

## Walks to the Paradise Garden

Raw Vision

A rediscovered manuscript by Jonathan Williams finally appears in book form, recording richly atmospheric journeys through the American South, where the talents of many notable outsider artists were nurtured. Here, *Raw Vision* publishes exclusive excerpts.

*Walks to the Paradise Garden: A Lowdown Southern Odyssey* is a new book of historical importance in the outsider art field, the insights of which will help deepen our understanding of the social-cultural environment from which many remarkable creations by self-taught artists of the American South have emerged. Produced by non-profit arts centre Institute 193, in Lexington, Kentucky, this book was written by Jonathan Williams and features photographs by Roger Manley and Guy Mendes. In its preface, the book's editor, Phillip March Jones, writes:

"*Walks to the Paradise Garden* sat in a box for over twenty years before Mendes pulled it down from a shelf in his studio and said to me, "We should publish this someday." Six years later, I began retyping the document and searching, with Mendes' help, for its corresponding images, our only guide being Williams' original manuscript and an annotated document titled "An approximate table of contents for *Walks to the Paradise Garden*."[...] I called Manley, and he began searching through his corresponding archive, too."



Clyde Jones, Haw River Crossing, Bynum, NC, 1988–1989

The book that Williams, Mendes and Manley sought to publish in 1992 was both ahead of and firmly grounded in its time. In it, there were plenty of jokes about the Reagans and former US Vice President Dan Quayle, reviews of the latest food and fashion trends, and visits with artists who were, at the time, still living. Most of these details have survived the editing process, but the artists have not. Fortunately, many of the artists' works that Williams described have been preserved by museums, foundations and universities that have recognised their value.

*Walks to the Paradise Garden* is not an art-historical text in the traditional sense, and Williams' writing veers off often and urgently into his own tastes and preoccupations. Opinions abound: he reviews barbecue restaurants, drops names, gives creative directions to artists' homes, espouses his own political leanings, and makes plenty of overt references to the male anatomy. This is not a condemnation but rather a warning to those without a sense of humour – this book might not be for you.

*The following excerpts include original chapter headings and appear in Williams' American English, complete with his stylistic irregularities.*



Clyde Jones, Bynum, NC, 1988–1989

### “JUNGLE BOY” JONES’ HAW RIVER ANIMAL CROSSING AT BYNUM

Clyde Jones is a retired logger, about fifty years of age, batchin' it in the pleasantly moribund village of Bynum, down by the River Haw, in Chatham County, North Carolina. Most of “downtown” Bynum has fallen down. Clyde offered me a tubular chair in his front parlor and it too collapsed. Roger Manley thought I'd gone through the floor. No harm done. Walking through his yard of both homemade and humongous animals, Clyde offered one or two observations: “These things are as wild on the outside as I am on the inside,” and “I made all this up, I've got a head full of ideas.” I allowed: “Clyde, I'll bet the neighbors are sure glad these things don't move at night.” “There's something to that,” Clyde allowed back. “What will you do when you've used up all the wood and trees there are in Chatham County?” “Move to another county!”



Sam Doyle, St. Helena Island, SC, 1986, photo: Roger Manley

THOMAS SAMUEL DOYLE, THE  
 ICONOGRAPHER OF ST. HELENA ISLAND

[W]e went to Frogmore [on St. Helena Island] to visit with Uncle Sam Doyle, who is another kettle of fish. Sam was sitting out under the trees in the yard next to his little house. The yard was filled with sculptures and paintings, his Outdoor World-Wide-International Gallery. The small sculptures were made from roots and found objects, usually covered with tar and then painted: chickens, snakes, turtles, lizards, dogs; the larger pieces (alligators, for instance) were made out of limbs sawed off Live Oaks, then worked with a hatchet. The paintings are usually painted on plywood and roofing tin with bright enamel. The yard functions as a gallery for people to drive past. Mr. Doyle [...] showed us how he had subdivided it into small garden areas shaped like stars, hearts, and moons outlined with bottles, providing a variety of angles from which to approach the works displayed there. [...] As Sam said: "Making pictures keeps me busy.

When folks carries them away, I got to replace them back." We wandered about the place and saw Ray Charles; Elvis; "Lincoln Preaching to the Slaves in Frogmore"; "Old Hag" (a witch who came in your sleep and suffocated you by sitting on your face); Joe Lewis; "Bull Dager" ("half-slut, half-stud"); the first black midwife on the island; and a collection of racy ladies up to no good but pleasure.



Sam Doyle's Yard, St. Helena Island, SC, 1986, photo: Roger Manley

## THE AMAZING WIND MACHINES OF VOLLIS SIMPSON

Vollis Simpson doesn't know where mama and papa got the name Vollis. He's had a brother named Dewey Roosevelt Simpson – not Thomas E. & Franklin D., but Admiral & Teddy. And another named Groves, and one named Daryl, pronounced Darl. Obviously, a family of inventors. One connects Vollis, this man born into tenant farming (corn, cotton, tobacco) in Lucama, North Carolina, with volant and volatile: AIR! What he loves is airplanes and the wind moving machines through space. At Moore's Crossroads, he has built a lake, grassed an old mule pasture, and started building a "mess," a unique cluster of giant whirligigs and complex totems out of scrap metal. "First thing I ever built was a wind-powered washing machine on Saipan in the Marianas. We were living rough, in fox-holes, and did a lot of crawlin' to stay alive, just like moles. My job was helping make landing strips out of that green coral rock. The B-59s took off from there to bomb Japan." [...] Vollis has this to say: "I don't really know what an artist is. Depends on what you think art is. You can call anything art." Whatever you call it, Mr. Simpson makes it big and grand. The local school kids who drive by in their buses think it's "neat."



Vollis Simpson Whirligigs, Lucama, NC, 1988  
inset: Vollis Simpson and Whirligigs, Lucama, NC, 1988 photos: Roger Manley



Henry Dorsey's House, Brownsboro, KY, 1970, photo: Guy Mendes

## HENRY DORSEY, PRODIGALSONALICESBOY

Henry Dorsey's place was located in Brownsboro, about nine miles northeast of Louisville, Kentucky, in the southern part of Oldham County. [...] Mr. Dorsey, a retired stonemason in his seventies, had already had two strokes and was seldom able to come out and set everything to going. "Everything" consisted of almost anything that Mr. Dorsey had ever picked up in a junkyard or along a highway. [...] Guy Mendes describes the scene: "It's the pink flamingoes and the glass-reflecting ball on the front lawn gone berserk, carried out to the nth degree. It's the whole American mechanical/plastic skeleton compressed into a little cube like a junked automobile. It's all there, or at least most of it is: scores of dolls and mannequins, plastic clowns and flowers and soldiers and horses, religious statuary and electric light fixtures, an Old Crow doll with a baby doll head atop it, and an alligator landscape inside an icebox that opens and closes. And somewhere near the middle, at the entrance of his house, a group of small stick-on letters says: "STEP RIGHT IN YOU ARE WELCOM AS FLOWERS IN MAY." Guy was lucky enough to catch Mr. Dorsey in action. "He came out and poked around in a maze of extension cords, unplugging one here, plugging one in there, and, suddenly accompanied by a kind of musical squeaking and grinding, various parts of the construction began to revolve!" Surveying the thing from a safe distance, his wife Laura said: "You never know when something's gonna fly off. You don't see me standing under there, no sir."



Henry Dorsey, Brownsboro, KY, 1970, photo: Guy Mendes

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Mary T. Smith's Yard, Hazelhurst, MS, 1986, photo: Guy Mendes



Mary T. Smith, Hazelhurst, MS, 1986, photo: Guy Mendes

## ACROSS THE KUDZU AND WAY DOWN YONDER UNDER ALGAMILA

Up I-55 we finally got to the south side of Hazelhurst and the home place of Mary Tillman Smith. The “collectors” have pretty much taken it all away. Mrs. Smith is eighty-four, has had strokes, cannot speak or make more of her startling and poignant messages on pieces of tin. But she obviously loves for people to come and visit. When we’d try to tell her how much we enjoyed her garden, she’d smile and open her arms and say something like “IT’S ALL!!! IT’S ALL!!!”

Images courtesy of the photographers and Institute 193  
*Walks to the Paradise Garden* is available from [www.institute193.org](http://www.institute193.org).

Jonathan Williams (1929–2008) was an American poet who cofounded the publishing company the Jargon Society in 1951. Among its well-known titles: *White Trash Cooking* and the first monograph on photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard.

Roger Manley (b. 1952) is a photographer, filmmaker, curator and writer based in North Carolina, where he is the director of NC State University's Gregg Museum of Art and Design.

New Orleans native Guy Mendes (b. 1948) studied at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, with the writers Wendell Berry and Guy Davenport. Several monographs about his photography have been published.

Phillip March Jones (b. 1981) founded Institute 193, a non-profit art centre, in Lexington, in 2009 and also served as director of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation in Atlanta, Georgia. He co-curated the 2019 Atlanta Biennial.