

Urgent Visions of Inner, Outer and Imaginary Worlds

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Every time an artist embarks upon the production of a new drawing, painting, sculpture or other work, he or she also inescapably sets out to create the world anew—or, more precisely, to conjure up a new, self-contained world, one that emerges on a sheet of paper or canvas or out of the materials from which its maker fashions its tangible, visible form. For even though every work of art, as an actual or potential product of the human imagination, exists here in the “real” world—the perceived, observable, physical world—every work of art may also be seen as embodying a world unto itself.

The French modern artist Jean Dubuffet, a pioneering explorer in the 1940s of works by self-taught art-makers who found themselves on the margins of mainstream culture and society, instinctively grasped this essential aspect of the act of artistic creation. Moreover, Dubuffet understood that, when it comes to recognizing the kinds of works he collectively dubbed “*art brut*” (literally, “raw art”), made by inventive, outside-the-mainstream autodidacts, one of their defining characteristics is that they resemble no familiar, traditional art genres. Instead, each such creation—and the entire body of work of the maker of any such piece—may be seen as a unique genre in its own right.

The singular nature of such works, which are often described as “visionary” to call attention to their makers’ unique sensibilities, is the very subject of *Unreal Realms*, an exhibition showcasing the art of Henry Darger, Adolf Wölfli, Achilles Gildo Rizzoli, Charles A. A. Dellschau and Ken Grimes. (Of these artists, only Grimes is alive and working today.) The exhibition’s title alludes to *In the Realms of the Unreal*, the multi-volume, typewritten manuscript the reclusive Darger produced, along with, subsequently, a body of related illustrations, over several decades in a humble, boarding-house room in Chicago, unbeknownst to anyone.

The complete oeuvre of each of these artists is remarkably original and genuinely visionary, and may be seen as a narrative of the alternative reality each one represents. To encounter even a single image by any one of these artists, all of whom were primarily picture-makers, is to enter into the distinctive, imaginary world to which each gave lasting, visible form. The artistry and creative achievement of each of these artists lie as much in the artworks he produced as they do in his respective process of conjuring them up.

HENRY DARGER

Born in Chicago, Henry Darger (1892-1973) was four when his mother died. He was brought up by his father until 1900, when, ill and impoverished, the old man was sent to a mission home. Young Henry was then sent to a church-operated home for boys and, later, to what was known as the Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Lincoln. Eventually, after several attempted

escapes, Darger fled the asylum at the age of 16 and headed back to Chicago. There, he found custodial work at a hospital run by the Roman Catholic Church, which allowed him to eke out a living. A devout Catholic who attended Mass several times a day, he moved into a boarding house on Chicago's North Side in 1930.

It was there, while keeping weather journals and personal diaries, that he created a massive work of visual and literary art. The full title of his 15,000-typewritten-page narrative is *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. In it, he tells a good-versus-evil tale of the Vivian Girls, princesses of the honorably Christian land of Abbieannia, who take part in a revolt against the enslavement of children by the Glandelinians. In the story, weapon-toting children combat their foes, who kill and mercilessly torture them. Such episodes contrast dramatically with the story's more pleasant scenes of happy children romping through flower-filled landscapes, sometimes accompanied by fantasy winged creatures with horns, known as "Blengigomeneans" (or "Blengins," for short), which sometimes appear in human form.

Darger's great work was discovered after he died. Since that time, critics, art historians and average viewers have all speculated about how his complex story and its accompanying illustrations, which make use of drawing and watercolor, tracings from magazine photos and children's coloring-book images, and the enlarging and reducing in size of borrowed photographs, may reflect certain aspects of the artist's life. (These images range in size from small portraits to double-sided works up to nine feet in width.)

Examining these pictures, observers may wonder exactly what Darger's fascination might have been with little girls, and why he depicted them with male genitals. For some, a temptation to psychoanalyze Darger through his art might be hard to resist. At the same time, though, to do so could make a more detached, formalist appreciation of his work hard to foster and put more emphasis on the details of the artist's biography than on his art's inherent truths (that is, than on the internal, organic wholeness of Darger's monumental oeuvre and on what it has to say in its own way and through its own form).

ADOLF WÖFLI

The Swiss self-taught artist Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930) is one of the emblematic, towering figures in *art brut* and outsider art's canon. A poor farmhand who grew up in the environs of Bern, Switzerland's capital, young Adolf, along with his mother and siblings, was abandoned by his alcoholic, stone-cutter father when the boy was around six years old, leaving his mother to scrape by as a washerwoman. Before Adolf turned ~~ten~~10, government authorities sent him to labor on a farm in exchange for food and lodging; his mother was sent to a different farm and soon died. Adolf was treated harshly, and, for a youth, the work was hard.

Later, in his mid-twenties, Wölfli was arrested for the attempted sexual molestation of two young girls and was sent to prison for two years. Eleven years later, he was arrested again for attempting to molest another girl, but this time was sent to the Waldau Psychiatric Clinic on the

outskirts of Bern to be psychologically evaluated. Diagnosed as schizophrenic, he became a resident-patient at this psychiatric institution and remained there for three decades until his death.

At the clinic, in 1899, Wölfli began making intricately patterned, plain-pencil drawings on newsprint containing empty, six-line musical staves. He signed them “Adolf Wölfli, Composer.” By 1907, he had begun using colored pencils to draw his elaborate compositions, which combined regularly repeating patterns, abstract images of birds, and depictions of buildings or places with which the artist was familiar. These color drawings also featured six-line staves on which Wölfli had written musical notes, although his notation system was one of his own devising. (A staff in Western written music has five lines. It appears impossible to accurately decipher key signatures, melodies or rhythm patterns in Wölfli’s notation.)

During this period, the psychiatrist Walter Morgenthaler (1882-1965) arrived at the Waldau hospital, where he took keen interest in Wölfli’s art-making. His observations culminated in his writing of a book, *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler* (*A Mental Patient as Artist*, now available as *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*, University of Nebraska Press, 1992), a study of the self-taught draughtsman’s evolution as an art-maker. In this book, which was first published in 1921, Morgenthaler recognized that genuine artistic talent and, significantly, vision—referring to an artist’s creative intentions and to the decisions he or she makes in the process of creating works of art—could and did reside in someone like Wölfli, despite his mental illness.

In time, in addition to making several hundred separate drawing sheets, which became known as his “*Brotkunst*,” or “bread art,” Wölfli created a masterwork consisting of 45 large-format, handmade, text-and-image-filled books. He produced more than a dozen notebooks and some painted furniture. Throughout his body of grand oeuvre, Wölfli’s creative power, mythologized by the artist himself, is as much a central theme of his art as any of the recognizable subjects to which it refers.

CHARLES AUGUST ALBERT DELLSCHAU

Charles A.A. Dellschau (1830-1923) was born in Prussia and probably arrived in the United States around 1849 or 1850; a decade later, in 1860, he applied for U.S. citizenship from his home near Houston, where he worked as a butcher. Details of his early years in his adopted country are sketchy, but it is possible that he might have spent part or all of the decade of the 1850s in California. By the time the U.S. Civil War began, Dellschau had married a widow with a daughter; later, he and his wife had children of their own. In 1877, his wife and young son died, prompting Dellschau to move to Houston, where he went to work for the Stelzig Saddlery Company, the family-owned business of his stepdaughter’s husband.

It is assumed that, when Dellschau was in his late sixties, after retiring from his job, he began filling what would turn out to be about a dozen hand-stitched books with pictures of imaginary flying machines, which he rendered using watercolor, collage and other materials. Altogether, the books contain roughly 2,000 colorful, pattern-decorated pages, each of which is a double-sided picture, in which newspaper clippings often appear as collage elements.

No one knows exactly what became of Dellschau's artwork after his death, but in the late 1960s a Texas-based used-furniture dealer bought them from a junk dealer and then stashed them away in his warehouse. Shortly thereafter, in 1969, Mary Jane Victor, an art history student, stumbled upon the illustrated books when she was rummaging through that cluttered repository. She reported her find to Dominique de Menil, then the art director at Rice University in Houston and one of the city's wealthiest arts patrons, who purchased four of the books and exhibited them at the school.

Dellschau's books recall the activities of the so-called Sonora Aero Club, an association of aviation enthusiasts in California who gathered to discuss flying machines during the Gold Rush era of the mid-1800s. (The Wright Brothers did not make their historic first flights in North Carolina until 1903.) Whether or not Dellschau's association of aviation aficionados ever really existed remains a matter of speculation, but Pete Navarro, a graphic artist who was interested in unidentified flying objects and saw the Rice University exhibition, went on to acquire the artist's remaining books and conduct his own extensive research about the drawings they contained and their creator's life story. According to Navarro, Dellschau used coded language embedded within his drawings to tell the story of the Sonoro Aero Club's activities and accomplishments. Apparently the group's goal was to create the first flying machines using a secret gas that could defy gravity and power an aircraft's motor and other mechanical parts.

Dellschau's quizzical art reflects the kind of unfettered, unflappable, audacious positing of the seemingly impossible ("Think big!") that is a hallmark of the accomplishments of so many American inventors and creative types. That the veracity and particulars of the real or imaginary aviation club that is an integral part of his work's subject matter should remain shrouded in mystery only reinforces the visionary character of the thinking from which it emerged and of Dellschau's skillfully executed drawings.

ACHILLES GILDO RIZZOLI

In contrast to Dellschau's, the artistic imaginings of Achilles Gildo Rizzoli (1896-1981) were fantasy structures anchored firmly in solid ground. Born in Marin County, in northern California, Rizzoli was the youngest of five children, whose father committed suicide in 1915. Achilles, who never married, was devoted to his mother and lived with her until her death in 1937. Although he received little formal education, during his late teen years he attended a polytechnical school and later became a member of the San Francisco Architecture Club. In San Francisco, he worked for almost four decades as an architectural draftsman.

Away from his day job, Rizzoli created a distinctive group of drawings of grand, imaginary, Beaux-Arts-style buildings that were, in effect, symbolic architectural portraits of his friends and family members, including several of his beloved mother. (He dubbed those fantasy structures his "Kathredals.") Rizzoli produced these drawings in colored ink on high-quality rag paper between 1935 and 1944. Elegant, elaborate and exquisitely rendered, these works are among the most unusual creations anywhere in the annals of *art brut* and outsider art.

Rizzoli was about 19 years old when the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, a world's fair, took place in San Francisco in 1915. With a floodlit, sparkling Tower of Jewels and pavilions

boasting endless colonnades, domes, monumental gates and majestic archways, the fair's architecture was a riot of spectacular, neoclassical gestures. Later, in developing his own fantasy-architectural drawings, Rizzoli conceived his own extravagant exposition or "expeau," which he referred to as "Yield to Total Elation" and abbreviated within his artworks as "Y.T.T.E." Images of the structures Rizzoli imagined for his own Y.T.T.E. exposition constitute another portion of his oeuvre. Like all of the other artists cited here, Rizzoli was a visionary whose art's sources lay deep in his memory and in that unknowable region of the psyche where yearning, aspiration and an expressive impulse reside—and, ultimately, compel an untrained artist to give his musings, no matter how unlikely or peculiar they might seem, some kind of tangible, visible form.

KEN GRIMES

The contemporary artist Ken Grimes looks out—way out, scientifically, into the far reaches of outer space—before tapping into his inner sense of logic, narrative and truth, and then reaching out again to the world with paintings that bear witness to his understanding of extraterrestrial intelligence and dubious occurrences in the cosmos. Are the U.S. government's national-security and defense agencies holding onto valuable data about alien life forms and, if they are, could or would they ever make such information public? Those questions point to some of the main thematic concerns of Grimes's art.

Grimes, who was born in 1947, is intrigued by the possibility of life existing on other planets and by the notions that aliens might have had some effect on how Earth's human inhabitants have thought and behaved, and that such influence may still be pervasive today. With simply rendered images in black-and-white acrylic paint on Masonite boards, Grimes depicts the objects of his fascination: satellite dishes, space probes, UFOs and other spacecraft, and assorted texts referring to electromagnetic transmissions from outer space that just might suggest that other forms of life exist elsewhere in the cosmos.

In effect, he uses his art as a kind of propaganda tool to highlight his concerns and, in a way, to help pry out and shed light on the truth he is seeking. His vision is one that makes willing, believing room for what, for many, may be unfathomable; in turn, his artistic expression of his doubting-inquisitive, probing and provocative point of view has become a visionary statement in its own right.

Darger, Wölfli, Dellschau, Rizzoli, Grimes—the "unreal realms" these most original creators conjured up in their art remain compelling and intriguing today and continue to attract appreciative admirers with each new exhibition, book or magazine article that calls attention to their innovative uses of art-making materials and techniques; their unusual subject matter and their often obsessive preoccupations with it; and their images of inner, outer and imaginary worlds (sometimes all at once, conjoined), which they project with passion and an unmistakable sense of urgency. As *Unreal Realms* amply demonstrates, even as these unconventional and perhaps unlikely artists gave enduring, visible form through their art to the most extraordinary musings, they also used their talents as all great conjurers do. For through their art, they made the imaginary *real*.

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