

# The Outsider

## Creative reuse

Lonnie Holley's inventive spirit to reveal itself at Intuit

## Art in motion

Rhythm, movement inspire J.J. Cromer's highly detailed works

## Photo ops

A Polaroid-filled market is one man's tribute to his Detroit neighbors











# Moved to Create

Through repetition and meticulous detail, Virginia artist J.J. Cromer finds the means for expression.

BY ROGER THOMPSON



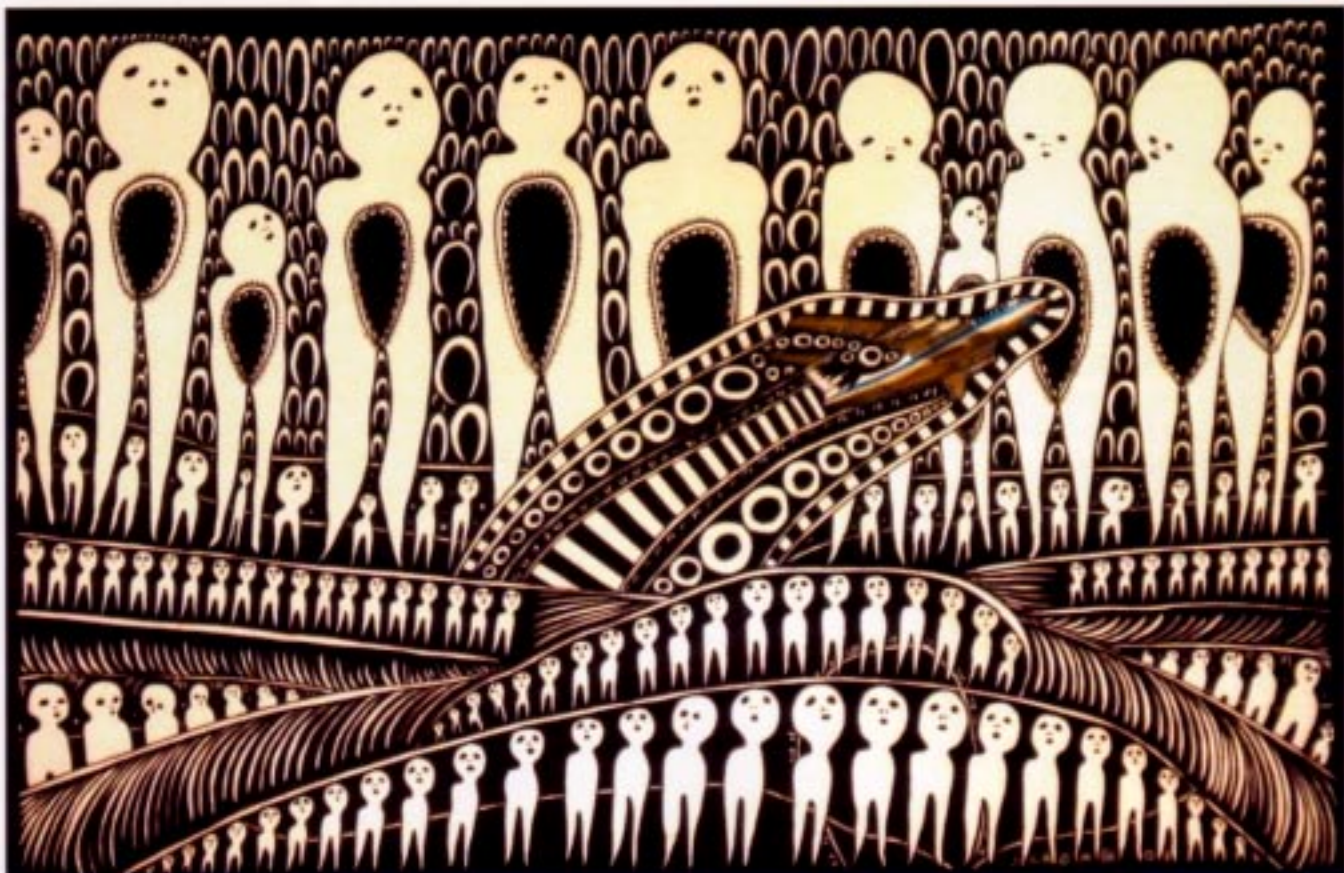
In the mountains of Appalachia, J. J. Cromer pursues his art, obsessively drawing and painting late into the night. When he works, he listens to a single song on an endless loop. Sometimes bluegrass, sometimes jazz, sometimes shortwave radio recordings from the Conet Project. The subject of the music is not important.

It is the repetition and the movement, a continual circling back of theme, sound and experience, that matter. He describes this reliance on repetition by analogy. On a childhood trip to a beach at Emerald Isle, North Carolina, he spent a long morning swimming in the ocean. When he returned to shore, he felt the rocking and swaying of the sea for the rest of the day as he sat on the beach. His process, he says, is that endless, rocking motion.









*Still for a Monument*, 2003. Mixed media, 5 3/8 x 8 1/4 in.

Cromer's roots are in the rural southeastern United States. He currently lives in Buena Vista, Virginia, a small factory town that sits on a river nearly six miles from Lexington, Virginia, the home of two giants of contemporary art, Cy Twombly and Sally Mann. The contrast between the towns could not be more stark, or more symbolic. Lexington is a wealthy town of Old South sensibilities, home to two colleges, a law school and a bevy of academics. In Lexington, Twombly and Mann are celebrities. In Buena Vista, on the other hand, they have little currency. A blue-collar town with residents who work long hours in one of several factories, Buena Vista is a place where people embrace practicality and usefulness, a good job and a loyal family. In the minds of many Buena Vista residents, culture and art are pastimes of the wealthy Lexington elite. Artists, at least artists like Twombly and Mann, do not live in Buena Vista. Artists like J. J. Cromer do.

Cromer works in a public library during the day, but at night he draws and paints in a

poor Buena Vista neighborhood. His roots in the town run deep. An early ancestor was a Confederate soldier who once found refuge in a cellar in Buena Vista as Union troops took control of the Shenandoah Valley. He swore that if his life were spared, he would name his first son after the town. He survived the conflict, and shortly afterward, Buena Vista Elswick—J.J. Cromer's grandmother's grandfather—was born.

Despite the family connection to the area, Cromer only recently settled there. He was born on November 21, 1967, in Princeton, West Virginia, though he was raised in Tazewell, Virginia, a deeply rural area in the far western mountains of the state. After spending his youth in this depressed area, he moved to Wyoming, Kentucky, Mississippi and West Virginia before finally returning home to Virginia in 1998. Since then, his drawings and paintings have attracted greater attention. He has exhibited annually at the Outsider Art Fair in New York since 2001, and his work has been shown in outsider and folk art galleries and exhibitions in Virginia,

West Virginia, North Carolina, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Vermont, as well as in Atlanta, Chicago and New York.

In the fall of 2004, his work was included in an exhibition and its catalogue, *Life in the South*, at Lindenau-Museum, in Altenburg, Germany, and he is currently represented by Grey Carter.

Though Cromer began drawing at an early age, he stopped before he was a teenager and did not pursue it again until he was in his late 20s. His family had not fully supported it. His father had been an artist who had painted signs for farms in southwest Virginia. Some owners of the farms, according to family lore, were so amazed by the hand-painted signs that they would bring them into their houses and hang them on the wall instead of placing them on the road front to advertise their homestead. The signs, however, failed to support the family, so Cromer's father left his art, and he discouraged his son from the same disappointment.





Seven in the Sauleum, 2001. Ink drawing, 9 1/2 x 6 1/2 in.



So, J. J. Cromer did not paint or draw for nearly 20 years, until one night, as his wife, Mary, sat watching television, he picked up a children's set of oil pastels and began to paint. Within a year, Mary began to show the work to friends, and a small gallery specializing in rural folk art gave him a show.

Despite growing success on the national and international scene, Cromer remains largely unknown in both Buena Vista and Lexington. The Lexington establishment has yet to recognize his talent, and, despite a reputation as a somewhat good-natured recluse in Buena Vista, his artwork remains largely unknown to his neighbors.

His early works were almost exclusively paintings, but he now experiments extensively with medium and technique. He works in paint, pen and ink, colored pencil, multimedia, and collage. He has even tried stone carving. He paints on found wood, paper, and at one point, even on hardcover book-boards discarded from the periodical room of a library. He cuts up his old paintings and pastes the pieces onto new work, and he is considering drawing on photographic paper in order to see what happens to ink when it is exposed to the chemical processes of developing photos. With no formal training in art, he finds few limits to his expression.

Cromer's paintings are characterized by intense color and an endless blending and blurring of images and shape. Often, they include elaborate designs scratched into the surface of the paint. The scratches reveal other layers of paint so that the scratched-on image shifts in color and texture as it exposes different layers below. His pen and ink drawings exemplify an obsessive quality to both his work and his work habits. Indeed, while the paintings lack tight control, the drawings exhibit an excessive attention to detail and meticulous parsing of space. The paper is most often filled with minute designs and repetitive images of faces, ghosts or undefined shapes—resembling the most detailed and dense works of outsiders like Edmund Monsiel or Raphael Lonne. It is a proliferation of imagery, and larger works

take weeks to complete. Even with the amount of time it takes to finish a single drawing, he has amassed a body of work that is impressive in its sheer volume if not also in its breadth of expression. The amount of work is testament to a compelling need to draw that leaves him little time for socializing with friends or neighbors.

Most of Cromer's pen and ink work is black and white, though recently he has used color ink. They vary in size from images on 3-by-4-inch scraps of paper to larger pieces nearly 18 by 24 inches, and in the past year he has begun to create larger-scale diptychs. For a period, he filled the entire page with black ink so that ghosts or other images were the negative space that was left un-inked. In other, more recent work, the negative space seems to dominate and the drawing is minimal. His color drawings gravitate toward a layered filling of space, such as in *Untitled 1*.

In these latter works, bondage is a dominant theme. Figures appear wrapped tight in mummy-like cocoons, or they are stretched in awkward positions by lines pulled tight by other objects or animals. In *Zoophrion 21*, for instance, a figure's arms are pulled skyward by a space capsule while fruit anchors him; in *Seven in the Sauleum*, mummified figures dominate a sheet of obsessively drawn lines.

Ghost and phantom imagery occurs frequently. Ambiguous figures often run in repetitive lines along the borders of a drawing, as in *Still for a Monument*. They sometimes radiate out from a single point, or at other times rise or fall from an assumed line running across the paper. Sometimes they are entirely independent, phantoms rising in opposition to a larger figure in the work. In some works, such as in *Lips Such as Hang Out the Flag*, small, ghostly figures constitute the body of a larger image so that, when viewed from a distance, they are not seen at all. Only when examined closely do the phantoms emerge from the image and demand to be seen. The ghost or phantom recurs with frightening regularity and obsessive

repetition, but when asked what they might mean, Cromer scoffs: "You tell me."

When he works, he says, he has no plan. Instead, he feels he is letting free an expression that is not fully within his control. He describes it as a visionary experience, where all else around him melts away and all that is left is the rhythm and the motion of the creation. This is not, however, a typical Southern religious vision experience like those of Howard Finster or J. B. Murray. Instead, Cromer sees himself as an agnostic who works not through divine revelation, but through an ongoing exploration of themes and images that are not entirely his own but nonetheless recur with disturbing force.

This repetition is seen in Cromer's personality. For example, he has one type of pants he likes to wear, so he buys large quantities of them so that he can wear the same type over and over again. He is uncomfortable in crowds, and time spent in large cities causes him to turn inward. While he enjoys music, concerts agitate him, and he will often leave early to sit alone in his car while his wife and friends stay for the show. He avoids art exhibits and museums, though he has visited the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. While he enjoys talking about the composition of his work, he is uncomfortable discussing "meaning." He shifts about, answers questions with sarcasm or self-deprecation and invariably turns it back to the questioner. You can talk about meaning, he suggests; his work is simply expression.

Ultimately, he is not, in contrast to many religious visionaries, interested in the question of meaning. He is interested in the process, because for him, the process itself is the meaning. Questioning it is tantamount to asking the sea at Emerald Isle why it moves. For Cromer, the movement itself is answer enough, and so he continues to draw. ■

*Roger Thompson is a professor of English and Fine Arts at Virginia Military Institute. He is the editor of a variety of books, and his work has been read on National Public Radio.*

*Photos courtesy of Grey Carter Objects of Art*