

VOLUME 23

The NEW ENCYCLOPEDIA *of* SOUTHERN CULTURE

CHARLES REAGAN WILSON, *general editor*



Folk Art

CAROL CROWN & CHERYL RIVERS

volume editors

Mark Hewitt and Nancy Sweezy, *The Potter's Eye: Art and Tradition in North Carolina Pottery* (2005); Charles R. Mack, *Talking with the Turners: Conversations with Southern Folk Potters* (2006); Nancy Sweezy, *Raised in Clay: The Southern Pottery Tradition* (1994).

Cromer, John James (J J)

(b. 1967)

J J Cromer grew up in Tazewell, Va., where both his parents were science teachers, a fact he credits with giving him an early interest in nature. He recalls drawing "creatures real and not" as well as writing stories from an early age. However, he had no intention of becoming an artist. Cromer earned his B.A. in history at the University of Wyoming in 1990, an M.A. in English at the University of Western Kentucky in 1994, and a Master's of Library and Information Science at the University of Southern Mississippi in 1996. He met his future wife, Mary, a fellow librarian, on the first day of his job as a reference librarian at Clinch Valley College (now the University of Virginia's College at Wise). In 1998 they married and began living on her family farm.

Cromer picked up an old art set belonging to his wife and began making drawings while the couple watched television in the evenings. Soon he was covering reams of paper with his nightly drawings. At first the Cromers hung his work in their house, and then gave some to friends. Nonetheless, Cromer eventually had boxes full of drawings. He showed some to a gallery in Bluefield, W.Va., and to his amazement, the gallery took a group and sold them. On a

modest budget, Cromer also began collecting self-taught artists' work. It was in the course of buying a painting by Malcolm McKesson from dealer Grey Carter that Cromer first asked Carter if he would look at his work. Carter was impressed and became Cromer's exclusive dealer.

Mary Cromer practices environmental law, and J J draws all day, every day. He says he "has to do" his drawings and cannot imagine not making art as "a way to filter the world." He describes himself as "self taught," but, as many have noted, he is not unsophisticated. He appreciates contemporary art, but he claims that what he is doing is different from contemporary art making. "When I work as a reference librarian, it's my responsibility to provide answers. When I work on my drawings, I'm less interested in certainty. I sit in isolation, directing myself to ambiguity and exploration, skepticism and play." His method of working involves listening to music or books on tape that distract a certain level of his attention so his hand is free to create. He often starts with what he calls a "letter," ghostlike little people, or with the elongated, open oval he calls a cowry shell. He then multiplies this form until another "letter" appears. The process is intuitive, and the results are meticulously detailed, brightly colored, repetitive forms that are linked by rhythmic, two-dimensional patterns. His mixed-media works start with pen and ink and colored pencil and then add collage, paint, and scratching.

Cromer's work is in public collections of Intuit: The Center of Intuitive

and Outsider Art, the Taubman Museum of Art in Roanoke, Va., the University of Virginia at Wise, and the High Museum of Art.

PAMELA H. SIMPSON

Washington and Lee University

Brooke Davis Anderson et al., *Life in the South: Self-Taught Artists from the Huffman Collection*, catalog for Lindenau-Museum Altenburg (2004); Cara Zimmerman Campbell, "Visual Vocabularies of J J Cromer," *Raw Vision* (Fall 2010); Pamela H. Simpson, *The Outsider* (Spring 2007); *Our Stampedes are Compatible: A Selection of Works by J J Cromer*, brochure for Staniar Gallery, Washington and Lee University (2008).

Crowell, Harold

(b. 1952)

Harold Crowell is an untrained artist who lives and works in Morganton, N.C. His career as an artist began in 1975, after he became a resident of the Western Carolina Center (wcc) in Morganton, which serves clients with developmental disabilities. Dr. Ivor Riddle, who developed the art program at wcc, encouraged Crowell to continue with the art making he had done since childhood.

Crowell came to the attention of the art world during the 1990s, when his work was included in exhibitions like the New Orleans Museum of Art's *Passionate Visions* (1993). Since then, his paintings and drawings have been widely collected.

Although Crowell, like many untrained artists, is not aware of the precepts of contemporary art, he seems to be a painter in the tradition of 20th-century modernism. Crowell's use of

color and form are independent of the experienced visual world. His powerful abstractions depend on color and form to create a variety of visual impressions of individuals and places and to generate spatial and three-dimensional sensations of joy, pleasure, humor, or delight for the viewer. Crowell never compromises the flat surface of paper or canvas, another hallmark of modernism.

Crowell's palette is usually limited to three or four colors that enhance the "scene" he paints. He applies his colors with a range of gestures that give his works the improvisation and immediacy associated with 20th-century painting. His colors are usually thinly layered, and they frequently overlap and intermingle, creating forms that can be uneven, rough edged, and spiky as well as smooth. His shapes reference individuals, objects, and events, and his contrasting colored forms balance each other to give his paintings an energetic equilibrium. Crowell's subjects may be friends or familiars, local scenes of the mountains, or scenes observed in books or magazines. His father was a Methodist minister who had also served as a Seabee, and Crowell frequently explores biblical and nautical scenes. The artist's references are sometimes very clear to the viewer while at other times the intense colors or unusual juxtaposition of forms seem whimsical and capricious. Recently Crowell has begun to make wire figures that he fashions from a single strand, which he twists, turns, reverses, and overlaps until the figure emerges from the tangle. These fresh, spontaneous forms recall Alexander Calder's circus figures.



(top) Thornton Dial Sr., *Don't Matter How Raggly the Flag, It Sill Got to Hold Us Together*, 2003, Mixed Media, 71" x 114" x 8" (Courtesy Indianapolis Museum of Art)



(bottom) John James Cromer, *The Way We Dig Keeps Them Floating*, 2008, mixed media on two sheets of paper, 43.5" x 29.75" (Courtesy J J Cromer)