



BY SUSAN MITCHELL CRAWLEY

Opening Night at the Madison Morgan Cultural Center.

Georgia and Beyond: Southern

Georgia and Beyond: Southern Self-Taught Art, Past and Present takes a look back at 20th-century Southern self-taught (or vernacular) art, with a special focus on Georgia, and a look at what lies ahead in the 21st century. The exhibition was curated by Susan Mitchell Crawley for the Madison Morgan Cultural Center in Madison, Ga., which will be familiar to attendees of the 2012 Folk Art Society of America Conference in Atlanta. Conference participants who visited Madison toured the superb turn-of-the-century Richardson Romanesque schoolhouse that houses the Cultural Center. Several Folk Art Society members loaned pieces from their collections for the exhibition and graced the January 17 opening

Two galleries were dedicated to artists who grew up in a South that was predominantly rural. Some were born or later worked in urban areas, but, with few exceptions, they emerged from a slower-paced environment in which most people's lives were focused on the land. All the artists in Gallery 2 were born or worked in Georgia, while the artists in Gallery 3 lived and worked elsewhere in the South.

Gallery 1 was dedicated to artists who represent the future of self-taught art in a South that now is both more urban and more technologically connected.

Until the middle of the 20th century, most Southerners lived off the land. They knew their locales intimately, often from birth, and their artwork often shows a

Garden in Pennville and St. E. O. M.'s *Pasaquan* near Buena Vista.

In Georgia, as in the rest of the South, religion permeates everyday life, particularly in rural communities. As varied as it is pervasive, religious expression is the force behind much vernacular art and can be seen in aspects as diverse as biblical subject matter and the incorporation of text into visual compositions.

All over the world, the intersections of different cultural traditions are places of aesthetic ferment, producing cultural artifacts of great originality. The South is no exception. For generations, the descendants of African slaves and European settlers have lived in close proximity here, their cultures

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with their presence. To the delight of the crowd, artists J.J. Cromer and John Culver attended the opening and discussed their work.

A body of visual art of unprecedented richness and variety arose in the American South during the 20th century. Created by artists without formal art training and born out of the region's agrarian character, its racial tensions, and its religious fervor, self-taught art belies H. L. Mencken's 1920 characterization of the South as "The Sahara of the Bozart."



marked attachment to place. In addition to many depictions of beloved home ground, Georgia produced two of the most fully realized and highly developed art environments in the United States: the Revered Howard Finster's *Paradise*

dramatically changing and influencing each other to a degree we have only recently begun to fully appreciate.

Most Southern self-taught artists were people of limited means. Often lacking professional artists' supplies, they created their art works using available materials—house paint, plywood, roofing tin, local stone, scrap metal, even the dirt under their feet—and skills they had acquired working on farms or in factories.

As the agrarian South dwindles and virtually everyone becomes electronically connected,



Self-Taught Art, Past and Present

the conditions that gave birth to 20th-century self-taught art are rapidly vanishing. In particular, the relative

Some are highly educated—although not in visual art—and some have traveled widely. Most use professional

In addition to a common interest in the formal problems found in the tension between large-scale compositions and

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isolation from the art world that provided both temporal and physical space within which self-taught artists developed their unique styles have all but disappeared.

People with or without formal training will continue to make art, as they always have. Who, then, makes up the next wave of unschooled artists?

artists' materials rather than reusing found materials. But one persistent characteristic they share with their predecessors is the strong sense of place—even if that place is sometimes imagined. Another is a preoccupation with the spiritual—although that spirituality may no longer be that of a strictly orthodox Christianity.

intricate detail, what links them to each other and the other artists in the exhibition is a determination to follow their own aesthetic paths, without regard to any dialogue with art history. Their work, very different but no less exciting, represents the future of self-taught art. Artists J. J. Cromer and George Lowe are prime examples.

The Story Was Never Investigated, 2011, by J.J. Cromer, 20 x 30 inches, courtesy Grey Carter.

Bouncing Out the Empty, 2007, by J.J. Cromer, 30 x 22 inches, courtesy Grey Carter.





John Hancock by Howard Finster. Copyright Thomas Scanlin Collection.

The boundaries of these and other categories are porous, containing more than one artist whose work crosses them. The work of artists such as

The exhibition, drawn almost entirely from area collections, included work by Leroy Almon Jr., Linda Anderson, George Andrews, Eddie Arning, Alan

Gertrude Morgan, J. B. Murry, Mattie Lou O'Kelley, Melissa Polhamus, Roger Rice, Nellie Mae Rowe, Lorenzo Scott, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, Bill Traylor, Robert

One persistent characteristic [the new self-taught artists] share with their predecessors is the strong sense of place—even if that place is sometimes imagined.

Thornton Dial and Lonnie Holley, for example, is highly conceptual, with little besides the artists' schooling and social background—biography, in other words, not product—to differentiate it from that of trained contemporary artists. Viewers to the exhibition were encouraged to seek out the ways all these artists exceed the boundaries of the categories in which they have been placed.

Wayne Bradley ("Haint"), David Butler, J. J. Cromer, John Culver, Brenda Davis, Thornton Dial, St. EOM (Eddie Owens Martin), Minnie Evans, William Fields, Howard Finster, Mr. Imagination (Gregory Warmack), Bessie Harvey, Lonnie Holley, Clementine Hunter, Toby Lee Ivey, Capt. William Jordan, Roland Knox, Ronald Lockett, George Lowe, Charlie Lucas, Reginald Mitchell, Sister

Lindsay Walker and Purvis Young. *Georgia and Beyond: Southern Self-Taught Art, Past and Present* was on view at the Madison Morgan Cultural Center, Madison, Ga., January 17 through April 13, 2014. ❏

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J.J. Cromer and John Culver.



Akhamz Razor by George Lowe.



Photograph by Steve Davis. Copyright George Lowe.