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## An Interview with Brooke Davis Anderson about Outsider Artist Henry Darger

May 6, 2008 11:59 AM, by [Ruiyan Xu](#)

In 2005, P.O.V. aired [Jessica Yu's](#) film [In the Realms of the Unreal](#). The film is the astounding tale of outsider artist **Henry Darger**, who, unbeknownst to anyone, had created a 15,000-page novel and hundreds of illustrations that have inspired artists and viewers since their discovery. Three years later, Darger continues to fascinate and astound, and last month, **Dargerism: Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger** opened at the [American Folk Art Museum](#) in New York City.

**Dargerism** is curated by **Brooke Davis Anderson**, the director and curator of the Contemporary Center at the American Folk Art Museum. Three years ago, we worked with Brooke on one of our favorite website features — an [interactive audio tour through several of Darger's works](#) for the P.O.V. In the Realms of the Unreal [website](#). Now Brooke has been kind enough to answer some of our questions about the show at the Folk Art Museum, and Darger's continued hold on our imaginations.



Henry Darger: 6 Episode 3 Place not mentioned. Escape during violent storm, still fighting though perished for long distance. [Zoom into the image](#). © Kiyoko Lerner. Image used by permission of the American Folk Art Museum.

**P.O.V.:** Tell us about the show you just curated at the American Folk Art Museum — **Dargerism, Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger**.

**Brooke Davis Anderson:** The **Dargerism** show illustrates how Henry Darger has been influential to eleven contemporary artists over the last 25 years. The show examines

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how one artist has played a role in contemporary discourse in the art world, but one of the underlying themes of the show is also the self-taught artist's movement from the periphery of the discourse to the center. In a way, I'm trying to be playful with this show: I'm suggesting that if so many artists are influenced by Darger, then he can no longer be considered to be on the margins of art history.

The eleven contemporary artists in the show are very diverse — they work in painting, sculpture, video, drawing, photography, etc., and Darger's influence on them are integrated into each artist's oeuvre. In fact, this is the first time the Folk Art Museum has highlighted academically trained artists, and it's also the first time we have exhibited video and contemporary photography.

In terms of Darger's influence, some artists are very taken by the roles girls and women play in the work of Darger. They respond to Darger's powerful Vivian girls by creating their own mythological figures. **Justine Kurland**, for example, portrays Tom Sawyer-like girls; **Amy Cutler** forces the girls she portrays into work situations, which harkens back to Darger in subtle ways.

Other artists, like **Trenton Doyle Hancock** and **Yun-Fei Ji**, were released to become storytellers when they discovered Darger's work. Both were in graduate school and feeling that their work was too narrative, but then they saw Darger's 15,000 page novel and the journeys of his characters! Yun-Fei Ji said "Darger took the monkey off my back..." while Doyle Hancock said that Darger's work gave him "the permission" to pursue narrative art.

Read more after the jump...



Trenton Doyle Hancock: *And the Branches Became as Storm Clouds*. [Zoom into the image](#). © Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Image used by permission of the American Folk Art Museum.

Still, other artists, including **Paula Rego** and **Grayson Perry**, are influenced by Darger's transgressive ideas and his portrayals of nude, transgender kids. Each of the artists in the show addresses aspects of Darger's work, and they show, in a variety of ways, how influence plays a role in artmaking.

**P.O.V.: You've done an immense amount of curatorial work around Henry Darger. What is about his art that continues to interest you?**

**Anderson:** Darger's paintings are beautiful — aesthetically, content wise, and conceptually. They are masterful. They are also perplexing. What continues to interest me is that we still don't know very much about Darger's body of work at all.

I'm interested in trying to get other younger scholars to study Darger. There's still a whole lot of work to be done on his oeuvre. There are questions about his work, and I want there to be continued probing for answers. In fact, the American Folk Art Museum has announced a [Henry Darger Study Center Fellowship](#) for scholars to further study Darger's work through the archive at the museum.



Henry Darger: *At battle of Drosabellamaximilian. Seeing Glandelinians retreating Vivian girls grasp Christian banners, and lead charge against foe*. [Zoom into the image](#). © Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Image used by permission of the American Folk Art Museum.

**P.O.V.: In the years since Darger's work was discovered, many artists, including poet John Ashberry, writer Neil Gaiman and musicians from Sufjan Stevens to Natalie Merchant, have referenced him in their**

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**work. (Not to mention Jessica Yu's wonderful film, *In the Realms of the Unreal*, which aired on P.O.V.) What is it about Darger's art that continues to make it so relevant and fascinating to today's artists, writers and musicians?**

**Anderson:** Darger's work is so masterful! It's his life's work. I think creative people are in awe of his work ethic and his devotion to his art.

Artists are always struggling with the need to keep their work in the forefront of their life, the need to not let distractions get in the way. Darger was so devoted, and I think creative people have a great admiration in terms of how he worked.

There's also not much out there that's like Darger's 15,000 page novel! Because the work was so unknown during his lifetime, no one has ever been able to ask Darger what he was after in his work. So in that sense, other artists and creative people can put their own stamp on the work.

So it's that combination of the masterfulness of the work, the opportunities for intersections and collaborations with the work, and the mystery of the work, that makes it so inspiring to others.

In 2002, we held a panel at the museum about the influence of Darger. On the panel were five people from different disciplines, including poet **John Ashberry**. To this day, it's one of my favorite panels that we've done at the museum. It really showed that borrowing and begging is so much a part of the creative endeavor for all artists.

**P.O.V.: Who and what were Darger's influences?**

**Anderson:** Darger's own influences are actually a part of the show! **Kevin Miller**, an intern at the museum, curated a sidebar exhibition about Darger's influences. Kevin looked through our Darger archives and selected 20 pieces of comics, cartoons, coloring books, newspapers, magazines, and children's books. Those things were the primary influences on Darger, and they were saved from his apartment after he died. The pieces on display show how Darger traced from these visual objects to learn about landscapes and figuration. In fact, these archival items have remnants of pencil marks on them; through tracing, Darger was learning how to draw. So through this great sidebar to the exhibit, viewers can really see how Darger and the eleven contemporary artists are engaging in the same process. Darger is playing the same game, learning how to paint and draw from his influences.



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 pursued 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. [Zoom into the image](#). © Kiyoko Lerner. Image used by permission of the American Folk Art Museum.

**P.O.V.: Henry Darger is one of the most well known "outsider" artists. Can you tell us about the relationship and influence of outsider artists like Darger on more conventionally trained artists throughout art history?**

**Anderson:** Part of the nuance of the *Dargerism* show is to acknowledge that there has been a relationship between outsider artists and conventionally trained artist for a hundred years. It became solidified with **Dubuffet**, **Andre Breton**, and the surrealists, who mined asylums, prisons and schools and looking for artwork that was untutored and untouched. They tried to utilize those experiences to both come to terms with what creativity is, and to be inspired and influenced by the great objects they were finding. Dubuffet, in particular, was rigorously influenced by self-taught artists and their work.

There are a lot of living, actively working artists today who can be considered "outsider" artists. The notion that these artists are isolated is hogwash; they may be isolated from the high art experience, but they are still finding sources to urge on their creativity.

*Dargerism* will be on exhibit at the American Folk Art Museum until September 21, 2008. Visit [the museum's website](#) for more information.

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