

Outside is Now “In”

An Irresistible Urge to Create

The Monroe Family Collection of Florida Outsider Art

On view through September 5th at the Boca Raton Museum of Art

The passion for Outsider Art runs deep in Florida, where self-taught artists have forged an indelible mark of special attention on the creative landscape of the state. *An Irresistible Urge to Create: The Monroe Family Collection of Florida Outsider Art* is the most comprehensive exhibition of its kind, on view at the [Boca Raton Museum of Art](#) until September 5th. This is the first time a museum has presented this definitive group of artists with an exhibition of this size and scope. Against the odds, many of these artists created obsessively to escape from their worlds that were often full of deep conflict and personal struggles.

Starting in the early 1990s, the photographer Gary Monroe drove throughout the state of Florida for more than ten years — from Key West to Jacksonville to Pensacola — on a mission to find what he calls “Florida’s renegade artists.” Thirty years later, after collecting, protecting and archiving more than 1,000 works by outsider artists, the result is an exhibition that leaves viewers spellbound.



George Voronovsky (pictured above in Miami Beach in the 1970s) was a solitary figure among a sea of elderly Jewish retirees in old South Beach. No one saw the pictures that were tacked up throughout his room, painted with cheap watercolors and inexpensive brushes on pizza box tops and other scraps that he had found in alleys. His visual recollections reflected an idealized past of his charmed youth in the Ukraine that he preferred to his post-war reality, finding solace through his artmaking. Most of Voronovsky’s works have never been seen before. Gary Monroe has been a custodian of his life’s work for 38 years.

“When I made these journeys across Florida to seek out and connect with these outlier artists, it was before the internet and it was quite laborious,” says Monroe. During his decade-long quest across the state, Monroe personally met nearly all of these artists one by one and became part of their lives. At the time this required a major personal commitment: he had to earn their trust to be allowed into their reclusive worlds. “It was an adventure,” adds Monroe. “Especially since there were no cell phones or GPS. Just good old road maps and phone booths.” Monroe’s odyssey culminated in 2003, when his book *Extraordinary Interpretations: Florida’s Self-Taught Artists* was published by the University Press of Florida. The Museum has selected 86 of these works by 44 Florida artists for this landmark exhibition, which has already been tapped to travel to two other museums. “This new project opens a welcome window into another world. The world of wonders that lies outside the artistic establishment,” says **Irvin Lippman**, the Executive Director of the Boca Raton Museum of Art. “This confounds our understanding of contemporary art, in a good way.”

“Outliers, boundary-crossers, pilgrims, exiles”

An Irresistible Urge to Create presents 86 works, many never seen before, by 44 Florida artists including: Purvis Young, George Voronovsky, Aurelia “Mama” Johnson, Frank Ritchie, Ruby “Miss Ruby” Williams, Gene Beecher, Kathy d’Adesky, Brian Dowdall, Floryan (Florian) Ludwig, Reva Freedman, Ozzie Lee “OL” Samuels, Sybil Gibson, Joey Smollon, Polly Bernard, Milton Ellis, Janice Kennedy, John Gerdes, Susanne Blankemeier, Morgan Steele, Alyne Harris, and Ed Ott. “For these artists, making art was as essential as breathing,” says Irvin Lippman. “Their artistic freedom was a pure, sincere and intimate means of communication.”

The artists in this exhibition were not interested in monetary gain or acclaim, they just wanted to create. “People who admire the independent spirit that unites these artists are awed by their sense of urgency. Their art is genuine. They let it flow from deep within their interior selves, they did not promote their work,” says Monroe. Most of George Voronovsky’s works, for example, have never been seen before. “I’ve been a custodian of his life’s work for the past 38 years,” adds Monroe.



Aurelia “Mama” Johnson had “doodled” all her life, but she said that she is unworthy of being called an artist. Johnson drew with colorful felt-tip markers. Her forms are filled with unending circles that spiral and overlap. The lines continue beyond the forms, across the paper to go on owhere and everywhere. Best known for her “missionary girls,” Johnson also drew “aliestos,” her endearing term for aliens. She rendered fish, snakes and flowers to o. She was surprised that people were interested in her images.

The show is accompanied by an exhibition catalog with a specially commissioned poem by Campbell McGrath about artists' urge to create. Titled *Florida Primitives*, the poem starts: “All Florida artists are primitives, so feral in their soil, so lush, endemic and elemental . . . All Florida artists are outsiders, outliers, highwaymen, boundary-crossers, pilgrims, exiles . . . ,” and ends with: “art is an urge as irresistible as Florida.” The state, after all, continues to be known for its high strangeness. Home to 21 million people and growing more every day – especially after the pandemic – Florida also attracts more than 100 million tourists each year, adding to its population. The warm weather has also historically attracted homeless citizens from the colder regions, and people who live on the margins. Since its beginnings, Florida has always been known as a curious destination for artists of all types. Often what happens in Florida can serve as a lens to view upcoming cultural trends for the rest of the country too. The exhibition catalogue explores how, over time, the vocabulary that is used to describe these “outsider” artists has evolved as the art world shifts its perception about what art is, and what art can be. “None of these artists were trained technicians, yet they each found their own way to technically transcribe their intuitions,” adds Monroe.

The History of Outsider Art

The interest in what is frequently called Outsider Art began in the early 20th-century with psychiatrists who studied artists who were institutionalized. In 1922, the book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* became influential to the Surrealists. Later, in 1948, Jean Dubuffet and others founded the *Compagnie de l'Art Brut*, a collection of what they called “raw art” – art made outside the traditions of fine art. According to **Kathleen Goncharov**, the Senior Curator of the Boca Raton Museum of Art: “This interest has recently increased exponentially, as more mainstream institutions celebrate these kinds of artists. ‘Outsider’ artists are now most definitely ‘In.’ Many controversial terms have been bandied about to describe them, such as *self-taught* (in addition to ‘outsider’), but no truly definitive name yet. I suggest we call all creative works that are arresting, intriguing, and interesting conceptually, as simply ‘art’ and leave it at that. Jean Dubuffet said it best when he declared that *art’s best moments are when it forgets what its own name is*,” says Goncharov. “Artists create – that’s what they do.”



Purvis Young (pictured circa 1995, Miami) created thousands of paintings of the Overtown inner city neighborhood. They are referred to as visual revelations of a moral vision, often painted on scrap wood. In 2018, he was posthumously inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame. His work is found in several collections, including the American Folk Art Museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Boca Raton Museum of Art, Rubell Museum, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the High Museum of Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

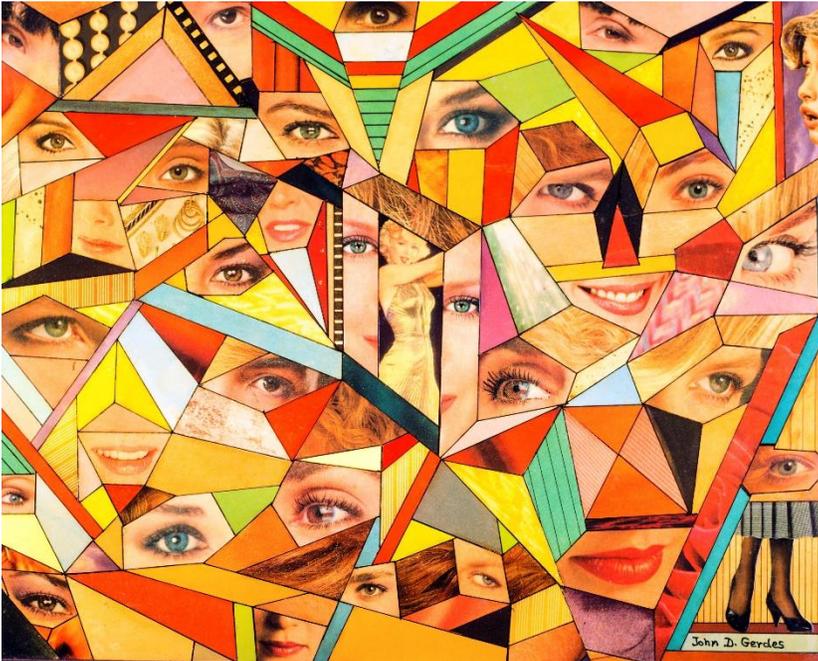
Up until 20 years ago, this work was not widely accepted as fine art. It wasn’t shown in museums and professionals from the art world looked down upon it. “This challenges the primary beliefs of traditional artmaking and has added a lot to the plurality of art,” says Monroe. “Being surrounded by such a large collection of artworks made by self-taught artists is invigorating. Especially because of their visual resolve to express themselves without convention.”



Ruby “Miss Ruby” Williams lives and paints beneath a wooden lean-to from which she can oversee the sale of the fruits and vegetables that she grows. Williams’ produce stand is along the deserted stretch of highway near Lakeland. People zooming by, along State Road 60 through Bealsville, easily read her vivid and bold marketing signs. Most of her paintings have life-lessons, offering “It will get Better” and “Tired of Being the Good Guy,” and “Shut Your Mouth.” There, her harvest includes black-eyed peas, turnips, strawberries, watermelons, and collard greens.

No Distance

These artists were not learning from their predecessors, their works are all coming from deep within themselves. Many of them dealt with deep emotional loss in their lives, and debilitating conflict. Yet at the same time they each experienced an overwhelming surge of creativity in their lives. "A lot of times, when going to see a museum or gallery show the viewer experiences a sense of distance, exhibitions can feel standoffish," says Monroe. "Here, there is no distance between you and these self-taught artists. I think it's because the work is so visceral. There's no pretense whatsoever, no artifice, there are no rules."



The "inlaid paintings" of John Gerdes appear to be made by assembling small wooden pieces, but each one is tediously painted to mimic varieties of wood. He incorporated an array of textures, knots, and grains to further delight the eye. Gerdes' electronically-driven sculptures are three-dimensional versions of his geometric-perspective based artwork. Using discarded computer circuit boards, he constructed elaborate edifices and occasionally lighting fixtures.

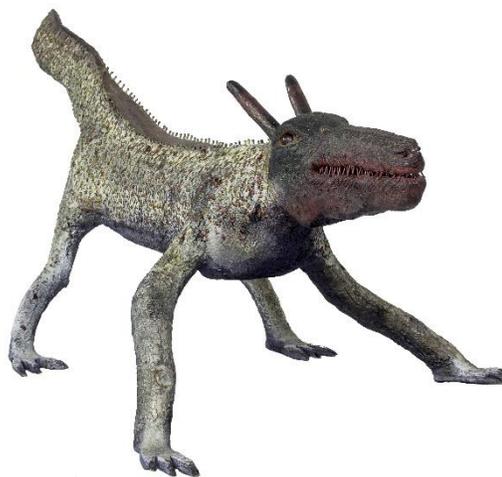
Most of the artists in this exhibition worked in total isolation. There were no political points to be made. These are people who created solely by delving into their own psyche and expressing themselves purely. Their art is not part of anything else except their own reality, they were not following canon. "There's nothing between you and their art because it is so heartfelt," adds Monroe. "This project gives you a glimpse into their psyche, which is so different from ours. Their whole being comes across. **As the title suggests, they were driven to create.**"



Alyne Harris compulsively mixes and feverishly applies paints to canvas boards, lost to the process and seemingly oblivious to the pieces she has produced once they are completed. It is as if the images materialize, conjured by her unrestrained brushstrokes. Her subjects include landscapes, slaves and churchgoers. She also paints what she calls "haints," devilish creatures whose open mouths sometimes reveal angels.

Virtual Art Experiences from the Museum's Digital Galleries

The Boca Raton Museum of Art has created virtual tours and activities for art lovers from around the world to enjoy online, including this [exclusive video presentation by Gary Monroe](#) discussing the lives and work of under-recognized Florida artists; and [Only in Florida! Your Story, Your Art](#) with Dr. Caren Neile, a dynamic performance/lecture that weaves together the creative impulses and talents of storytellers and outsider visual artists – both groups who were long considered unworthy of serious recognition and study (funded through a grant from the Florida Humanities with funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities). Support is provided by Art Bridges Foundation for the Museum's virtual programming [#BocaMuseumatHome](#) and [#KeepKidsSmartwithArt](#).



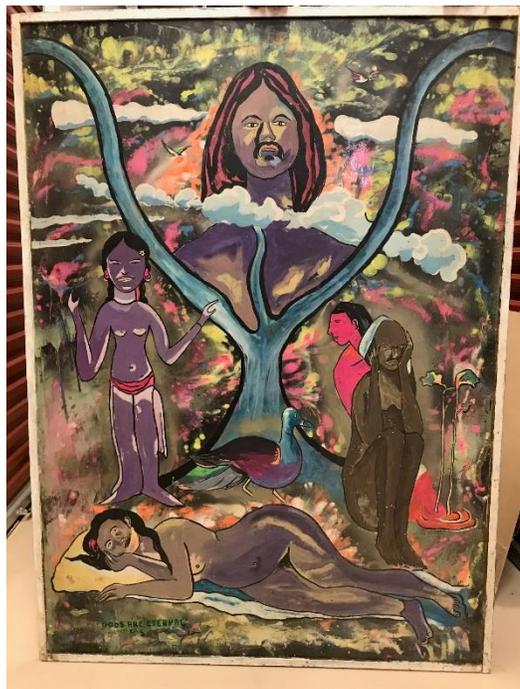
Ozzie Lee "OL" Samuels' grandmother told him that when he gets sad he should carve, for he was a forlorn youngster. She suggested that he use a thread spool and a knife to fashion little animals and thereby relieve anxiety. Instead, he learned to create beasts from trunks of trees and their heavy roots. Soon thereafter he built "skeletons" and the extremities of creatures from knots of wood. By mixing sawdust, paint and glue, he concocted a substance to use as "skin" for his figures whose basic forms he constructed with two-by-fours. His sculptures defined themselves: "The wood talks to you, like when you're cooking," says Samuels. He blows his breath into his cupped hands and rubbed them over the sculptures, infusing his life into his creations. "The state you're in always comes through in the piece."



In her art, as in her life, little comes between **Kathy d'Adesky's** thoughts and her actions. Her paintings are bold and uninhibited with little interest in delicacy, but they are full of the paranoia and anxiety that fueled their creation. She applied paint quickly and densely. The illusion of flight seems real in her birds, due to the intense energy that she paints into them. During her life she has battled with emotional and neurological damage.

More About the Exhibition and the Catalogue

After originating at the Boca Raton Museum of Art through September 5, the exhibition will travel to the Tampa Museum of Art (November 4, 2021 – May 22, 2022), and then to the Mennello Museum of American Art (June 10, 2022 – October 16, 2022). The exhibition catalogue, published by the Boca Raton Museum of Art, is available for purchase at the museum store: bocamuseum.org/visit/boca-raton-museum-store.



At ninety-one years of age, **Milton Ellis** became homeless after a freak tornado barreled through his New Smyrna Beach residence during January of 2007. His personal possessions now filled two grocery bags while his large reverse-paintings on Mylar, which had been rolled-up and stowed away for thirty years, somehow remained unscathed by nature's fury. Through these paintings, Milton had expressed his vision of a pending apocalypse. He elaborated further on this theme in his manifesto, *The Drama of Man in the Universe*.

Media Contacts:

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Artwork Captions

George Voronovsky, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Watercolor on cardboard, 10.75 x 15.5 inches. Copyright the artist's estate.

Aurelia "Mama" Johnson, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Markers collage on board, 12.5 x 17.5 inches. Copyright the artist's estate.

Purvis Young, *Untitled*, (n.d.). House paint on wood, 40 x 24 inches. Copyright the artist's estate.

Ruby "Miss Ruby" Williams, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Paint on plywood, 24 x 48 inches. Copyright the artist.

John Gerdes, *Looking at You*, (n.d.). Collage, 11 x 14 inches. Copyright the artist's estate.

Alyne Harris, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Paint on canvas, 24 x 36 inches. Copyright the artist.

Ozzie Lee (OL) Samuels, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Wood and paint, 18.25 x 27 x 55.25 inches. Copyright the artist's estate.

Kathy d'Adesky, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 inches. Copyright Katherine Marie d'Adesky estate.

Milton Ellis, *Untitled*, (n.d.). Paint on Mylar, 58 x 42 inches. Copyright the artist's estate.

About the Museum

Kicking off its eighth decade in 2021, the Boca Raton Museum of Art encompasses a creative campus that includes the Museum in Mizner Park and the Art School. As one of South Florida's cultural landmarks, the Museum has provided cultural and artistic service to the community, and to many visitors from around the world, since it was founded by artists in 1950. Visit bocamuseum.org/visit/virtual-visits to enjoy the Museum's current online content, including video tours and digital gallery guides. Support for [#BocaMuseumatHome](https://www.instagram.com/BocaMuseumatHome) and [#KeepKidsSmartwithArt](https://www.instagram.com/KeepKidsSmartwithArt) virtual programming is provided by Art Bridges Foundation. Museum hours, admission prices and more visitor information available at bocamuseum.org/visit.

About Gary Monroe

Gary Monroe is a Florida photographer and author. He received a master's degree in fine arts from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Monroe has photographed people and culture in numerous countries and throughout Florida, including the endings of the old-world Jewry that once characterized Miami's South Beach, with extensive travels throughout Haiti, tourists on their "rite of passage" at Disney World, and corporate effects on the landscape. In addition, Mr. Monroe has written ten books about Florida art, including the seminal book, *The Highwaymen: Florida's African-American Landscape Painters*, which explore uncharted cultural territories and constitute a meaningful part of our social history.