

Elaine de Kooning's Old House Is Art's New Home

Edward M. Gómez

EAST HAMPTON, New York — What is one to make of those occasions when a seemingly disparate group of ideas, events, actors, and ambitions comes together in the firmament of the ever-permutating world of art and culture, those moments of confluence that some Zeitgeist-watchers point to as evidence of the spirit of the times?

One of these moments is unfolding right now, with the former residence of the artist Elaine de Kooning in East Hampton serving as one of its loci. But as stories of creative coincidences go, this one is already splitting off subchapters as fast as it came together in the first place. Its main elements line up like this:



Exterior of the Elaine de Kooning House, East Hampton, New York, summer 2018 (photo by Petita Cole, courtesy Elaine de Kooning House)

A few years ago, Chris Byrne, a co-founder of the Dallas Art Fair, which, this past April, celebrated its tenth anniversary, was poking around East Hampton, Long Island, with some rare time on his hands in between assorted curating, publishing, and art-related research projects. He recently told me, in an aw-shucks manner suggesting that big, risky, now what-do-I-do? undertakings — like starting a costly art fair a decade ago — seemed to attract him as naturally as flames lure fluttering moths, “I was driving around and saw a house for sale; Elaine de Kooning had lived there during the last years of her life. After she died in 1989, the sculptor John Chamberlain lived and worked there, and then later came the painter Richmond Burton.”

Byrne bought the house.

Not sure about what he would do with it — dividing his time between Dallas and New York, he had no plans to move in — over time Byrne began inviting certain artists to spend time at the house, living and working in the large, nondescript, brown-shingled structure, whose main spaces flow into each other with loft-like ease. Earlier this summer, one of the house's temporary residents was Susan Te Kahurangi King, the self-taught artist from New Zealand, who, over the past decade or so, has seized the attention of outsider art aficionados with her wild, space-twisting drawings, which mash up everything from old Disney cartoon characters to clowns' faces, cascading landscapes, and swirling passages of psychedelic patterns.

In fact, years ago, Byrne first traveled to New Zealand to meet the artist — who, since early childhood, has not spoken — and her family, and to learn about the evolution of her unusual art. He went on to work with galleries and museums in the United States and Europe to make King's work known to the

public. “Susan came with her sister, Petita; it was the first time she had ever worked in a dedicated studio space, away from her home,” Byrne recalled. He added, “Susan was prolific, drawing all the time, but she seemed to enjoy the very different environment here and to respond to the house and its ambiance.”

Made up of plain, building-block forms, the house’s irregular structure is one King could easily chew up and spit out, radically transforming it in her explosive compositions. (An exhibition of the gouache-on-paper works King created during her residency will open at the house sometime in the fall. Meanwhile, the website Ephemera: New York City Art and Culture has produced a short film documenting her stay.)



Mike Goodlett’s sculptures made of concrete and Hydro-Stone (gypsum cement) on display at the Elaine de Kooning House (photo by Katherine McMahon, courtesy Elaine de Kooning House)



Mike Goodlett, “Untitled” (2017), Hydro-Stone with spray paint, 17.50 x 16 x 10 inches (photo courtesy Institute 193)

Since 2011 the house has hosted numerous informal residencies and exhibitions involving, among other visitors, such artists as Jerry Torre (aka “The Marble Faun”), a sculptor who lives in Queens and makes stone carvings; Chris Duncan, an artist from California who works with sculptural forms and sound; and New York-based Liz Markus, whose paintings and collages roar with cheeky, Pop-Punk exuberance. As for the spirit in the house of the late Elaine de Kooning, its traces are subtle, at best — but Byrne certainly has tried to evoke them. In one room he hung one of her self-portraits, a gentle, pencil-on-paper drawing from 1940, in which she stares back at the viewer through big, probing eyes.

In July, the house served as the venue for a gathering of the Beach Painting Club, a group of local artists who routinely get together to create en plein air. This time they mixed it up with representatives and supporters of the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, who were using the house for a benefit. Through such events and artists’ working stays, the former de Kooning residence has continued to ease into a new identity as a multi-purpose, laid-back cultural center.

Enter Phillip March Jones.

Born in Shreveport, Louisiana, Jones later grew up in Lexington, Kentucky, to whose arts community he maintains strong ties. Jones moved to New York around 2014 after serving for several years as the director of the Atlanta-based Souls Grown Deep Foundation, whose historic donation of emblematic works by visionary, self-taught, black artists of the Deep South is now on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Prior to heading north, Jones also spent time in Lexington, where, in 2009, he founded Institute 193, an independent arts center in a 310-square-foot storefront whose offerings showcase a wide range of cultural expressions from the American South — visual art, music, poetry, storytelling

— through exhibitions, special events, and, notably for a still-young, non-profit organization, an active publishing program. In 2016, Institute 193 won a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts in support of its programming.

Until recently, Jones served as the director of Andrew Edlin Gallery, a downtown-Manhattan venue presenting the work of both trained and self-taught artists, including that of such outsider luminaries as Melvin Way, Guo Fengyi, and Eugene Von Bruenchenhein. Jones is well known in the outsider art world, and, as he recently told me, “About 20 to 30 percent of the art we’ve shown at Institute 193 has been that of Southern self-taught artists.”

Given Byrne’s involvement promoting King’s drawings (he has shown them at the Outsider Art Fair in New York), inevitably, he and Jones met and got to know each other some time ago; more recently, during an impromptu brainstorming session, they cooked up Summer Studio, a group show of works made by artists associated with Institute 193. That new project needed a venue.

Enter the Elaine de Kooning House — literally.

There, through September 15, Summer Studio offers visitors intimate access, in the house’s various rooms, to works by such artists as Mike Goodlett, whose sensuous sculptures made, surprisingly, of concrete and Hydro-Stone (gypsum cement) tease the imagination with bulbous protuberances exuding an air of fecundity and, well, sex. On a nearby mantelpiece, Lina Tharsing’s pictures depict droopy flowers and spindly plants that seem to scrape their simple, urgent forms right out of the jungly greens of the oil paint covering their wood-panel surfaces.



Lina Tharsing, paintings from the “Plant Portraits” series (2018), oil on wood panels, each piece 20 x 18 inches (photo by Katherine McMahon, courtesy Elaine de Kooning House)

Elsewhere, Adam O’Neal’s collages include snippets of old National Geographic covers and photos clipped from magazines. In his “VOL. 130, NO. 5 – VOL. 150, NO. 2” (2015), smiling families and their luggage-filled station wagons appear to be headed straight into raging fires or big ocean waves — images that eerily evoke the Earth’s current rash of devastating, climate-related natural disasters.

Other artists whose works are on view include Robert Beatty, Lonnie Holley, Shara Hughes, Guy Mendes, Aaron Skolnick, and Mare Vaccaro. The exhibition finds its creative-spiritual anchor, however, in the works of the late Jessie Dunahoo (1932-2017), which fill a large studio space on the house’s lower level. There, Jones has hung a selection of Dunahoo’s long, curtain-like patchworks made up of countless, cast-off plastic bags.

A self-taught artist who spent his entire life in his native Kentucky, Dunahoo was born deaf and, at an early age, became blind. No one knows when he began making his signature, quilt-like creations, into which he sewed, in addition to shopping bags, old clothes, fabric scraps, and twine. Jones explained that Dunahoo sometimes sewed folds into his mixed-media sheets, effectively giving them body and producing “tent-like structures” that the artist referred to, through an aide, as “shelters.”

Jones said, “The artists whose works are on display represent part of the ‘brain trust’ that fueled Institute 193’s development. All sorts of projects have emerged out of our discussions — from our cross-pollinations. For a small city like Lexington that’s far from the big art and media centers but is located in

a region that's loaded with talent, we've become the go-to place for all sorts of non-mainstream voices.”

Jones, who now serves as the Kentucky art center's curator at large, then dropped some big news: On September 26, his organization will open a New York annex, Institute 193 (1B), at 292 East 3rd Street in the East Village. There, partnering with cultural and educational institutions from across the South, Jones and his collaborators will provide a Manhattan showcase for the same kind of programming that has become Institute 193's hallmark in Lexington. The new venue's first presentation: Works by the outsider artist Eddie Owens Martin (1908-1986) who was known as “St. EOM” and created Pasaquan, a mystical art environment located in Buena Vista, Georgia. The exhibition is being mounted in collaboration with Columbus State University, which oversees Pasaquan, and the Pasaquan Preservation Society.

Meanwhile, in recent years, Elaine de Kooning and other female artists from Abstract Expressionism's paint-flinging heyday have been enjoying something of a long-overdue moment of scholarly and media attention. In 2016, the Denver Art Museum originated a traveling exhibition, Women of Abstract Expressionism, featuring works by de Kooning, Jay DeFeo, Lee Krasner, Grace Hartigan, and others. Last year's Museum of Modern Art exhibition Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction examined a similar theme.



Adam O'Neal, "VOL. 130, NO. 5 - VOL. 150, NO. 2" (2015), collaged paper, 14.5 x 19 inches (photo courtesy Institute 193)



Jessie Dunahoo, untitled, mixed-media constructions, dimensions variable, on display at Elaine de Kooning House (photo by Katherine McMahon, courtesy Elaine de Kooning House)

Last year, too, Oxford University Press published Cathy Curtis's biography *A Generous Vision: The Creative Life of Elaine de Kooning*, and this month, Little, Brown and Company is releasing Mary Gabriel's *Ninth Street Women*, a collective history of the lives of de Kooning, Krasner, Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler. (I'm reading an advance copy now; richly atmospheric, it vividly chronicles its subjects' overlapping life stories and path-breaking careers against a backdrop of dramatic cultural and social change.)

On a date in October that will be announced in the near future, the Elaine de Kooning House will serve as the venue for a discussion and book-signing event featuring Gabriel, who will speak about her research and her big, new, multi-artist biography.

There will certainly be more parts of this still-unfolding story to come, but in the meantime, the custodian of the Elaine de Kooning House was last seen making a sign. It said, simply, "Watch this space."

Summer Studio continues at the Elaine de Kooning House (55 Alewife Brook Road, East Hampton, New York), through September 15.