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Review: Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, 'King of Lesser Lands'

By KEN JOHNSON APRIL 28, 2016



Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910-1983) made doughnuts in a Milwaukee bakery. Otherwise he lived and worked in an enchanted world of art and fantasy that he ruled with his wife, Marie, in a small, clapboard house. There he produced a large and varied oeuvre of paintings, drawings, sculptures and photographs that remained unknown to all but his family and friends until a few months after his death. Now he's considered [one of America's great self-taught artists](#). This inspiring [exhibition](#) at Andrew Edlin samples his diverse efforts.

Along one gallery wall hang examples of myriad, mysteriously affecting photographs he made of Marie posing nude and in different scanty costumes as if she were a movie star pinup like Betty Grable. She exudes a shy, uncertain innocence, which Mr. Von Bruenchenhein captured with tender libidinousness.

Mr. Von Bruenchenhein also painted on Masonite and cardboard using his fingers, sticks, combs and other implements to create vivid abstractions evoking submarine life-forms and cosmic turbulence. A group of them in a separate room here makes for a transporting show within the show.

Using clay acquired from construction sites, Mr. Von Bruenchenhein made exquisite teacup-scale flowers and bulbous vases consisting of patched-together leaf forms, which he fired in the coal-burning stove at his home. And he created miniature chairs and small abstractions by gluing together chicken and turkey bones. In his last decade, he produced luminous, pixelated images of skyscrapers by applying paint in tiny daubs on sheets of cardboard. These ethereal visions of spiritual glory contrast sharply with the humble circumstances of their origins.