

**April 18, 2008**

ART REVIEW | 'DARGERISM'

## **An Insider Perspective on an Outsider Artist**

By [KEN JOHNSON](#)

Correction Appended

During his lifetime no one knew that [Henry Darger](#) (1892-1973) had been secretly producing in his cluttered Chicago apartment one of the 20th century's great works of visual art. At his death he left behind, in addition to voluminous writings, almost 150 large-scale watercolor paintings (or nearly 300, counting both sides of each sheet) illustrating a hair-raising epic adventure called "The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion."

Originally bound in volumes as wide as nine feet, Darger's scroll-like paintings have since been recognized as the works of a self-taught genius, and this outsider art has been inspirational for many academically trained professional artists.

The influence of Darger's work on insider artists is the subject of an enlightening but problematic exhibition at the American Folk Art Museum called "Dargerism: Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger." Organized by Brooke Davis Anderson, curator and director of the museum's Contemporary Center, the show presents 12 Darger paintings from the museum's permanent collection alongside works by 11 contemporary artists who have been influenced or inspired by Darger. It is the first — and one hopes not the last — exhibition of contemporary art at the museum.

It's a promising idea for a show, especially considering Darger's emergence in recent years as a kind of pop-culture mascot. (He has been referred to in songs by numerous rock bands.) A problem is that none of this exhibition's contemporary artists, although worthy on their own merits, are in the same league as Darger.

Yet this turns out to be a good thing. Seeing Darger among other artists brings into focus what makes him so singular. That can be summed up in a word: amplitude. Darger's art has a breadth of technical, formal, narrative and symbolic imagination rarely encountered in today's professional art world.

In an eccentric, old-fashioned children's picture-book style (William Blake meets L. Frank Baum's "Wizard of Oz") the Darger paintings show how seven sisters called the Vivian Girls attempt to rescue children enslaved by men known as the Glandelinians. They depict panoramic landscapes populated by often naked, prepubescent, sexually ambiguous children (they look like girls, but have penises) and by soldiers who menace, pursue, abuse and kill them. The paintings envision a cosmic, erotically charged struggle between good and evil, innocence and experience, freedom and captivity.

How the paintings are constructed is also fascinating. Darger traced his images — people, trees, flowers, birds, mountains and clouds — from books, magazines, comics, children's books and other sources. He transferred

images into his paintings using carbon paper, and if the size of a source wasn't right, he would have it photographically enlarged at the corner drugstore.

Because of this process, the paintings have a jumbled, collagelike look. Yet at the same time they cohere into expansive, atmospheric, lushly colorful, sometimes hallucinatory worlds. Teetering between order and chaos, the paintings formally reflect the terrific narrative and symbolic tensions that animate them.

The exhibition's professional artists have more modest goals. In Justine Kurland's staged photographs, teenage girls hang out in pastoral landscapes like *Vivian Girls*. But there is no broader story line. Similarly, in Amy Cutler's finely made painting of long-haired girls in dreamlike situations; Anthony Goicolea's photographs and paintings of boys in wilderness settings; and Robyn O'Neil's oversize pencil drawings of tiny people in vast landscapes: their mythic narratives are implied but not developed. (Though not very Darger-esque, Mr. Goicolea's two short, surrealistic videos might start you fantasizing about a *Vivian Girls* movie directed by, say, [Terry Gilliam](#).)

Paula Rego's big canvases from the early 1980s are the exhibition's most surprising inclusion. These brushy, cartoonish paintings picture *Vivian Girls* in various exotic situations, but mainly they look like a classicist's ill-advised attempt to hop on that era's Neo-Expressionist bandwagon.

Yun-Fei Ji and Trenton Doyle Hancock are closer to Darger in their ambitions and techniques. But while Mr. Ji's complicated, faux-antique ink-on-paper paintings — illustrating the Chinese opium wars and the displacement of Chinese villagers by the Three Gorges Dam project — have narrative sweep, they do not have the peculiar psychological urgency conveyed by Darger.

Mr. Hancock's drawn, painted and collaged works are based on a humorous cosmology revolving around furry, striped creatures called mounds. They have some of Darger's storytelling flair and technical inventiveness, but a goofy absurdity limits the sort of emotional poignancy found in Darger.

The British ceramicist Grayson Perry, whose vases are covered by roughly hand-drawn imagery and photographs, may be close to Darger too, but it is hard to tell how expansive his vision is from only the two vases on view.

Jefferson Friedman's 15-minute classical-music composition "Sacred Heart: Explosion," which is based on a particularly violent Darger painting and plays three times an hour in the museum's cafe, raises the question of how Darger might have scored his heroic tale.

Two artists, one could argue, don't belong in the show. Michael St. John's small sculpture of a Darger character called a blengin simulates a movie souvenir toy. It may be an homage, but as a Pop-conceptualist object it is far from Darger's romantic, visionary spirit. The same is true of Justin Lieberman, who digitally inserts the bodies of nude girls from Jock Sturges photographs into landscapes copied from Darger paintings, and gives them photographic heads of preteenage beauty queens.

On the other hand, the exhibition suggests the possibilities of an even more inclusive show. Completely unknown as an artist during his lifetime, Darger is now a widely beloved figure of almost [van Gogh](#)-like mythic stature. A show exploring all the ways he is seen and thought about by his artistic followers and fans could be revelatory.

*“Dargerism: Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger” is on view through Sept. 21 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 265-1040 or [folkartmuseum.org](http://folkartmuseum.org).*

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 23, 2008

An art review on Friday about “Dargerism: Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger,” at the American Folk Art Museum, misstated the number of artworks Darger created to illustrate his epic adventure tale, “The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion.” It was 150 double-sided watercolor paintings for a total of 300 works, not almost 300 such paintings for a total of nearly 600 works.

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