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Examining Evangelicalism: The Power of Signage, Painting and Sculpture in the Southern Yard Show

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Evangelicalism Examined: The Power of Signage, Painting, and Sculpture, in the Southern Yard Show

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Arts
of Bard College

by
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"Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all."

-William Faulkner, “Absalom, Absalom!”

**Introduction**

On January 20th, 2019, while the Saints were playing in overtime before the Super Bowl, I stepped out of a bar in New Orleans to answer the phone. It was Suzi Altman, the director of the Mississippi Folk Art Foundation and the person in charge of protecting the legacy of self-taught artist Herman D. Dennis’s Margaret’s Grocery in Vicksburg, Mississippi. I had previously sent her an email about visiting the site, spelling the Reverend Dennis’s name as Harmon rather than Herman. My mistake was not unfounded; the misprint was common both online and in print. Suzi corrected me, asked if I had found my information from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, and warmly welcomed my visit, looking to set the record straight and share the history. The spelling mistake has been rectified online over the past several months, but I find that this error speaks volumes.

The error is demonstrative of the lack of consideration and respect for a long-running artistic subset often referred to as ‘yard art,’ specifically in the American South. ‘Yard art’ refers to art that is unique to its location, usually the home of the artist, and functions as a simultaneously public and private installation. This includes sculptures, paintings, and signs that coalesce to form a miniature environment reflective of the artist’s vision. The Reverend Herman Dennis’ artwork at ‘Margaret’s Grocery’ has been featured in several exhibitions and used as an example of self-taught art in several universities across the country; all the while, the first name of the artist was widely misprinted. Others spelled his name correctly, and these spelling discrepancies made it so that information on the artist was scattered and difficult to access. My
mistake and confusion are indicative of the complexities and issues that arise when researching art made by people with no formal education who did not begin making art with the expectation that it would ever be studied. I highlight this particular moment in my process to illuminate the lack of attention that has been given to the subject until relatively recently.

In writing this project I hope to give due diligence to this category of art history that has been relegated as a niche rather than treated as a subset of contemporary art. I will examine and critique the structural underpinnings of how we understand yard art and how it falls under the following umbrella terms: ‘outsider,’ ‘vernacular,’ ‘visionary,’ ‘naïve,’ ‘folk,’ and, as I will most often employ, ‘self-taught.’ The driving narrative of this project seeks to analyze artistic spaces created in the homes of people who have taken on a religious title or authority—this includes the visual and textual patterns that emerge, the personal biographies and intentions of the artist, the religious implications, as well as the role of the museum. This includes examinations about the manner in which race, gender, and class intersect with self-taught art, ranging from the content itself to the way it is perceived by art historians, working in a patriarchal, white, and capitalistic art world.

While starting to write this project I felt compelled to better understand the sites and experience the immersiveness of the art, so in January of 2019, I traveled to Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama. I first visited Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden in Summerville, Georgia, followed by Reverend Herman Dennis’ Margaret’s Grocery in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and finally Joe Minter’s African Village in America in Birmingham, Alabama. As soon as I visited Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden in Georgia, I realized how difficult it is to understand the physicality and sheer magnitude of these sites solely from reading about them and looking at photographs. The pictures of the sites that I saw online before I visited could not capture the
overwhelming and encompassing scale all of these spaces and the experience of having the work surround you. Observing the towns, the artists, and the people who work at the spaces gave insight into how these art environments help to form the Southern narrative. It spoke volumes to the commercial and commodifiable aspects of the yard show and illuminated what is preserved and what falls away. With that in mind, much of the artwork I discuss in this chapter I experienced firsthand. The only exception is the artist Missionary Mary Proctor, in Tallahassee, Florida, whose work I did not have the opportunity to see. Her home, although a factor, is not central to my analysis of her work. I primarily focus on the subject matter, stylistic aspects of her paintings, commercial ventures, and identity politics. I did original research and therefore some of what I describe in this paper reflects the current state of the sites, which does not always match descriptions from sources published years earlier.

I am not sure at what particular moment in time it occurred to me to that this was the most important and personal senior project I could write, but it seems that it stemmed from a desire to better understand where I came from, what I have experienced, and what I saw growing up that I did not have a name for. The yard show, the decoration of the outside of a home often in an outlandish way, is relatively commonplace in the American South. When I write about the South in this project and make references to the South as one entity, I am referring to what is considered the ‘Deep South’ - South Carolina, where I am from, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana. One artist examined in chapter 3, Missionary Mary Proctor, is from Tallahassee, Florida, but given the cultural similarities between northern Florida, its relative proximity to Georgia, I think that it counts for the purposes of this project (in spite of perceptions I may have at other times).
It was not until I began examining these artists and studying what ‘self-taught’ art entails that I realized my mother is a self-taught outsider artist. She is not a total outsider to the arts, my father is a Southern muralist with a B.A. in painting and an M.F.A. in screenwriting, but she has had no formal artistic training. I did not think of my mother this way because she makes art in a rather business-like manner (not totally unlike other self-taught artists), working on commission and mastering a style that people like. It was not until late March writing this project that I had a childhood memory that I was just recently able to contextualize within what I had been writing. When I was around eight years old, my mother was just gaining recognition as an artist and beginning to sell her work and attract small but meaningful amounts of attention. My mother was also a huge David Byrne fan, following his blog, receiving email updates, and listening to the Talking Heads as though they were a new group. David Byrne at some point, somehow, heard of my mother and set up a time to visit her studio on a day that he had a show in town, which my parents, of course, had tickets to. The day seemed like the most important day in the world, prepped and talked about for months among my parents and their friends as she had been communicating with his team for months. In the end, he stood her up, absolutely devastating my mother who still found it in her to go to the show that night. Chapter One in this project explores the work of Reverend Howard Finster, who was partially made famous by David Byrne’s collection of his work and Finster’s cover of the Talking Heads album, *Little Creatures*. I had never really thought much about why David Byrne wanted to visit my mother’s studio, a relatively unknown artist, until I put it together that she was an ‘outsider’ artist he was considering courting, or being the first one to collect. This revelation, simple as it may be, helped me to understand why I find this question of capitalism and ‘self-taught’ art so intriguing. It illuminates a notion that I will problematize concerning the obsession with ‘purity’ in self-
taught art that at once requires the art to be available for consumption and yet remain unaffected by this very consumption.

In writing this project so intrinsically based on questions of identity and capitalism, I feel I must address my position. I am a white Southerner looking at a culture that is both mine and at the same time, not mine at all. The connection that I feel with the South runs deep; the Southern experience, be it language, visual culture, or music, conveys an innate sense of pride and understanding that I believe would be impossible for an outsider to truly grasp. That being said, blackness and poverty and evangelicalism are not my background by any stretch. I recognize that I must confront what it means for me to write about work by untrained and largely uneducated artists from the lofty position of academic writing. I believe that the South has something that is special, an essence that is indescribable to those who have not grown up in it, and there is no other subject that I felt was more worthy of my time. I hope to capture something unique about these manifestations.

I have a particular interest in the textuality in these pieces and the way it reflects evangelical history and doctrine. I believe that understanding evangelicalism and what makes it different from mainline Protestantism is central to understanding these artists (their motivations, their visions, and the texts that they use). I have included an overview of evangelical Christianity and recounted a history that is often forgotten. Evangelical Christians are known for their strong influence in political elections and their baffling, unwavering support for Donald Trump, but it is not immediately clear how evangelicals came to be the largest group of Christians in the United States.¹

¹ https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/ The Pew Research Center reported that 70.6% of Americans identify as Christians. Of this 70.6%, 25% identify as evangelical Protestant. The South has higher percentages of evangelicals: In Alabama, that number is 49%, In Georgia, it is 38%, In Mississippi, 41%, In Louisiana 27%, and 35% in South Carolina. Tennessee has the highest rate at 52%.
The spitfire and radical image of Southern spirituality further enforce the cultural isolation of the South. Southern Baptists, Methodists, and at times, even Presbyterians have been cast as the dark horse of American Protestantism, whose members have been regarded as poor, fanatical, and conservative. The South’s resolute scriptural literalism confounds the outside world, especially given that the intense racism and classism within the South is incongruous with biblical lessons. I will attempt to deconstruct the formation of evangelicalism in an effort to understand its contemporary manifestation. There is a notion that evangelicalism has always existed in the South; however, Baptists and Methodists consisted of less than half of the white Christian population as late as 1830. I will examine how the rise of Southern evangelicalism created a spirit with a distinct set of politics, language, and visual culture.

Evangelicalism has not always been the status quo in the South. The colonial origins of southern states were largely British and fell within an Anglican protestant tradition. Christine Leigh Heyrman, a historian who focuses on American Protestantism, traces the origins of evangelical Christianity, grouping Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians together because of their belief in the importance of rebirth in her book *Southern Cross*. Prior to the 1740s, religion did not play a substantial role in the South. Most white southerners identified as Anglicans, which would become Episcopalianism in the post-Revolutionary War era, however, changing demographics in the South gave way to new ideologies. In the 1750s a group called the “Separate Baptists” relocated from New England to North Carolina and began to spread throughout the colonies, as did Methodists in the 1760s. These Presbyterian, Baptists, and

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Methodist missionaries all believed and were vigorous in their assertion that “spiritual rebirth is essential to salvation.”

Anglicanism, once the dominant religion of the South, preached a moderate form of Christianity often described as stately and gentle. Anglicanism focuses on the possibility for differences within interpretations of the Bible and, unlike evangelicalism, believes that mankind is ultimately good-natured. Much to the South’s benefit, it also often alludes to natural hierarchies that allowed the “planter class” to justify their contradictory notions that all humans are good while simultaneously asserting that the rich are better than the poor, men better than women, and white people more worthy than black people. Throughout the eighteenth century, Evangelicalism criticized the contradictory nature in Anglicanism and derided the religion as lazy and elitist. They decried the hypocrisy of Southern Anglicans, particularly the elite faction, and their penchant for lavish balls, foxhunting, and general hedonism. Anglican leaders painted Baptists as dissenters and criminals. Baptist leaders were often arrested for preaching without a license, and subsequently, their followers would protest and rally for their release. Even those in the middle classes who did not partake in any sort of Southern hedonism preferred a harmonious and hierarchical society to one considered aggressive and overly moralistic. Most social classes of Southerners were not keen on following the stringent evangelical tenets, which considered the following sinful: drinking, joking, barbecues, balls, horse races, gambling, dancing, cockfighting, and bars.

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5 Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 17.
The most reprehensible aspect of Baptists and Methodists to many Southerners was the practice of full body baptisms; Southerners were fascinated and at once horrified. Heyrman describes the baptisms as such:

Mass baptisms that followed revivals afforded a truly riveting spectacle: new converts, men in the lead, lined the river’s edge, solemnly awaiting the minister, who laid his hand on the head of each individual and prayed aloud for each person […] after the converts waded into the river, they were tilted backward and briefly submerged by preachers. It was that ritual climax, commonly known as “being dipped” the sight of a “watery grave,” closing over the faces over the believers before they resurfaced, sputtering but reborn, that inspired the greatest fascination and horror among non-Baptists.”

The radical nature of Baptist and Methodist baptisms was a deterrent for many middle-class Southerners who otherwise may have aligned themselves with anti-elitist evangelical messages. This radical display seemed ridiculous to many and dangerous at worst. Baptists also touched each other frequently throughout sermons; they kissed and washed each other’s feet, much to the horror of other Southerners. Methodists were considered less radical because they did not force the dipping in a body of water for the unchristened or the christened but made it a choice. They participated in secret meetings called “love feasts” in which small groups of similar age, race, and class split up to talk about their spirituality. The idea appears innocent and not considerably far from what is referred to as “small group” or “bible study” in contemporary times; however, the secretive qualities of the meetings frightened and intrigued Southerners, further ostracizing them from their Anglican counterparts. Throughout the mid-eighteenth century, evangelicals struggled to take hold within the South and were seen as a fringe movement, contrary to the current idea that evangelicalism has always been ubiquitous with the South. Without understanding the difficulties evangelicalism faced during its first few decades in the South, it is hard to comprehend how such a radical religion took hold of an entire region.

7 Heyrman, Southern Cross, 20.
The Revolutionary War provided a gap that allowed evangelicalism to take hold in the South. With the unexpected declaration of American Independence, many Anglican clergies returned to England and the presence of the Church of England in the colonies was destroyed. Although the Church of England resurfaced in 1789 as the Protestant Episcopal Church of America, it had largely lost its footing and many Christians found themselves with evangelicalism as their only option. Baptist churches and Methodists churches, although often pitted against one another, had essentially the same ideology and agreed on the basic tenets: heaven and hell, salvation, and God against Satan. The same was true for black and white churches, and freed black people and lower class whites often worshipped together until the post-Civil War period. Kenneth K. Bailey points out in *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* that the systemic exclusion of black worshippers first began in 1872 when the Southern Baptist Convention did not include black congregations within their semi-official census. The separation was officiated when a convocation representing black Southern Baptist churches met in Montgomery, Alabama to form the Foreign Mission Baptist Convention of the United States. In 1870 the Southern Methodist church had a convention in which they transferred 70,000 black church members out and into what is now called the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in America. In 1898 Presbyterians followed suit and formed an Afro-American

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8 By 1790, 14% of southern whites and 4% of southern blacks were members of Baptist, Methodists, or Presbyterian Churches. In 1830 the numbers had crept up to nearly half of the population attending evangelical services, and by 1900 3,200,000 out of 6,200,000 southern whites belonged to the Southern Baptist Convention, Methodist Episcopal, or Presbyterian. Black Southerners had been forced out and formed their own Baptists conventions and African Methodist Episcopal churches. Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 22.

Presbyterian Church. Segregation within the evangelical church from this point on became as much of a part of their doctrine as the Second Coming.  

This is development is unsurprising given that the origins of Christianity and slavery in this country were often justified by the claim that the enslavement of African people was noble because their conversion saved them from Hell. It also set forth a legal justification that did not allow those who had come from “Christian nations” to be enslaved, with state laws changing frequently over the years in order to close loopholes that would allow slaves to be free on the basis of their status as Christians. During the Civil War and the Reconstruction period, the narrative within white evangelicalism shifted from that of an egalitarian basis to a patriarchal and white supremacist agenda. Although mainline Protestants had historically shunned Baptists and Methodists for their belief in rebirth and full-body adult baptisms, they aligned themselves with the Confederacy prior to and during the war. This contributed significantly to the cultural isolation the South experienced and solidified evangelical ideas as a part of Southern identity. Kenneth Bailey quotes a Mississippi preacher who, towards the end of the War, summed up the new Southern mindset as such: “If we cannot gain our political independence, let us establish our mental independence.”

During the Reconstruction era there emerged a new economic system replacing the plantation system, referred to as the “New South.” In his book *Hard, Hard Religion: Interracial Faith in the Poor South*, John Hayes examines the way that this new economic system

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disenfranchised and impoverished poor white and black people, leading them from a fringe evangelical sect of Christianity he refers to as “folk Christianity.” To understand the way poverty spread so rapidly in the South and its ties to Baptists and Methodists, one must understand the new economic systems. The massive wage gap between the North and the South is reflective of the economic collapse the South suffered immediately after the war and, furthermore, its inability to maintain an economic system not based on low agrarian wages. Sharecroppers, former slaves, and poor whites were permanently indebted to landlords and merchants while industrial workers were paid the least out of any region in the country because “labor costs were Southern manufacturers key asset in national competition.” As coal mining spread “capitalists outside the region were the primary owners of the extractive industries.” Despite the widespread practice of sharecropping and an agricultural economy, “four-fifths of everything the regions farmers ate and wore was brought from well-capitalized industries outside the South.” The spirit of the Southern economy, in its attempt to break into new markets, remained one that favored the elite and relied upon the lowest wages possible.

Evangelical rhetoric began to emphasize patriarchy, laws, and white supremacy towards the end of the nineteenth century. It viewed poverty as a moral failure, despite the significant amount of impoverished Baptists and Methodists. Evangelicals began to form their own seminaries and schools for their clergy and young people. This new exposure to theology and scholarship enabled the two sects to push a pro-slavery agenda. They began to create “elaborate treatises defending slavery as a divinely ordained institution for the paternalistic edification of

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14 In 1938 the Report on Economic Conditions of the South noted that the “per capita income in the south was $314 compared to $604 outside of the region […] taxable property in the south was $463 per capita, compared to $1370 in the North East; and with 28% of the nations population, the region contributed less than 12% of the nations income tax collection.”

slaves.”\textsuperscript{16} Baptist and Methodist clergymen rallied around the Confederacy and advocated for nationalism. While freed lacks and lower class whites continued to worship together despite the steady growing racism in the church, the Reconstruction era led to the mandate of separation and expulsion of all black church members, leaving them to form their own congregations.

Freed blacks and slaves had been forming their own Baptist and Methodist ideology throughout the nineteenth century prior to the Civil War. While white evangelicals were busy restructuring their ideals, black Baptists and Methodists combined evangelicalism with West African traditions. Black evangelicalism, however, focused on communal spirituality. Hayes notes that salvation was a communal event based on the wellbeing of the congregation, baptism and conversion were critical to initiation, and spirituality did not end in the church.\textsuperscript{17} During this time, black evangelicals began to celebrate ancient Israelites for their communal spirit and emphasis of collective health for God’s people. Their Christianity, as Hayes points out, did not create such strict divisions between secular and non-secular, and thus their evangelicalism was extended much further and was considerably more imaginative than white evangelicalism. Despite the turn towards West African influences in the black Church and the opposing turn towards violent white supremacy in the white Church, both groups followed very similar trajectories in shifting their messages. In the spirit of a new prosperous and highly capitalistic “New South,” both black and white Baptists and Methodists returned to emphasizing “austerity” and moral uprightness.

According to Hayes, the white master patriarchy in white Baptist and Methodist churches turned to austerity because of the humiliation they felt from losing both the war and the slaves

\textsuperscript{16} Hayes, \textit{Hard, Hard}, 28.
\textsuperscript{17} Hayes, \textit{Hard, Hard}, 28.
upon whom they had projected a paternalistic Christian mission. Black evangelicals who were not forced into sharecropping began to lose their sense of communality in favor of the capitalistic harshness of the New South. Episcopalians and Presbyterians increasingly became the church of the well-to-do, as they required a seminary degree for clergymen and thus became associated with middle and upper classes. Baptists and Methodists were once again seen as extremists as other Protestant branches regained their footing. They remained judgmental and austere, but their demographic was mostly made up mostly of poor and disenfranchised people, which still constituted a majority in the South.¹⁸

The Project

In chapter one, I write about Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden in Summerville, Georgia. I look at the visual culture of Paradise Garden, the creation of the garden, its influence, and the question of preservation. I also examine Finster’s persona and the role evangelicalism, race, and class factor into his fame. In chapter two, I examine the yard-shows of two artists, Joe Minter’s African Village in America and Reverend Herman Dennis’s Margaret’s Grocery. They both used their yards not just as places of self-expression and worship, but as missionary outposts intended to spread their message. These yard shows, in Alabama and Mississippi respectively, are indicative of a larger problem in the self-taught arts field: preservation. The question of preservation still hangs over the African Village in America as Minter ages, and Margaret’s Grocery is currently holding on to what is left, unsure about the future holds. I explore how this

¹⁸ A 1922 study showed that of 22,000 rural churches associated with the Southern Baptist Convention, roughly 12% were represented at state convention meetings, and around 6% had delegates at the annual SBC meeting. A 1927 study that Kenneth Bailey included in his introduction of White Southern Protestantism in the Twentieth Century showed that “4% of Southern Methodist clergy were seminary graduates, about 11% had college degrees, and approximately 32% had no schooling beyond the elementary level.”
issue exposes the capitalistic drive and commodification of the niche self-taught art market. In the third chapter, I analyze Missionary Mary Proctor’s work in Tallahassee, Florida. This includes connections between her visionary instincts, black feminism, and her entrepreneurial drive. I cross-examine her style and the treatment of her work with notable self-taught artists, Nellie Mae Rowe and Sister Gertrude Morgan. I look at the scholarship surrounding their work and the posthumous presence of their art in the museum. Nellie Mae Rowe’s ‘playhouse,’ and Sister Gertrude Morgan’s Everlasting Gospel Mission both no longer stand, and thus I draw connections about what this may mean in the future for Missionary Mary Proctor. Finally, in the conclusion, I looked at museum data on diversity, what the trend of self-taught art actually means, and scholarship about the role of the museum and race. I also talk about the state of evangelicalism today, the critics of the self-taught moment, and what I predict the future holds for the field. Although these issues are complex and the reality can seem dim, I have a positive outlook and I am hopeful about what the inclusion of self-taught art within art history can bring forth. I learned more than I could have ever imagined when writing this project, and feel I have a new understanding regarding art in the South and what it means to be a Southern art historian in 2019.
Chapter One - Georgia’s Self-Taught Evangelical Alien: Unpacking Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden

The Dawn of Paradise Garden

On January 17th, 2019 I arrived at the Reverend Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden in the small North Georgia town of Summerville. I had rented an Airbnb advertised as “Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden Suite #1” positioned just across the street from the famed self-taught artist Howard Finster’s gargantuan yard-show. It was an overcast today and much of the abundance had worn from the garden, eighteen years after the artist’s death. The colors were faded, the vegetation was waning, and the chain-link fence surrounding the property did not exude ‘paradise’. All of that aside, it was easy to understand the magic of Paradise Garden that had attracted visitors from across the country for close to forty years. I had been studying the garden for several months and had been aware of Howard Finster for years, but nothing I read and no photographs I looked at could accurately convey the scale and grandeur of Paradise Garden. It is filled to the brim with Finster’s painting, sculptures, and small chapels. Visiting provided a window into the creation of Paradise Garden and the inner psychology of Howard Finster. Paradise Garden, like the other evangelical yard shows I will explore, is meant to excite and spread the evangelical message. While I did not leave Paradise Garden an evangelical convert, I began to understand what an effective tool Finster had created and felt myself falling for his enchanting rhetoric.

The Reverend Howard Finster claims to have had his first vision at the age of three when he saw his recently deceased sister, Abbie Rose, descend from a set of steps in the sky in all white, the stairs appearing in front of her and disappearing as she stepped down. He cried out to her, but she just looked at him before going back up the stairs. In the book *Howard Finster,*
Stranger from Another World: Man of Visions Now on This Earth, an “as-told-to autobiography” composed of nine years of recording Finster’s soliloquies to create a chronological narrative of his life in his words, describes seeing his sister as the foundation for all of his visions to come. He boldly proclaims that this pivotal moment was his sister’s way of telling him, “Howard, you’re gonna be a man of visions.” Finster embraced early the otherworldliness of evangelical Christianity; he became a ‘born-again’ Christian at the age of thirteen during a Baptist tent revival sermon and at the age of sixteen he began to spread the gospel. By 1940 Finster was employed as a full-time Baptist pastor and garnered a reputation in his small town in Georgia as a traveling tent revival preacher. His first attempt at public preaching with signage involved him painting on a car “The wages of sin is death. Your soul is most precious. Seek Jesus today,” and driving around with a fellow revivalist preacher. Finster would sit on top of his car preaching out of a megaphone and refusing to quit until they had a large enough audience. He understood the power of energetic evangelical sermonizing and learned how to hone this skill to become one of Georgia’s best known artists today.

Howard Finster thrived and capitalized on theatrics, and he often retold his revelatory origin story. Although the particulars of Finster’s famed epiphany varied with each re-telling, a few facts remain consistent. The epiphany usually took place in January 1976 when a human-like face appeared on his finger, instructing him to make holy art, no less than 5,000 paintings. Finster quickly made his first painting on a dollar bill, often times describing painting George Washington, but sometimes Elvis. The story relied mostly on his audience and was often

20 The Reverend Howard Finster was born in Valley Head, Alabama in 1916 and was one of thirteen siblings.
21 Bradshaw, Howard Finster, 47.
embellished depending on the circumstance. Finster employed his old-school Baptist preacher skills, reading his crowd and reacting appropriately. Norman Girardot, a religion professor at Lehigh University, wrote an extensive biography titled *Envisioning Howard Finster* after spending several years visiting and observing the artist. He studied the manner in which the bible influenced Finster’s work. He asserted that the artist did not begin making religious artwork because of this one definitive moment, but rather the Finster’s had an intrinsic understanding of the “aural and visual culture of King James Bible phraseology, Bible pictures, diagrams, church talks, and apocalyptic charts […] roadside crosses, tent revivals, Baptist camp meetings, traveling carnivals, sideshows, itinerant preachers and salesman, religious yard art and flea markets.” Evangelicalism was and is incredibly expansive in terms of the sheer breadth of material culture that it attached itself to, which was indelible to Finster’s mythos. As Girardot enumerates, the language of Baptist and evangelical preaching heavily defines Paradise Garden in Summerville, GA, and the persona of Reverend Howard Finster.

Howard Finster began to construct Paradise Garden in the early sixties, years before he had his vision instructing him to make holy art, with a goal of creating a museum comprising humanity’s inventions. Many of the sculptures in Paradise Garden are reminiscent of parks, roadside attractions, and grottos, particularly the Ave Maria Grotto in Cullman, Alabama (Figure 1). Finster grew up in proximity to the Ave Maria Grotto and was very much aware of the attention these sites of this nature attracted. The Paradise Garden Foundation notes in their

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23 Girardot, *Envisioning Howard*, 9
description of Finster’s Garden that he was likely influenced by the Ave Maria Grotto. The grottos are one of Paradise Garden’s most important structures, lining the entrance to the property and effectively creating a wall (Figure 2). The grottos are chock full with memorabilia creating a mosaic and alluding to the eclecticism inside the property. The Ave Maria Grotto was constructed in the first half of the twentieth century by Brother Joseph Zoettl, a Benedictine monk born in 1878, who made miniature replicas of 125 of the most famous religious monuments in the world. The figures are cemented into a rock wall, or grotto, cascading up a hill and creating a monument in and of itself. The Ave Maria Grotto not only looks similar to Finster’s grotto but was plausibly the inspiration for Finster’s original idea to build a museum commemorating humanity’s inventions. There were several other prominent roadside attractions that Finster’s family would visit during road trips that likely played a substantial role in Finster’s material (such as Ripley’s Believe it or Not Museum or Rock City in Georgia), many of which contained kitschy rock sculptures similar to those in Paradise Garden. The idea that Finster visited similar places as a kid and was aware that they attracted tourists and relative fame has been suggested as a possible motive for Finster’s creations, leading some to raise doubts about his artistic ‘authenticity’.

A Visual Analysis of Paradise Garden

The epicenter of the garden is The World’s Folk Art Church, a structure that resembles a farmhouse with a tower precariously fastened onto it. The tower has four levels and the second

26 "What is the Ave Maria Grotto?," Ave Maria Grotto, accessed February 17, 2019, http://www.avemariagrotto.com/about.html
level has a wrap around porch. Thelma Finster, Finster’s daughter, describes it as shaped like a “wedding cake.”

It has a metal steeple made out of mechanical parts that twist to the side (Figure 3). The compound is sprawling and consists of different nooks, shacks, and caves; some of the imagery is religious, some of the portraits cannot be traced to any person in particular, and some are of celebrities, chiefly, Elvis. His vision instructed him to paint five thousand works of religious art, however, the total number of works today is, according to his children, forty-six thousand nine hundred and two paintings.

While many of those forty-six thousand plus paintings are in the homes of private collectors or museum collections, signage remains as a persistent force through Paradise Garden. One could spend hours just reading the biblical verses on the signs that dot the property, looking at the massive sculptures, or examining the iconographic images in the grottos. The fantastical aspects of the yard-show are indicative of Finster’s extraterrestrial psyche and penchant for mixing hardline evangelical Christian ideologies with utopian imagery. The grottos have a fairy-tale like quality to them, with garden gnomes, mushrooms, and flowers cemented into the structure as well as statues of Mary and Jesus (Figure 4). Statues of the Virgin are prominently cemented throughout the grotto, indicating an odd discord between Finster’s espoused evangelicalism and his employment of Catholic icons. Finster, like many self-taught artists who create in spite of limited means, used whatever he could find to make his art, and the Virgin Mary was likely widely available and as a Christian symbol, somewhat in line with his views. Finster created an almost mosaic effect in the walls of the grottos, cementing cracked plates and pot lids with protruding handles in every available space (Figure 5). The effect is a muddled yet telling look into Finster’s evangelical imagination, giving a preview into the mixture of

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28 Bradshaw, Howard Finster, 92.
29 Bradshaw, Howard Finster, 133.
capitalism, evangelical Christianity, and the anti-capitalistic power of found and random objects as assemblage materials.

Paradise Garden today has a substantial amount of imitative paintings created by fans, some of which are such close reproductions that one would have to be considerably familiar with Finster’s work to discern what is genuine and what is not. There is a long hall that makes a L-shape through the property, serving as a gallery for fan’s work. There are also a few prints of his images throughout the property, including a soda machine with his coca cola image replacing the corporate logo. When walking around the garden and trying to determine whether pieces were imitations or originals, I felt that the only paintings I could be sure were Finster’s were murals and paintings that are integral to the space.

I did not get to enter the World’s Folk Art Church, but I did walk around and observe a small chapel that I believe is the most intensely religious aspect of Paradise Garden still standing. In this small chapel, there is a coffin at the forefront with a Howard Finster angel floating above it, pews lining the room, and walls covered in his signs. The signs are intermixed with quotes from the New Testament, the Old Testament, and Finster’s personal doctrine and relationship with God. He does little to distinguish between his thoughts and bible verses, effectively elevating his religious musings to the ecclesial. One sign hanging above a smaller, more diminutive sign reading Matthew 6:27-29, stands out because of its gold metal background and capitalized proclamations painted in dark red (Figure 6). It reads:

HOWARD FINSTER AND GOD- Seventy years hearing and learning about the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob. The God who created our Earth. Years I believed in God. 65 years I tried God. And come to know God as now I know God better than I knowed my Father and Mother or any of my family or anything else on this earth God is my top acquaintance and my top wisdom.
It goes on to describe the power of Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. This sign illuminates Finster’s message and more specifically the way he uses language to convey his relationship with God beyond painting. In the evangelical tradition, one does not need schooling to preach but simply a call to work on behalf of God. Finster uses colloquial language, referring to God as his “top acquaintance” and yet closer to him than anyone in his family.

Preserving Paradise

Eighteen years after Finster’s death, Paradise Garden is both well maintained and at the same time, a shell of what it used to be. Considering how difficult it is to maintain structures like these after the death of the artist (state funds for the arts are scarce, particularly in places like Georgia), it is a small miracle that the site has not been shuttered. After Finster’s death, there was no immediate plan for preservation and the property remained in the family until Chattooga county, where it resides, purchased it in 2011 and handed it over to the Paradise Garden Foundation in 2012. In 2015, the Foundation had poured $700,000 into restoring and restabilizing the garden’s most integral art pieces. The site was in decline after Finster’s death and the community, once peppered with curious fans of Finster, was suffering. Since the renovation, the garden has received an average seven thousand visitors a year and the Summerville has had a revival. Chattooga County has a poverty rate of 22.5%, over ten percentage points higher than the national 12.3% poverty rate. The Foundation believes that

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31 United States Government Census Bureau, "Chattooga County Georgia, Selected Economic Characteristics," American Fact Finder, last modified 2017, accessed April 22, 2019, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF. This information is based on the United States Census Bureau’s American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates, 2013 to 2017. This is an ongoing survey by the Census Bureau sent to 1 in 38 houses.
the presence of a cultural site like Paradise garden can help to alleviate the economic woes of the area via cultural tourism.\textsuperscript{32}

A substantial amount of the art remains, although it does not abound with plants and paintings like in photos from its heyday (Figure 7). Everything I saw in old photos was not necessarily there, for example, the grotto entrance is considerably smaller and does not resemble the cave it used to, however, much of the sculpture made of wood and cement remained. I visited several self-taught art environments in the South within this trip, and Finster’s seemed to be the only one with a plan for maintenance in the future. Paradise Garden has a foundation set up to maintain the property and run a small gift shop and informational center. It has an annual “Finster Fest” with visiting artists and musicians to celebrate the life of Howard Finster. The Airbnb cottages set up by the foundation to accommodate visitors to help fund the maintenance of the garden, charging around $130 a night.

**Howard Finster’s Rhetoric- The Appeal of the Evangelical Alien**

Finster’s garden paintings combine traditional Baptist language with his own prophetic ideas. He considers himself a “stranger from another world” that has been sent to Earth to help convert people until he has to return to this unspecified other world. It is unclear at what point Finster’s narrative shifted from a more traditional evangelical message to one fused with science fiction. Those who have spent time with him noted that his rambling monologues were often hard to follow and at times felt aimless, however, through the chaos of the “Finsterian cycle”

there was a commanding power. Norman Girardot notes in his extensive coverage of Finster that, like in Hebrew and Christian texts, Finster’s contradiction and whimsy are central to his ideology and persona. This sort of fascination with Finster as “crazy” or “eccentric” by the art world can at times be patronizing, as though he is being made into a spectacle rather than being taken seriously as an artist.

Finster effectively broke into mainstream American culture by appearing on Johnny Carson’s *The Tonight Show* in 1983. Girardot describes a particular instance when Finster was on the Johnny Carson show as a moment that was exemplary of Finster’s ability to capitalize on publicity. Carson played the part of someone who had just met a “somewhat laughable alien creature from the rural South,” while Finster performed the role of a secularized, charming, and wacky preacher. When asked why he built Paradise Garden, Finster said that it was “a little like how we all know exactly where and how to scratch an itch.” Finster quickly charmed the audience and Carson, morphing the segment into a “full-blown evangelical preacher strut.” The personalized performance Finster gave to each of his visitors, a job he was well versed in as a former salesman and tent-revival Baptist preacher, centralized around his mythic revelations. Finster argued that he wanted to be famous in order to spread the word of God and Jesus Christ to as many people as possible. Finster defended himself against the criticism that he just wanted money or fame by asserting “even Jesus had to have publicity to be heard.” Cynics were not always convinced it was so simple.

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Finster often reiterated that he had visions all his life, however, he began to consider himself as a mystical figure more and more as his paintings and fame progressed. One telling self-portrait depicts Finster carrying a cross, reading:

I am Howard Finster. A stranger from another world. My father and my mother, My sisters and my brothers, my wife, my children, my grandchildren have really never figured me out. For my kingdom is not of this word. Only my father in heaven knows me. On this planet. And that is why I have been strong and happy, when my work is finished I will go back to the other world. (Figure 8).

Finster here has portrayed himself as existing in two dimensions: the evangelical Baptist setting of Summerville, Georgia and an unspecified otherworld. He pushes the already extreme boundaries of conventional Baptist preacher rhetoric by not just claiming that God personally speaks to him, but claiming to be a “second Noah,” and having visions that transport him to other planets.37

Within Paradise Garden, one easily comes into contact with Finster’s self-proclaimed prophetic identity along with his more whimsical nature. His evangelicalism is at once adamant and stern with biblical verses surrounding the property, and yet makes reference to aliens and promotes Coca Cola and Henry Ford as saviors with as much zeal as he does Jesus. When scholars have searched for a way to understand the force of religion in the South, more so than anywhere else in the United States, they often remark upon the notion of escapism. As Finster declares himself a stranger from another world, he affirms the idea that Southern hardship and poverty is but a blip in eternity. Charles Reagan Wilson, chair of the Southern Studies program at the University of Mississippi, describes Finster’s mixing of the trivial and the spiritual in his essay “Religious Ephemera” as such: “Finster did not draw from the domestic sentimentality of the cardboard mottoes but often preached warnings of apocalypse and doom, with verses from

37 Tom Patterson and Howard Finster, Howard Finster,., 22.
the book of Revelation common. Finster’s Paradise Garden environment, though, was filled with both warnings and comforting sayings.” This tendency that Wilson describes, to blend the benign with the apocalyptical, is exemplified in a painting of man in Finster’s garden; the man wears a suit with religious messages such as, “Get right with God,” “Take time to be holy,” as well as simpler messages like “Henry Ford Built This Car,” and “Don’t leave yourself behind” (Figure 9). Finster’s off-beat philosophy is just so, giving equal weight to the teachings of Revelations and popular culture in a manner that allows the disadvantaged to aggrandize the world around them.

His ability to blend the darker, more extreme aspects of evangelicalism with something that is palpable and charming (such as popular brands and figures) is central to his appeal for the outside world. This results in the perceived eccentricity that charmed the art world and elites who typically feel adverse, if not morally superior, to evangelicals for their apocalyptic and often right-wing views. He humanizes lower class Southern whites, a group that by mainstream standards is often looked down upon as regressive and uncreative. This duality between Finster’s ideals, evangelical hellfire coupled with a love for humankind, and the vastly different background and belief system his greatest admirers often held is what makes Paradise Garden so fascinating. The pleasant nature of the site bridges a gap between people in a way that art by a more institutional artist is incapable of doing.

Where Does Howard Finster Fit Within The Canon of Southern Art?

Paradise Garden has three major installations, one being a rather massive wheel made of bicycle wheels and garden tools, another tower-like sculpture made of mixed mechanical parts

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with pot lids as ornamentation, and the previously mentioned World’s Folk Art Church (Figures 10 and 11). Paradise Garden’s sculptures, its massive wheels, whirligigs, and bottle trees are a part of the distinctly Southern tradition: the yard show. The yard show has been a part of the South since the post-reconstruction era and is a conglomeration of African, European American, and Native American traditions that are critical to understanding the origins of Southern art. The use of vines, glass bottles, popes, stones, found iron, and bicycle wheels harken back to African traditions as well as a simple lack of resources.\(^{39}\)

Timothy Anglin Burgard, curator of American Arts at the San Francisco Museum of Fine Arts, describes in an essay the history of the yard show in regards to a 2017 exhibition he curated, *Revelations: Art from the African American South*. He describes the materiality of the yard show as consisting often of:

> Both works of art and objects with symbolic or talismanic properties—often they are one and the same. Ingredients may encompass personal possessions that commemorate the life and death of family members; gourds, bottles, and bottle trees that trap or repel malevolent spirits; and revolving objects such as wheels, fans, and whirligigs that may represent the cycles of life.\(^{40}\)

He notes beforehand that these yards are often not built with a specific plan in mind but are a product of the accumulation of objects that use both Christian and folkloric imagery to show the worldview of the maker. Essential to Burgard’s thesis is that the creators of these yard shows are black artists. If one looks at the majority of notable outsider art environments in the South, this is true. The Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which in recent years has been a defining force in the self-taught art world as they grow to represent, deals exclusively with black artists from the

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\(^{40}\) Burgard, *Revelations: Art from*, 20.
South. Race is at the core of every question and nuance in the South and Finster’s fame in itself is problematic in several aspects.

Finster, as many writers have acknowledged, is essentially responsible for the Folk Art and the South becoming synonymous. His work was one of the earliest examples to grab the attention of people across the country and enjoyed the hallmarks of success unknown to almost all artists: appearing on the Johnny Carson *Tonight Show*, participating in the 1984 Venice Biennale, and selling his work for thousands of dollars. Finster was heavily criticized in the nineties for selling his work for high prices and was accused of having his family make his paintings in an “assembly-line style.”

After his appearances in the Venice Biennale and on the Johnny Carson show, Finster realized that people would pay large sums for basically anything he touched. Girardot describes in Finster’s biography the way he started to reproduce crowd-pleasers like Elvis and Coke bottles by making “mass-produce cutouts in a quasi-assembly-line fashion, where some of the grandkids prepared and primed the plywood templates. Finster, however, always continued to put the finishing touches on these works.” Finster was essentially criticized for overcoming the ‘naïve’ categorization by understanding the market value of his work, like many contemporary artists, rather than remaining a true ‘outsider’ to the contemporary art community he was thrust into.

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Finster’s southern black peers, even those represented by the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, have struggled to attract enough attention to rouse efforts for preservation. Finster’s use of materials clearly stems from a lack of resources but borrows heavily from West African traditions in a troublesome manner. The question of authenticity is often raised with Finster, however, issues of race largely fall by the wayside when examining Finster’s work and success. Perhaps this is because Finster’s work was originally explored by white Northern art world elites who likely had no idea about bottle-tree traditions and bicycles as symbols in the Southern black community. Maybe it is because his work is often not shown with other artists and that he is often looked upon as a unique aberration within the art world.

Finster’s role as a Southern evangelical is inextricable to his identity as a white man, as race, like all aspects of life in the South, is central to the Southern evangelical origin story. The South’s fraught racial history and dedication to scriptural literalism are, arguably, the two defining features of Southern culture. Finster’s identity as a white man automatically gives him a position of power that can hardly be contested. His privileged identity is complicated by his status as poor rural Southerner in one of the poorest counties in Georgia, one of the least advantaged demographics in the country. His work is not created in a vacuum but has emerged as a product of biblical imagery, Southern imagery, and the race and class politics that are inherent in America.

The difference between Finster and black Southern artists who create art in the evangelical tradition is the manner in which evangelicalism emboldens them. As Carol Crown, an art history professor at the University of North Carolina and the author of the comprehensive reference Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Folk Art, points out in her book Coming Home! Self Taught Artists, the Bible and the American South, that evangelicalism has often been used as a
tool to further oppress marginalized groups within the South. Finster’s relationship to evangelicalism is one that promotes patriarchy as the natural order and does not encourage dissent, benefitting Finster as a white man and harming him as a poor man. Self-taught art as a branch of art history has been dominated by figures like Finster; the more well-known artists within the burgeoning movement are European white men, despite the fact that outsider art is the rare branch of academia meant to centralize marginalized communities. Crown astutely proclaims:

Evangelical Christianity in the South has responded closely to the dominant world of unequal racial power in the region. Three major themes have defined this relationship: racism, racial interchange, and interracialism. In each case, a close reading of the Bible has produced an evangelicalism both tragic and triumphant, one that has fatally defended and almost magically undermined an historical unjust and oppressive racial order.\textsuperscript{44}

The racialized aspects of evangelical Christianity that Crown underscores cannot be discounted when observing Finster’s work, who acknowledged time and time again that his paintings and Paradise garden itself were simply a different, and more effective, form of preaching. They personify and glorify evangelical ideals that have had a sinister and stifling impact on progress in the “New South.” The narrative often presented in scholarship surrounding Finster’s work for one reason or another shies away from questions regarding identity politics. Despite his rural Georgia home being critical to his myth, very few authors have been willing to write about how race factors into the success of a white artist working with mediums historically stemming from black culture. Conversely, most texts make only a passing remark about Finster’s rural poverty and the complicated intersection of class, gender, and race that he incarnates.

Finster became a symbol for downtrodden Southern creatives who feel that Southerners are a marginalized group, often portrayed as ignorant and simple in media. Rock groups like

\textsuperscript{44} Crown, \textit{Coming Home!}, 38.
R.E.M.\textsuperscript{45} used Finster as a sort of muse, thinking that he was a fellow Southern artist who was not taken seriously because of his redneck roots.\textsuperscript{46} R.E.M. used Finster’s image to further their status as a hip advocates for Southern self-taught art by using Finster’s non-evangelical work for an album cover and shooting the music video for their single “Radio Free Europe” in Paradise Garden.\textsuperscript{47} Finster capitalized on this fame that hardly made mention of Christianity by justifying that it helped to spread the gospel. It helped to propel him to fame, but as a tourist attraction for curious onlookers highly skeptical of religion. His 1985 cover of the Talking Heads \textit{Little Creatures} solidified his status as an honorary member of the art world elite (Figure 12); the Talking Heads previous album cover, \textit{Speaking in Tongues}, had been designed by artist Robert Rauschenberg.\textsuperscript{48} In his essay “Little America: R.E.M., Howard Finster, and the Southern 'Outsider Art' Aesthetic”, Matthew Sutton explores R.E.M. and Howard Finster as representatives of a complex question of identity and class in “New South.” The post-Reconstruction era economic system referred to as the “New South” created space in which Southern white men felt disadvantaged or, at the very least, apolitical.\textsuperscript{49} The wound of losing the Civil War, compounded with the South being a bastion of poverty, created a complex that gave way to an ‘underdog’ and ‘rebek pride’ identity. Indelible to the false sense of persecution is a sense of urgency that often manifests itself in apocalyptic doom, paramount to the survival of contemporary evangelicalism.

\textsuperscript{45} R.E.M. is an American rock band from Athens, Georgia, formed in 1980 by drummer Bill Berry, guitarist Peter Buck, bassist/backing vocalist Mike Mills, and lead vocalist Michael Stipe.
\textsuperscript{47} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKVyCjit1AE
\textsuperscript{48} Sutton, "Little America," 12.
\textsuperscript{49} Sutton, "Little America," 12.
Finster’s position in the South is by no means unusual, but when reckoning with the commodification of work that is intended for religious purposes, questions of identity and intent are integral. Artists like Jean DuBuffet, Henry Darger, Adolf Wölfli, have dominated conversations around self-taught art history for years and are some of the few ‘outsider’ artists whose successes thrust them into actual art world fame. Finster differs from these three examples in that he was able to achieve mainstream success with religious work, which is often looked down upon as folksy or kitschy. His work has actually benefited from the fetishization of kitsch and a cultural fascination with “religious wackos.” While Finster’s work sold easily and he was widely admired, he just barely avoided being categorized as “naïve art.” People who came to meet Finster often listened to his ramblings with a paternalistic outlook, amused by his fervor and smug with their self-proclaimed open-mindedness. Sutton proposes that Finster’s work served as a relaxing counter to the conceptual and heavy themes being presented in the art world during the eighties, from Jenny Holzer’s machine art, Jean Michel Basquiat’s paintings, and to Cindy Sherman’s photos subverting definitions between artist and subject. His work was not overly complicated or theoretical in this way, and most importantly, unlike performance and video art, it could be sold. Not only was it commodifiable and refreshing in the face of postmodernism, but Sutton underscores that:

Art collectors could exert their superior intelligence by imagining the artist as an untrained, provincial ‘outsider’. Additionally, they could rationalize their accumulation of unschooled art as an act of social work, reinforcing their lofty self-image of the collector as patron and benefactor.  

The situation that Sutton describes denotes a power imbalance between artist and art collector because the collector becomes the gatekeeper for the art market, and the marketability of self-taught artist is contingent on their outsider status. Often times when collectors buy their work

and predicate the talent of the artist as dependent on their obscurity, they pigeonhole the artist into being just that. They are unsatisfied and feel that they have been ripped off if the provincial artist they ‘discover’ begins to play the collector at their own game. Matthew Sutton also observes that Jean Dubuffet’s definition of *art brut* or self-taught art, as Finster was categorized, specifies that the artist in question creates in isolation. This ‘isolation’ myth is effectively others Southern artistic culture and delineates mainstream contemporary art as the only true culture in which people can learn the merits of good taste. That line of thinking is another reason, I believe, they find themselves fascinated with the strangeness of Finster’s imagery and it’s visual appeal. Finster’s work is not isolationist but draws upon cultural cornerstones. The missionary aspect of his cult of personality put him in constant contact with society, often with elite members of the art world.\(^5\) His fame, like many other noted self-taught artists, was not posthumous and therefore much of his work is acutely aware of his audience.

Finster’s evangelicalism, even at its darkest, Sutton notes are “tempered with smiling faces and written descriptions offering advice on repentance and forgiveness. Far removed from the Boschian nightmare, Howard Finster’s paintings of Hell are actually pretty charming, taken as a whole.”\(^5\) It’s true that Finster, per his fanbase, created a milder version of apocalyptic doom. Beyond that, his race made him unthreatening to many social groups who would likely not take well to prophetic and eccentric black evangelicals waxing poetic on the Apocalypse.

Black artists in the South have not fared so well. Those who have created similar visionary environments have failed to achieve recognition on the same level and certainly did not

become profitable in the manner that Finster did. Thornton Dial and Lonnie Holley are Finster’s only true counterparts in terms of widely recognized Southern self-taught artists, however, to group their work as similar would be reductive to all involved. While all three use found materials, Dial and Holley’s success is rooted in their abstract paintings and sculptures, respectively. Dial and Holley’s work is significantly more sophisticated than that of Finster and remains in the permanent collection of museums including, but not limited to, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney. Holley and Dial did not brand themselves as preachers nor attempt to cultivate a cult of personality and their work is respected for its aesthetic qualities more so than Finster. That being said, Finster’s bedside evangelicalism blend of fire and brimstone with his sweet and eccentric grandpa persona gave him an aura of affability unattainable to most.

Finster’s fame creates an enigma. He is not the only showboat Baptist preacher, nor the only successful untrained artist, nor the only artist accused of fraud and subject to controversy. The interpretation of Howard Finster is dependent on how much weight one decides to put on the factors that created the public persona of Howard Finster, one that ultimately served as a representative for white evangelical Americans to their “Yankee” counterparts. Paradise Garden represents the whimsy of the South that often feels antithetical to an overbearing religion and an ugly history. The landscape of the kudzu and palm trees and Spanish moss come alive in Finster’s dedication to evangelicalism and the pop culture icons that have replaced religion in much of America.
Chapter One Images

Figure 1. The Ave Maria Grotto in Cullman, Alabama. Photo courtesy of the Ave Maria Grotto Foundation.

Figure 2. Howard Finster, 1916-. 1970- over time. Paradise Garden: Entrance and grotto.

Figure 3. Howard Finster 1916-. 1987. Ref.: World's Folk Art Church: det.: south and southwest.

Figure 6. Howard Finster. January 18, 2019. “Howard Finster and God” sign. Photograph taken by author.
Figure 7. Howard Finster. 1916-1979. Paradise Garden: Pennville, Georgia: det.: overview.

Figure 8. Howard Finster. 1916-. 1977. Self-Portrait.

Figure 9. Howard Finster. Man in suit. January 18th, 2019. Photograph taken by author.
Figure 10. Finster, Howard. January 18th, 2019. Metal wheel made of wheels. Photograph taken by author.

Figure 11. Howard Finster. January 18th, 2019. Sculpture made of pots, wires, and kitchenware. Photograph taken by author.

Chapter Two- Missionary Artists in Mississippi and Alabama: Joe Minter and Herman Dennis Attack the Beast of Sin From Within

This chapter will examine the ways that Joe Minter and Herman Dennis use Christianity and evangelical messaging to bring forth their political and religious agenda via painting and sculpture. I will first write about Joe Minter and his African Village in America in Birmingham, Alabama. I visited Joe Minter’s home on January 22nd, 2019. I will compare Minter and Finster and the particularities of their messaging, as well as cross-examine Minter’s work in conversation with that of fellow Alabama artists Thornton Dial and Lonnie Holley. I will also look at the burgeoning market of black artists in the contemporary art world in relation to the complicated commercialization of self-taught art. This will include an examination of the rise of the appeal of black self-taught artists and explore the ethics of comparisons to African symbols in current ‘outsider art’ scholarship. I will delve the question of preservation with both artists, focusing more on Herman Dennis. Rev. Herman Dennis has died and the question of preservation looms over his self-taught art environment Margaret’s Grocery in Vicksburg, Mississippi. As I mentioned in the introduction, I visited Vicksburg on January 21st, 2019 and had the opportunity to speak with Suzi Altman regarding her efforts to revive and maintain the yard show. Keeping in line with the nature of this project, I will analyze Dennis’s use of signs and sculpture, as well as his rhetoric, his persona, and the missionary implications as follows. I hope to uncover something unique about the relationship between language, signage, and sculpture as it relates to these two black men living in the heart of the Deep South.
Joe Minter’s African Village in America: A Missionary Yard Show Exploring American Tragedy

A Visual Analysis of the Village

When I visited the African Village in America, I was lucky enough to arrive at the same time as Joe Minter. I was nervous at first about showing up at someone’s house and asking to be let in, but he seemed to be expecting it and my anxiety eased. He let me in and told me I could walk around at my own risk. Mr. Minter came out a few minutes later and walked me through his enormous yard show with his totemic walking stick covered in bells, a construction helmet with a swinging crucifix attached, and wearing a U.S. army jacket (Figure 13). I spent a few hours walking through the African Village in America with Mr. Minter as he waxed eloquent about his pieces, his relationship with God, about American tragedies, metal versus wood, Aretha Franklin, drones in Syria, and more. When Mr. Minter told me to walk around at my own risk, he meant it. His yard show is overflowing with sculptures, mostly composed of metal and wood, jutting out in every direction. The experience was more overwhelming than any installation I have ever set foot in. His sculptures defiantly shoot into the sky and stretch outwards, dwarfing his home (Figure 14). I had seen pictures online and in books prior to visiting, but I did not realize that he had effectively taken over his block, his yard show stretching down the street and into a property on the other side. As he kindly guided me through his yard, he spoke about his favorite pieces, the reason he made them, his experience growing up in Birmingham and fighting in Vietnam. He talked about religion, politics, and conspiracy theories, quickly shifting between the three in a manner that would typically seem erratic, but made sense with his calm and practiced demeanor. Before I left, he handed me and my friend each a piece of a long, white piece of plastic that read “God Love You and Thank You, Joe
Minter Peacemaker.” Joe Minter asked me to sign his visitor’s book, encouraged me to take pictures, and invited me to come back and visit whenever I please.

Mr. Minter, while indisputably Christian, does not position himself as a religious authority but rather a moral one. His work could be described as “social justice” or political, although Mr. Minter considers it to be simply a duty. The site is unique to the region as an environmental outsider art piece because it uses sculpture and signage to take on injustice throughout history, be it slavery, natural disasters, or school shootings. Some of Mr. Minter’s sculpture feels reminiscent of nearby Lonnie Holley, also of Birmingham, however, his sculptures often rely heavily on language via painted signs to convey their meaning. A significant part of the power of Joe Minter’s yard show is looking at it with him and through his eyes as much as possible. Signage plays a serious role in the way that the work is understood, but so does the way Mr. Minter presents it. Minter is represented by the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, however, his work was relatively unknown before the 1996 show *Souls Grown Deep: Art from the African American South* that brought William Arnett’s collection of works by unknown black artists to the High Museum of Art. While Minter does something similar to Finster in his usage of found objects as material and signs to convey his mission, he has made his work incessantly and has not gathered much recognition for it in the way that Finster was able to. Minter receives around three hundred visitors annually in contrast with Finster’s posthumous seven thousand. Mr. Minter’s work is not rooted in capitalism and is not created to be sold; each sculpture and sign forms a part of his village and much of their significance is lost when not viewed as a collective.

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53 William S. Arnett (born May 10, 1939) is an Atlanta-based writer, editor, curator and art collector who has built internationally important collections of African, Asian, and African American art. Arnett is the founder of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. He is often considered responsible for drawing attention to Southern black artists within the market/museum context.
Joe Minter is a Vietnam War vet and former construction worker who had a vision from God in 1988 instructing him to make his village. The village is located in the outskirts of Birmingham and has stretched from his yard all the way down the block. Minter’s home overlooks a graveyard and he says that he often ends his day not by talking but by sitting beside the cemetery and “just listening to the collective 70,000 years of lessons his ancestors can teach him.” He notes that the souls in the graveyard are the true creators of Birmingham; the steelworkers, slaves, and farmers who built Birmingham with their hands. Homes up the street are covered in Minter’s signs, ensuring that no visitor forgets that they are in his domain (Figure 15). As his neighbors faced foreclosure and older members of the community passed away, Mr. Minter was able to purchase the neighboring properties and grow his African Village in America substantially. Minter’s enormous yard is covered in his sculptures made of found materials. They largely consist of iron, which Mr. Minter welds himself, and rely heavily on chains. When one looks closely they can see the conglomeration of bicycle wheels, car parts, gardening tools, mattress springs which come together to form a body. While the assemblage may look random or incomprehensibly abstract, as Minter walked me around his space, he explained the pieces and told me the name and gave a short speech for each one of them. The site is intended as an homage and dedication to, as Minter puts it, the Africans in America who have endured hundreds of years of relentless hardship. His work conveys biblical stories, his views on contemporary justices issues, memorials, and pop culture figures, like Aretha Franklin. He creates fake automobiles using the carcasses of abandoned school buses and memorials out of Barbie dolls.

The Souls Grown Deep foundation describes Mr. Minter’s yard show as a retelling of history. They describe the nineteenth-century division of the evangelical church into white and

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black factions that helped create the African American Christian theology that he touts. Mr. Minter’s yard in this way is a non-canonical, non-white telling of black history and black Christianity. Paul Arnett, collector William Arnett’s son and co-editor of the enormous two-volume catalogue of the Souls Grown Deep collection, defiantly proclaims:

History musn’t be entrusted to powers with an interest in any one outcome; his twist is that he applies this dictum internally to black society. Minter finds a parallel in the way class divisions tint the telling of black history, and offers his site as the other side of a black story ideistically unbounded by frontiers and hierarchies. The black diaspora, in Minter’s yard, gives way to an empathic diaspora of all the world’s suffering servants, all its nomadic hobos.\(^\text{55}\)

Minter elevates the disenfranchised in his work by telling the story from their point of view. His use of found and recycled materials speaks to this reconfiguration of history; the rusted and iron and wood tell a story about American brutality via their viscerality, while signs around the property commemorate and mourn American tragedies. He takes what America has left behind, both found objects and stories forgotten, and demands they receive the proper respect.

Minter focuses on the death of young black Americans, including Michael Brown and Tamir Rice, as well as the killing of four young girls in the 16\(^\text{th}\) Street Baptist Church Bombing in Birmingham. As national tragedies ensue, Minter builds more memorials for the fallen and the abused, both at the hands of mankind and natural disasters. One titled \textit{A Monument: the Birmingham Jail Cell} depicts Martin Luther King’s jail cell complete with a black and white striped figure, a toilet and sink, and Dobermans guarding the outside (Figure 16). Minter painted his message on the outside of the cell, which opens “GOD LOVE YOU” and describes the incident in which MLK was jailed, before giving thanks to various reverends in town for their work (Figure 17). Minter describes this piece as: "The jail cell that helped change the United

States. From this cell Martin Luther King wrote his Birmingham letter."56 This is just one of many examples of Minter’s work which laments hardship while praising God’s grace. Joe Minter’s work is critical of the American spirit- he believes in the country but is clearly disheartened by its inability to do better.

In a 2013 *New York Times* article titled “Scrap-Iron Elegy,” Michael Tortorello reports on Joe Minter’s African Village in America. In the article, Joe Minter does not believe that America has made much progress throughout his lifetime, noting that schools are as segregated as ever, and the country is bankrupt.57 This is evident in his signage, he frequently mixes Christian optimism with his ambivalence about the state of the nation. One reads “The Lord is My Shepherd in the Name of Jesus,” while others acknowledge wars and natural disasters. One particular moving memorial to Sandy Hook features twenty-six children’s shoes, large Barbie doll heads, and signs reading “Why God USA,” and other descriptions of the violence and horror of the Sandy Hook massacre (Figure 18). Minter’s religion is a far cry from the evangelical, feel-good whimsy espoused by Howard Finster’s signage and performance.

The signs in Minter’s African Village in America are often self-descriptive, recounting dates, names, and figures about the events represented in the work. Interspersed in these messages are religious proclamations, such as “Why God Why?” and “God Forgive U.S. for our Hate.” One popular image of the Village is a series of three crosses with large signs stretching down the base, emulating Jesus’s crucifixion (Figure 19). The tops of the crucifixes read, respectively from left to right and then down and across, “LOVE” “God Will Forgive U”, “Jesus” “God Will Save You”, and “Peace” “God Love You.” The first cross has a large sign attached

quoting Isaiah 4:1, the second describes the 2010 Port-Au-Prince Earthquake in Haiti with facts and figures, “Earthquake 1/12/2010 Haiti Port-Au-Prince 7.0 magnitude, 3 million need Aid, populated by 9 million people” and underneath large letters proclaim “God Have Mercy Forgive save us Hear our Cry Thank You my Lord Jesus Christ Amen.” The third reads “God Bless the Human Family I come to aid Haiti Thank you Jesus.” The words on the third are spliced and appear to be on a piece of repurposed metal with holes in it. Minter’s signs defy typical conventions in abstract sculpture by directly enumerating their inspiration. This series of sculptures is indicative of Mr. Minter’s spirit and art-making process; he hears about a tragedy on the news, such as the earthquake in Haiti, and feels so distraught by the incessant pain in this world that he must do his part to memorialize and help heal. He is, after all, a Peacemaker. By divulging exact details of tragic events that often fall by the wayside, Minter ensures that his viewers confront the enormous scope of violence and tragedy, and actively engage with the power of abstraction. He creates a space in which abstract art becomes interactive, effectively divorcing abstraction from the white, elite, art world in which it is often associated with theory and intentionally inaccessible to the average viewer.

The fence surrounding Mr. Minter’s yard shows is strapped with different colored signs, giving the chain link fence a more vibrant appearance (Figure 20). The signs are made of long sheets of metal and wood about and are stacked on top of each other, each declaring in all caps Minter’s various messages, such as “Come together or perish,” “Wall of struggle,” and “400 years of lost Africans.” His signage, in comparison with Finster, does not seek to quote specific scripture from the Bible and it is not as neat or precise. Finster’s work is mostly figurative and blends iconic Christian imagery with popular culture motifs, his persona is omnipresent in his work, be it painting, sculpture, or signage. The African Village in America is best seen with Joe
Minter and with an understanding of him as a creator, but Minter does not include himself in his work. His work rarely, if ever, makes mention of the character of Joe Minter. It is about the collective mourning of hardship in humanity, mostly in America, but also throughout the world. Joe Minter is a visionary artist and is working because of a vision he had years ago, however, he defines himself as a peacemaker. This clear distinction separates the two artists because it asserts Minter as simply a vessel meant to educate.

Minter’s Mission

Minter’s overarching thesis is one of unbridled love and compassion for, as he put, “all Africans living in America.” He laments the tragedy of slavery and the forced removal of enslaved of Africans throughout America- signs across the property read “400 years” and Minter recreated his abstract version of a slave ship, which he encourages visitors to interact with (Figure 21). The piece is made of rickety wood and features Minter’s signature iron welding and sign painting, reading “Slave Ship America, God see you, Atlantic Ocean, Middle Passage.” The abstracted boat is one of Minter’s larger-scale and interactive pieces, although much of his sculpture stands alone. A piece in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art titled *Four Hundred Years of Free Labor* is a welded iron sculpture composed of rusted shovels, pitchforks, hoes, pipes, and chains in a style typical of Minter’s work (Figure 22). The welded materials create a skeleton that invokes a body and represents the hundreds of thousands of slaves whose existence remains largely anonymous and whose lives were reduced to a means of production. Birmingham has one of the darkest histories of racial violence in the United States, and Joe Minter’s work is reckoning with the endemic hardship endured by black people living in

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Alabama for hundreds of years. His sculpture and signage is a denouncement of white supremacy and a call for change. Minter makes his work incessantly, suggesting that while his creations are educational tools, they are also a manner of healing the effect of generational trauma, as well as the traumatization of living in Birmingham throughout the twentieth century. The yard show and the public/private nature of them, Paul Arnett argues, is indicative of newly found power for those born into slavery or pre-civil rights era, like Mr. Minter. It is a declarative stance flying in the face of the white picket fence yard.

Preserving the Village

Large scale sculpture pieces made of rusted parts, including gardening tools, bicycle wheels, cans, and other found and thrifting iron make up a considerable part of Minter’s yard. Although Minter’s work is well known among those familiar with Southern self-taught art and several of his creations belong to prominent institutions, like many other self-taught artists, he is left with the question of restoration and preservation as he nears 76. Despite being one of the few artists represented by the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, there is no real plan for Minter’s yard show once he can no longer take care of it himself. Joe Minter maintains that it is critical that it be preserved in situ so future generations can visit the site and learn from Minter’s work as it was intended to be seen. Parceling out pieces of the Village to museums and private collections is not ideal and raises puzzling questions regarding the Museum and the art world’s place in spaces like Joe Minter’s. The 2013 article and interview with Joe Minter published in the New York Times, describes the site as “one of the most extraordinary and least known sculpture gardens.” Recognition, however, does not equal security and the article acknowledges

that Minter’s yard is, like many others, endangered. The question of maintaining these spaces grows as they receive more recognition, but the funding for projects like this one is practically non-existent. State governments, particularly in states like Alabama, are not inclined to provide funding or grant historic landmark status to sites like this, despite the fact that they form an important part of the cultural and artistic landscape of the state. The *New York Times* article makes mention of the problem of distribution to museums and Mr. Minter asserts that he believes it should be preserved as an educational tool. Minter personally mentioned to me that although a few of his pieces are now part of museum collections, the integrity of the site as a whole is crucial to him and his legacy.

**Joe Minter’s Manifesto**

Joe Minter does not see himself as a preacher in the traditional or evangelical sense of the word, but rather a voice that is committed to educating his peers. In his self-published book he sells at his property titled *To You Through Me: The Beginning of a Link of a Journey of 400 Years* (Figure 23 front and back cover) he begins by stating: “Today many of our youth do not know the contributions of African Americans to America other than their sweat and blood. In this first chapter, there is a listing of all of our forgotten heroes that help make the United States what it is today.” He goes on to describe and enumerate “African Service in U.S. Wars,” “African Inventors in America,” “Mechanical Devices,” and “African Astronauts.” The book is around ninety pages long and consists mostly of Minter’s ideas surrounding the state of African-American people in America. The text’s central mission relies on Minter’s reckoning with injustice and the role of God. He refers to himself as “Joe Minter Peacemaker” and gives a brief biography of his life and his family history. The text is often in all caps and the spacing shifts
without warning. He denounces white supremacy and the hypocrisy of Christianity in America in the face of violence, declaring in one passage: “YOU CAN NOT HOLD THE HOLY BIBLE IN ONE HAND AND A MACHINE GUN IN THE OTHER”, and ending the passage with a simple statement standing alone: “HOW CAN A MAN TAKE AN IRON PIPE A IRON CHAIN AND CALL HIMSELF A CHRISTIAN” (Figure 24). Minter includes pictures of his work with the title of the piece in a large capitalized and italicized font, a few examples read: “THE HAND OF GOD FROM GENESIS TO REVELATION 2005,” “AN ATTACK ON AFFIRMATIVE ACTION 2003,” and “TSUNAMI REVELATION 6: 7 SEALS 7: 144,000 PEOPLE DEAD. GOD FORGIVE US WE PRAISE YOU LORD SAVE THY CHILDREN IN THE NAME OF JESUS.” (Figures 25, 26, and 27). Joe Minter does not have a persona in the manner that Howard Finster does, he does not broadcast or self-promote himself, but his self-published book invokes another dynamic in art making. He uses writing as a tool to proselytize and stretch beyond the boundaries of painting and sculpture.

Joe Minter was struck by a vision that commanded him to try and save the world. Storytelling via art he felt was the most effective way he could do. On the back cover (Figure 23) of the book Minter describes his vision and mission as such:

I asked GOD in 1989 for a vision and with a vision come a mission and with a mission come work, and with work come sweat and sometimes tears. God will hold his children in his loving hand and see you through it all. He will be with you in the valley and on the mountain top. I asked God to humble my heart, and to fill my heart with love, compassion and peace. My vision was to tell a story of the beginning of a link of a journey of 400 years of the African-American people in America. A story told in love to bring peace. A story that not only the elderly can understand but also the children to bring us together as one. We may not have it all together, but together we have it all. May God bless all mankind over mother earth. Forgive and save us. Let there be love let there be peace and goodwill. The EArth is the Lord and the fullest thereof. Joe Minter. Peacemaker. Thank You, Jesus.”
Christianity is central to Minter’s message, however, race and history are equally important to Minter. Throughout his book, which effectively serves as his own bible or manifesto, he reprints a series of Bible verses ranging from passages in Revelations to Genesis to Corinthians and more. He often puts his own prayer or comment after a verse, italicizing the verse to distinguish between the two. He also includes outside texts such as “Birmingham’s Racial Segregation Ordinances,” which he copied into the book, and the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (Figures 28 and 29). In his bibliography he cites: The Holy Bible King James Version, The World Almanac 1997, The Birmingham News, Stolen Legacy by G.G. James, All Africa Conference of Churches?, United Nations General Assembly, Civil Rights Institution, Paul and William Arnett Souls Grown Deep Volume Two, Shirley Gavin Floyd the Foot Soldier Informer, and Vivian Sammons, Blacks in Science and Medicine (Figure 30). In creating a bibliography of this sort, Mr. Minter does not position himself as a visionary that stands alone, or an alien from another world, but rather someone who is working within a canon and history of black leaders. Isolation, as is often invoked by critics when writing about self-taught artists, is firmly rejected in Mr. Minter’s book and his outlook of the world.

**Politicizing the Political: Identity, Appeal, and Africa in Joe Minter’s Yard Show**

Minter’s manifesto and his African Village in America situate him as visionary artist fighting staunchly against racism against Africans in America. In the *New York Times* article, Mr. Minter brings up several ideas that he brought up to me during my visit. He said to the reporter concerning his affinity for wood and iron and his connection to Africa that “I was going back to what they were doing in Africa. You know how they say there was a Bronze Age and the
Iron Age. There was a wood age. But they never did keep a record of the wood age.”

This leads the reporter to mention that in some parts of Africa, a man’s spirituality is directly linked to his ability to work with and weld iron and metal. Mr. Minter, the reporter notes, sees himself this way and says that he is drawn to iron. In the face of an industrialized world ruled by metal and iron, wood grounds the yard show in the natural world. Wood effectively roots the yard show in both its environment and Joe Minter’s vision. As the price of scrap iron has increased throughout the years, he has begun to use more plastic objects and mixed materials purchased at flea markets.

Kinshasha Holman Conwill, deputy director of the Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of African American Arts and Culture, remarks upon the question of materiality in her essay “In Search of an ‘Authentic’ Vision: Decoding the Appeal of the Self-Taught African-American Artist.” She cites bell hooks’ description of the importance of similar homes in the Southern landscape and their use of materiality, quoting: “my thinking about aesthetics has been informed by the recognition of these houses: one which cultivated and celebrated an aesthetic of existence, rooted in the idea that no degree of material lack could keep one from learning how to look at the world with a critical eye, how to recognize beauty.” Conwill uses this quote to elaborate on questions of materiality, which she points out have not prohibitive to artists like Joe Minter, or other black southern artists like Sister Gertrude Morgan, Lonnie Holley, or Rev. George Kornegay. He describes in his Souls Grown Deep website biography the way in which God has guided his creation, noting that “a spirit of all the people that has touched and felt that material has stayed in the material. God supplies me with what is needed, what other people

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throw away as junk, what I find on streets, and in flea markets, outlet stores, Goodwill, Salvation Army.” He imbues these quotidian objects with a collective significance that makes direct reference to African traditions brought to the South via slavery, as opposed to Finster, whose work evades questions regarding origin and authenticity in favor of the individual.

Conwill dedicates her essay to exploring what caused this genre of art to become recognized in the latter half of the twentieth century, and the politics of the commodification of work by artists who are often poor, southern, black, and lack formal artistic training while the collectors of the work are typically white, affluent, and highly educated. The very writing of a senior project on this topic begs the question as well. Many of the artists who became famous in the earlier stretch of the movement, such as Sister Gertrude Morgan or William Edmiston, were famous as visionary artists and often tossed under the category of “naive” art. Conwill notes that black, Southern, untrained artists who have started to gather major museum shows often make work that conforms to contemporary art historical standards and thus art historians have a pre-designated set of criteria to judge the formalistic qualities of the work. These artists frequently have their work linked to African traditions, regardless of whether there was any indication of their intention or knowledge about what they are being compared to. These black artists are showcased and praised for their ability to create work so similar to more famous contemporary pieces without any formal training, indicating that this fact amplifies their genius or raw talent as artists.

Printed in the Outliers catalog is a roundtable discussion with Lynne Cooke, Katherine Jentleson, John Beardsley, and Faheem Majeed titled Folk Art Redux: A Curatorial.

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64 Conwill, "In Search," 4.
Jentleson remarks upon the double standard in the art world in which self-taught artists are routinely dismissed as inauthentic if they begin to tweak their art for the marketplace and understand the business aspect of their work in a way that is expected of traditionally trained artists. This brings up an idea of authenticity and what it means to observe these artists “in a community where your presence is shifting the experience.” The art historians, curators, and collectors looking in are always perceiving a different reality, one that is influenced by their idea of marketability and fine art. Authenticity in self-taught art is predicated on an ideal that fetishizes the naive quality yet remarkable “raw” talent in artists who did not attend art school in the traditional way. As I briefly mentioned in the first chapter, this poses the question of what ‘self-taught’ really is. Self-taught artists are not, as it is often perceived, people working in isolation with no community, context, or cultural influence. Jentleson looks towards the Alabama artists Ronald Lockett, Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley Holley and Joe Minter, and observes that:

From the Dial-Lockett clan to Lonnie Holley and Joe Minter, there has been a critical mass of great artists working around the Birmingham-Bessemer area in the same decades, creating found-object assemblage sculptures, sharing ideas and practices with each other. As Bernard Herman has proposed, isn’t that its own kind of school, or its own kind of art movement?

These artists are influenced by each other and the similarities in their work are readily apparent. Collectors, whether of Finster’s work or of artists in the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, often seek to categorize the work as isolationist. Joe Minter and Lonnie Holley are creating an

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65 Outliers and American Vanguard Art focuses on three periods over the last century when the intersection of self-taught artists with the mainstream has been at its most fertile. It is the first major exhibition to explore how those key moments, which coincided with periods of American social, political, and cultural upheaval, challenged or erased traditional hierarchies and probed prevailing assumptions about creativity, artistic practice, and the role of the artist in contemporary culture. Bringing together some 250 works in a range of media, the exhibition includes more than 80 schooled and unschooled artists and argues for a more diverse and inclusive representation in cultural institutions and cultural history.


67 Cooke, Outliers and American, 73
Alabama style of sculpture not dissimilar to the Alabama quilters at Gee’s Bend. 68 Lonnie Holley, also of Birmingham, creates sculptures out of found materials and combines iron and wood in a manner similar to Joe Minter (Figure 31). His use of abstraction launched him into the mainstream art world, the *New York Times Magazine* once referred to him as the “insider’s outsider.” 69 William Arnett has said that visiting Lonnie Holley’s home in the 1980s was a pivotal moment in which he decided he needed to examine art in the American South in much greater depth, leading to the creation of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. In 1997 Holley’s yard show and home were condemned by the Birmingham Airport Authority for the expansion of a runway, resulting in Holley’s artwork being removed and destroyed. The runway was never built. 70 This is indicative of the precarious situation of artists creating in the margins of society, even for those with considerable clout, like Lonnie Holley. While the art market may appreciate their work, bureaucratic systems often do not.

The fascination with these artists because of their combination of modernist techniques and perceived naivety has created an art market eclipsing that of Howard Finster’s era. The constant comparison to Africa as a virtue within self-taught art is a puzzling one, Conwill notes, because it is often perceived as a crutch or disadvantage in formally trained black artists. She explains this seemingly contradictory notion by highlighting:

> It seems contradictory that African culture, so misunderstood or degraded in the context of the larger American culture, would provide a window of validation for the self-taught black artist. This is doubly ironic for the trained black artist, for whom references to an

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68 *Gee’s Bend:* The quilters at Gee’s Bend is a group of black women who have been making quilts in Gee’s Bend, Alabama for generations. They are thought to be an isolated group and their quilts are a unique visual contribution to visual culture in Alabama. They are a part of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation and were brought to the mainstream by William Arnett.


African past are routinely dismissed as romantic or escapist. Yet, by all indications, the self-taught black artist seems only to profit from this cultural legacy.\textsuperscript{71}

Minter’s work creates an interesting space within this confounding idea. His work has not profited from this cultural legacy - it is hardly known. Minter’s personal convictions towards Africa cannot be disputed and his work is so detailed, complex, and massive as a collection without anything for him to gain from it. The consumption of the work, in spaces like the Metropolitan Museum and the High Museum of Art, asks a certain question about exoticism in the art world and the way its current manifestation as the trend continues to rise. Conwill wonders if “the art of self-taught black artists, therefore, more easily ‘consumed’ by the public because it is more ‘exotic’ than the art of their trained black colleagues? Is the art of the trained black artist viewed as less ‘authentic’?”\textsuperscript{72} The frequent categorization of these artists as ‘eccentric’ undermines the communities that they are a part of, including their peer groups as well as motifs linked to Christianity. In the aforementioned \textit{Outliers} roundtable discussion, the panel members problematize the connection that art historians often make with black artists and African motifs, noting that these comparisons are often unfounded. Joe Minter presents an interesting case because, although he has never visited Africa, he often asserts that he feels a strong connection with the continent.

The African Village in America in Birmingham, Alabama is Joe Minter’s testament to God and humanity. It promotes a distinctly Alabama style of abstraction that is sophisticated and honest. Minter bucks convention in his refusal to acquiesce to evangelical standards that discourage dissent and creates an outdoor sculpture park that rallies against the injustices in his community, Birmingham, America, and the rest of the world. Although he may claim that he has

\textsuperscript{71} Conwill, “In Search,” 5.
\textsuperscript{72} Conwill, "In Search," 5.
finished the Village, his need to memorialize has kept his creativity unwavering. After visiting Minter’s home, I believe it is imperative that it does not meet the same fate as Lonnie Holley’s bygone art environment.

**Herman Dennis: A Question of Fate**

Reverend Herman Dennis’ Margaret’s Grocery situated along the Mississippi Delta town of Vicksburg is not an easy place to stumble upon. It lies outside the center of town and is beginning to crumble. In the years after the artist’s death, Suzi Altman is fighting tooth and nail in the hope that Dennis’ monument does not meet the same fate as Lonnie Holley’s home, or disappear into the void the way nearly every Southern yard show created by black men has. It looks like a relic of the once vibrant pink-hued grocery store that garnered attention from the self-taught art community. As I mentioned in my introduction, the first problem with attempting to find information about the Reverend is that his name is widely misprinted. The work is sometimes labeled as Rev. H.D. Dennis’, Margaret’s Grocery, or, occasionally, the Double-Headed Eagle, referencing a sign on the property. This discrepancy makes the work very difficult to research and writing about the work is inconsistent. The place would have very likely crumbled if it were not for the incredibly dedicated Suzi Altman.

I met with Suzi Altman, photographer and longtime friend of Herman Dennis, who she affectionately refers to as “Preacher.” Altman owns the art, structure, and intellectual property of the Dennis’s highly adorned former grocery store. She moved from New York to Mississippi in 2000 and met H.D. Dennis and Margaret in 2001 and began to regularly visit them and

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73 Suzi Altman, "Margaret's Grocery," Suzi Altman, accessed March 5, 2019, https://www.suzialtman.com/portfolio/G0000GqjuyOj0vyw. Suzi Altman is the founder and executive director of the Mississippi Folk Art Foundation. She has been a photographer for over 25 years and formerly worked for the Associated Press.
photograph the two of them on the site. One of her photographs of the couple at the grocery store is in the permanent collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C. (Figure 32). Upon their deaths, Suzi promised to maintain and take care of the site and its legacy. It has been an uphill battle ever since as Altman has fought aggressively for landmark status and any grant or opportunity to help preserve the space. Altman, who identifies as a Jewish lesbian, she explained, has had a particularly difficult time getting the state of Mississippi to pay attention, nonetheless provide funding, to the artwork of a poor black man. The site, as Altman explained, is quickly unraveling as the buildings and sculptures fall apart. The grocery store, as it stood, has been removed from the site to prevent it from deteriorating more and with the hopes of restoring it to its former glory. The towers, such as Dennis’s Ten Commandments, are toppling over with cement blocks; Dennis had a limited masonry knowledge and teens now use the site as a late night hang out, adding to its disrepair. Construction and restoration of the site have been temporarily halted as Altman looks for a more permanent solution. It is important to her to that she finds a foundation that honors Dennis’ commitment to preserving the site rather than splitting it up amongst museums and collectors. The property, once wildly colorful and enticing, badly needs repainting and restoration (Figures 33, 34, 35). Most of the signs with Dennis’s commandments on them have been placed in storage. I was lucky to get a glimpse at the pièce de résistance of the site: Reverend Herman Dennis’s decked-out school bus. The school bus, Altman told me, was the site Dennis would most often preach from. He would drive visitors from the grocery around town on his magical school bus, explaining to them his philosophy and Christianity as he knew it.

Herman Dennis was born in 1916 in Mayersville, Mississippi and began preaching during his teenage years. He was ordained in Columbus, GA at the age of twenty before joining the
army. He fought in the Pacific theater in WWII and upon his return from the war, had four years of training in basic masonry via the G.I. Bill. The Reverend met Margaret, a grocery store owner, and proposed to her. Margaret’s first husband had also fought in WWII and had returned safely, only to be robbed and murdered in the grocery store. Margaret was hesitant about Dennis’s offer, but he promised that he would transform her shop into a “palace.” The pair married in 1984 and Dennis built his first tower soon thereafter.

The tower is intended to house his two tablets of the ten commandments, however, he never felt it was sufficiently finished. From that point onwards, the Preacher continued to employ his masonry skills and build towering structures all around the space. The tablets sit in the *Ark of the Covenant*, a gold-painted trunk inside the grocery store covered in costume jewelry, padlocks, satin cushioning, and doorknobs among other knick-knacks (Figure 36). Around the brightly painted pink, yellow, white, and red market are “proverb” towers constructed of cement blocks painted red, white, and blue. The main tower closest to the road reads vertically “God Love You,” and has mirrors, pots, reflective strips, and silver spray paint over the cement blocks that reminds one of Finster’s silver infused sculpture towers (Figure 37). The tower has three cinder-block walls around it. Many of Dennis’s towers resemble chimneys and other industrial artifacts. Unlike Finster’s towers and grottos, which are reinforced with cement, Dennis’s are not quite as sturdy. They have begun to topple in recent years and are reinforced with support beams. The largest structure is part tower, part archway, party entry. It is a rather foreboding brick structure with a sign that introduces the property as “Margaret’s Grocery and Market, Home of the Double-Headed Eagle, Rev. H.D. Dennis.” The Souls Grown Deep Foundation describes the structure as “close as Dennis’s vision comes to seeking

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architectural symmetry. The tower, probably inspired by some combination of church facades, quilts, prayer cloths, and the American flag, appears to attest to the architect’s patriotism, in addition to his always conspicuous religious beliefs.”75 (Figures 38 and 39). The tower was meant to grab the attention of passersby in order to spread Dennis’ message and, assumedly, attract customers into the grocery store. The compilation and arrangement of towers at first seems chaotic but is actually very cohesive in terms of form, color, and messaging. It is a sort of organized chaos that is present in a significant amount of African American vernacular art. Arnett describes Dennis’s stylistic choices as in tune with “the improvisation, syncopation, and intellectual spontaneity of African American cultural expression,” that is predictable and yet unpredictable.

The crown jewel, as Suzi put it, is the school bus. The Souls Grown Deep foundation describes the bus as “heavily decorated with beads, found materials, artificial flowers, hubcaps, aluminum pie plates, light bulbs, lots of gold and silver and red and blue paint, some biblical art reproductions, and much more, covering the ceiling and all the walls. Nothing is left unadorned except the bus seats, which serve as comfortable pews.”76 Altman described how Dennis would take visitors to the bus and drive them around while preaching. He believed in one church that unified everyone and strongly rejected the segregation of Churches. The site was a dedication to God and a labor of love for his wife, but the bus was his church. The school bus, which Altman let me visit under the condition that I tell no one where it is currently being stored, is so highly adorned that it feels like a church. More specifically, it feels like a Catholic Church in Latin America in its bright colors and unabashedness (Figures 40 and 41). It is highly unique as a piece of environmental or immersive self-taught art in the South because of its mobility. It is not

just simply a colorful site meant to attract the viewer but rather a tool to help the Reverend spread his message. While Rev. Dennis was not as overtly political as someone like Joe Minter, he did have a clear message to spread. His signs read: “this is the Church of Christ. It is the only one he built. Matt 17:18 Rev H.D. Dennis, “Christ is the rock,” and “Please go to Church,” (Figures 42 and 43). Altman clarified that while his mission was peace and love, conversion was critical to his artwork.

Dennis, like Finster, had a certain bravado and performance to his preaching, often saying: “I had Russians and a lot of Japanese people come here. I am an inspired man of God for people all over the world. You won’t find this nowhere else in the world, because God gave me the vision to do it just like this.”77 He was a visionary inspired to do the work of God, but he was not particularly interested in publicity the way that Finster was. Similar to Minter, he offered staunch criticism of the United States but with less specificity. He would tell his audience:

God gave us this country and his blessings so Christians could come here from the old country to escape their persecutions”—and he will look away, and then back, as anger enters his voice and he delivers his punch line ”and we done more dirty work in three hundred years than they done in the old country in six thousand. Hallelujah! Tell them I say that, Reverend H.D. Dennis, Vicksburg, Mississippi, inspired man from God. There is not another one like me.78

Race and abuse seem to be implicit in his condemnations, although he does not mention it explicitly. The subtext of any condemnation of the U.S. from a black man living in Mississippi is the history of slavery and the particularly brutal history of Mississippi. In his soliloquies, he rails against Washington, crime in the U.S., and prisons as work of the devil. He emphasizes that he believes a unified church is the only way to solve the nation’s problems: “We got to get together in a united church in America and we can stop crime and we can beat the devil. A house

divided will not stand. *Races divided will not stand.*”

Dennis does not go into specific events or numbers the way Joe Minter does, and while Mr. Minter focuses on the resilience of African people in America via specific moments of injustice, Dennis vaguely outlines what he believes to be the devil working in America.

Unlike much of the pieces one sees in the art world today, the Reverend Herman Dennis’s art is the product of a love story. In the heart of the Mississippi Delta, it is safe to assume that Dennis did not have significant exposure to the art world. If he has any relationship to the art world, it remains within the scope of Southern tradition and yard shows. That being said, I do not mean to idealize or denigrate his position for this reason. I believe that a significant problem with the examination of work by untrained artist lies in the obsession that they are both accessible and untarnished by the very exposure. Herman Dennis did not have much exposure outside of his recognition by the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, as his yard show is particularly unsuitable for museums and institutional spaces. If there has ever been such a thing as *l’art pour l’art,* surely this must be it.

The Preacher’s work is commercial in that it is linked to his wife’s business and therefore his livelihood, however, he did not seek to profit from his art directly in the way that Howard Finster did. Although he was not granted the same stage as Howard Finster, both of the Reverends viewed their art environments as sanctuaries for them to preach and spread the gospel.

Dennis positions himself, like Finster, as semi-prophetic when he proclaims: “There is not another one like me!” It is a declaration that very purposefully sets him apart from other preachers and is indicative of the fact that he believes himself to be a vessel speaking for God. Unlike Finster, Dennis does not claim to be extraterrestrial nor equal to God or Jesus, but simply

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someone with a gift to share to anyone who will listen. Dennis employed the skills he acquired as a Reverend to his signage and bus-preaching. His work is not for sale and not well known by those who are not involved in Southern self-taught art. As I drove through Vicksburg, Mississippi, I noticed the plaques and well-preserved antebellum homes in the center of town, handsomely funded by the city and state governments as a testimony to their cultural significance. The stately homes and their maintenance are indicative of what Vicksburg, and Southern society in general, has chosen to preserve and dignify. These are homes built by white people and made for white people’s consumption. As one person fights to rectify and maintain the work of one Mississippi citizen, Mississippi has effectively demonstrated their disinterest in preserving black culture and black artistic mediums. Although Reverend Dennis did not garner significant publicity during his lifetime, the example of Lonnie Holley proves that the fame of untrained black artists does not merit funding in the Deep South. I would be incredibly surprised if Warren County, where Margaret’s Grocery is located, purchased the property the way that Chattooga County did for Paradise Garden. His work today is considered endangered. As Altman searches for a way to preserve the site with limited support, the fate of Margaret’s Grocery remains ambiguous.  

80 If you would like to help Suzi Altman and Margaret’s Grocery, donate here: https://www.gofundme.com/SaveMargaretsGrocery/donate.
Chapter Two Images

Figure 13. Joe Minter posing next to sculpture, with his walking stick and helmet. Photo from *New York Times* Article “Scrap Iron Elegy”, April 24th, 2013.

Figure 14. Joe Minter posing next to sculpture, with his walking stick and helmet. Photo from *New York Times* Article *Scrap Iron Elegy*, April 24th, 2013.
Figure 15. The outside of Joe Minter’s yard show. From the SPACES archive.

Figure 16. Joe Minter, MLK’s Jail Cell. Photo courtesy of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

Figure 17. Joe Minter, MLK’s Jail Cell, detail. Photo taken by author, January 22nd, 2019.
Figure 18. Joe Minter, Sandy Hook. Photo courtesy of the *New York Times*.

Figure 19. Joe Minter, Memorial for Haiti.

Figure 20. Signs on Joe Minter’s Fence. Photograph taken by author, January 22nd, 2019.
Figure 21 Joe Minter, “Slave Ship America”. Photo from New York Times Article *Scrap Iron Elegy*, April 24th, 2013.

Figure 22. Joe Minter, "Four Hundred Years of Forced Labor". The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 23 Joe Minter’s *To You Through Me* front and back cover.
PEOPLE EITHER. MAN DID NOT UNDERSTAND THIS WONDERFUL LAND OR ITS BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE. GOD MADE IN HIS OWN IMAGE OF THIS TODAY. FOR THIS REASON THE WHITE MAN CAME TO AFRICA ON SHIPS TO CAPTURE AND ENSLAVE GOD'S CHILDREN. THE BLACK MAN. THE WHITE MAN ALSO WANTED TO RUN A RAMPAGE ON THIS GARDEN OF EDEN WHICH GOD MADE BY HIS OWN HANDS. THE WHITE MAN WANTED TO RULE IT WITH THE POWER OF HIS GUN NOT THE POWER OF GOD. THE WHITE MAN HAS NO FEAR OF GOD. IF SO, HE WOULD LIVE BY HIS COMMANDMENTS. YOU CAN NOT HOLD THE HOLY BIBLE IN ONE HAND AND A MACHINE GUN IN THE OTHER AND IF YOU HOLD THE BIBLE IN BOTH HANDS AND GO ALONG WITH THE MAN HOLDING THE WEAPON AND THE BIBLE, YOU ARE A MUCH BIGGER HYPOCRITE THAN HE. FOR THE BLACK MAN HAS TURNED EVERYDAY IN THE WORLD AND IN EVERYWAY. FOR NOW THE BLACK MAN IS ABOUT TO CRY OUT IN THE WILDERNESS WHICH IS THE WORLD WHICH IS COMPLETELY CONTROLLED BY WHITE MEN. I PRAY TO GOD IN HEAVEN TO STOP THIS HAVOC AND THE ENSLAVEMENT OF HIS CHILDREN EVEN TODAY. FOR HE WHO SITS HIGH AND LOOKS LOW IS THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN STOP THIS. I AM A BLACK MAN AND I FEEL THAT WHAT GOD PUT IN MY SOUL IS IN EVERY MAN'S SOUL FOR IF IT WAS NOT SO GOD WOULD NOT HAVE CREATED US. FOR THIS I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW HOW CAN A MAN TAKE AN IRON PIPE A IRON CHAIN AND CALL HIMSELF A CHRISTIAN.

Figure 24. Joe Minter, *To You, Through Me: The Beginning of a Link of A Journey of 400 years*. Chapter 2, page 19.

Figure 25. Joe Minter, *To You, Through Me: The Beginning of a Link of A Journey of 400 years*. Page 54.
Figure 26. Joe Minter, *To You, Through Me: The Beginning of a Link of A Journey of 400 years*. Page 58.

Figure 27. Joe Minter, *To You, Through Me: The Beginning of a Link of A Journey of 400 years*. Page 57.
Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Birmingham’s Racial Segregation Ordinances.

Figure 30. Joe Minter, *To You, Through Me: The Beginning of a Link of A Journey of 400 years.*

Figure 31. Lonnie Holley, “After the Flood.” Photograph courtesy of Souls Grown Deep Foundation. 1996.
Figure 32. Reverend H.D. Dennis and Margaret outside of Margaret’s Grocery. Photograph copyright property of Suzi Altman, currently in the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. https://www.suzialtman.com/index, suzisnaps@aol.com, (+1) 601-668-9611

Figures 33 and 34. Photographs taken by author, January 22nd, 2019.
Figure 35. Photograph taken by author, January 22nd, 2019.

Figure 36. Herman Dennis, “Ark of the Covenant.” Photo courtesy of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. 1998.

Figure 37. Herman Dennis, “God Love You Tower.” Photo courtesy of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. 1998

Figure 39. Herman Dennis, “The Home of the Double Headed EaglePhotograph copyright property of Suzi Altman, https://www.suzialtman.com/index. suzisnaps@aol.com, (+1) 601-668-9611

Figure 40. Herman Dennis on his bus. Photograph from the SPACES archive, 2001.
Figure 41. Margaret on the bus. Photograph copyright and property of Suzi Altman, https://www.suzialtman.com/index, suzisnaps@aol.com, (+1) 601-668-9611

Figure 42. Margaret’s Grocery. Photograph copyright and property of Suzi Altman, https://www.suzialtman.com/index, suzisnaps@aol.com, (+1) 601-668-9611

Figure 43. Margaret’s Grocery. Photograph copyright and property of Suzi Altman, https://www.suzialtman.com/index, suzisnaps@aol.com, (+1) 601-668-9611
Chapter Three - Self Taught Women: Mary Proctor, Nellie Mae Rowe, and Sister Gertrude Morgan

Missionary Mary - The Next Generation Visionary

Mary Proctor of Tallahassee, Florida (b. 1960) observes that nothing happens that she doesn’t see first. In 1994 she describes having a dream where she saw smoke and light opening up to heaven. When she awoke she found out that her grandmother, aunt, and uncle had tragically died in a fire while she was dreaming. She fell into a deep depression and began to meditate, pray, and read the bible as a means of healing. She fasted for thirty days and describes this moment:

On that thirtieth day, a beautiful light just shone. And I looked up, saw it shining in heaven, and I thought, Instead of taking my life, God’s fixing to come back here at me. And that beautiful light just came over my spirit and said to me, “Get a door and paint.” I already had a pile of doors there, and had paint, and I went and did it. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved.” And I was writing on them doors. And I was releasing myself.

Mary Proctor began to paint on doors and bathtubs and whatever else she could get her hands on, quickly filling up her yard with paintings. The work often features a cool-hued background and loose, impressionistic, and dynamically posed figures with bible verses and other spiritual musings filling the piece. Some of her pieces have a mosaic or collage quality to them as she glues buttons, rocks, shells, and costume jewelry on them. The shells and costume jewelry are gold, giving the work an almost gilded appearance. Most of her pieces are signed “Missionary

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Mary Proctor.” She describes a vision in which two years into making her paintings she asked the Lord:

‘Why am I doing this?’ and he responded: ‘You are on a mission to get a great message out into the houses and hearts.’ That’s why the ‘missionary’ name came to me, because of my mission. I’m going to get a message out to broken women, a message to help and glorify them. I’m going to get a message out so men can search their hearts, learn to respect us and treat us the right way.\(^{83}\)

A significant amount of Missionary Mary Proctor’s work examines the role and subjugation of women, particularly, black women, and seeks to lift them up. In one series of doors positioned in her yard, Proctor painted full body profiles of black women in brightly colored patterns against vibrant backgrounds.

One piece that is exemplary of Missionary Mary’s door series depicts a black woman against a blue sky reaching upwards in a dress made of shells. The text reads at the top “The road has been rocky but I’m goin on any how” (Figure 44). On the border of the piece, there are small figures and heads, all black and wearing the same shell dress, looking upwards towards the sky. Around the figures are stories of hardship from Missionary Mary’s life, such as, “3 family members perish in house” and “I went to have my 3 child-83. Doctor hit a nerve left me with numb right side. Since no damages.” In an interview, Proctor recounts that an anesthesiologist hit a nerve during childbirth and left her paralyzed on part of her right side. She sued for medical malpractice and the doctor admitted fault, but an all white jury decided she was not entitled to damages. Her case was later used as an example of negligence when a white woman sued for the same case and was awarded one million dollars.\(^{84}\) The words “Lord” and “Lord Said Go On” are scattered throughout the piece. The image is triumphant, but to reduce Missionary Mary Proctor’s work to a simple story of hardship overcome via visionary painting would be reductive.

\(^{84}\) Hahn, "Don't Ignore," Bitter Southerner.
Her work is part of her healing process, but she emphasizes that it is not a story of pain, but rather a way to illuminate her truth as a Missionary.

Proctor, more so than Joe Minter or Herman Dennis, has a lot in common with Howard Finster. Proctor emphasizes that her role is to spread the word of God, and she blends herself into her piece and her mission. She is also, like Finster, a saleswoman and a showboat. She tells her story to her audience and describes her visions. She is keenly aware of the market and works hard to sell her art, going so far as to open up a store she calls the “American Folk Art and Visionary Museum” (Figure 45). She initially had her shop close to her home in the country, but eventually decided to move it into the Tallahassee Mall. It is unclear if she is still using her yard as a workspace or storage space, or if most of her work goes into her store and other galleries.

In a video interview posted on Youtube in 2010, she gives a tour around her yard and shows off her work. She points out her self-portraits, sculptures, and found objects. She welcomes her visitors to come along for the ride and cheerily describes her pieces. One featured piece consists of a large block of wood with baseball caps nailed to it that she refers to as *Put on My Thinking Cap*. In the video, she rattles off a few of the idioms painted on the piece, such as “think before you speak,” “think before how you treat someone,” “think to how you treat each other as saints,” before imparting a bit of wisdom, telling her audience “Just thinking. Thinking is a good thing.”

(Figure 46). She then pivots to a statue of the Virgin Mary and says “the Virgin Mary, thats me! When I say *virgin*, I mean, I never painted before. So that’s a virgin, ain’t it? Virgin of the *mind*.” The Virgin Mary is a common motif in Missionary Mary’s work and it is clear that she feels some sort of kinship with the figure. This mixing of her evangelical painting style and motifs with the Catholic symbol of the Virgin Mary feels reminiscent of

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86 “Missionary Mary,” video file.
Finster, who had statues of the Virgin scattered throughout Paradise Garden. In one piece featured on the Souls Grown Deep Foundation website, Missionary Mary placed a small statue of the Virgin Mary in a painted bathtub (Figure 47). The piece has small painted angelic figures floating upwards, the background is an ethereal and cloudy blue, and the top of the piece reads “Holy Mary Will Thou” while the inside of the tub reads “Ask God to Forgive our Sins?”. Finster-like flying angels are a common motif in Mary’s work and hint at his influence, intentional or not. The work also calls to mind an ex-voto retablo and seems to have a similar objective; Missionary Mary is calling upon the Virgin Mary for her help in a way that reads more Catholic than Protestant. Ex-voto retablos are small devotional paintings typical to Catholic folk art that employ iconographic images to express gratitude towards God, Christ, the Virgin, or a Saint for their presence and guidance during a trying time or near-fatal moment. Finster notably employed Catholic imagery in spite of his intensely evangelical origins. When describing her relationship to the Virgin in this piece, Missionary Mary observes that they have the same name and remarks “I feel like I bore her spirit. If you know about her, she was not a white woman. She was a black woman and she bore a black child and the child was Jesus. I believe I'm a representative of that black woman, and that spirit is within me.” Missionary Mary is doing something here that Finster did- she is elevating herself to sainthood. Finster, however, often took an approach that declared him as a true alien to our planet. Proctor believes herself to be a missionary with the healing spirit of the Virgin Mary. From the genuine reflections present in her signage and her relaxed preaching style, Proctor embodies the ‘authentic’ outsider. Although she is, of course, trying to sell her work, she does equate herself to a prophet and by maintaining

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her missionary status, which invokes service rather than holiness, she remains an approachable visionary artist.

In one sculpture titled *Tower of the Women’s Upholding America* Proctor assembled a large tower composed of bicycle wheels topped by two angels painted on wood (Figure 48). It brings to mind the large-scale bicycle wheel sculpture at Paradise Garden or Finster’s tower made of pots and metal. Finster, however, is not the originator of this type of sculpture. In the introduction of *Souls Grown Deep Volume II*, Paul Arnett cites notable African art historian and scholar Robert Farris Thompson. Thompson, an expert in African Art, has traced the use of the bicycle wheel in Southern yard art to the Kongo employment of “emblems of motion.” He also notes that these yard shows, including Missionary Mary Proctor’s, are incredibly cohesive and consistent in terms of materials.88 This comparison arguably falls under the problematic practice of connecting black Southern artists with Africa, despite the fact that many of them are probably not directly aware of African visual culture. These motifs from Africa, however, are common in the South and as a symbol of black Southern domesticity, reconfigure a distinct Southern visual culture. As I suggested in the first chapter, Finster’s work more likely borrows from these yard shows, similar to Mary Proctor’s, he had seen throughout his upbringing than vice versa.

**Missionary Capitalism**

Missionary Mary Proctor is considerably younger than many other notable self-taught artists. She began to create in her thirties and was ‘discovered’ only a few years after she began making her art, giving her the advantage of being able to create based on market needs in real

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time. Her entrepreneurial attitude rivals that of Howard Finster, and bucks the myth of the black Southern artists working without any expectation of financial gain. Most of her predecessors in the Souls Grown Deep group began creating and did not receive recognition for decades. Not only does Proctor have a store in the Tallahassee mall where she sells her work, on her website missionarymary.com, under the “sales” section she lists the names, websites, addresses, and phone numbers of different galleries that represent her. Much of her work is available for purchase online. In bell hooks’ Art on My Mind she unpacks and discusses the position of the woman artist. She notes that because women have not had the leisure and solitude that is typical of white male artists, they must not only justify to others how their time is spent, but they must also make a profit. Hooks puts it as such:

We are working to make money (since we have all long abandoned the notion that men would support us while we make art- if we ever thought that- or that patrons would recognize the inequities of history and make reparations granting us time and material support), to take care of ourselves and our non-patriarchal families.89

Hooks does not mention black women explicitly in this chapter, however, it is, of course, notable that she is writing from the perspective of a black woman and that white women artists have been in a different position for the past several hundred years. Missionary Mary self-promotes and tries to sell her work, defying expectations for what visionary artists and what women should crave from their creative endeavors. She is selling her brand of Christianity and womanhood- it is as much a missionary Christian enterprise as it is a capitalistic one.

Missionary Mary has not, however, received much recognition in the self-trained art world. There was no mention of her in the Outliers catalog for the 2018 exhibition, which featured hundreds of contemporary American outsider ‘vanguard’ artists. Nonetheless, because her work is part of Bill Arnett’s collection and the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, it is part of

the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the piece gifted from the Souls Grown Deep foundation to the Metropolitan titled The Keys Jesus is shown on the cross at the center of the Hollowcore door, surrounded by a flashy baroque-like mosaic of costume jewelry and, as the title implies, housekeys surrounding the crucifixion (Figure 49). The door is painted gold and the flashy jewelry, buttons, and coins that cover the piece imply a playfulness that is typical of Proctor’s iconographic work. Proctor describes the piece in My Soul Has Grown Deep, the catalog of the Souls Grown Deep foundation’s gift to the Metropolitan Museum, as an homage to a Tallahassee “wealthy motel owner and philanthropist, Ruby Pearl Diamond” who Proctor describes as having “opened a lot of doors for people.” Although it is exciting to see art from a self-taught artist in the Metropolitan Museum, much of the context of the work and persona of Missionary Mary is lost within the sterility of the institution.

Hooks’ Art on My Mind, published in 1995, presciently warns in her chapter “Women Artists: the Creative Process” against the commodification of art by women and people of color and the unintended effects it can have on the work. She observes:

They mistake greater involvement in the marketplace with the formation of a liberatory space where women can create meaningful, compelling, ‘great’ art and have the art be fully recognized. The ‘commodification’ of difference often leads to the false assumption that works by people of color and marginalized white women are ‘hot’ right now and able to garner a measure of recognition and reward that they may or may not deserve. The impact such thinking has on our work is that if often encourages marginalized artists to feel we must do our work quickly, strike while the iron is hot, or risk being ignored forever.

Hooks’ exploration of commodification indicates that interest in women and people of color work runs the risk of being a trend rather than being treated with the respect other artists are granted. The question of authenticity, which is often conflated to mean an uneducated artist who

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91 hooks, Art on My Mind, 132.
has no financial expectations for themselves, is interlinked to the question of commodification that hooks poses. Missionary Mary in an interview notes that, like many other untrained artists, she did not consider what she was doing to be art until she was approached by a “New York City gallery owner.” She recounts the pivotal moment in which a woman who owned a gallery in New York’s ‘SoHo’ drove by her yard as she was outside painting and made a u-turn to come back and speak to Proctor. The gallery owner asked her “What are you doing? Do you know what you are?” and when she replied that she was just painting, the woman informed her that she was, despite her not knowing, a “folk artist.” This interaction epitomizes the central question of “outsider art”: what are the effects, intended or not, of commodifying artwork by disenfranchised artists and forcing them into the intense capitalism of the contemporary art market? Proctor describes, with no resentment, the women from the gallery immediately offered her five thousand dollars to buy ten of her painted doors (Missionary Mary had earned roughly one hundred dollars selling her pieces in flea markets since she began making them one year before) and offered her a solo show. The doors sold easily, priced between $2,500-$5,000 each.

Missionary Mary was ‘discovered’ thirteen years after the iconic Black Folk Art in America 1930-1980 exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery in 1982 and several years after Bill Arnett had made waves in the art world with Thornton Dial and Lonnie Holley. This gallerist, it appears, recognized Mary Proctor’s profitability in the rapidly expanding untrained artist market niche.

Missionary Mary, the video makes clear, is happy with her success, and happy to spread her artwork to others, keeping in line with her ‘missionary’ spirit. She emphasizes that she is not doing this for wealth, but rather she is simply trying to live. The paradox of outsider or self-

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92 "Missionary Mary," video file.
93 Black Folk Art in America 1930-1980 was a milestone show in 1982 that underscored the historical lack of understanding, representation, and acknowledgement of black culture in museum collections and exhibitions. It caused a flurry of debates surrounding questions of diversity and language used while referring to self-taught art.
taught art is that once the artist is brought into the mainstream art world, plucked out of their perceived ‘isolation,’ they risk losing their brand of authenticity. This is most clearly seen with Finster, who was criticized for having his grandchildren help produce his work and turning out numerous paintings that he knew sold well. Others, like Lonnie Holley and Thornton Dial, have become fixtures in the contemporary art world. The words ‘self-taught’ are not always attached to their profiles. A 2018 *Hyperallergic* article on Thornton Dial noted that the romanticization of the notion of “outsider art” and the purity of poverty and obscurity further enforces the political underpinnings that create the poverty.\(^9^4\) Mary Proctor’s work sells, but she is not on the same level in terms of recognition of Holley, Dial, or Finster and thus occupies a sort of middle ground in the canon of self-taught art. Despite her early gallery success, she is still a relatively young artist at fifty-nine as of 2019 and spends much of her time selling her work in her store, to her followers on Facebook, and at folk art festivals.\(^9^5\)

**The Women Who Came Before:**

**Nellie Mae Rowe**

Mary Proctor, as a black women ‘self-taught’ artist, has notable predecessors, Sister Gertrude Morgan and Nellie Mae Rowe among them. Nellie Mae Rowe’s whimsical paintings set her apart from her self-taught peers- Rowe’s paintings are figurative but unconcerned with spatial conventions. She often paints herself against bright backgrounds with trees, farm animals,

birds, hybrid human figures, et cetera, floating around her.\textsuperscript{96} Much of Rowe’s later work is thought to be autobiographical and is believed that she at times represents herself via animals.\textsuperscript{97} Her paintings are fantastically bright with undulating lines dividing color planes, seemingly on a whim. Much of Rowe’s work, however, follows African American traditions and reflects her particular brand of spirituality. She made art from whatever materials she had, painting on plastic refrigerator trays, old wallpaper, cardboard, wood, books and “shaped forms made up of chewing gum.”\textsuperscript{98} On these materials, Rowe used crayon, felt-tip markers, and paint. She made clear that her art was possible through God, but she was often the protagonist of her pieces, as opposed to Jesus or the Virgin Mary. Both Proctor and Rowe used their homes as their primary creation sites, with Proctor painting in her yard and displaying her pieces semi-temporarily, and Rowe creating her ‘playhouse.’\textsuperscript{99} Her home and garden are decorated in dolls, drawings, and other fanciful creations (Figure 50). Rowe’s yard art, while less immersive, is unique in its whimsy in comparison to the heavily thematic immersive-ness of artists like Joe Minter or Reverend Herman Dennis.

From studying Rowe’s art, one can derive and begin to understand the visual code Rowe employs in her work. One notable aspect of Rowe’s Southern black evangelicalism is her belief in spirits, sometimes referred to as haints. Haints are an evil spirit or ghost that has not been able

\textsuperscript{96} Nellie Mae Rowe was born in 1900 in Atlanta, Georgia and often worked alongside her father in the fields growing up. Rowe is possibly the best known of the three and is a posthumous member artist of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Her work is held in the American Folk Art Museum, the Smithsonian, and the High Museum of Art, among others.


to move to the next phase in the afterlife. In one drawing, *Nellie’s House at Night*, Rowe depicts a house with a blue roof, often referred to as Haint Blue, thought to ward off spirits in Southern black communities (Figure 51).\(^{100}\) The house sits in the center of the piece with large flower pots on either side. A brown pig said to be Rowe, floats up away from the house and towards the heavens. Much of the work Rowe created in the last few years of her life reflects her grappling with death. In another painting, *Haints*, ink on paper, Rowe is shown in the center, sitting down, surrounded by a brown background with animals, plants, ghosts, and other semi-human figures swirling around her (Figure 52). Rowe smiles and holds a pipe, but the drawing has a considerably darker tone than much of her other work.

Rowe, towards the end of her life, began to garner considerable attention as a “folk artist,” as it was referred to at the time, in the wake of Howard Finster’s success. Her art is bright, winding, and often makes reference to her life in the South. *Picking Cotton* shows stereotypical imagery of a Southern lifestyle with people, animals and a farm (Figure 53). Sharon Bloom and Alexander Levitt note that in *Picking Cotton* the black mule traversing Rowe’s body is representative of:

> [...] The forced labor of the black woman. The seated white woman scrutinizing Rowe may represent her employers during her years as a domestic servant; the red rodent beneath the chair is Rowe’s symbol for an unpleasant situation. In addition, the blue-green man sitting in the lower left corner, who grins while he watches her work, may represent her former husband.\(^{101}\)

Rowe, living in the South, creates work about the evils of slavery and Jim Crow laws that Mary Proctor, sixty years her junior, did not experience in the same way. Rowe, who spent her life as a domestic servant and working on a plantation before becoming an artist, is dealing with a

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\(^{100}\) Haint Blue originated in Gullah culture in the Sea Islands and coastal areas of Georgia and South Carolina, but has been widely adopted in many parts of the South.  
\(^{101}\) Sharon Bloom and Alexander Levitt, "Seeing Things Differently," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 2, no. 344:  
http://dx.doi.org/10.3201/eid2002.AC2002
different, albeit rooted in racism and slavery, set of issues and trauma than Mary Proctor. Mary Proctor’s work, like Nellie Mae Rowe’s, heavily features herself, but Proctor’s work pays homage to black liberators and women leaders who came before her. Proctor began creating in the late nineties and has lived to see her work become a part of museum collections. Both artists use color in a similar way, although Proctor’s paintings are often larger. They both use mixed materials including shells, costume jewelry, buttons, keys, among other things. Edmund Barry Gaither, Director and Curator of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, notes in his essay “Witnessing: Layered Meaning in Vernacular Art,” that in the South artists who describe having visions compelling them to create, often employ the “African notion of aggregated power captured through the assemblage of many diverse materials, each of which has its own anima or spiritual force, for it is created from wood, wood putty, cowry shells, fabric, costume jewelry, paint, and artificial hair.”\textsuperscript{102} While I do not think that the work of these artists can necessarily be categorized this way when they have not expressed themselves any connection, given the scope of this paper, I do think the commonalities between what Gaither describes and how it has possible relevance to Rowe and Proctor’s work is worth mentioning.

The most in-depth literature on Rowe’s work is Lee Kogan’s \textit{Ninety-Nine and a Half Won’t Do: The Art of Nellie Mae Rowe} produced in conjunction with the 1998 eponymous show. Kogan looks extensively at the scholarship surrounding Rowe’s work and examines the similarities it has with West African traditions. This includes the imagery in Rowe’s ‘playhouse’ as well as her paintings and drawings. According to Kogan, Rowe often mixes African symbolism with Christianity, and while her decision to decorate her yard is not necessarily linked to Kongoese traditions, it is often connected to spiritualism and the idea of elevating the

everyday object to a metaphysical level. Rowe, living on the freeway nearby a wealthy Atlanta community, received significant backlash and bullying from her white neighbors because of the unruly appearance of her yard. Kogan describes the violence she experienced as “a few people called her a fortune-teller or ‘hoodoo’ and threw things at her house, broke windows, tore up flower beds, and ripped decorations from the property and spread the contents all over the road. [...] In time, the assault stopped, and people’s reactions changed.”¹⁰³ People soon became more receptive to Rowe’s work and she eventually had a few hundred visitors to her playhouse a year. Kogan draws a comparison to the practice of ‘vodun,’ describing the symbolic nature of detached body parts, hybrid animals, dogs, fish, and parrots, and Rowe’s blending of herself with these elements. Kogan acknowledges that vodun comparisons are speculative, but the similarities between Rowe’s work and the West African symbols are striking. In citing Kogan I do not wish to necessarily promote her reading of Rowe’s work but rather acknowledge the leading scholarship surrounding her work. Rowe’s drawings, paintings, and playhouse emphasize that art made within Southern black traditions cannot be relegated to one ideological school, evangelical or otherwise. Rowe emphasized her Christianity and viewed herself, in her widowed state, as a child receiving a second chance to express herself. Her blending of Christianity with her own visual language, in its joyous use of color and form, resonated with many.

Sister Gertrude Morgan

At the age of 37, Morgan heard a voice telling her to “Go and preach, tell it to the world,” and two years later she moved to New Orleans to do just that. Sister Gertrude Morgan moved to Louisiana in 1939 with the goal of converting voodoo or hoodoo practitioners in what she

considered the most sinful city in America. She believed that nowhere needed her help more than New Orleans and would take to Bourbon Street to proselytize before finding setting up camp in a shotgun style home she proclaimed as the “Everlasting Gospel Mission.” On her decision to move to New Orleans, Morgan said “New Orleans is the headquarters of sin…. When people go to do some evil work, they go to the ninth ward.” Morgan moved to the lower Ninth Ward and became a New Orleans fixture by the sixties and seventies, known for preaching on her front porch. She joined forces with two other Sisters and the three of them created an orphanage. They practiced a fundamentalist branch of Christianity that employed music and dance as a mode of connecting with God. Gertrude played the guitar, piano, tambourine, and sang. She began painting in in 1956. She started painting more when the orphanage was destroyed in a hurricane in 1965.

In 1957 Sister Gertrude Morgan received a divine message that she was to be the bride of Christ, so she subsequently switched the habit she wore (although she was not a nun), for all white clothes and took up the position of his ‘everlasting bride’. Morgan’s paintings often depict her alongside her husband Jesus Christ, innocently sidestepping the eras forbiddance of interracial marriage. She donned a nurse’s outfit, complete with a cap and white tights, and often sat on her porch with a tambourine (Figure 54). Morgan’s Everlasting Gospel Mission in the Ninth Ward served as Gertrude’s church or yard show. Like Morgan’s clothes, she kept the Everlasting Gospel Mission whitewashed, all of the furniture and objects (including her Bible)

105 Clark, "New World," 441
106 Jane Livingston and John Beardsley, Black Folk Art in America 1930-1980 (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi and the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, 1982), 100.
were painted white, and the only color burst from her bright paintings.\textsuperscript{107} She identified not just as the bride of Christ but as the bride of Christ in the Book of Revelations, often depicting herself at the epicenter of the apocalyptic showdown.\textsuperscript{108}

Morgan often evangelized via songs, some of which can be heard on Spotify or YouTube, prophesying “If you live like Jesus told you, everything will be alright,” “he will make your life easy and your burden light, it will be alright.”\textsuperscript{109} Her album \textit{Let's Make a Record} is full with these positive platitudes sung in Morgan’s deep voice with her accompanying tapping tambourine as she sings “I Got the New World In My View,” and traditional Southern gospel favorites, such as “Take My Hand, Lead Me On,” (often times titled “Precious Lord,” or “Take My Hand, Precious Lord). In her song “I Got the New World in My View,” Morgan recounts chapter 21 of the Book of Revelations, proclaiming that:

21st Chapter Revelation/ John talking about the new world/ Said I saw a new heaven and a new earth/ For the first heaven and the first earth were passed away/And thou will no more see/ John said I saw a new Jerusalem coming down / From God out of heaven, prepared as a bride/ A dawn for a husband, amen/ You know 'e are a city, that's set on the hill cannot be here, Certain a person is a city, amen.\textsuperscript{110}

This song reflects the words and sentiments Sister Gertrude Morgan often lightly pencils on her paintings in cursive, making it nearly impossible to read. These two verses are indicative of Sister Gertrude Morgan’s opinion of the role of the bride as central to the apocalyptic narrative of the Book of Revelations and New Orlean’s potential damnation as a city of sin. Her musical

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\textsuperscript{108} Clark, "New World," 443.


musings go hand in hand with her paintings and drawings and transform her art into an evangelical performance, not unlike that of Howard Finster.

Sister Gertrude Morgan used whatever materials she could find to make her work. She would most often use acrylic or tempera paint, crayons, markers on old wood doors (like Proctor), Tide detergent boxes, strips of wood, styrofoam meat trays, ‘for sale’ signs, window shades, paper, and even megaphones.111 Her inventive spirit and drive to create art despite limited means is indicative of the attitude of many of the artists I have examined. As is the case with Nellie Mae Rowe, it is often viewed as a quirky and amusing aspect of their work by patrons and curators, rather than looked at as symptomatic of the incredible poverty these women, only two generations from slavery, experienced. Mary Proctor, Nellie Mae Rowe, and Sister Gertrude Morgan have all described an impulsive need to create that drove them to use unconventional materials out of necessity.

One piece typical of Morgan’s style titled Jesus is my air plane shows Sister Gertrude Morgan and Jesus flying in a small plane above a cityscape, surrounded by angels and Morgan’s cursive pencil-etched text quoting Psalms and describing the scene (Figure 55). She places them amongst scripture and angels, further intertwining the already deeply personal connection she feels as the bride of Christ with biblical significance. In this painting, Morgan is among the angels and is larger than life, her two-person airplane dwarfing the cityscape she depicted. Morgan is the pilot flying the airplane while Jesus sits behind her, demonstrating her equal partnership with the Christ of her fantasies. This flies in the face of Louisiana social structures and Protestant mores regarding the depiction of Christ. Despite her rallying against sin, Morgan’s Christianity is considerably progressive in this manner. Her staunch Revelation-based

111 Clark, "New World," 441.
work paired with whimsical colors and fantastical situations are central to Morgan’s appeal in the contemporary art world. In her painting, *Two Beasts of Revelation* she shows a lion with a crown and a black panther juxtaposed with the text “Two Beasts of Revelation 13” and “Fear God and Give Glory to him: For the hour of his is judgment is come Rev 147” (Figure 56). The work has a textured appearance and is made on cardboard with pen, pastel, watercolor, and pencil. The background is a fiery pink and the apocalyptic tones are undeniable. The bright colors and simplistic figures she paints embolden a stark, edging on ironic, contrast from the notions of hellfire and damnation at the core of much of her work. Her use of bright colors implies lightness and optimism, while brown, maroon, and black codify “the reckoning.”

Morgan’s work is possibly the least similar to Proctor’s in terms of painting style and materiality. Proctor’s work is large scale and often revolves around one single figure, whereas Sister Gertrude Morgan, like Rowe, tends to show figures scaled into a landscape and oftentimes with Jesus Christ or animals in the foreground. Sister Gertrude Morgan’s mission was largely driven by her desire to convert New Orleanians who practiced VooDoo or HooDoo, which blends Catholic traditions with West African traditions, to more conservative and traditional evangelical Christianity. Missionary Mary Proctor is less stringent and often incorporates traditional elements of West African art into her paintings, most noticeable in the dress pattern she paints onto her figures and her use of shells. Both artists, however, heavily emphasize texts within their paintings. They both make their art relatively understandable by including bible verses, the names of their subjects, and sometimes the titles of their work.

Sister Gertrude Morgan and Nellie Mae Rowe, both born at the turn of the twentieth century, flourished and created under an artistic landscape significantly different than the contemporary art scene of today. The space for women, artists of color, and self-taught artists
has changed substantially since the artists gained recognition in the early eighties, shortly before deaths. These artists were setting a precedent and thus had no way of knowing the influence they would posthumously exert for artists like Missionary Mary Proctor. There is currently a show prominently featuring the work of Sister Gertrude Morgan, titled *Vernacular Voices: Self-Taught, Outsider, and Visionary Art from the Permanent Collection* at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art (March 8th - July 14th, 2019).¹¹² Morgan and Rowe, although they received a great deal of success before the end of their lives, did not live to see the financial or critical success of their work within the permanent collections of the Smithsonian Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or the High Museum. In the foreword of *Ninety-Nine and a Half Won’t Do* Gerard Watkins, the director of the Museum of Folk Art, offers a critique of the term ‘self-taught’ as it applies to artists like Nellie Mae Rowe, and by default Sister Gertrude Morgan and Missionary Mary Proctor. He remarks that self-taught implies “creativity un-influenced by context or tradition. On the contrary, without detracting from the highly individualistic expressive voices with which the most accomplished of artists speak, their work is often deeply rooted in folk culture, even if it is not dependent upon perceived forms and conventions.”¹¹³ The word ‘folk’ is one I have shied away from in this project because it feels diminutive, that being said, I believe that the focus on tradition rings particularly true in the case of these three artists. Mary Proctor is creating work within the canon of black feminism- she paints the Virgin Mary as a black woman, along with Sojourner Truth, civil rights activist and founder of Bethune-Cookman College, Mary Bethune, as well as Martin Luther King, Tiger Woods, and foremost, her grandmother.¹¹⁴ She, however, does not describe herself in politicized words but rather

¹¹⁴ “Missionary Mary,” video file.
asserts, like other visionaries, that there is a wisdom “being given” to her that is for all of mankind, black or white.  

Self-Taught Art: Can it be Saved?

Nellie Mae Rowe’s playhouse no longer stands; in its place sits a hotel and a commemorative plaque acknowledging Rowe’s former home. Sister Gertrude Morgan’s Everlasting Gospel Mission on Dorgenois Street in the Lower Ninth Ward was torn down ten years ago and is now a vacant lot. The artists are now integral figures in the Southern self-taught art movement, but their homes have been cast aside. Museum recognition, inherently capitalistic, has not done enough to negate their marginal status. Their work can travel to museums and sit in the homes of collectors, but their homes, often in vulnerable neighborhoods and communities, cannot be truly be commodified. There is little incentive to turn these homes, whose fan bases are often geographically and socially distant, into landmarks or historic sites. The politics of charging an entry fee to visit the home of a deceased poor person are questionable at best, and exploitive at worst. Placing works like this within the institution divorces them from their cultural context and leaves viewers to marvel and wonder about how such delightful work was made, eventually chalking it up to the product of an isolated genius. Only time will tell how the public will consume and archive the works of Peacemaker Joe Minter, Reverend Herman Dennis, and Missionary Mary Proctor.

\footnote{“Missionary Mary,” video file.}
Chapter Three Images

Figure 44. Mary Proctor, “The Road Has Been Rocky But I’m Going Anyhow.”

Figure 45. Missionary Mary outside of her store in Tallahassee, Florida.
Figure 46. Screengrab from “Missionary Mary” Youtube video. Proctor’s “Thinking Caps.”

Figure 47. Mary Proctor, “Holy Mary, Will Thou Ask God to Forgive our Sins?” Photograph from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, 1998.

Figure 49. Mary Proctor, “The Keys.” From the Metropolitan Museum of Art. 1996. Hollowcore door, plywood, keys, glass cabochons, buttons, watch faces, beads, toys and commercial paint.
Figure 50. Nellie Mae Rowe’s “Playhouse.” Photograph from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, 1971.

Figure 51. Nellie Mae Rowe, “Nellie’s House at Night.” Photograph from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. 1981. Felt-tip pen and crayon on paper.

Figure 52. Nellie Mae Rowe, “Haints.” Photograph from the High Museum of Art. Ink, crayon, and marker on paper.
Figure 53. Nellie Mae Rowe, “Picking Cotton.” Photograph from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. 1981. Crayon, felt-tip pen, ballpoint pen, on paper. 19 x 24.5 inches

Figure 55. Sister Gertrude Morgan, “Jesus is my airplane.” ca. 1970. Drawings and watercolors.

Figure 56. Sister Gertrude Morgan, “Two Beasts of Revelation.” ca. 1965-1975. Pen, pencil, pastel and watercolor on cardboard.
Conclusion

What Does this Mean for Museums?

Black self-taught art is a rapidly expanding art market in the contemporary world and is the subject of numerous exhibitions as of late. This is in part because of the Souls Grown Deep mission to disperse Bill Arnett’s extensive collection to museums across the country, however, it seems that something larger could be at play. I believe that this goes beyond the confines of the self-taught movement and encompasses a question of representation of black artists in the museum sphere in general. As recently as March of 2019 the New York Times published an article detailing the newfound success and recognition that black artists in their seventies and eighties are receiving, long after being cast aside in the 1960s and 70s. Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power has received widespread recognition and traveled from the Tate Museum in London to the Brooklyn Museum, and has now landed at The Broad Museum in Los Angeles. Once again the question of authenticity arises- Howardena Pindell recalls in the New York Times article: “‘Within the African-American community in the 1970s, if you were an abstract artist you were considered the enemy pandering to the white world,’ said Ms. Pindell. ‘But white dealers would say that African-Americans who did abstract work were inauthentic.’” Bell hooks remarks upon this by noting that black people working under the framework of art for art’s sake were viewed as apolitical, or “out of the loop.”

118 Hilarie M. Sheets, "Discovered after 70."
119 hooks, Art on My Mind, 3.
There is a massive push to diversify institutions and museums are at the forefront of this, however, it often seems that much of the effort put in towards diversifying remains surface-level. The SGD gift helps to ensure that the representation stretches beyond exhibitions and puts the work within the permanent collection and holdings of the museums, preserving the legacy of the artist for years to come. These efforts, however, bring hooks’ warning back to mind. In the introduction of Art on My Mind hooks argues:

Art constitutes one of the rare locations where acts of transcendence can take place and have a wide-ranging transformative impact. Indeed, mainstream white art circles are acted upon in radical ways by the work of black artists. It is part of the contemporary tragedy of racism and white supremacy that white folks often have greater access to the work of the artists and to the critical apparatus that allows for understanding and appreciation for the work. Current commodification of blackness may mean that the white folk who walk through the exhibits of work by such artists as Bettye and Alison Saar are able to be more in touch with this work than most black folks. These circumstances will change only as African-Americans and our allies renew the progressive black liberation struggle- reenvisioning black revolution in such a way that we create collective awareness of the radical place that art occupies within the freedom struggle of the way in which experiencing art can enhance our understanding of what it means to live as free subjects in an unfree world.¹²⁰

The eliteness of the art world and the white supremacy inherent in American institutions means that efforts to diversify often feel too little, too late. The solution, besides dismantling the museums and rebuilding them from the ideological groundwork up, is not an easy one. A study conducted in 2019 examining data from eighteen major U.S. museums regarding the diversity of permanent collections in the United States found women and people of color to be vastly underrepresented.¹²¹ When looking at data ranging from ethnicity, gender, geographic origin, and birth decade for over ten thousand artists in the permanent collections of museums, among them the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the High Museum in Atlanta, the Detroit Institute of Art, et cetera women artists accounted for just 12 percent of artists overall. A table measuring the

¹²⁰ hooks, Art on My Mind, 9.
demographics of the artists showed that within that 12% of women, 1.2% identify as black/African-American. Overall, the collections are 85% white, 87% male, and 75.7% white male.\textsuperscript{122} As the article makes note, much of the push to diversify involves outreach programs and attempts to reform the visitorship rather than the permanent collection. The study observes that recent pushes to integrate institutions has led to a competition between museums for major works by black artists.\textsuperscript{123} One notable outlier in the study was the High Museum of Atlanta, in which 10.6% of its total 10.7% woman artists identified as black/African American (it is worth noting that the High Museum also had the lowest representation of Asian women in the group and 86.4% of the women in the collection are white).\textsuperscript{124} The High Museum exhibited the first Souls Grown Deep show in the mid-nineties and every show organized by the foundation since then has visited the Atlanta museum.\textsuperscript{125}

Kellie Jones, notable art historian and Africana studies scholar, when critiquing the curatorial practice in her book \textit{Eyeminded}, took note of the reluctance of museums to include art that falls outside of European aesthetics, underscoring that:

These organizations and those who run them are now somewhat ready to accept cultural or ethnic diversity; aesthetic diversity, though, is another thing. It’s still hard to accept that a piece of art might not be following conventions that you like or understand, that it still might be good or of a quality based on other criteria. This type of difference is hard to integrate into a museum that has a specific ‘vision’ that it takes pride in. More than that, though, it is hard to accept that a European aesthetic is just one of many ‘different’ forms.\textsuperscript{126}

This resistance to accept work that does not fit into European and American value systems of contemporary art is exemplified by the fact that work by self-taught artists is always exhibited

\textsuperscript{122} Topaz et al., "Diversity of Artists," 8.
\textsuperscript{123} Topaz et al., “Diversity of Artists,” 2.
\textsuperscript{124} Topaz et al., "Diversity of Artists," 8.
\textsuperscript{126} Kellie Jones, \textit{Eyeminded} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 315
under this very pretense, and rarely in thematic group shows that emphasize their form without an attachment such as ‘self-taught.’ The only possible exception to this rule would be Thornton Dial and at times Lonnie Holley, who has garnered so much fame that he is no longer designated as a self-taught artist but often a contemporary one. Dial, however, does not make figurative work like Morgan, Rowe, or Proctor; his work falls closer to abstract expressionism and he is often compared to artists like Robert Rauschenberg for his skillful collage work. As Jones notes, he presents the ethnic and cultural diversity that museums seek, but not the aesthetic difference. That, of course, is not to say that Dial should not create abstract work because of his blackness, a common idea that historically excluded black artists from contemporary circles, it merely points to the idea that the aesthetic judgment that Dial receives functions on a different plane from that of other untrained artists.

In chapter two I posited the idea that the notion of ‘self-taught’ is limiting because it implies that one can only learn how to create canonical art within the confines of higher education. This ignores regional traditions and artists who did not go to school altogether but whose work informs one another, like in the cases of Lonnie Holley, Thornton Dial, Ronald Lockett, and Joe Minter in the Birmingham and Bessemer, Alabama community. This promotes one aesthetic and alienates expression within the untrained and trained art scene, particularly among artists of color.

This brings up the heart of the issue of the 2004 show Black Romantic at the Studio Museum in Harlem curated by director Thelma Golden. In the exhibition catalog, Golden

128 Black Romantic was a 2004 show that explored the figurative impulse in African American art. Thelma Golden chose to exhibit works that are not associated with contemporary art, but speak to a more populist notion of black art and representation. The show featured largely trained artists, including Kehinde Wiley and Kadir Nelson.
describes the alienation between the average person and much of the work that passed through the Whitney, where she was formerly a curator and the Studio Museum. It was not artwork that most people, specifically black people, could emotionally connect to and engage with outside of the downtown New York art scene.  

Black Romantic featured black artists whose work, while contemporary and successful, did not have the attributes typically associated art in New York. Golden problematized her own taste and her own disinterest in figurative work by acknowledging the inaccessibility of much of contemporary art. The issue raised in Black Romantic is pertinent to the issues raised in exhibiting work by untrained artists. These conversations and texts do not solve this problem or answer the question, but more so point to the issue of placeless-ness for these artists and their work. Where does it fit within a contemporary landscape that was not carved for them at all, and more than that, was carved with the explicit intention of exclusion? How does the contemporary art scene, with its newfound fascination or fetishization of the untrained artist, restructure their missions to include the ‘other’? Jones sheds light on the issue as such:

Michael Wallace has pointed out that women of color fall outside the constructs of western binary logic. In a society predicated upon such opposite notions as black/white, male/female, and ‘universal’/‘other’ women of color remain excluded from either/or formula in which the polarities to white male are occupied by black (as in male) and female (as in white). In the schema of western discourse, then, women of color inhabit a space of complete invisibility and negation that Wallace refers to as the ‘other’ of the ‘other’.  

This very dichotomy that insists upon whiteness and maleness as contingencies for producing ‘good,’ or ‘conceptual,’ or ‘intellectual’ art leaves artists creating figurative and religious work with little ground to stand on. It prioritizes one aesthetic over the multiverse reality that is contemporary art, in which self-taught artists and figurative artists greatly outnumber the type of

130 Jones, Eyeminded, 330.
art that has been falsely positioned as the norm. The aesthetic commonalities between Joe Minter, Lonnie Holley, and Thornton Dial delineate a school of thought, and there is no reason to judge these schools as anything less than other groups: Abstract Expressionists, Impressionists, Surrealists, or Minimalists.

The Evangelical Church Today

Why have there been no more Howard Finsters? Something has changed in evangelicalism in the South in the past thirty years that homogenized evangelical Southern culture into a larger American evangelicalism. I believe the sweeping role of the megachurch, the rise of televangelism, and the influence of Fox News has been detrimental to white ‘folk’ Christianity. The evangelical megachurch has quadrupled in attendance in the last two decades, with the largest church in the United States serving 40,000 worshipers in Houston, Texas. Televangelism and megachurches push a highly capitalistic Christianity that is starkly in contrast with the poorer evangelical parishes I wrote about in my introduction. It has transformed evangelicalism from something that created art and had a distinctly Southern soul into an incredibly homogenized religious experience meant to placate the masses. The megachurch and televangelism, inherently Protestant methods of mass communication, is a distinctly American combination of capitalism and religion. It eliminates folk Christianity, with its traditional Southern hymns and smaller congregations, in favor of the milquetoast genre “Christian Rock” and the booming stadium speakers. Evangelicalism, bizarre and problematic as it may be, inspired the artists I have examined in this project to make artwork. It provided rich imagery and language for them to base their art on. Howard Finster, itinerant and at times roadside preacher, may not have found that same inspiration in the confines of a megachurch. That is not to say that
I think all hope is lost. From looking at this subject in depth I believe that this art has a mystifying power that can and will prevail in the South.

**The Role of Authenticity and the Question of Preservation**

A 1993 interview on PBS’s *60 Minutes* nearly threatened to derail Bill Arnett’s collecting and what would come to be known as the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Morley Safer of *60 Minutes* interviewed Charlie Lucas, Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, Bessie Harvey, and Bill Arnett. Safer immediately casts the artists as “almost all black, poor, uneducated, and talented” and fundamentally incongruous with the “white, wealthy, and highly educated art dealers” who seek to exploit the artists for financial gain.\(^{131}\) He casts Bill Arnett as a sort of Christopher Columbus, an empowered white man sweeping up art made by poor black people. Safer highlights that Arnett paid artists he ‘discovered’ a monthly one thousand dollar stipend as an advance for their future work and with a promise to preserve their legacy. Bessie Harvey notes in the interview that she loaned Arnett several pieces for a show that she has yet to see returned and disputes Arnett’s status as a benevolent benefactor. He paints artists like Thornton Dial as ignorant and unaware that they are being manipulated, emphasizing Bill Arnett’s reputation as a control freak. Safer highlights that Dial only lets Arnett distribute his work and that Arnett owns the deed to Dial’s house, saying “Thornton Dial may think he owns the house, but he doesn’t.”\(^{132}\) Arnett highlights that he purchased and owns the house because no bank would give Dial a loan and explains bureaucratic issues that have kept the title of the house from being transferred to him. Safer tells Arnett, “there is no heavier control of a man than the roof he lives under.” *60 Minutes* wraps the

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\(^{132}\) "Thornton Dial," video file.
segment concluding that these artists were “making art simply because they had to, unsullied by fashion or popularity. Now it seems that purity has been lost.” Arnett disputes this claim, pointing out that a loss of ‘purity’ is inevitable when bringing art out of the woodwork and into the public.

Safer in this interview reinforces the idea that prioritizes ‘purity’ as a necessary qualifier for authenticity, effectively validating the marginalization he claims he seeks to expose. A 2018 Hyperallergic article on Dial’s work focuses on this interview and notes that while Arnett is not a saint nor immune to fault, his efforts are not nearly as harmful or exploitive as Safer’s. The article on Dial criticizes Safer’s sentimentalist narrative:

By selling the idea that there is some purity to poverty and obscurity, Safer obscures the structures that create such societal problems, while sprinkling them with artificial sweetener so they become easier to swallow. Unless the critic is to fundamentally oppose the ideological framework of capitalism then there are very few negative things that can be said about the work of Bill Arnett. For decades, he has championed Dial’s work, pushing it up through the gallery and museum ranks until, at last, it was placed (at least temporarily) in the Met alongside Clyfford Still and Jackson Pollack.133

This idea clarifies that despite the work that museums and contemporary art institution still have to do to be truly representative of the art world and to become institutions that seek to dismantle elitism rather than uphold them, the emergence and popularity of artists from diverse backgrounds is, ultimately, a positive thing. This issue is multi-fold and there is no one correct conclusion to draw from the placement of this art within the institutional context. This art has always existed and for years it has been demolished and disappeared. There are countless self-taught artists in the American South creating in a vernacular or visionary tradition whose work has perished with their lives. The question of preserving these environments remains tentative and uncharted territory; it seems unlikely that government grants and art foundations will be

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capable of footing the bill to preserve these yard shows for years to come. The removal of the work from the sites and the placement of it in the museums is by no means ideal. Hopefully, as these works draw more attention and a broader audience, there will be a greater public push to maintain the work in the same manner in which historic homes and spaces associated with more institutional artists receive.

In a 2017 Washington Post profile of Bill Arnett, the collector muses about what will happen to these sites. He comments on Reverend George Kornegay’s home, an artist in the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, whose yard show and art disappeared after the artist’s death in 2004. Kornegay’s children had wanted Arnett to stop visiting and Arnett, aware that there was a market emerging and collectors were now attempting to buy up pieces of yard shows, offered Kornegay an extra stipend to not sell his work and keep it in situ.\(^{134}\) After Kornegay’s death, Arnett has no idea what happened to his work. Arnett reflects on Joe Minter’s African Village in America, noting that he hopes he can find a way to preserve it, but he’s not quite sure how. Minter observed, as he did with me, that because the Village is at the end of a thirty year journey, it could be moved and maintain its integrity. Minter stressed to me that it is critical that it is maintained as an educational tool for generations to come, whether it remains in its original location or not. Arnett laments, “I promise to God that if a white man had done this, there’d be a civic organization dedicated to protecting and preserving and restoring it … I mean, this is important.”\(^{135}\) Suzi Altman, charged with preserving Margaret’s Grocery in Mississippi, has been


struggling for years to maintain the property and has had to dismantle parts of it for storage as she fights for grants to restore the site to its former glory.

Visiting these sites and looking at the structures that have been rectified as testimonies to a higher power, I realized that in spite of the recognition these artists have received from prestigious institutions, they are still largely marginalized. Being printed in books does not change the fact that these artists are creating in remote Southern towns that have little connection to the contemporary art world. Recognition in academic circles is relatively meaningless if these self-taught art environmental structures do not have the means to survive. When I visited each of the three sites, I was the only person there. There were not hoards of people lining up to see the work of these artists. The remoteness and solitude of the yard shows has prevailed against the fascination of the art world, proving that the critic’s obsession that the work remains ‘pure,’ has in fact worked. The question of long-term preservation continues to loom over each person tasked with taking care of the work of self-taught artists without foundations or governmental support to rely upon.

As I began writing this conclusion, Paris’ Notre Dame caught fire, burned swiftly, and received close to a billion dollars for the rebuilding efforts in just a matter of days. Just a week beforehand, three black churches in Louisiana were burned to the ground by the son of a Louisiana Deputy sheriff and had received little press and minimal outrage; these churches had existed for over a century and had been spiritual havens for black communities. Only after the Notre Dame burning that exacerbated the stark difference in treatment the religious tragedies had received did the Louisiana churches see an outpouring of donations to help rebuild. This story I believe serves as a metaphor for the preservation question I have been struggling to answer. It is possible to maintain these monuments to God at the same level that other famed artistic
monuments receive, but it requires public support that is equal to what is automatically granted
to the hegemonic, white, patriarchal, and canonical artworks that shape the contemporary
narrative.
Bibliography


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