

THE DREAMBUILDERS OF CALIFORNIA

THE CHEVRON GALLERY, 555 MARKET STREET, SAN FRANCISCO, APRIL 9 THROUGH MAY 25, 1984



MICHELLE VIGNES
"Grandma Prisbrey in her Bottle Village," 1977
Cibachrome print

In 1968 Gregg Blasdel wrote in *ART IN AMERICA* on "The Great Grass-Roots Artist" that "they have no definition in art history, have not been patronized by an art-oriented society and are unaware that they are even artists."

He was referring to the ill-defined group of "primitive," "naive," and "folk" artists scattered throughout America. Included were such fantastical environments as Clarence Schmidt's 35-room 7-story house and tinsel-encrusted shrines/assemblages in Woodstock, New York; S.F. Dinsmoore's "The Garden of Eden and Modern Civilization" (containing U.S. flags, Adam and Eve, the devil, bird and animal cages, and trees 8 to 40 feet tall, all made of cement); and Merman Rusch's fence made of painted concrete embedded with shells, rocks and mirrors which surrounded his "Prairie Moon Museum" in Cochrane, Wisconsin.

Since the article appeared, Clarence Schmidt's magical mansion has burned to the ground, and "The Garden of Eden" has fallen into disrepair. Yet over 300 "folk environments" have been discovered, documented, destroyed or preserved, and have entered into the consciousness of the art historian/collector who still fumbles with a comfortable definition of "outsider art."

"Folk art environments are hand-made personal spaces. They may be buildings, gardens, decorated walls, or

accumulations of objects. No two folk art environments look alike but they are similar in their disregard of the traditional materials, forms and methods of architecture, painting and sculpture. Such environments are often composed of discarded materials juxtaposed in unorthodox ways. They are almost always developed organically, without formal plans, in association with their creators' homes or place of work, and tend to be monumental in scale and multiplicity of components."*

*SPACES, Volume 1 Number 1 Page 1
Los Angeles, 1982

DREAMBUILDERS offers a colorful moment from 8 environments, documented by photography and assemblages from the sites. Included is Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village consisting of 22 structures built over a 20-year period, using materials from the city dump — discarded dolls, plumbing fixtures, doors and over 1,000,000 bottles. When asked about the inspiration for this project, **TRESSA PRISBREY** then 62, said she needed more room for her pencil collection (which numbered 4,000 at the time).

Possum Trot, returned now to the desert from which it first grew in 1954, consisted of 57 dolls carved by **CALVIN BLACK** and dressed by his wife, **RUBY BLACK**. The dolls were housed in the

Bird Cage Theatre, where Calvin donned a black cape and manipulated the dolls, while a tape of his voice in falsetto told stories of the Old West. Lifesize figures, mechanized by windmill devices, were placed in front near the highway to attract the occasional "lost soul" to their Fantasy Doll Show and Desert Rock Shop.

SAM DARLING, upon retirement as an oil company technician, took a tramp steamer trip to the Far East. After his return, he picked up an Ace Hardware paintbrush and a can of semi-gloss enamel paint and painted his first painting on the back of a TV cabinet — a Pacific island complete with grass shack and palm trees. He continued to paint scenes from his childhood and his travels on anything and everything, and ended up with one of the country's most unusual and colorful one-man art shows — The House of 1000 Paintings.

"I didn't know myself how I started," say **LITTO DAMONTE**, a retired cement contractor, but one day in 1957 he decided to amuse himself by hanging a few hubcaps on the outside of his house. Now, over 3000 hubcaps line the driveway and ring the house along with spray-painted tractor tires, beer can reflectors, and other auto-related assemblages. Litto says, "this is my place. It's nobody's but mine. You can travel all you want, you don't see no hubcap ranch, no hubcap king all over the world."



MICHELLE VIGNES
 "Litto Damonte in his Hubcap Ranch," 1976
 Cibachrome print

ROMANO GABRIEL first cut out pieces for his wooden "sculpture garden" with a handsaw, but over the ensuing 30 years his "garden" grew and he used a small electric saw as he worked from a small shed that became overgrown by his creations. His ideas came from people and things he had seen during trips to Italy such as the Pope, nuns and priests. Later, animals were added to his repertoire, creating complicated sculptures which turned like carousels. "I just made up pictures out of wood. I wanted to make something different."

This exhibition is a tribute to California's own folk artists and allows us an unusual experience — to appreciate an American tradition which has been rarely acknowledged, understood or respected.

John Turner

For the past 15 years, **JOHN TURNER** has been documenting folk artists and their environments through photography, oral histories and videotape. He is currently writing a book on Howard Finster, a folk painter from Summerville,

Georgia. John is the curator of 20th Century American Folk Art at the San Francisco Crafts and Folk Art Museum, and works for ABC television in San Francisco.

MICHELLE VIGNES has been documenting folk artists in America and France since 1974. Well-known as a documentary photographer, her other specialties include the history of the American Indian Movement, and the blues musicians of Oakland, California. Michelle is a board member of Camera-work Gallery and of Media Alliance, and she teaches documentary photography for the University of California Extension Program.

Six of the 8 exhibited environments have survived the rigors of the passing years, but the gradual destruction of a rare and important part of American culture will continue without concerted public efforts. SPACES is a nationwide organization concerned with the recognition and preservation of America's monumental folk art environments. SPACES helped restore the Watts Towers in Los Angeles, secured 3 California sites on the National

Register of Historic Places, and assisted in making 10 other sites State Registered Landmarks. For further information, please contact SPACES at (213) 463-1629.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

THE DREAMBUILDERS OF CALIFORNIA is presented by Chevron U.S.A. Inc. for the enjoyment of its employees, friends and neighbors.

We extend our appreciation to John Turner and Michelle Vignes who developed the concept for this exhibition. John Turner procured loans of the three-dimensional objects from: Ray and Dolores Vellutini, Amy Skilman, Larry Whitley, Litto Damonte, and his own collection. We thank each of them for their generosity. We extend equal gratitude to Michelle Vignes for the documentary photographs of the folk artists and their environments.

The exhibition is presented by Art Programs, Inc. of San Francisco and Los Angeles. For more information, please call (415) 552-1734.