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Eugene Von Bruenchenhein

Time Produced Non Better

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Photograph of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, c. 1950s,
photographer unknown

This exhibition of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910–83) provides a sampling of the breadth of work made by this Milwaukee-based, self-taught artist, active from the early 1940s through the early 1980s. Living in a modest house, which served as both a studio and exhibition space, with his wife and muse, Marie, he created a world of highly original beauty steeped in an idiosyncratic synthesis of non-Western art and architecture, girly magazine archetypes, theories of cosmic genesis, and current events like the Cold War fear of nuclear annihilation. *Time Produced Non Better* presents Von Bruenchenhein's signature ceramics; a selection of paintings of imaginary architecture and fantastical botanical imagery; pinup-inspired black and white photographs of his wife; and rarely seen 35mm color slides of Marie and arrangements of completed art works photographed in the artist's backyard, presented in a slideshow format.

A 1947 hand-colored photographic self-portrait by Von Bruenchenhein is inscribed by the artist's hand with the following: "Edward the first king of lesser lands/Time cannot touch/He moved ten centuries/A fortress of good/Time Produced non [sic] better." While we can surmise that this statement is an homage to his father, Edward, the fact that it is superimposed over his own image indicates Von Bruenchenhein's belief in his own greatness, a kind of icon of self-proclaimed genius. Indeed, Von Bruenchenhein believed that he and his wife were bestowed with special gifts, a result of supposed royal heritage. His birthdate of 1910, a year graced by the appearance of Halley's Comet, further indicated a sign of heavenly blessing, he argued. Von Bruenchenhein even thought that his first name suggested elevated status, stemming from the Greek *eugenes*, or well born. Gene, as he was known, identified his alter ego as the Genii, the plural of genius, sometimes inscribing his paintings with the words "Wand of the Genii." One might be struck by Von Bruenchenhein's self-confidence. After all, he was a man of lesser means, a baker who lived frugally (he began the profession in 1944, shortly after marrying Marie, and retired in 1959 due to health reasons). His steadfast ego belied the fact that he remained unrecognized as an artist, rarely exhibiting his work during his lifetime. In order to make his art, however unacknowledged that pursuit

was, he inhabited two different worlds—one workaday and the other a realm of artistic fantasy. The latter was made real through a tireless nocturnal work ethic, in which he sometimes collaborated with his wife, Marie.

His interest in a wide range of ideas, from the origins of the universe, to Asian architecture, to poetry and philosophy, to amateur archaeology and horticulture, beget a staggering range and number of works. Von Bruenchenheim photographed his wife in a variety of erotic and exotic poses and contexts—part pin-up girl, part princess. He created ceramic sculptures including crowns, vessels composed of leaf patterns, and delicate flowers—all made from clay sourced from local construction sites, fired in the couple's small parlor stove, and often spray painted with automobile enamel. He made chicken bone towers inspired by both Khmer temples discovered in the pages of



Untitled, c. 1950s, 35 mm color transparency

National Geographic as well as Sam Rodia's Watts Towers, which he read about in his local newspaper. He created sculptures of mask-like heads made from concrete which he displayed outdoors. He painted fiery energy bursts conjuring epic events like cosmic genesis and the birth of otherworldly creatures with homemade brushes, his own fingers, sticks, bits of cloth, and combs. Later in life, Von Bruenchenheim focused his efforts on paintings of visionary architecture, echoing his bone towers as well as the leafy arches of his earlier clay vessels.

Known as an artist only to his family and close friends, Von Bruenchenhein worked diligently but in obscurity for more than four decades, until his death in 1983. In that year, a friend of Von Bruenchenhein's, seeking financial security for the artist's widow, began a dialogue with the Milwaukee Art Museum and later the Kohler Arts Center. The latter institution conserved and inventoried Von Bruenchenhein's entire oeuvre and also acquired a large, representative body of work for its permanent collection, insuring that Marie would have an income in her final years (she died in 1989).

Von Bruenchenhein's home—both interior and exterior—was his *gesamtkunstwerk*, a dynamic artist environment that must have been overwhelming when museum curators first entered the space in 1983, shortly after his death.¹ Walls were elaborately decorated using brushes and spray paint, playing off of the pulsating paintings of galaxies-in-the-making hanging on them. Artist writings and poems were bound in handmade books (Von Bruenchenhein also tape recorded his ideas for posterity). Quotations, both cryptic and declaratively straightforward, were written throughout the house, on walls, along doorframes, and on makeshift bulletin boards. Many were exhortations, such as “create and be recognized.” Perhaps the most celebrated of these quotations was inscribed on a piece of gold insulation material in the artist's kitchen, which listed a range of avocations:

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein

Freelance Artist
Poet and Sculptor
Inovator [sic]
Arrow Maker and Plant man
Bone Artifacts constructor
Photographer and Architect
Philosopher²

Art was everywhere, both in plain sight and buried away in the recesses of basement and attic. Small chicken bone throne sculptures were strung across wires or attached to string pulls for light switches. The artist's ever-expanding collection of oven-fired ceramics was integrated into domestic spaces as objects to be lived with and admired. The outside of the



Courtesy of Works from the Estate of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein

Untitled, c. 1960–1980, 35 mm color transparency. Taken in the artist’s backyard, this photograph not only illustrates the stylistic range of Von Bruenchenhein’s ceramics, but also the large guardian-like concrete masks.

Von Bruenchenhein home was equally elaborate in aesthetic disposition. The house itself was painted in polychromatic splendor, a patchwork of yellow, pink, blue, and sea green, realized with recycled paint. His name was festooned near the front entrance of his home in block capital letters. Propped against the perimeter foundation of the house were large concrete masks, some over four feet tall, inspired by Asian, Mayan, and Aztec art. All had elaborate headdresses composed of smaller animal and human face motifs. Von Bruenchenhein believed the masks were endowed with spiritual properties—he had an avid interest in ancient civilizations’ religious beliefs—and arranged the sculptures on his property as sentinels warding off evil and ensuring good luck.

Over a nearly fifteen-year span of time from the early 1940s through mid-1950s, Von Bruenchenhein and his wife Marie collaborated on a vast number of photographic portraits.³ The majority of these photographs depict Marie in an assortment of awkwardly erotic pinup poses that reflect both Von Bruenchenhein’s interest in the burgeoning popularity of men’s magazines featuring images of nude female models, as well as the artist’s

own highly personalized love of Marie as symbol of noble beauty. The South Pacific theme of several of the photographs, including Marie's bikinis and floral hair accessories, hibiscus-printed drapery, and backdrops reference the late-1940s craze for the exotic, which developed in part from media coverage of the atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands less than a year after the end of World War II. Newsreels documenting the tests showcased America's military might in the wake of victory and also the exoticism of Pacific Island peoples, who were evacuated from Bikini just before the atomic tests. The bikini swimsuit was named after the test site (ironically, Marshall Island women did not wear bikinis) and heralded a Western fascination with this part of the world that also spawned the popularity of tiki-themed bars and cocktails and the music of Martin Denny.

Von Bruenchenhein and Marie's collaborations directly reference early men's magazines devoted to the photographic pinup girl as well as the suggestive bondage photographs of Bettie Page. Like the mainstream pinup images of the 1940s and 50s, Von Bruenchenhein's photographs of his wife are far from explicit by contemporary standards but were provocative in the context of American sexual attitudes of his era. Imitation pearls, artificial flower leis, and floral textile sashes sometimes drape across and at other times bind Marie's bare chest and abdomen in sexually charged images that would have certainly raised the eyebrows of the couples' working and



Untitled (Marie with floral halter top, flowers in hair), c. 1940s, Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 inches (paper size), GSPH 464 BD/EVB 427



Untitled (Marie seated next to Christmas tree), c. 1940s, gelatin silver print, 4 1/2 x 2 3/4 inches (paper size), GSVB 6850/EVB 418

middle class neighbors. Still, because of Von Bruenchenhein's isolated artistic practice, we can surmise that few people viewed the photographs and that they were the result of a private game of dress up.

Clearly Von Bruenchenhein saw these as art photographs: he paid keen attention not only to Marie as subject, but also to the background context of each portrait. He repainted their home's walls many times in order to create the appropriate backdrop for each shoot. He also used an array of boldly printed fabrics as backdrops that often clash riotously with the competing motifs on Marie's scant clothing or other cloth-covered props featured in the photographs. Not all of the images are erotic, however. Von Bruenchenhein took annual portraits of a well-dressed Marie in

front of their Christmas tree; other photographs feature Marie fully clad in fashionable ensembles. Using his bathroom as a darkroom, the artist experimented with double exposures, montage printing, and color tinting. Some early black-and-white photographs were hand colored by both the artist and Marie. Von Bruenchenhein also took photographs using expired army-surplus color slide film out of economic necessity; these transparencies emphasize the contrasting colors and patterns of the compositions in a manner that only color photography can achieve.

Von Bruenchenhein began painting in earnest during the 1950s, exploring themes like the connection between deep sea and deep space and the looming apocalypse felt by many Americans at the time—the threat of nuclear war—which he represented in a range of paintings of mushroom clouds.⁴ Owning both microscope and telescope, Von Bruenchenhein looked both near and far for the images that inspired him. Peering into his

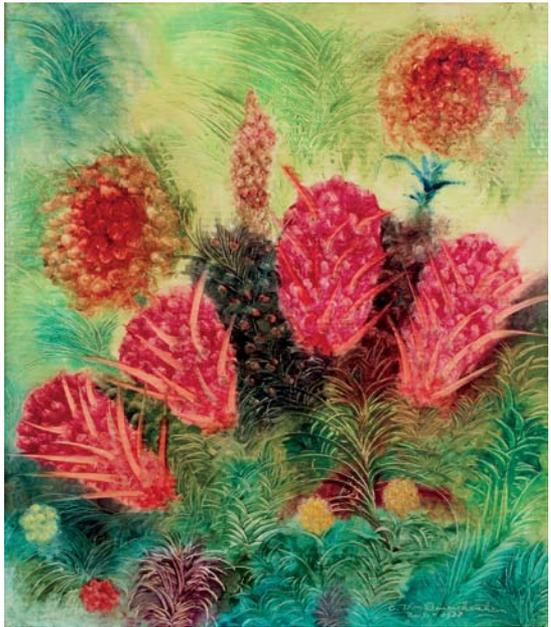


Untitled (no. 542), 1957, oil on board, 24 x 24 inches, EVB 371

microscope at droplets of water, he saw tiny organisms that would form the basis for the stylized creatures he represented later in paint. An amateur scientist and theorist, Von Bruenchenhein associated space travellers/aliens with sea life and developed a theory of how life forms made their way from space to Earth aboard meteors which plunged into the sea and catalyzed, he thought, the evolution of our planet's oceanic creatures. In other writings, the artist found parallels between sea creatures and jet propulsion. While Von Bruenchenhein might have been separated from the art world of his time, his work was very much a part of the wider culture and resonated with a range of subjects that held the attention of many people during the 1950s: the hydrogen bomb, science fiction, the beginnings of the space race, and the

popularization of anthropology and science through publications like *National Geographic*.

Von Bruenchenhein stopped painting in about 1964 and did not return to it until the late 1970s, when he began painting botanical and, shortly after, architectural imagery. The botanical paintings of this period are not simply staid paintings of plants, but morph into imaginary realms, sometimes evoking sea life or underwater environments. The architectural paintings highlight yet another resourceful way of applying paint without traditional brushes, building upon his painting experiments twenty years earlier. Created by using the edges of cardboard in a monoprinting-like process, the works resemble cathedrals and skyscrapers and also relate to the architectural sensibility of his earlier ceramic vessels and bone tower sculptures. The blue skies and clouds that serve as the background for the buildings suggest height and imbue the works with a soaring, heavenly orientation. Several of these works combine the artist's painting skills he mastered during the 1950s (like his deft handling of paint with fingers, sticks, combs, and improvised brushes) with his newly mastered cardboard printing technique. Whether these paintings are tributes to modern architecture or Gothic cathedrals we may never know, but we are aware that Von Bruenchenhein was impressed by Sam Rodia, the visionary architect of Watts Towers in Los Angeles, as the artist saved an article from the *Milwaukee Journal* about the Towers.⁵



Untitled (Flowering Plants), Nov. 4, 1977, 1977, paint on cardboard, 29 1/2 x 26 inches, GS 420/EVB 431

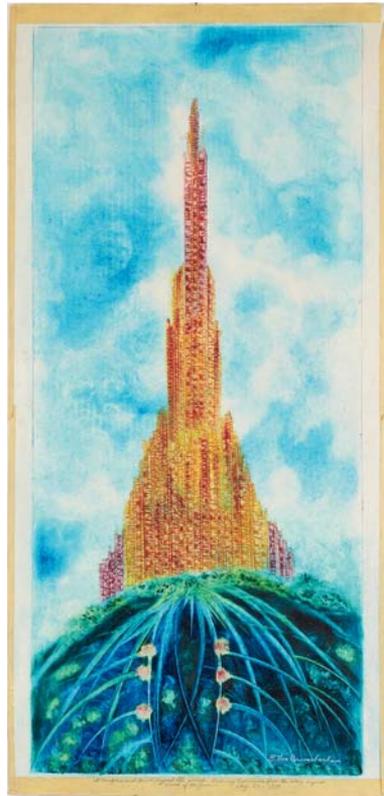
Courtesy of Works from the Estate of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein

Whether by accident or design, the spindly, lattice-like structures of the Watts Towers are echoed throughout Von Bruenchenhein's practice.

Von Bruenchenhein's paintings have a strong resonance with Surrealist art despite little evidence of his knowledge of it.⁶ Von Bruenchenhein's extemporaneous, expressive approach to painting shares some affinity with the automatism of Surrealism and, later, Abstract Expressionism. Witnesses to Von Bruenchenhein's creativity have remarked on the artist's trance-like state when making art that would have been the envy of any Surrealist. A close friend watching Von Bruenchenhein paint recounted:

His most complicated paintings were done in a very short time. There were times when he was unaware of what he had done until it was finished. Some were done in a frenzy like a man possessed.⁷

Von Bruenchenhein's openness to deploying a range of inventive techniques in the creation of paintings, including fingers, sticks, and cardboard monoprinting, seems directly descended from Surrealist paintings' embrace of frottage (pencil rubbing), collage, and decalcomania (applying thick paint, covering it with paper or foil, and then removing it before the paint dries leaving a richly textured surface). Like the Surrealists, Von Bruenchenhein firmly believed in channeling the unconscious by giving aesthetic form to dreams. His fascination with the evolution of the universe and living matter and his commitment to representing his ideas in painting finds good company in



Red Wing Tower..., August 28, 1978, 1978, Oil on corrugated cardboard, 40 x 18 1/2 inches, GS-489/EVB 441

Joan Miro's origin narratives, Andre Masson's prehistoric battles between sea creatures, and Max Ernst's primordial landscapes.

Von Bruenchenhein loved plants and his enthusiasm for them remained a touchstone throughout his life. He built a greenhouse in his backyard in the early 1940s where he tended a variety of cacti and exotic plants. He was a member of the Milwaukee Cactus Club, worked for a local florist, studied books on botany, and even referred to himself as a horticulturalist before devoting himself fully to art. Plant motifs first became evident in his artistic practice during the 1940s, when he began to fashion delicate leaves and flowers from scavenged clay, firing them in his parlor stove, and painting them in an array of colors, both naturalistic and artificial. Alongside his exploration of plants, he created small clay curiosities of devilish masks, reptilian-like creatures reminiscent of the sci-fi films of the day, arrowheads (Von Bruenchenhein was also an amateur archaeologist and made sculptures reflecting discoveries in the field), and small clay busts based on, perhaps, family members or friends.

In about 1960, Von Bruenchenhein began creating ceramic vessels, many of which were formed from hundreds of carefully modelled leaf elements. He called them "sensor pots," a misspelling of censer vessels, or incense burners, which he read about in an exhibition catalogue on Mexican art he often referred to entitled *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* (1940). According to the text, these objects originated in Mayan rituals in which smoke was used as a purifying agent, and later were adopted by the Spanish Catholic Church.⁸ Von Bruenchenhein wrote about this aspect of his creative enterprise:

Sensors
Pots by Eugene

I make the pots one each night and fired it the next day. Each went through its own violent fire. Each was cherry red at the peak period of firing [sic]. There was no model for any of them. 500 took some 4000 clay leaves in their construction. All were made for love of creation. May be used for dry flowers or incense burners.⁹

Many of the vessels have traditional vase-like shapes, but others are composed of scaffold-like arches and resonate with his architectural paintings of the 1970s. Like all of the ceramic objects, Von Bruenchenhein preferred



Courtesy Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia and Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz

Clockwise from top left: *Untitled head*, n.d., painted, oven-fired clay, 4 x 3 x 4 inches, VB-CM-038/EVB 325; *Untitled head*, n.d., oven-fired clay, 5 x 4 x 5 inches, VB-CM-044/EVB 330; *Untitled Pink Vessel*, n.d., painted, oven-fired clay, 12 1/2 x 3 inches, VB-C-114/EVB 73 *Untitled Turquoise Vessel*, n.d., painted oven-fired clay, 11 1/2 x 6 inches, VB-C-6/EVB 55



Courtesy of Works from the Estate of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein

Untitled, c. 1950s. 35 mm color transparency

painting over glazing and many of the pieces are painted in metallic automobile spray paint or other bright colors. Some have fruit jar lids as bases.

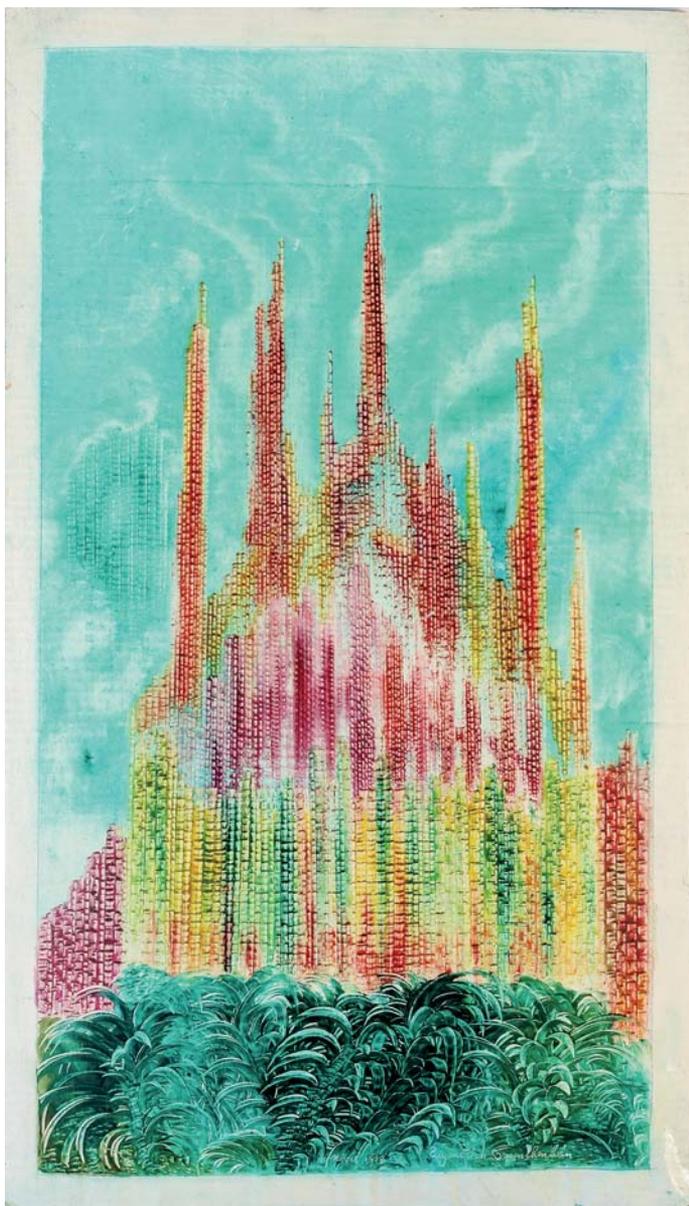
Another aspect of his ceramics centered on a series of life-size crowns which incorporated similar leaf pattern motifs and were also colored with metallic finishes. As mentioned earlier, Von Bruenchenhein believed he and his wife, Marie, were descended from royalty and the making of crowns was one way in which the artist explored their supposed noble heritage. Other types of crowns make their way into Von Bruenchenhein's photographic practice. Marie was sometimes photographed wearing elaborate, skillfully improvised crowns, fashioned from tin food cans or Christmas ornaments. Von Bruenchenhein's obsessive preoccupation with royal titles and the trappings of nobility reflect his romantic view of the artist as genius and center of the universe. He spun his own web of self-importance, inventing what Von Bruenchenhein scholar Joanne Cubbs calls an "aristocracy of the self."¹⁰ Perhaps Von Bruenchenhein inhabited this web to buttress his ego against the reality of a near complete lack of recognition for his artistic efforts during his lifetime.

Von Bruenchenhein's fondness for crafting Byronesque love poems and his belief that his unique creativity was at once a noble gift and also something intangible, attributable to "unknown forces at work, which I myself cannot rightly explain, forces that have gone on since the beginning" might seem like the romantic contrivances of a self-taught artist obsessed with his own grandiosity.¹¹ But Von Bruenchenhein was more complicated than the stereotype of the artist as suffering genius that his writings sometimes convey. In fact, much of his inner creative life was tempered by the external world—a world in which he was fully engaged. As early as the 1940s, he wrote poems about the futility of war (at 5'2" he was too short to serve in World War II) culminating in *The Vietnam Papers* during the 1960s, a series of poems addressing that conflict as a "useless bloody game" which he mailed to a range of local newspapers for publication.¹² The piece was deemed too inflammatory and was rejected by the press. Such work can be viewed as the written equivalent of his nuclear bomb paintings of the 1950s. In other poems, the artist addressed looming ecological catastrophe and penned cautionary tales of world overpopulation. He wrote poems honoring Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Lyndon Johnson. In 1962, he sent two paintings to John F. Kennedy and after the assassination, mailed poems of condolence to Jackie Kennedy. He also wrote practical letters of advice to local industry and government regarding how to best handle fires or oil spills. Constantly working on novel inventions, he wrote to relevant corporations pitching a variety of ideas, such as treating cancer by injecting tumors with plastic. Alongside of his political and pragmatic concerns were poems professing his love for Marie, imaginary tales of space travel, and his writings on the role of the artist and the origins of creativity.

Despite Von Bruenchenhein's attempts to reach wider audiences through his art and writings, he remained isolated from a community of appreciators, something which bothered him greatly, but not enough to halt his creative endeavours. We know that he exhibited his work at least once and sold it occasionally, but for prices he thought unfair.¹³ During the last few years of his life, he refused to sell his work at all. It is difficult to speculate on the reasons he was professionally unsuccessful during his lifetime, but surely lack of access to the art world as a result of poverty, social class, and education all played a role. It is no wonder that Von Bruenchenhein had no choice but to find a solitary contentment in an aesthetic universe of his own making, a sentiment he committed to words:

The real artist, one who comes from nothing like I did, with no art schooling necessary, has to live in two worlds. I have to remain on my side of life while the great majority live on their side. When they ask, how did you come by all the things you paint and form in clay, and since there is no answer for such thing, I just have to live in my own little world.¹⁴

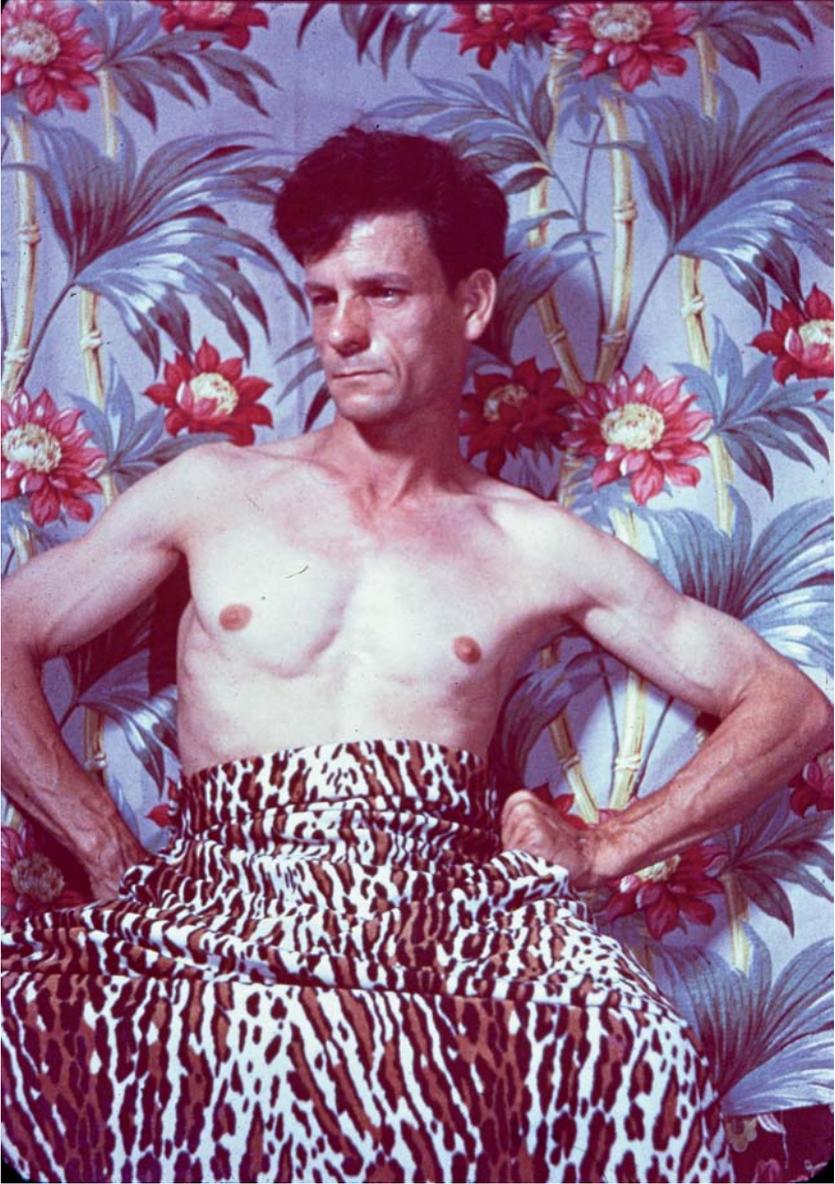
The fact that museum professionals recognized Von Breunchein's singular talents and began efforts to catalogue, conserve, and purchase his work within a year of his death is all the more poignant as he would never savor the attention that he believed he so greatly merited. We are indebted to Von Bruenchein's dear friend Dan Nycz who rescued the artist from obscurity by introducing Milwaukee Art Museum and Kohler Art Center staff to his vast inventory of work, thereby bridging the gap between Von Breunchein's private "little world" and the larger world of art where he is increasingly—and deservedly—ensconced.¹⁵



*Untitled, November 18, 1978, 1978, Oil on corrugated cardboard,
36 x 20 1/2 inches, GS-505/EVB 444*

Notes

- 1 This discussion on Von Bruenchenhein's home as artist installation, draws from Joanne Cubbs, *Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Obsessive Visionary* (Sheboygan, WI: John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 1988), p. 11.
- 2 Cubbs, p. 11.
- 3 This discussion on Von Bruenchenhein's photography draws from Umberger, pp. 249-251; Cubbs, p. 19; and Marvin Heiferman, "Eugene Von Bruenchenhein" in Gerard C. Wertkin, et. al. *Self-Taught Artists of the 20th Century: An American Anthology* (New York/San Francisco: Museum of American Folk Art/Chronicle Books), pp. 120-121.
- 4 For an in-depth analysis of the scope of Von Bruenchenhein's paintings of the 1950s, see Cubbs, pp. 12-14.
- 5 Leslie Umberger, "Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Once Upon a Starlit Night," in *Sublime Spaces and Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists*, ed. Leslie Umberger (New York/Sheboygan: Princeton Architectural Press/John Michael Kohler Arts Center), pp. 260-265.
- 6 This discussion of Von Bruenchenhein and Surrealism draws from and builds on Cubbs, pp. 16 and 23.
- 7 Cubbs, pp. 12-13.
- 8 Umberger, p. 253.
- 9 Umberger, p. 253.
- 10 Cubbs, p. 18.
- 11 Cubbs, p. 21.
- 12 Cubbs, p. 20.
- 13 His career as a poet was equally unrewarding professionally, having been published just once in 1936.
- 14 Umberger, p. 268.
- 15 While Von Bruenchenhein is renowned within the context of outsider art, recently, his work has been exhibited either alongside contemporary art or in art centers specializing in contemporary art. Recent exhibitions such as these include *Dirt on Delight: Impulses that Form Clay*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 2009; the 2013 Venice Biennale; and *The Alternative Guide to the Universe*, Hayward Gallery, London, 2013.



Untitled (self-portrait), c. 1950s, 35mm color transparency

Acknowledgments

Fleisher/Ollman is indebted to Jean and Lewis Greenblatt for making works from the Estate of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein available for this exhibition. Working in collaboration with Lewis Greenblatt, Caelan Mys, curator for the Estate, was instrumental in planning the exhibition and guiding us through the selection process. Caelan also suggested presenting Von Bruenchenhein's color transparencies in slide format—the most authentically appropriate way in which to show this stunning body of work. We are also thankful to Lance Kinz and Michelle Tillou of Kinz + Tillou Fine Art for consigning us an early Von Bruenchenhein painting from the 1950s which broadened the scope of this exhibition. Von Bruenchenhein's ceramics have been avidly collected by Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz; we acknowledge their generosity once again in sharing these oddly beautiful objects with Fleisher/Ollman.

An early fan of Von Bruenchenhein's ceramics, John Ollman was supportive of the prospect of examining Von Bruenchenhein's work in depth and I thank him for allowing me the freedom to move forward in this regard. Our staff at the gallery was very supportive in seeing the exhibition through in all phases. Justin Webb, the gallery's new preparator, expertly framed the photographs and installed the exhibition. Working alongside Justin, Matthew Lucash insured safe delivery of the bulk of the Von Bruenchenhein works from Chicago. Associate Director, Claire Iltis, expertly designed this publication as well as all exhibition-related marketing materials including poster/invitation and advertising. Special thanks to Rich Shapero for allowing reproduction of *Untitled (no. 542)*, 1957. Finally, a note of appreciation to the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania for lending us their slide projector, making possible the proper presentation of Von Bruenchenhein's color photography.

Alex Baker

Director, Fleisher/Ollman

Cover: detail from Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's
Untitled (November 16, 1977), 1977, paint on wood
board, 21 3/4 x 21 inches, GS 423/EVB 430

Throughout this booklet, the GS numbers
refer to Works from the Estate of Eugene Von
Bruenchenhein's numbering system, while the EVB
and VB numbers refer to Fleisher/Ollman's system.

All works Eugene Von Bruenchenhein unless
otherwise noted.

