

OFF THE WALL Gallery

lee steen

MAY 13-31

Lee Steen and his twin brother Dee were born in Kentucky in 1897 and started for Montana with their family when they were a year old. The family settled in Roundup, Montana, where their father did some ranching and horse trading, and owned a bar. Lee worked in Walla-Walla and the Yakima Valley in Washington for the railroad and the WPA; Dee was a veteran of both World Wars. Both men returned to Roundup, where they sometimes worked as cooks, and began filling their yard with strange, fantastic sculptures, animals, and a chaotic assortment of objects and what many people would call junk.

Lee got the wood for his figures from the cottonwood trees along the Musselshell River; Dee worked primarily with metal and automobile parts. When Jim Todd interviewed Lee in 1973, Lee didn't remember when he began making the figures, only that "I was pretty good size, because I was handling pretty good size limbs in the trees." He described what he did in this way:

It was just something to do to pass the time away . . . it come to me that I could see a man just by looking up in a tree. I'd cut him down and trim him out so he had two legs and two arms, and put a face on him with crayon . . . some of them I just marked out to make a nose where he'd been sawed off on a slant. I think about it and then I go out and see if I can find what I see in my mind, looking up into the trees. The more you do, the more it comes to you.

Lee sold his "men" for \$5.00 or \$10.00 to people in Roundup and travellers driving by on the highway. People would see the tall, totem-like figures standing up in the yard, stop, and take the pieces back east with them, to places like St. Paul and Minneapolis.

After Dee's death, the home in Roundup became more and more unmanageable. There were fires; people broke in and took things, the figures began to deteriorate from the weather. In 1973, John A. Armstrong (then director of the Yellowstone Art Center in Billings) and Jim Todd (currently chairman of the University of Montana Art Department) organized an exhibition of Steen's work at the Yellowstone Art Center in Billings and made arrangements for preservation of Steen's work. Some of the pieces from that exhibition are in Armstrong's possession in Phoenix, Arizona; the rest were stored at the Paris Gibson Square Gallery in Great Falls, Montana. The pieces in this exhibition have been loaned by the Paris Gibson Square Gallery, and we deeply appreciate the cooperation of Vicki Everson, Gallery Director, Jim Poor, Art Supervisor, Great Falls Public Schools, and Mel Watkins, Artist in Residence, Great Falls Public Schools.

It is hard to talk with any precision about the sources of Lee Steen's work. In the 1973 conversation with Jim Todd, Lee couldn't name any artists whose work had influenced him, or even any art he had seen. One of the strongest memories of his childhood during that conversation was a memory of riding his father's big Percheron horses at roundups when he was a small boy. It's easy to see in the size of these figures a child's eye view of giant adults.

Steen seems to have made the figures and collected his animals (deer, pheasants, an owl, a spider monkey, a vicious badger that only he could handle) to people his lonely world. This work softens the usual boundaries between human and non-human life, between animate and inanimate. Steen released his figures from the cottonwoods and then used whatever materials came to hand to dress them up, making the human or animal forms he saw visible to others. His figures are powerful emblems both of our human ability to project our form onto the natural world around us, and of our need to find ourselves in that nurturing environment.