

VALPARAISO  UNIVERSITY

BRAUER MUSEUM OF ART



Mr. Imagination:

Chicago Self-Taught Artist

January 7 - April 6, 2014

Curated by Gregg Hertzlieb and Dr. Nina Corazzo

Mr. Imagination

Chicago Self-Taught Artist

The Brauer Museum of Art is pleased to present *Mr. Imagination: Chicago Self-Taught Artist*, an exhibition drawn from the remarkable collection of Robert Alter and Sherry Siegel. During our work on this exhibition, we became more acquainted with the collectors and were fascinated by their stories of the time they spent with Mr. Imagination (real name: Gregory Warmack, 1948-2012) during the course of his life. This exhibition highlights the artist's beautiful and endlessly inventive work, widely collected and represented in respected public and private collections nationally and internationally, but also chronicles through these objects Alter and Siegel's tastes and interests as they built their collection and enjoyed a friendship with the artist.

Mr. Imagination (or Mr. I) was a native of Chicago who early on discovered and impressed others with his creative gifts. He endured trauma in his life, such as getting shot at close range during a mugging in 1978 and dealing with a fire in 1982 that destroyed his home and much of his art. In addition, a second fire in 2008 killed his dog Pharaoh and his cats; fortunately, Mr. I was not home at that time. Despite these personal setbacks, Mr. I continued to be prolific, seeing such life events as prompts to keep working and stay true to his vision. He seemed to possess a motivating energy and a lively spirit of invention, both of which led him to fully realize his identity as an artist and even a type of shaman, complete with a throne and other royal accessories of his own making. Throughout his life, Mr. I rejected the term "outsider art", preferring instead the terms "visionary" and "self-taught" to describe his perspective and style.

One aspect of Mr. I's artistic ability was his talent for reclaiming or reusing discarded materials in order to give them new life in the context of the sculptural objects he made. A particularly important moment in his career was his discovery of discarded industrial sandstone in his neighborhood; the sandstone's sculptural possibilities, for example the ease with which it could be carved, proved to be very inspiring to Mr. I, who then went on to use it for literally thousands of sculptures. Works in Alter and Siegel's collection are especially noteworthy examples of his sandstone carving.

Discarded paintbrushes and brooms in Mr. Imagination's hands were similarly transformed into characters and self-portraits that seem full of life and personality, perhaps ready to proclaim their independent identities at any moment. One facet of Mr. I's work that is so admirably effective is his ability to combine found objects and conventional art-making materials in such a way that his finished pieces seem to



Mr. Imagination and Sherry Siegel at Googleworks, 2007. Photo by Robert Alter

possess the same sort of purposeful, sacred character as, say, tribal art from Africa and the South Pacific. The patina of time on Mr. I's pieces adds to the general impression of these items as being the products of ritual, with bottle caps and seashells rhyming with materials seen in tribal artifacts associated with fertility and harvests. The magic of Mr. I's creations lies in their power to summon the spirits of beauty and delight, to be savored by admiring viewers.

We at the Brauer Museum of Art are grateful for the warmth and support of Robert Alter and Sherry Siegel who found in Mr. I's work the beauty and delight mentioned above. Through various times both good and bad, they nurtured the artist's creativity and motivated him with their enthusiasm. Future exhibitions of Mr. Imagination's art will no doubt continue to explore and celebrate his visionary art, but the Brauer's in particular celebrates the lovely connection that existed between two sensitive, insightful individuals and an artist who developed a rich realm and persona to inhabit.

We appreciate the financial support of the Valparaiso University Cultural Arts Committee, the Brauer Museum of Art's Robert and Caroline Collings Endowment, the Brauer Museum of Art's Brauer Endowment, and the Partners for the Brauer Museum of Art that made this exhibition possible. In addition, we are grateful for Richard A. Wester's article on Mr. Imagination in the fall 1998 issue of *Raw Vision*, as well as Tom Patterson's essay on Mr. I in *Reclamation and Transformation: Three Self-Taught Chicago Artists* (Chicago: Terra Museum of American Art, 1994). We highly recommend both writings for further reading about this complex, enigmatic, even playful artist.

Co-curators of the exhibition

Gregg Hertzlieb, Director/Curator, Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso University
Dr. Nina Corazzo, Walter E. Bauer Endowed Chair, Valparaiso University

Curator's Note

In the 1940s, Jean Dubuffet coined the term "art brut" (raw as in unprocessed, unadulterated art) meaning art that was not produced by someone formally trained as an artist but art made by those outside the Academy. His special interest was those art works made by the mentally challenged, children, mediums, and others at the margins of society. The raw power he experienced in their works had to do with their unrestrained and authentic creative impulse and energy, their startling intensity of expression, as well as the deeply personal involvement of the art makers.

The art critic Roger Cardinal, in 1972, used the term "outsider art" to describe this art produced by untrained, self-taught artists (sometimes called folk, vernacular, or grass roots artists). Today that term is hotly contested, leading scholars, critics, collectors, and artists to use terms with fewer negative connotations such as "visionary" or "self-taught". There was a strong interest, especially in the United States, with the works produced by the poor and those in disadvantaged, remote rural areas, far from acknowledged centers of culture and uneducated in matters of art making and its history. These people created unsolicited works that were refreshingly spontaneous, direct, and deeply heartfelt. They were not worried about painting or sculpting like the Old Masters or even the new ones, they did not have to create works that could be sold, or were made on commission according to the dictates of a patron. They simply made art because they felt compelled to. All produce art which is deeply personal and highly idiosyncratic, sometimes even eccentric. In many cases the impulse to create was sparked by an emotional trauma of some sort. Some of these artists work from visions they have experienced, others from dreams, some describe their intense religiosity, or a life-changing conversion experience, some reference Heaven, others the Apocalypse, some respond to contemporary political and social issues like the troubling subjects of environmental abuse, war, and homelessness. Others revel in the more mundane aspects of their everyday life.

These artists are not afraid to use whatever materials are at hand, which leads to very exciting, unexpected, often bizarre results. They are not afraid to juxtapose unrelated objects, bold colors, varied textures, and unusual shapes together to form intriguing compositions that tantalize the eye of the viewer. We experience a strange new beauty in their presence. Often lengthy, sometimes rambling texts written by hand, replete with grammatical and spelling errors, accompany the image. These usually aid in the understanding of the piece. Self-Taught art defies easy categorization because each artist formulates his or her own unique, highly idiosyncratic style and choice of subject matter. Slowly, it is becoming acknowledged in the mainstream art world as a legitimate art form. Until then, the works of Self-Taught artists remains a surprisingly new and fresh delight for the eye and the soul.

—Nina Corazzo



Anna, ca. 1990, lamp with mixed media, 33 x 18 x 18 inches, Collection of Robert Alter and Sherry Siegel. Photo by William H. Bengston



Self-Portrait (Mr. I with briefcase containing sandstone), 1990, mixed media, 19 x 10 ¼ x 7 ½ inches, Collection of Robert Alter and Sherry Siegel. Photo by William H. Bengston

Collectors' Statement

Why did our Mr. Imagination collection grow to more than a hundred pieces?

Not because we needed the art. We didn't. Our Mr. I collection grew because of our eight year relationship with the artist. Sherry spoke to Mr. I over the phone, approximately five times a week. We visited him in Chicago and later in Bethlehem, Pa. several times.

The night before moving to Bethlehem, while busily packing, Mr. I announced he wanted to send an 80th birthday gift to Bob's mother. No way, we thought. He needed to pack all night. He didn't have time. Shipping was expensive.

To him, none of that mattered. A day and a half later, a personalized sandstone carving arrived at Bob's mother's house.

From that gesture we learned: Mr. I could make a piece of art faster than he could drink a cup of coffee. He was the King of Procrastination, but repeatedly accomplished what he set out to do. His generosity knew no bounds. Over the years, we saw these attributes reappear in vivid and astonishing ways.

Upon entering his home, you were either entranced, overwhelmed, or both. Every surface was covered. There was one empty chair, and the dog got it. Art was everywhere, packed in layers.



Untitled (large bust), 1989, sandstone, 19 ½ x 13 x 7 inches, Collection of Robert Alter and Sherry Siegel. Photo by William H. Bengston



Native American Head, 1990, sandstone, 24 x 21 ¼ x 6 inches, Collection of Robert Alter and Sherry Siegel. Photo by William H. Bengston

Sandstone, bottle caps, cat food cans, coffee filters—we saw all kinds of humble materials transformed into elegant creations. We watched him sew copper, tin, fabric, and screens. We saw the clothes he made and heard about the furniture he upholstered. He created everywhere- in a hotel room, on a bus, anywhere he happened to be. After a vandal destroyed some public sculpture, the city of Bethlehem hired Mr. I to fix it.

Through triumph and tragedy, Mr. I was a wildly prolific and creative artist. A highly social, generous and beloved soul; we saw him support and promote other artists and collect their creations. He often labeled his art “one of a kind”. Mr. Imagination, the man, was truly “one of a kind.”

We congratulate the Brauer Museum of Art for mounting the first Mr. I museum show in the Chicago area since Mr. I's passing.

Thanks to Nina Corazzo and Esther Sparks for planting the initial seed for this show, long ago, when Mr. I was alive and well. Thanks, also, to Nina Corazzo, Gloria Ruff, and Gregg Hertzlieb who brought the show to fruition. Working with them has been a delight.

–Sherry Siegel and Robert Alter

Exhibition List

All works are Collection of Robert Alter and Sherry Siegel

Paintbrush People, ca. 1980s, mixed media, various sizes

African Princess, 1985, sandstone and mixed media, 17½ x 10½ x 5½ inches

Untitled (Statue of Liberty), ca. 1986, sandstone, 11 x 12 x 1 inches

Untitled (bearded man), 1986, mixed media, 36 x 12 x 10 inches

Sarcophagus, 1986, painted sandstone and mixed media, 21½ x 5 x 1½ inches

Lady with Flowing Hair, 1986, sandstone and seashells, 13 x 10 x 3 inches

Untitled (lady), 1988, sandstone and mixed media, 13 x 7½ x 4 inches

Untitled (couple), 1988, sandstone, 12 x 11 x 4 inches

Untitled (large bust), 1989, sandstone, 19½ x 13 x 7 inches

Untitled, ca. 1989, sandstone, 27 x 21 x 8 inches

Native American Head, 1990, sandstone, 24 x 21 ¾ x 6 inches

Self-Portrait (Mr. I with briefcase containing sandstone), 1990, mixed media, 19 x 10¼ x 7½ inches

Untitled (paint roller man), 1990, mixed media, 16 x 4 x 3½ inches

Anna, ca. 1990, lamp with mixed media, 33 x 18 x 18 inches

Self-Portrait, 1990, mixed media, 18 x 11½ x 2 inches

Self-Portrait, 1990, oil on canvas, 12 x 9 inches

Untitled (mother and children), 1990, mixed media, 20½ x 13 x 9 inches

Large Lady Brush, 1990, mixed media, 11 x 8½ x 3 inches

Opera Singer, 1991, mixed media, 26 x 8½ x 6 inches

Untitled (scrub brush man), 1991, mixed media, 20 x 8 x 4 inches

Rose, 1991, mixed media, 17¼ x 8 x 3½ inches

Mr. I, 1991, mixed media, 16 x 8 x 3½ inches

African Princess, 1993, bottle caps and mixed media, 24½ x 14 x 7 inches

Twins, 1993, mixed media, 10¼ x 8½ x 3 inches

Chicago, 1994, painted sandstone, 8 x 6 x 1½ inches

Untitled (fish), 1995, bottle caps and mixed media, 31 x 8 x 3 inches

Untitled (fish), 1997, bottle caps and mixed media, 21 x 11 x 11½ inches

My Hands, 2000, painted plaster, 10 x 5 x 1 inches

Untitled (space age scene), 2000, mixed media on board, 14½ x 12 x 1½ inches

Jewelry, ca. 2000, painted sandstone and cords, various sizes

Junior, 2001, bottle caps and mixed media, 35 x 24 x 8 inches

Untitled (walking man), 2002, mixed media, 43 x 31½ x 10 inches

Untitled (ukulele with bottle caps), 2002, mixed media, 24 x 8 x 3 inches

Untitled (dragonfly), 2003, mixed media, 32 x 25 x 7 inches

Bottle Cap Pin, 2004, mixed media, 5 x 3 x ½ inches

Red Dress, 2005, wire mesh, 19 x 10 x 6 inches

“Standing Tall” Sherman, 2005, mixed media, 63 x 21 x 8 inches

Invisible Man, 2006, wire mesh, 17 x 9 x 8 inches

Fire, Water, Ice, 2008, oil on canvas board, 24 x 18 inches

Self-Portrait (Sun God), undated, mixed media, 36 x 36 x 8 inches

Untitled (push broom head), undated, mixed media, 26 x 3 x 5 inches

Christmas Ornaments, undated, sandstone, various sizes (each approximately 2½ x 1¼ inches)

Christmas Fireplace, undated, mixed media, 2 x 1½ x 3/8 inches

Michael Noland (b. 1958), **My Good Hearted Brother (Mr. I)**, 2008, gouache on paper, 13 x 9 inches, based on a photograph by Link Harper



Mr. Imagination in Pittsburgh, 2002
Photo by Robert Alter



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University

Brauer Museum of Art
1709 Chapel Drive
Valparaiso, IN 46383