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## Walks to the Paradise Garden: A Lowdown Southern Odyssey, ed. Phillip March Jones

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**JTF (just the facts):** Published in 2019 by Institute 193 ([here \(https://www.institute193.org/publications-jonathan-williams/\)](https://www.institute193.org/publications-jonathan-williams/)) to coincide with the exhibition *Way Out There: The Art of Southern Backroads* at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta (March 2-May 19, 2019). Hardcover, 352 pages, with 100 color and 80 black-and-white photographic reproductions. Organized as a collection of writings by Jonathan Williams with photographs by Roger Manley and Guy Mendes. (Cover and spread shots below.)

Comments/Context: Jonathan Williams (1929-2008) was one of the wild cards of American arts and letters. Poet, publisher, photographer, folklorist, gadfly, he devoted his sizable energies and learning as an adult to seeking out and championing the culturally marginalized.

Williams wrote this manuscript in the early 1990s, an account of journeys made in the 1980s with friends Roger Manley and Guy Mendes, as they rode around the backroads of the Southeastern United States (except for Florida where Williams refused to go) in search of native oddballs and visionaries.

This was an era before Outsider Art Fairs became regular events and self-taught artists were esteemed by museum curators and collectors. We are therefore given early and privileged access to numerous figures (Howard Finster, Martha Nelson, Thornton Dial, Henry Speller, Harold Garrison, Annie Hooper, Edgar Tolson, James Harold Jennings, Vollis Simpson, Sister Gertrude Morgan) prior to their academic and monetary validation. In his Editor's Note, Phillip March Jones, who has worked to preserve the tangy flavor of Williams' vinegary prose while correcting a few errors, writes that this book offers "one last look at the artists and place-makers of the Southern United States before the arrival of a new and interconnected world."

Although in some ways an art historical document of the period, with time-stamped references to the 1991 Iraq War, among other Bush-era asides, it is also a self-portrait. Williams was as eccentric as anyone celebrated in these pages. Calling himself a spokesman for "those who are defenseless and open to the hard, destructive nature of the venal American juggernaut," he wanted here to bring attention to people who had overcome poverty, racism, social disdain, sexual ostracization, religious belittlement, or mental illness to make something of themselves. He was not a political reformer, however, and Jones has made sure to keep the relaxed, cranky, and diversionary tone of a gay polymath taking a four-wheeled pleasure cruise with a couple of pals.

Each of the approximately 75 artists is allotted from 1 to 14 pages, with either their work or their person illustrated with photographs by Manley or Mendez. We get extensive visits with Martha Nelson, whose soft-sculpted "doll babies" were the basis for the Cabbage Patch franchise. Williams had been an admirer of the Kentucky artist since the early '70s and commissioned her to make "Jeremiah Baby," complete with adoption papers, in 1977. Annie Hooper, a visionary dollmaker from NC, is also a central figure in the book. Williams graciously turns over the floor to Manley, an American Folk Art scholar, who has written extensively on Hooper's biblical creations. His essay is the closest to a traditional art historical analysis to be found here.

The photographs are documentary in character with both Manley and Mendez aiming to capture the artists and their art as well as idiosyncrasies of dress and distinctive parts of the country where they lived. In Manley's portrait of Churchill Winston Hill from 1987, for instance, the car customizer is posed in front of his masterpiece: a 1962 Chevrolet "Corvaire 95" van he transformed into a shrine to Elvis Presley. The sides are covered with 65 paintings, done by hand, that depict the Life and Times of the King. There's a large portrait of Graceland and another of his Tupelo, Mississippi childhood home. Smaller pictures on the sides of the black vehicle reproduce album

covers of Elvis' many gold records. (Push a series of gold buttons below these images and you could hear the songs—the van was a rolling jukebox.) Wearing a light blue shirt and bright blue pants, holding his hat, shod in work boots, Hill stands shyly with his handiwork, parked in a gravel driveway against the pale wavy outlines of the mountains that ring Elizabethton, TN.

The format does not allow for detailed biographic information; many of the artists, such as the Lexington, KY, drag queen Bradley Harrison Picklesimer or J.T. "Jake" McCord of Thomson, GA, who did plywood paintings in his yard, are given only a couple of pages. That's often enough to make you want to know more about them. In other cases, such as Minnie Links Black and her Senior Citizens All Gourds Band (a small orchestra in which the players perform on gourds she has grown in her patch), what we have to read seems plenty to me.

A journey begun without a map or a clear destination, the book stops along the way for places of good eating (Williams devotes a chapter to Ridgewood Barbecue in Bluff City, TN) and breaks up the wayward narrative with examples of yard or store signs seen or photographed along the road: "Television is a Tunnel of Lightning from Hell"; "Spring Lizards Polish Sausage"; "Meat Fireworks Watermelons"; "Snuff Slaughter Videogames." There are lots of corny jokes, several of them about penises. (Jones warns that for "those without a sense of humor—this book might not be for you!")

The artists sometimes seems to be vehicles for Williams to digress on what he views as the sorry, corrupt state of the nation. Before paying his respects to the work of Jolly Joshua Samuels, an African-American artist who brightened his property with discarded cans, Williams writes: "Let's first devote a few words to Southeast South Carolina. If, by some weird chance, you ever are unfortunate enough to venture off I-95, you will see a horrid part of the world. Nearly all the old motels and commercial buildings have been torched for insurance money. Even Eastern Kentucky doesn't look so wretched."

Williams, Mendez, and Manley are appreciators of anyone willing to go his or her own way, such as "Cowboy Steve" Taylor (1922-1993), a black DJ who broadcast country music over a tiny station in Lexington, KY; or Edwin H. Paget, a retired professor of public speaking whose calling card alleges that he is "History's Most Significant Man." (Among his many proposed inventions was a Dining Room Table for Dieters that begins to rise as soon as you sit down.) Williams writes in a preamble that apart from its more vaunted reasons for being, "the United States of America is also about irresistible joy, wacko diversity, and 'the flight of the alone to be alone.'"

Williams does not pretend to have discovered these artists and in his text never fails to credit his friends for leading him to an encounter. The clues he follows aren't always visual, as with the Virginia potter Georgia Blizzard: "Anyone with half an ear and the top half of an imagination has to know already knows that a person named Georgia Blizzard has to be somebody very special."

Not everyone here is an Outsider Artist either. One of the highlights is a 1970 portrait by Mendez of Eugene Meatyard, standing in the doorway of a barn and waving a straw hat. The scene is described by Williams as a "farewell performance, produced by the one and only human being on the Earth, her name being the ineffable Lucybelle Crater." Collectors may want to read the pages on William Arnett of Buckhead in Atlanta, whose sponsorship of self-taught African-American artists—in his writings and with his wallet—helped to legitimize them with museums. Thirty examples of paintings, sculptures, drawings and quilts from his Souls Grown Deep Foundation were exhibited last year as part of a gift to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

A final chapter by Gregory Harrison and Katherine Jentleson, curators at the High Museum, draws parallels between self-taught artists and certain photographers in the American grain. Among the fascinating historical nuggets in the essay is the fact that William Edmundson, a tombstone carver and sculptor in the 1930s, came to the attention of the Museum of Modern Art only after seeing Louise Dahl-Wolfe's photographs of his work. The 12 Edmundson sculptures exhibited at the museum in 1937 were MoMA's "first solo exhibition for an African-American artist and the first for a self-taught artist." A 1968 photo essay by Gregg N. Blasdel in *Art in America* titled "The Grass-Roots Artist" documented more than a dozen art environments, which led to the landmark exhibition *Naives and Visionaries* at the Walker Art Center in 1974. The curators point out that an affinity for the vernacular, for the tradition of snapshots, postcards, signposts, and folk art sculpture can be found in work by several photographers, not only Walker Evans but also Edward Weston and Consuelo Kanaga as well.


Well-schooled proponents of Outsider Art, often with the best intentions, can't help but condescend when extolling the self-taught as geniuses, as though having a talent undisciplined by teachers were automatically a virtue rather than a handicap. By some miracle, Williams, who dropped out of Princeton and attended the Institute of Design in Chicago and Black Mountain College, sidesteps this trap, maybe because the momentum of his unbridled enthusiasms carried him over these dangers. A man who seemed always happy to go his own way himself, he was an American treasure, as is Institute 193, which should be thanked for keeping his memory and sensibility alive.

**Collector's POV:** Neither Roger Manley nor Guy Mendes appears to have consistent gallery representation at this time. As a result, interested collectors should likely follow up directly with the publisher (linked in the sidebar).

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