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*Eugene Von Bruenchenhein
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The Mississippi Imagists:



Steve Shepard and David Thomas Roberts

Mississippi has given a special edge to the writers, artists and musicians who have emerged from the southern state over the years. Joe Adams investigates the arrival of two self-taught artists from the bayous.



Some people claim the black murky bayous in Mississippi get their colour from the dust of their ancestors. Ashes to urk, so to speak. It may be true. Damp souls seem to steam up on dark summer nights and have been siren calls for some of America's greatest writers, musicians and generations of visionary artists, including the likes of Walter Anderson on Horn Island; George Ohr, The Mad Potter of Biloxi; and Son Thomas with his spook heads made of gumbo clay and real teeth.

We can now add two young contemporary artists who qualify as 'Mississippi Imagists', both of whom claim an overwhelming influence of the environment of the bayous - Steve Shepard and David Thomas Roberts.

Almost all of Steve Shepard's visual images are concerned with water - the grand swamps near his home in Gautier and the Gulf streams where he has fished and explored for more than thirty years. His wife, poet Jeanne Lebow says, 'Steve paints the world he lives in - the salt marshes, the cypress swamps, the bayous, the barrier islands, the channel markers where he fishes, the pine savannahs and pitcher plant bogs. Always his images are recognizable. Yet each plant species, bird or person is stylized. Always there is a story.'

His paintings on paper are created with coloured pencil over watercolours. Many of the paintings are surrounded by complex borders containing titles, phrases, pieces of musical tunes - all of which are important in experiencing and piecing together his narrative. He is a storyteller extraordinaire, in his paintings and in person.

He likes to tell stories of living in pre-Castro Cuba as a child; of his maternal grandparents, circus people who travelled widely, but came to the town every year or two to entertain. His grandmother was a trapeze performer well into her mid-sixties, after which she trained greyhounds. His uncle had a trained seal that could play 'Dixie' (which undoubtedly made him a popular act in the Southern states).

His visual images tell a different story, not always happy ones. Shepard admits to having 'a lot of pain in me. It is a pain that is alleviated by drawing. I look at nature, at landscapes. I try to memorise what I see. I use my imperfect memory to help me distort and personalize my vision of the world. I push my vision toward a reflection of my inner tensions, toward anger and anxiety, but my vision is mostly intact as it arrives from my pencils, ink or paint and is unified by the filtering action of my imperfect recollections. I put myself in front of empty paper and then turn my pencil

loose. I draw out of blackness. I avoid internally visualizing. The only thing I plan ahead are ideas: What if Elvis Presley was picked up by a UFO in 1955? What if I combine a mean nasty environmental diatribe with a hellion face? Why not combine mean environmental diatribes with the image of a UFO landing in an abandoned pitcher plant bog?'

In talking about his work, Shepard says that he 'wants to pile up messages and activity. My anger toward overpopulation and over development inclines me to place written statements around written narratives around borders including visual equations. The driving force that makes me make art also suppresses my ability to tamper and over-refine. Once I put something on paper, it stays put.'

A few years ago, Shepard became the darling of Outsider Art galleries in the U.S. with more than five major galleries showing his work. But the term 'Outsider' - or any label for that matter - are touchy subjects with him.

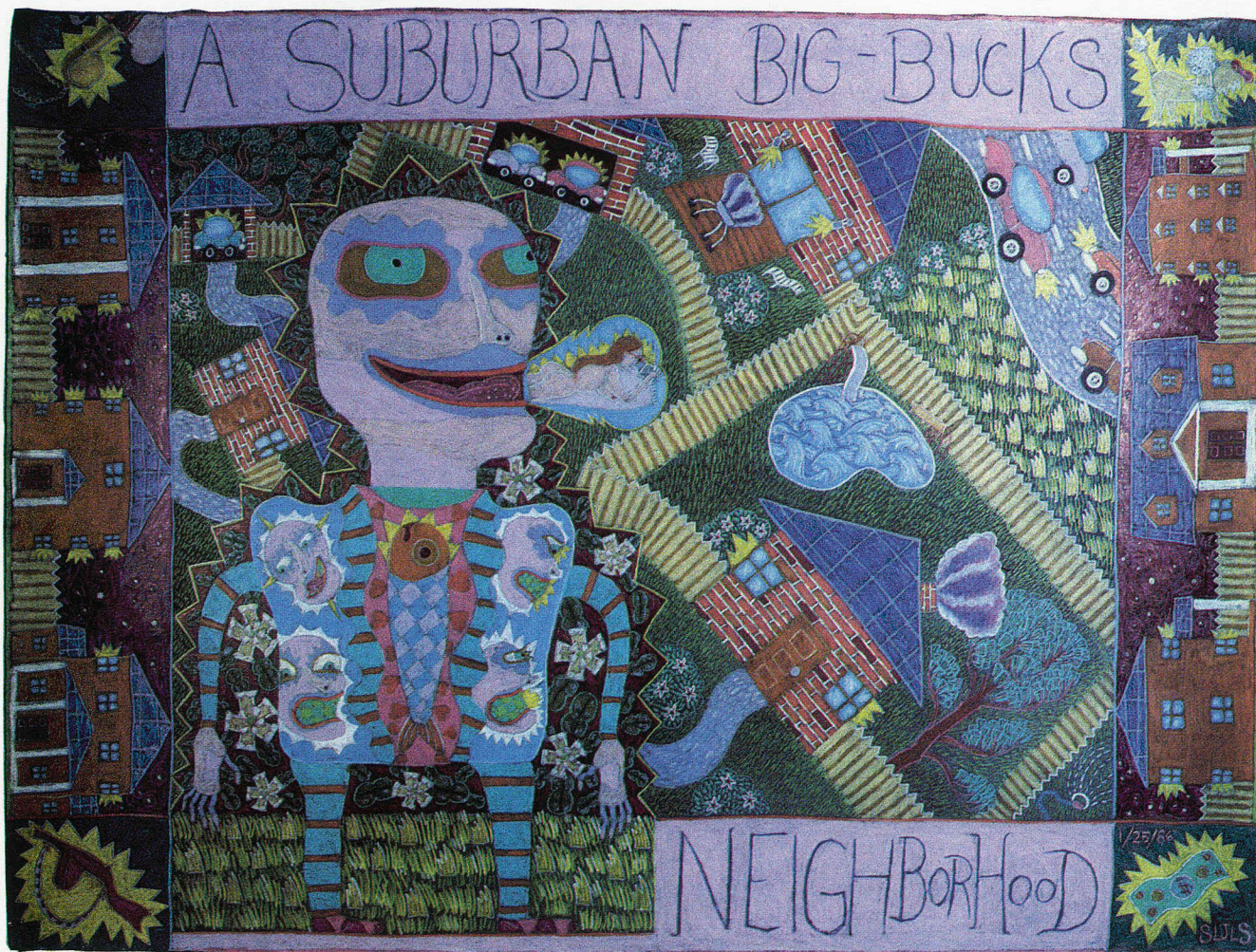


'I push my vision toward a reflection of my inner tensions, toward anger and anxiety.'

overleaf, left
Steve Shepard
24 x 24 inches
courtesy: Mississippi Museum

overleaf, right
David Thomas Roberts
My Orientation No 2
27 x 39 inches
coloured pencil and watercolour

above
Steve Shepard
Save the Earth
22 x 17 inches, 1993



Shepard claims, 'I am not naive in the sense that I know who many historically important artists are. I have seen many styles. I continue to visit museums and look at art books. I draw from an obsessed vision that refers to the work of others, but which is ultimately born in myself. I have given my mind as much visual fuel as I can feed it, particularly from nature. What my mind does with this fuel is only partly tampered with by my consciousness. Mostly it just pours out.'

Shepard has taken to the road with his art, travelling as his circus grandparents did, showing his work at arts festivals, jazz festivals, etc. People love his art; his narratives speak loudly to a broad spectrum of the population and Shepard likes the acceptability he has found from ordinary people. But he's also pleased when he receives praise from critics as he did last year as winner of the top art award at Charleston, South Carolina's famous Spoleto Festival.

Shepard thinks that everyday people find the paintings appealing because

they're packed with life. 'I take a dim view of the notion that less is more. I pack my work with activity,' he said. 'I think my work is better packed than emptied in some gesture of denial, some attempt to exclude multiplicity because too much of a good thing is supposedly bad. Not in my book. Not in my world. More is more. I grew up on the Mississippi Coast, where rainfall and extensive estuaries create an explosion of life forms. It is a place where the eye sees a multitude of images all at once, stacked from the marshes to the trees and into the towering squall clouds.'

'I've been told by a few art dealers that my work is difficult to present to patrons in an urban environment. It makes me laugh. This is the same environment that inspired most of America's most acclaimed writers. Did Tennessee Williams write about Los Angeles? Did Flannery O'Connor write about big city life? Mississippi is the soul of America. The silt of all of North America comes down the Mississippi River and drops into our bayous.'

'The driving force that makes me make art also suppresses my ability to tamper and over-refine. Once I put something on paper, it stays put.'

above
Steve Shepard
22 x 30 inches



David Thomas Roberts, *Subtropical Affirmation*, 39 x 55 inches, coloured pencil and watercolour

Like Steve Shepard, David Thomas Roberts is also a story-teller. But, in addition to his visual artistry, Roberts is a writer and acclaimed as 'the most important composer of this half century in America' by jazz historian Al Rose.

His musical language is only one language in his trilogy of expression. In the small room where he composes, the walls are covered with watercolours and coloured pencil drawings of dreamlike images. He draws with gusto.

Roberts has been drawing and playing music since he was four years old. By the age of eight, he had a piano and lessons. Roberts adds, 'As a child, I simply asked for what I thought I needed. I had my piano; my supplies for drawing, painting and writing. I remember no time when my identity was ambiguous, my goals uncertain, or my inclinations unrevealed.'

'All objects are fair fodder for an imagination unrestricted by conventional socialisation and decorum: An inanimate assembly, free of the visibility of its arranger, intimates mysterious experience of the type that preoccupies me. The untranslatable intrigues voiced by isolated or shut-down communities, remote dwellings, lost articles, farm equipment or construction machinery unattended, warehouses, railroads, factories, the props of the highway...such images are central to my life. They are carriers of the most urgent mysteries and evocations; they are vehicles of dire longing.'

'Though the identity of my present visual art language had manifested much of itself in my early to middle teens, it was my discovery of the book *Outsider Art* by Roger Cardinal in 1975 that, while affirming my oneiric predilections, jolted me toward an even more 'aberrant,' anti-rational, anti-social mode, a ruthless frontiersmanship of the wilderness. The visionary utterances of such socially deviant artists as Adolf Wölfli, Heinrich Anton Müller and Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern would henceforth remind me of stances and standards I would do well to regard as variations of my own.'

Roberts' ragtime compositions and performances have been produced on two CDs, 'New Orleans Streets' and '15 Ragtime Compositions'. Both are illustrated with his own paintings. Roberts calls himself a 'Terrain Wrangler' because he claims to be so influenced by the land around him. 'I consider myself a connoisseur of terrain,' he explains. And the human-land relationship is central to almost everything I do.' Moss Point, Mississippi, where he was born and continues to live, is a paper milling town on the Escatawpa River.

'In Moss Point, the coastal marsh and savannah meet river swamp to compile a



roaring dictionary of greens. Bordering this network are pockets of the vast pine forest that overspreads south Mississippi. To the north, along the Pascagoula River, stretches one of the few intact major river swamps in North America. Southeast of Moss Point, on the fringe of the terrain that melts into bayous and open water, is the village of Kreole. In this collage of vegetation, industry and shoreline, I was born. One of my most reassuring associations with Kreole and Moss Point is the late night beeping and clacking of the paper mill as I lay on the verge of sleep. Moss Point...that sad river town with its boxcars, shrimp boats, tangled foliage, half-cleared lots and loneliness whose sombre lyric goes on quavering in my dreams, on my desk, in pianos, and windows...'

Through the land-object collaboration I possessed a conduit of love. Through fields, ballparks, subdivision streets, pine thickets and houses at swamp-side, my love of women screamed and fought to nourish its irrepressible life.'

above
David Thomas Roberts
A Traves de la Noche
29 x 41 inches, 1987
coloured pencil and
watercolour

Joe Adams is a resident of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, which he uses as a base to cover the southland of America in search of interesting art and authentic experiences. As a former advertising and publishing executive, he still maintains a consulting business 'to support his art addiction'. He is a founding member of the S.C. Folk Art & Craft Center and is involved as a patron and advisory with numerous art organisations. He lectures on *Outsider Art* and his *America Oh Yes!* Collection contains more than 2,000 works of art.