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Portraits of Life and Fantasy That Embody the Artists

By GRACE GLUECK

Admiring his mother as a bulwark of spiritual strength, an architectural draftsman named Achilles G. Rizzoli depicted her as an immense and intricate Gothic cathedral, a thing of elaborate stonework, soaring spires, flying buttresses, windows with lacy tracery, saintly statues and other attributes.

"Mother Symbolically Recaptured/The Cathedral" (1937), the title of this meticulously detailed epic (Rizzoli did several Kathedrals, as he called them, in tribute to her), certainly defies conventional notions of a portrait as a physical semblance. But why not? After all, a portrait is meant, among other things, to convey the animating force of a subject, not merely its facade.

Many of the other works in the refreshingly offbeat "Self and Subject" at the American Folk Art Museum in Manhattan also flout traditional expectations of portraiture. But some do not. In fact, the show, assembled by Lee Kogan, curator of special projects at the museum, covers a wide range of approaches. It "explores issues of identity and self awareness" in portraits by contemporary self-taught artists.

They include brooding self-observations like John Kane's "Seen in the Mirror" (1928); admiring takes on celebrities, like that of the soul singer Roberta Flack (1970) by a juicy Jamaican painter known as Kapo (Mallica Reynolds); and a childishly suggestive standing girl doll in shortie pajamas and a robe. She is one of 15 pre-and-pubescent figures made over a 30-year period by Morton Bartlett, a Boston print-broker and Harvard alumnus who wrote in the college yearbook for 1932 that his obsession released "the urges which do not find expressions in other channels."

There are unvarnished, true-to-life evocations, like Hugo Sperger's "What Doesn't Destroy Me" (circa 1987), a no-nonsense self-portrait of a cancer victim staring soulfully out from a square hole in a tight brick wall that imprisons him; and off-the-wall impressions, like the three wildly distorted versions of his own face by Mose Tolliver, a black artist of Montgomery, Ala., who started painting after a work-related accident in the late 1970's.

More than a few of the names here are well known to fanciers of outsider art and folk art, and even to a wider audience: Mr. Kane, Bill Traylor, Grandma Moses, Morris Hirshfield, William Edmondson, James Castle, Ralph Fasanella, the Rev. Howard Finster and Henry Darger.

Hirshfield, a slipper manufacturer who took up painting on his retirement in 1937, was even given a one-man show early on at the Museum of Modern Art. He loved to paint women, but of the two canvases shown here, "The Artist and His Model" (1945) better captures his yearning for artistic recognition.

In it he depicts himself, mustached and with wiglike hair, in a blue smock holding brushes and a palette. He regards admiringly a nude model with long hair who, equipped with Hirshfield's characteristic feet facing in one direction, stands stiffly on a pedestal, holding a gilded ceremonial staff in her right hand, a gold towel in the other. She's very much his creature, whose rendition, charmingly awkward as it is, confers on him the artist status he longs for.

But there are others whose work has been relatively unexposed, like the diffident but talented endeavors of Ray Materson, who, while in a Connecticut jail for armed robbery during the early 1990's, made tiny, poignant embroideries dealing with prison life and family nostalgia, using the thread from unraveled socks.

Among these miniatures, which include portraits of Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams from a baseball pantheon done by Mr. Materson, is "Self-Portrait: The Fenway Mural" (1995), a likeness of his

rehabilitated self, his head and shoulders set against a mural of Boston's Fenway Park that he had painted on a prison wall. Although he looks rather doleful, his life has been reclaimed, partly through his art.

Fantasy figures, personas that never existed but were created out of yearning, have prompted a number of portraits besides the Morton Bartlett dolls mentioned above. By now fairly well known is the large group of Possum Trot figures made by Calvin and Ruby Black in the 1950's and 60's, which adorned the rock shop they owned in the Mojave Desert near Yermo, Calif.

The 80-odd figures - mostly female - that sang and danced for visitors in the "Fantasy Doll Show" set up by the childless couple were based on celebrities or friends. All were carved of redwood by Calvin - who often referred to the dolls as his children - and dressed by Ruby.

A fetching example here is the fresh-faced "Lilly," who stands about three feet high, gaily garbed in a blue satin dress adorned with a pointed lace collar. On her blond-wigged head she wears a kerchief-like bonnet. But she seems a little lost without her siblings.

Some of the self-portraits here are extended and intensified by their settings, like the exuberant "Roseland" (1977) by Malcah Zeldis. A would-be dancer who felt "too insecure to do a fox trot," Ms. Zeldis fulfills her dream in this action-packed painting of dancers at the legendary Roseland Ballroom in New York City.

Elegantly gowned and handsomely partnered - both she and he loom larger than the groovy couples around them - she takes the center of the floor in the glow of a spotlight, perhaps ready to pull off a prize-winning tango. It's a lovely painting, enlivening the vision of stardom with the panache and color that such a fantasy deserves.

The fun of looking at these portraits, as opposed to more academic, rehearsed examples, is their lively let-it-all-hang-out-ness with no need to flatter or please. Along the way, they tell us a lot about ourselves.