

# ART LIES



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Theatre as Metaphor

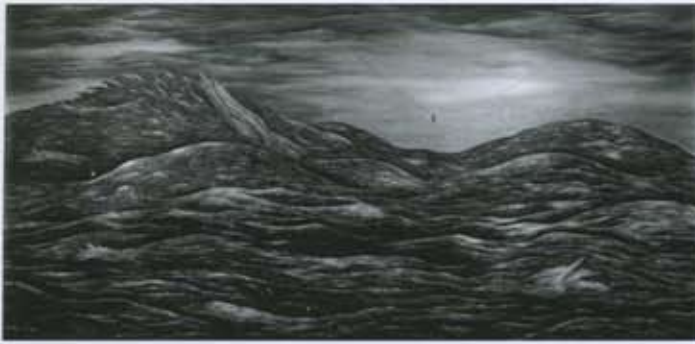


Theatre as Metaphor

Aram Moshayedi

Liam Gillick

Shannon Jackson



L. Robyn O'Neil, *These final hours embrace at last; this is our ending, this is our past*, 2007; graphite on paper; 83 x 166<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches; courtesy the artist and Dunn and Brown Contemporary, Dallas

R. Amy Cutler, *Traction*, 2002; casein and Flashe on wood panel; 32 x 60 inches; collection of Francie Bishop Good and David Horvitz; courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks & Projects, New York

## NEW YORK

### Dargerism: Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger American Folk Art Museum

The treasure trove left by Chicago outsider artist Henry Darger, discovered upon his death in 1973, included some 300 watercolor-and-collage paintings illustrating his 15,000-page *Story of the Vivian Girls*. It's one of the most fascinating creative legacies of the twentieth century, and perhaps the most valuable collection at the American Folk Art Museum. The first high-profile appearance of these works at the museum in the late 1990s instantly captivated the public imagination, influencing writers, pop musicians and, as AFAM argues with *Dargerism*, contemporary artists.

It's a tricky proposition to implicate an outsider artist in the broader dialogue of art history, especially one who has been "on the scene" for only a short time. An institution risks appearing opportunistic or arbitrary in drawing parallels between outsider and established artists. AFAM avoided this trap by selecting artists who articulate up front some kinship with Darger, be it inspirational or formal. By hanging Darger's work within the mix, both his subject matter and formal strategies are brought to the fore in contrast to the work of others. In a way, by showing the affinity contemporary artists have with Darger, the reclusive artist himself is brought into the art-world fold and evaluated on its terms—a boon for all involved in this thoughtful, deferential and at moments surprising exhibition.

The New York-based Amy Cutler traces her connection with Darger back to that first AFAM exhibition. She even paid direct homage in her painting *Out in the Meadow*, lifting the image of girls rolled up in an oriental carpet right out of Darger's scrolls. Cutler and Darger certainly share an impulse toward "action" painting, depicting girls engaged in intense activity: in Darger's case, it is child warfare or frenzied flight; in Cutler's,

symbolic drudgery. Her dour girls labor tirelessly, but it's mostly thistle gathering. There's a complicated pointlessness to every task, for instance, dragging a house by tethered braids of hair through a snowstorm in the painting *Traction*. These detailed scenes are so finely rendered in watercolor that the Sisyphean narrative aspects start to gel with the apparent toil of the artist herself, gaining a poignancy that seems to comment on the ultimate evanescence of any human pursuit. Likewise, Darger's waifs—endlessly hounded by marauding forces across hundreds of feet of brown paper—are rendered heroic by the simple virtue of their stamina. We root intensely for these little girls, whether naked or in pinafores, without fully grasping their dilemma or desiring to know the outcome.

This quality of obsessive work—embodying notions of transcendence or salvation—is also shared by Houston artists Robyn O'Neil and Trenton Doyle Hancock. O'Neil notes being first exposed to Darger in the late nineties by way of an exhibition catalogue, and sees similarities in the ways their mutual Midwestern Catholic backgrounds inform the look of their work. O'Neil's sweeping, fastidiously drawn scenes have an epic quality in their scope and massive accrual of tiny graphite marks on paper. Often depicting hapless groups of men in wilderness settings, these scenes are typically viewed from above, a particularly harsh, even moralistic vantage point.

Hancock is just as epic—if earthier in tone—and he credits Darger with bringing storytelling back to artmaking. His richly layered "mound" mythology oozes color, detail and lore in a chaotic disorder that would earn a psychiatric diagnosis if exhibited by an "outsider" artist. However, *Souls*, a graffiti mural using the word "soul" and framed drawings of girls taken



L. Anthony Goicolea, *Ash Wednesday*, 2001; color photograph: 40 x 80 inches; collection of Stéphane Janssen, Arizona; courtesy Postmasters Gallery, New York

R. Justine Kurland, *The Orchard*, 1998; color photograph: 30 x 40 inches; collection of Brae Art; photo courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

from portrait photographs—the site-specific installation Hancock created for *Dargerism*—is overdetermined and too neat, an indication that personal mythologies are difficult to pass from one artist to another.

Yun-fei Ji, a Chinese artist based in Brooklyn, also shares a passion for narrative and cites the appearance of Darger in the nineties as a liberating force to explore and depict storytelling. Working with mineral pigments on rice and mulberry papers, Ji's scroll-like friezes illustrate wars, natural disasters and characters in everyday activities. Like Darger, these "records" capture both the horrific and the mundane, played out within a single epic universe. Both artists' use of the narrative frieze to merge multiple scenes, characters, temporalities and formal techniques is a mainstay of art history, and most readily calls to my mind Gauguin's masterwork *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Of all the artists in *Dargerism*, the presence of Ji's work argues most successfully for the discussion of Darger in art-historical terms.

Ironically, two London-based artists in the exhibition, Turner Prize-winning ceramist Grayson Perry and painter Paula Rego, trace their first encounters with Darger's work to the late seventies show *The Outsiders* at the Hayward Gallery, beating their American counterparts to the punch by nearly two decades. These two appear to be more informed by Darger's use of color, composition and other intrinsically "folk" qualities rather than the overarching tale of stolen innocence and abandonment that was so effectively packaged in Darger's later, blockbuster launch into public consciousness. Stateside, the plight of little girls under mortal attack (with undertones of sexual ambiguity and exploitation) didn't find a resonant

decade until the nineties, with poster child JonBenét Ramsey.

Three younger American artists, Justin Lieberman, Anthony Goicolea and Justine Kurland, tap into this zeitgeist, though with differing motives and results. Lieberman and Goicolea (both teenagers when Darger and Ramsey hit magazine covers) take the Darger narrative at face value: Lieberman in salacious rip-offs that Photoshop vintage "kiddy porn" and child model headshots onto Darger's own landscapes, and Goicolea with digitally manipulated photo re-creations of Dargeresque scenes, replacing the girls with his own morphed image. (Also included are Goicolea's accomplished ink-and-acrylic-on-Mylar works from 2004–05; these hauntingly beautiful, less-literal references to Darger are an unexpected surprise from the young artist.) Kurland, nearly thirty when Darger appeared full-blown on the art scene, depicts a more integrated view of adolescence, combining its imagination, innocence, acting out and boredom in lush photographs of kids lolling about in idyllic landscapes.

Lastly, by including comics, children's book illustrations, commercial advertising and other ephemera discovered among Darger's possessions, *Dargerism* insightfully reinforces a truism that links all producers of visual culture: whether "sane" or out of our minds, inside or outside the establishment, we are all, always, watching each other.

*John Ewing is a freelance writer and editor based in New York.*