

Walks to the Paradise Garden

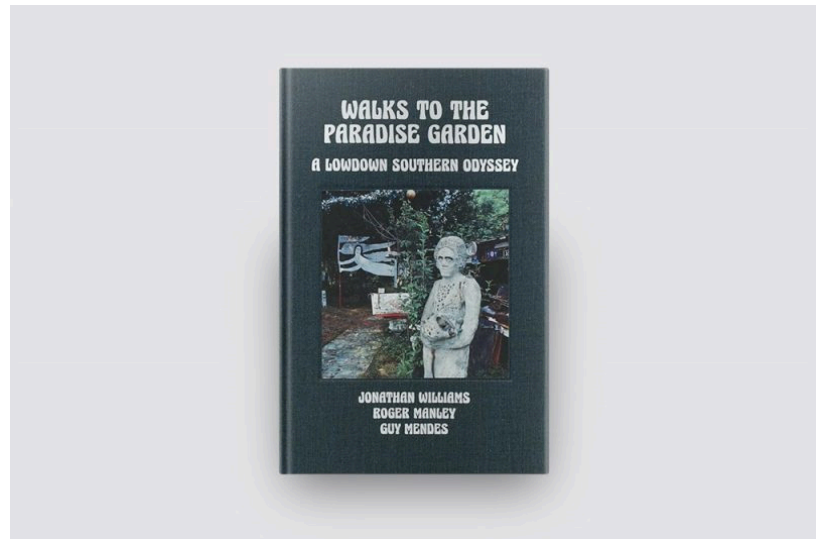
J.W. McCormack

In a 1988 interview for the *LA Times*, self-taught artist Reverend Howard Finster explained his creative predicament: “If I didn’t have visions of other worlds, I’d be miserable because I can’t adapt to a world like this.” You’ve surely seen at least one of his ten thousand works; the Reverend attained mainstream attention during his lifetime, a rarity among *outsider artists*—a term we will return to with great opprobrium later. You’ve seen his art on the cover of Talking Heads’ *Little Creatures* or in the video for R.E.M.’s “Radio Free Europe,” shot on location in Finster’s multi-acre sprawl of illuminated hubcaps, machine junk, and scriptural detritus dubbed the Paradise Garden.

And just a few miles up the road in Penville, Georgia, is the onetime abode of St. EOM (aka Eddie Martin), sole adherent of the homegrown denomination of Pasaquoyanism, whose church-compound wonderland consists of Day-Glo pagodas, smiling totems, and cosmic serpents. “I am the first martyr to Pasaquoyanism,” says Martin, “I am a Prophet without profit. It’s a bitch, man. Everything’s cotton, corn, and peanuts around here. People wouldn’t know art if it bit ’em on the ass.”

Finster and Martin are the deserving godheads of *Walks to the Paradise Garden: A Lowdown Southern Odyssey*, the road-tripping chronicle of poet Jonathan Williams and photographers Guy Mendes and Roger Manley. They embarked in 1984 on a search for a South “both celestial and chthonian,” compiling for the edification of non-okra-eaters a paean to the okra-eaters’ stylings. The result is eighty-some portraits of folk artists, front-yard sideshows, outsized personalities, and tricksters like Austin G. Sutton, maker of furniture with built-in sex jokes. (“Give A.G. a snort or two of good popskull and, buddy, he’ll tell you some tales.”) We’re also treated, by way of revelatory photographs, to a drive-through Bible park, a “Can City,” and an evangelical painting in which “Hitler, Mussolini, and Khrushchev are drawn down to the pit of Hell, while Descartes, Einstein, and Darwin look on.”

This odyssey passes through towns with names like Whynot, Zetus, Prismatic, Faceville, Flippery, Ty Ty, Arm, Chicken Bristle, Monkey’s Eyebrow, Skullbuster, Hot Coffee, Smut Eye, and Sublimity City, with the convenience-store marquees between promising SPRING LIZARDS or SNUFF/SLAUGHTER/VIDEOGAMES. But the project languished unpublished—until now, thanks to the efforts of editor Phillip March Jones. The gulf between conception and realization shows. Williams is dead, along with most of his subjects, and the world he documented is gone too. The trio anticipated the naive art boomtimes ahead; once-obscure creators like Henry Speller and Thornton Dial are now hailed as chroniclers of the African American poor and held in the Met’s permanent collection. St. EOM’s Pasaquan has



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Roger Manley, *Churchill Winston Hill, Elizabethton, Tennessee*, 1987. Courtesy of Institute 193.

been restored by philanthropists. Lonnie Holley, who Williams calls a man who “makes harmony and beauty of nothing to a degree that surely affronts all those dog-eat-dog palefaces that have him surrounded,” has gone on to a successful recording career.

Walks isn’t merely a showcase for “Way Out People Way Out There,” but a living testimony of those who will always be drawn toward the raw imagination’s anti-commercial hinterland—even if it happens to reside in a concrete caveman outside a filling station. Or in a 1962 Chevrolet Corvair laboriously converted into a micro-cathedral detailing the life and times of Elvis Presley.

Another thing preserved here is Williams’s voice, which is that of an obdurate, barbecue-gnawing codger cum connoisseur. A onetime pretender to the life of the cultured cosmopolite, Williams writes:

I still cast my lot with the clump of Shortia, the pileated woodpecker, the timber rattlesnake...those who are defenseless and open to the hard, destructive nature of the venal American juggernaut. Their crime is that they simply want to be themselves and money isn’t what they’re about. The United States of America is also about irresistible joy, wacko diversity, and “the flight of the alone to the alone,” or Mr. Manley and Mr. Mendes and I have been as useless as a knot on a dog’s dick. It well could be.

But it wasn’t. The nowheresvilles from Virginia on down (though Williams refuses to set foot in Florida) are as in bloom in these pages as in the shit-kicking music of Hasil Adkins, Johnny Cash, or The Cramps.

And now for our arraignment of the outsider artist label. *Walks to the Paradise Garden* exists to make the point that what we call art comes from a narrow European convention that has evolved into a market that prizes money, glamour, celebrity, and formal education. All things that the divinely inspired, dirt-poor visionaries of that invisible and nigh-extinct Dixie abhor. For Williams, Red Jennings’s scrap-wood whirligigs are equal to Joan Miró; Charlie Lucas, who makes dinosaurs out of tractors and stoves, is “certainly as inventive as Alexander Calder on a good day”; and *Man-Eating Banana* by sculptor Vernon Burwell could command “a look or two from Auguste Rodin or Medardo Rosso.” Let us face that it’s more noble to follow the dictates of our misbegotten hearts than example. One gospel-verse-studded grotto, clockwork automaton church service, or deformed doll at a time, *Walks* reminds us that in this territory, it is we who stand squinting outside the door.

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