

Site Report

The L.V. Hull House Kosciusko, Mississippi

The following quote, written by Chris Geortzen, is copied from the Mississippi Arts Commission's *Mississippi Folk Artist and Folk Artist Directory*

(http://www.arts.state.ms.us/folklife/artist.php?dirname=hull_lv)

Vernacular Art Yardscape, Kosciusko

L. V. Hull is an original, a self-taught artist and a lively raconteur. She has a house and yard incredibly crowded with her art. Hull was born and raised in McAdams, Mississippi, but moved to Kosciusko 35 years ago. Although no longer married, and with no surviving children, she retains an enormous "family" with the children she kept for others for many years, often a dozen at a time. When she sees them today, she still sees echoes of the babies in their adult faces.

Hull began creating her art in 1975. She doesn't know why she started: "That amazed me!" But she is thankful, and says she doesn't know what she would have done without it. She's not sure how to teach it, since no one taught her. However, she is certain no one is doing anything like it, and is proud of having a corner on painted hubcaps and the dots that cover most of her works.

How does she create her work? When asked, she gestures in turn towards her head, heart, hands, and eyes. "And you meditate, too," she adds. Quite a few of her recent pieces are boards painted black, then adorned with her trademark dots surrounding sayings, some familiar and some not, such as "Face powder may get a man; baking powder will keep him." She's not sure what she will do next, but does tend to work in series, whether on her dot-covered hubcaps, or pieces of wood encrusted with collages of discarded jewelry.

Hull is frustrated that so many garbage trucks pass by her home with perfectly good raw material for her art scattered through their cargos. These days, with her mobility limited by ill health, visitors bring her much of her supplies. But not just anything will do. Once, when she was hospitalized, a couple brought her a batch of dried gourds—so far, so good—but offered her paints in hues far more subdued than the bright colors she favors. To her, those colors looked "as dead as anybody that ever died." Indeed, if she employs a mild color like forest green, it is only to set off some hot pink dots.

Hull gets many ideas from studying her visitors and analyzing their personalities. In turn, she is used to provoking a variety of responses. When she started out, "They said I was crazy," she remembers. In fact, some visitors decided that she was a "hoodoo lady." To get rid of one couple who begged her to restore their former good sleeping habits, she searched her sense of humor and solemnly told them to bury a jar with some marbles in it in a strategic location. They later returned to timidly thank her--cured, but a little afraid.

When Hull tells this story, it's not to mock the credulous, but rather to note the power of belief. While she bemoans the passing of a pervasive "old time religion," she appreciates the effectiveness of faith in its many forms—whether it's trust in a doctor, in "hoodoo," or deeply-held Christian beliefs such as her own. Her advice on making art is the same as her recipe for life: "You've got to care."

L.V. Hull died in April 2008.

INTRODUCTION

The information in this report is based on a site visit that occurred on December 9, 2009, by Fred C. Fussell as part of a consultancy conducted on behalf of the Mississippi Arts Commission and under the auspices of the American Folklore Society. The site visit was conducted for the purpose of assisting the Mississippi Arts Commission and others who have an interest in the possibility of developing plans for the preservation and interpretation of an eccentric folk art environment located in Kosciusko, Mississippi, known as the L.V. Hull House.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The artistic legacy of eccentric artist L.V. Hull is well known in her adopted hometown of Kosciusko, Mississippi, although the town apparently identifies much more often with several of its illustrious natives -- entertainer Oprah Winfrey, civil rights leader James Meredith, and blues musician Charlie Musselwhite. Kosciusko, a town of around 7200 souls, is named for *Tadeusz Kosciuszko*, a Polish General who served in the American Revolutionary War with George Washington, from whom he received a commission as officer of engineers. Kosciusko is the seat of government for Attala County, Mississippi.

The Kosciusko home of L.V. Hull is a small five-room frame cottage located at 123 Allen Street. Over a period of three decades, beginning in 1975, Mrs. Hull transformed her home into one of the most notable, and noticed, showplaces of eccentric art in the State of Mississippi. Employing many hundreds of found and collected objects, L.V. Hull filled the interior rooms, front porch, and small front yard of her little home with an amazing assemblage of objects ranging from car tires to shoes to bed frames to basketballs to you name it, many of which were painted, glued together, stacked one upon the other, lined in rows, framed, strung together, hung from various supports, and otherwise decorated or manipulated by Mrs. Hull. The variety of the materials she employed in creating her striking artistic output appears to be nearly endless. However, during the intervening months since L.V. Hull's death in 2008, the natural elements, the intrusion of wild or unmanaged vegetation and animals, and the hands of occasional trespassers have disrupted the much more orderly arrangement of the front yard as it is remembered and reported by Hull's neighbors, friends, and patrons, and which is evidenced by numerous

documentary photographs that portray the order of the yard and porch as it was maintained by Mrs. Hull during her tenure.

Within the exterior assemblage of objects and materials, which are confined primarily to the very small front yard and to the adjacent front porch of the house, dozens of shoes are placed in repetitious patterns and singly here and there. Shoes of many kinds and colors, some painted and some not, are typically mounted bottom up on poles or on stakes driven into the soil. Dot-covered or otherwise painted bottles, chairs, fans, tires, appliances, and a host of other objects are scattered all about the yard. Hundreds of strands of colorful glass and plastic beads adorn the front porch. A nearly five-foot high structure made principally from painted and stacked auto and tractor tires dominates one side of the front yard. A narrow walkway, made even narrower by encroaching, toppled, and misplaced objects, allows a tight passage from the street to the front steps and up to front doorway of the house. Once inside, the passageway narrows.

Every room inside the interior of the home is so crowded with Mrs. Hull's collections and creations that there's hardly room to walk. And walking through the rooms is barely possible without literally climbing over or edging tightly around tables, beds, sofas, and other furnishings, all of which are stacked high with Mrs. Hull's collected memorabilia and artwork. As is true for the exterior, much of the materials and objects inside the house have recently been moved around and "gone through," primarily by Mrs. Hull's relatives and authorized others who have visited the house since the time of her death. A small number of pieces of artwork created by Mrs. Hull judged to be of some special significance have been removed to an off-site location for safekeeping, and another collection of perhaps twenty-five examples of her work are kept on exhibit at a local visitor center. Yet there remains within the house an astonishing array of painted signs bearing humorous slogans ("I started with nothing and I still have most of it"), religious quotes ("It's time to sit down and try Jesus"), framed or carefully positioned collections of buttons, ceramics, toys, boxes, bottles, plates, and miscellaneous other items in plastic, ceramic, metal, Styrofoam, fabric, and glass, and scores of individual objects, all of which were collected and placed on display by Mrs. Hull inside her house. Many of the assembled objects that are displayed there were decorated by Mrs. Hull with painted dots or were otherwise re-decorated by her using paints, markers, glue, and tape.

SITE ACCESSIBILITY and STRUCTURAL CONDITION

L.V. Hull's home is located in a predominately Black neighborhood that is situated several blocks away from the Kosciusko town square. The plot of land on which the house sits is quite narrow, narrower in fact than current Kosciusko zoning laws allow for dwelling places. This means that if the house is ever destroyed or sold, it cannot be replaced by another structure intended for use as a dwelling. The narrow asphalted street where the home lies is quite narrow and is uncurbed. There are no nearby off street parking areas available for visitors and any street-side parking that occurs in front of the house or in front of the adjacent neighboring houses creates a one-lane traffic situation and resulting congestion. Currently traffic congestion in the narrow street caused by frequent sightseers and visitors to the Hull house creates an ongoing nuisance for the adjoining neighbors. The interior and front yard of the house are so crowded with Mrs. Hull's artwork and assembled collections of objects that passage through the place cannot be comfortably achieved except by one or perhaps two persons at a time. Group visits to the site would be very difficult to safely or efficiently accommodate as it is currently configured.

Structurally, the L.V. Hull house itself appears to be sound. There is no obvious evidence of roof leaks, broken or missing windows, missing siding, or other avenues for damage from rain, wind or other seasonably inclement weather. There are no obvious infestations of rodents or damaging insects such as termites or roaches (although in the semi-darkened and ultra-crowded rooms such infestations may have gone unnoticed). The overgrowth of vines, grasses, and other vegetation, especially in the front yard and on the front porch, creates a hazard to the artwork it surrounds and will ultimately create a hazard to the structure of the house itself if left untended. And, obviously, the assemblages and other works of art that are components of the out-of-doors installations are continuously exposed to the damaging effects of heat, sunlight, rain, wind, ice, burrowing and nesting animals and insects, theft, vandalism, and so on. Even though the yard is bordered by low fencing on the front and sides, there is no locked gate. The yard is easily accessible to trespassers. In fact, the front doorway of the house was recently spray-painted by vandals. There are no fire, theft, or other security systems installed or in current use at the site. There are no heating, cooling, or other climate control systems in current use at the site. No electrical or telephone services are in active use at the site.

SITE UPKEEP and MANAGEMENT

Following the death of L.V. Hull in April, 2008, the ownership of her property at 123 Allen Street fell to her sister, Q.T. Hull, who lives in Memphis, Tennessee. However, the title of ownership to the property is not free and clear. Before her death, in order to support mounting medical expenses, L.V. Hull borrowed funds through the Medicaid Assistance Program, using her house and property as collateral. The following quote is extracted from a Medicare rules web site that explains the process to insure governmental recovery of any borrowed funds:

“Under Medicaid law, following the death of the Medicaid recipient a state must attempt to recover from his or her estate whatever benefits it paid for the recipient's care. However, no recovery can take place until the death of the recipient's spouse, or as long as there is a child of the deceased who is under age 21 or who is blind or disabled.

In addition to the right to recover from the estate of the Medicaid beneficiary, state Medicaid agencies must place a lien on real estate owned by a Medicaid beneficiary during her life unless certain dependent relatives are living in the property. If the property is sold while the Medicaid beneficiary is living, not only will she cease to be eligible for Medicaid due to the cash she would net from the sale, but she would have to satisfy the lien by paying back the state for its coverage of her care to date. The exceptions to this rule are cases where a spouse, a disabled or blind child, a child under age 21, or a sibling with an equity interest in the house is living there.”

The Hull house is unoccupied.

An informal volunteer group based in Kosciusko called the “Friends of L.V.” has arisen since Ms. Hull’s death to address the preservation of her home and artwork. This group, led by community volunteers Allen Massey and Sarah Cheek, intends to satisfy the lien on the Hull estate by purchasing the property from Q.T. Hull for the amount owed and by establishing a 501(c)(3) organization to manage the property and the collection of art into the future. They will seek funding assistance for that purpose through the local Community Foundation. Sarah Cheek was a long-time friend and patron of L.V. Hull’s, as was Allen Massey. Massey will spearhead the preservation effort. The amount of the lien against the estate of L.V. Hull is \$5000.00. At the present time, those two volunteers and others check on the property on a regular basis, making sure that the house is kept locked, that neighbors notify them of any suspicious or malicious activity, and in general watch over the house and its contents.

CONCLUSIONS

In an ideal world, the preservation and exhibition of the artistic work of L.V. Hull would best be done in the very environment in which she lived and where she created the

majority of her work in the first place. There is no equivalent substitute for seeing Hull's artwork displayed within the space in which it was created and in which she lived. That would undoubtedly be the most effective way to impart to visitors an understanding of L.V. Hull's life experiences, her thinking as a creative person, her desire and need to create works of art, and the general implications of the work that she created. That could all be done at the Hull house provided conveniently located and adequate visitor parking could be arranged for; if the house and yard could be configured to accommodate an ongoing visitor tour program; if adequate security and climate control systems could be installed and maintained; if an ongoing in-house program of art conservation could be established; if the opportunity for installing or maintaining explanatory devices to interpret Hull's life and work could be provided; and if adequate funding could be arranged to support such arrangements.

On the other hand, the major part of L.V. Hull's artworks are not physically attached to the Hull house or placed there in any permanent way, nor apparently were they, for the most part, created expressly with such specific placement in mind. Unlike the work of many other eccentric artists in the United States and beyond, the work of L.V. Hull, except for the out of doors installations in the small front yard at 123 Allen Street, is not necessarily or predominately site specific. This and the facts of the narrowness of Allen Street, the absence of adequate nearby parking, the apparent resistance of neighbors to frequent visitors to the site, and the lack of adequate space inside the house for visitors to view the work all somewhat eases the burden of preserving the work of L.V. Hull *in situ*. Perhaps an alternate solution, then, is to find another location, preferably in the Kosciusko community, for the exhibition, interpretation, and controlled maintenance of the artistic works of L.V. Hull. The relatively small environmental installation of work that exists in the front yard and on the front porch of the Hull house, including the façade of the porch, could be removed and reinstalled indoors, given the availability of an adequately large exhibition space positioned inside a climate-controlled environment. Existing arrangements of objects and furnishings that are currently inside the house could similarly be reinstalled as freestanding or wall mounted environmental exhibits. Such an arrangement would allow for the presentation of documentary photographs depicting the L.V. Hull environment as it existed during her lifetime along with a sizable collection of videotaped interviews with Hull and videotaped views of both the interior and exterior spaces of the house, all made while she was alive and in residence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above, the following recommendations are offered:

1. That strong consideration be given to the restoration and maintenance of the L.V. Hull house and the related collection of art at the site where it is now located.

2. That the “Friends of L.V.” organization become a formalized non-profit organization whose primary purpose and intent is the preservation and interpretation of the L.V. Hull site and the related collection.

3. That the “Friends of L.V.” settle any questions of clear ownership of the Hull house and collection by purchasing or otherwise gaining exclusive rights to and control of the property and its contents.

4. That the collection of artwork and other contents of the L.V. Hull house and yard immediately be thoroughly and systematically examined, documented photographically, and registered item by item under the supervision of a trained and qualified professional art conservator or curator.

5. That serious consideration be given to the acquisition of additional property located directly adjacent to or in front of the Hull property to provide for the establishment of a visitor/interpretive center and all the necessary support services of parking, site maintenance, security, interpretation, visitor and staff accommodations, and so on.

6. That a comprehensive long-range institutional plan for the preservation and upkeep of the site be created based on the following questions, among others: Does the vision for the future operations include a professional staff? A new exhibition facility? Changing and outreach exhibits? Educational programming? An audio/video listening area? An endowment fund for continued operations? Volunteer recruitment and training? It may be necessary to contract with a qualified museum planning consultant and/or a preservation architect to assist in developing a viable long-range plan. Qualified planning consultants, collections management experts, program development consultants, and many other museum specialists can be located through the American Association of Museums (AAM) web site. (<http://www.museummarketplace.com/>)

7. That planning include the eventual hiring of a professional staff person or persons. At first, and at the very least, an experienced and knowledgeable curator or registrar (or a curatorial team) will be needed, if only on a short-term basis, to systematically conduct a site condition assessment. That person or persons will need to work closely with anyone who may have pertinent information about the origin and history of the various parts of the collection. Afterward, as a permanent staff person is selected and hired, they should be charged with the duties of managing the day-to-day operations at the site. The presence of a professional museum staff will leave the "Friends L.V." free to establish institutional policy, to fund operations and maintenance, to plan and manage capital and endowment campaigns, to create institutional long-range planning, and to set institutional goals.

However, if after careful consideration it is deemed that preserving and operating the site as recommended above is absolutely not possible, then the collection, once photographed and registered, should be carefully removed as quickly as is feasible in its entirety and stored at an offsite location that is both secure and climate controlled. Once the collection of art is secured offsite, the community can then proceed to plan for the establishment of a publicly accessible facility that is devoted to the installation and maintenance of exhibits that interpret the life and artwork of L.V. Hull, the exact content and configuration of which can be determined at a later time.

Fred C. Fussell

Columbus, Georgia

January, 2010

RELATED SOURCES and RESOURCES for the L.V. HULL SITE

Photographs, video, and additional information about L.V. Hull and her work may be seen at the following web sites, among others:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l9KYuMWNrJo>

<http://www.discoverourtown.com/MS/Kosciusko/Attractions/18084.html>

http://nick.smugmug.com/gallery/98267#3458876_5jMkr

The following organizations, among others, may be able to supply useful information and other resources for the development of long range planning, the creation and operation of a non-profit organization, the restoration and conservation of artistic and cultural resources, funding for preservation and operations, and other considerations in the effort to restore, conserve, and interpret the L.V. Hull art site.

The National Endowment for the Arts	http://www.nea.gov/
Save America's Treasures	http://www.saveameericastreasures.org/
The Foundation Center	http://foundationcenter.org/
American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC)	http://www.conservation-us.org/
The American Association of Museums	http://www.aam-us.org/
The Mississippi Arts Commission	http://www.arts.state.ms.us/
USDA, Rural Development	http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rhs/cf/cp.htm
USDA, Mississippi	http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/ms/
Mississippi Museums Association	http://www.msmuseums.org/
Non-profit guides	http://www.npguides.org/