Joe Berland
 Photo courtesy Zach Feuer Gallery



Trenton Doyle Hancock
And the Branches Became as Storm Clouds
 2003
 Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

from the Civil War, often graphically depicted strangling, executing, burning or mowing down the girls with bayonets. Famously, the girls are also often depicted nude, with male genitalia, as in one work at the AFAM that depicts the team of eight "Vivian Girls" (leaders of the Catholic side) fleeing through a verdant landscape that is replete with enormous flowers, gripping what appear to be beehives, tiny penises clear for all to see.

Darger's beautifully colored compositions are horizontal in format, unfolding their narrative in storybook panoramas, often with scribbled captions telling what part of his manuscript they correspond to. The imagery is crisp and lively, with a keen sense for weather (his clouds often contain concealed heads and other, writhing forms) and landscape. Simultaneously, it is weirdly static and has a Medieval flatness, partly due to the fact that much of it was traced from magazines -- the Coppertone girl and images of Shirley Temple were favorites -- and Civil War picture books. (A small display of such items salvaged from Darger's apartment finds space in a back corner of this show.)

It is a memorable, self-contained world, fusing religion and fantasy, advertisements and spiritual exorcism -- a kind of esthetic singularity. The paradox is that Darger's work has grown in influence not only because of its uniqueness, but also because it plugs neatly into themes that have been ascendant in the visual arts since the '70s: a turn to narrative and illustration, a preoccupation with sexual fluidity, obsessive-compulsive elaboration, a reborn collage esthetic, an affection for esoteric cosmologies, and so on.

How difficult it is to get at what makes Darger special through such trendy themes is illustrated if we contrast a pair of artists at the AFAM: Trenton Doyle Hancock and Yun-Fei Ji. The Houston-based Hancock is probably the artist whose oeuvre comes closest to Darger's. He has elaborated his own personal, loopy cosmology in hundreds of mixed-media works involving a battle between evil "Vegans" and good, meat-eating "Mound" creatures (he even opened his own ballet in Austin just this year based on this world).

In one piece at AFAM, Hancock covers a wall with his own wallpaper and framed pencil sketches of children's faces. In another, titled *And the Branches Became as Storm Clouds*, a mural-sized composition shows a large, screaming "Mound," its hill-like body composed with strips of fur stuck to the canvas. It spouts pools of blood, represented by stains of bubblegum-like pink pigment, and is in the process of being ripped apart by hideous, shrieking skeletal creatures, all in a densely drawn forest setting.

Elsewhere in the galleries, the Brooklyn painter Yun-Fei Ji presents three large scroll-like works, packed full of swirling, cartoonish Chinese historical references, including the Opium wars and the current relocation of peasants to make way for China's Three Gorges Dam. In the wall text, the artist (who, like Hancock, has shown at James Cohan Gallery in New York) explains that what interested him about Darger's work was that it legitimated narrative illustration. Some of Ji's villainous figures are even made to resemble Darger's creatures, while his rice-paper compositions echo Darger's storybook flatness.

So, on the one hand, Hancock captures the sense of manic, mythopoetic creation in Darger's *The Realms of the Unreal*. Displayed next to Darger, however, what his cosmology seems to lack is the dream-like sense that its invented rules make sense; Hancock's

**Yun-Fei Ji**

Dinner at the Forbidden City
2001

Private collection
Photo courtesy James Cohan Gallery

**Anthony Goicolea**

Ash Wednesday
2001

Collection of Stephane Janssen
Photo courtesy Postmasters Gallery

**Anthony Goicolea**

Kidnap (still)
2004

**Justine Kurland**

Sheep Wranglers
New York
2001

Collection of A.G. Rosen
Photo courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash

output is more self-conscious in its grotesqueness, and more eclectic; there is no feeling that it touches on anything real. On the other hand, Yun-Fei Ji seems all too sober. As historical illustration, his scrolls seem conventional despite their outlandish detail. Hancock is too hot; Yun-Fei Ji too cold. Darger occupies a seemingly unattainable center.

Take another pair from the AFAM show: two photographers working in the popular vein of staged photography, Anthony Goicolea and Justine Kurland. The comparison with Darger is obvious. In Goicolea's *Ash Wednesday*, a pack of boys in yellow raincoats travel through a dark forest, with another boy in a black coat (maybe from another tribe?) tied to a stick and being carried like a pig being taken to roast. The artist digitally clones himself into the scene to play all the parts -- a nice modern-day analogue for Darger's process of retracing the images of his heroines. For Kurland's part, a photo like *Sheep Wranglers* also invokes Darger's identically innocent children, depicting a subtly utopian landscape of schoolgirls in uniform, lazing in a sunlit pasture. In another photo, *Battlefield*, Kurland depicts a Dargeresque field littered with what could be some of those same girls' corpses.

These works suffer in comparison to Darger not, as Ken Johnson suggests in his *New York Times* review, because Goicolea and Kurland lack any real story behind their images, which instead merely suggest tales that don't exist. After all, Darger's watercolors are mainly seen in isolation, with only hints of the world behind them, whereas Goicolea's terrific video *Kidnap*, playing on the fourth floor, shows that he can adroitly spin his elliptical images into equally elliptical narratives.

The important difference is that it is all too easy to resolve the meaning of Kurland and Goicolea's imagery; the emotions they invoke are fairly straight-forward, even calculated. You know *Ash Wednesday* is supposed to be *Lord of the Flies*-sinister, while *Sheep Wranglers* is intended to be eerie in its unreal pastoralism. With Darger's illustrations, you are always slightly unable to place where he is coming from -- the oft-depicted atrocities offer genuine horror as well as an unsettling sense of enjoyment; the moments of reprieve in his tale are idyllic but undercut by lurking unnaturalness.

You could make the same kinds of comparisons with all the other artists here, from Robin O'Neil's large, apocalyptic landscapes in graphite, to Amy Cutler's folk-art style magical realist paintings, to Paula Rego's choppy oil paintings incorporating Darger's "Vivian Girls" (dating from the '80s, and proving Darger-mania is not new). British art potter Grayson Perry may have the most sincere attachment to Darger (according to *Artnet Magazine* writer N.F. Karlins, he gave a heartfelt lecture in tribute to the great "outsider" at the AFAM). But Perry's two vases on view here, once again, simply incorporate images of Darger and his girls as decorative motifs, a fairly straightforward homage to a very complex body of work.

What stands out about *The Realms of the Unreal* is its ability to contain seemingly antithetical moods -- it is innocent and sinister, sophisticated and naïve, elaborately weird but also unforced, whimsical and infused with conviction. This is what makes it so difficult to process, at the same time it is what makes it so compelling. In Harold Bloom's famous lit-crit fable *The Anxiety of Influence*, it is this type of difficulty that sparks the need for artists to wrestle with something, achieving greatness by having to struggle with their influences' contradictions (for Bloom, Shakespeare is the ultimate literary



Justine Kurland
Battlefield
2001
Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash

influence, because his work is the most multiperspectival).

It does seem significant that for most of the contemporary artists here, the encounter with Darger is a missed one -- they draw on Darger-esque imagery as a kind of mythologized symbol for imagination, which is precisely a way of keeping the tensions that make his imagination so dangerously alive in the first place at a distance. It also seems significant that the figure whose work presents itself as most worth wrestling with for contemporary artists was an actual social outcast. And finally, taken together, these two observations probably point back to the same thing: not a vital contemporary tradition of "Dargerism," but rather the esthetic alienation of our own particular times.



Robyn O'Neil
These Moving Bodies, These Numb Processions
2005
Private collection
Photo courtesy Clementine Gallery

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*. He can be reached at bdavis@artnet.com



Amy Cutler
Traction
2002
Collection of Francie Bishop Good and David Horvitz
Photo courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks & Projects



Paula Rego

The Vivian Girls in Tunisia

1984

Collection of Paula Rego

Photo courtesy Marlborough Gallery



Grayson Perry

He Comes Not In Triumph

2004

Collection of Monica and Rick Segal

Photo courtesy of Victoria Miro Gallery