

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein

American Folk Art Museum

Exotic and full of strange energy, the work of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, who was born in 1910 and died in 1983, emerged from the Midwest like something belonging to another place and time. He painted glowing apocalyptic landscapes which, in the New Museum's 2008 exhibition 'After Nature', looked at home alongside rapturous visions of a ruined world by artists and filmmakers such as William Christenberry and Werner Herzog. Other works are obsessive but radiantly inventive: staged photographs of his wife that recall portraits ranging from E.J. Bellocq's haunting images of New Orleans prostitutes to Cindy Sherman's self-portraits; leafy ceramic vessels and crowns; and absurdly macabre towers and thrones, assembled from poultry bones, which could have been dreamed up by a young artist working today.

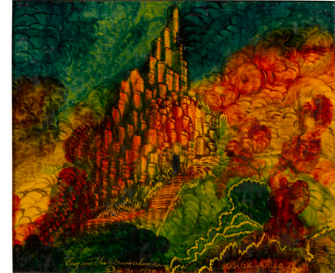
Von Bruenchenhein made art and wrote poetry for nearly 50 years. In his Wisconsin kitchen, where he literally cooked up much of his work (baking ceramics in a coal stove, cleaning and drying bones), he hung an incised aluminum plaque promoting his services as a 'Freelance Artist—Poet and Sculptor—Inovator—Arrow maker and Plant man—Bone artifacts constructor—Photographer and Architect—Philosopher' (sic). This shingle, presumably seen only by relatives and friends, provides the title for an intriguing exhibition focusing on this self-taught (but far from aesthetically unsophisticated) artist. The show's guest curator, The Drawing Center's Brett Littman, emphasizes Von Bruenchenhein's use of leaf and floral motifs as an organizing principle, and the results demonstrate how his disparate bodies of work enriched one another.

Botany was a lifelong passion that shaped Von Bruenchenhein's formal approach to art-making. The show opens with cacti displayed alongside one of the cast-concrete masks – several feet high and inspired by pre-Colombian art – that he created to place amongst exotic plants in a greenhouse he built in his backyard. He worked in a florist's shop and – later, for a longer period – a bakery, both jobs that suggest fertility and repetition. Gardening and floral arranging helped fuel a vivid reimagining of mass-cultural imagery in the thousands of photographs Von Bruenchenhein took of his wife and muse, Marie, from the early 1940s to the mid-1950s, developing them in a makeshift darkroom. Like Seydou Keïta, another self-taught photographer, he used patterned backdrops, but to more extravagant ends. Rococo wallpaper and drapery, exotic costumes and strings of beads combine to make his beloved subject resemble a blossom emerging from lush vegetation.

The images echo pin-ups – Marie is often topless and some poses mimic vampy cheesecake shots – but her expressions are those of an ingénue, unable to hide her pleasure as she assumes various guises, from tropical princess to Tinseltown siren. The identities she awkwardly assumes seem to anticipate Sherman's work, but that association is undercut by the palpable intimacy between photographer

About this review

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and model. Photographs that are tinted blue or mauve, or in which Marie gazes heavenward wearing a glittering crown, also recall Joseph Cornell's innocent carnality and the magical, protected world his collages evoke.

For Von Bruenchenhein, the domestic arena was a well of creativity. He also began to make ceramics early on and focused intensely on them through the early 1970s, firing clay he scavenged from construction sites. He made objects embellished with iridescent paint, included fragile florets, foliate vessels inspired by Mayan incense pots and graceful crowns made up of interlaced arching leaves.

He shifted his focus from photography to painting between the mid-'50s and mid-'60s, and made around 1,000 luminous images, working on Masonite or corrugated cardboard and applying paint with his fingers or tools such as sticks, leaves or combs. The show focuses on his vertical cityscapes, calling attention to how the accretive marks in the paintings echo the foliate patterns in the ceramics and the segments in the lacy bone sculptures. In works such as Edison Complex (1978), textured buildings and spires melt into mottled skies.

The bone towers and thrones Von Bruenchenhein made during the late 1960s and early '70s, such as Gold Tower (c.1970), subtly gleam with automobile paint; they too have architectonic qualities. Littman posits that he may have been inspired by Milwaukee Modernist architecture such as the conical glass-and-steel domes in the Mitchell Park Conservatory Complex, designed by Donald Grieb; he was apparently also struck by Simon Rodia's Watts Towers in Los Angeles. The show concludes with a selection of Von Bruenchenhein's dynamic line drawings, some mounted inside a wallpaper sample book, which reflect his continuing interest in uniting the geometric and the organic.

Such works make one wonder what would have happened if Von Bruenchenhein had lived in the New York area, like Cornell, and had made similar contacts, or had merely successfully exhibited his work in the Midwest. Such rigid hierarchies as outside/inside may not have much value, but if the question 'Where is it going?' is one that isn't asked about so-called outsider art, then Von Bruenchenhein's contemporary-looking visions, with their restless formal experimentation, don't belong in that category.

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Frieze

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