



Defining a King of Lesser of Lands

Gabriella Angeletti, April 18, 2016

[The Andrew Edlin Gallery](#) in New York has organized a solo exhibition comprising photographs, sculptures, paintings and poetry by the self-taught American artist Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910 – 1983), titled *King of Lesser Lands* (March 24th – May 8th 2016). Von Bruenchenhein’s ethereal body of both formalist and semi-abstract works were posthumously discovered but he—unlike most of the artists who fall under the outsider umbrella— “desperately wanted to be recognized, but simply lacked the means and wherewithal to connect himself to the larger art world,” says Phillip March Jones, the director of the gallery.

The artist was born in Marinette, Wisconsin, and spent his adult life in Milwaukee. He did not graduate high school but maintained life-long pursuits studying science, time, cosmology, and botany—themes that are recurrent in his work, especially his paintings. After leaving high school, the artist worked for a few local institutions from florist to bakery. At a state fair in 1939, Von Bruenchenhein met Eveline Kalke, a pin-up-esque woman whom he nicknamed Marie, and the two were married in 1943. She would go on to become his first muse.



Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Untitled, Gelatin Silver Print, 4.25" x 2.5", 1940s.

Shortly after Von Bruenchenhein and Kalke wed, the artist began costuming and photographing his wife in various choreographed and sometimes-erotic photo-shoots—a practice that continued for twenty years, and what he is best-known for today. From the 1950s to the early 1960s, he created more than 900 paintings that employ the aesthetic elements of shamanism, psychedelia, otherworldly architecture and botanicals. From the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, the artist turned to sculpting.

With little income, Von Bruenchenhein was forced to improvise the materials and mediums that he used to create art. He rendered paintings on cardboard and Masonite and made paintbrushes from his wife's hair. For his ceramic sculptures, he dug the clay by hand at local construction sites and fired them in the coal-burning stove in his living room. He used food scraps and leftovers, like turkey and chicken bones, to construct miniature thrones, spiralling towers, crowns for his wife and flora-inspired moulds. And, the photographs of Marie were sometimes done with expired film.



Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, from left to right. 1) Untitled, Chicken Bones and Paint, 8" x 5" x 5", 1960-1980. 2) Untitled (Bone Spiral), Chicken Bones and Paint, 7" x 4" x 4", 1960-1980. 3) Untitled, Chicken Bones and Paint, 9" x 5" x 4", 1960-1980. Photo credit Gabriella Angeleti.

Joanne Cubbs, the author of the forthcoming catalogue on the artist, writes: “Although Von Bruenchenhein might have felt like a king, he was not able to live like one.” The show, *King of Lesser Lands*, draws its name from a phrase that Von Bruenchenhein wrote on the back of a hand-colored self-portrait in 1947, a work that belongs to the collection of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Wisconsin, which inventoried the artist’s work after his death to benefit his destitute widow. “The artist earnestly believed that both he and Marie descended from nobility and this belief visually manifested itself through his work over the course of his life,” says Jones.

The majority of the 60 works in the show, which were created between 1940 and 1981, belong to Von Bruenchenhein’s estate, which the Andrew Edlin Gallery has exclusively represented since 2015. Seldom-seen works, like the two poems that were published in a poetry compilation titled *American Voices* (1936), reveal the multi-channeled complexity of Von Bruenchenhein’s creative output. The expansive variety of the works that are shown reveal an artist who worked genuinely, and who constructed his own throne when one was not monetarily available to him.

Clearing a misconception that the artist was secretive and reclusive with his work, Jones says: “Von Bruenchenhein wasn’t trying to hide his work—on the contrary, he was anything but discreet. His home was painted with dozens of different colors and his Buddhist inspired sculptures once landscaped his front yard.”

Von Bruenchenhein’s paintings, sculptures and photography are included in the permanent collections of major museums, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C., and the American Folk Art Museum in New York, which held a solo show of the artist’s work in 2010. In 2008, the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York featured paintings by the artist in a show titled *After Nature*, and the Hayward Gallery in London included the artist in its *Alternative Guide to the Universe* show in 2013, an exhibition that explored the work of self-taught artists and other visionary minds. And, also in 2013, Von Bruenchenhein’s work was featured in the 55th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale.

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: King of Lesser Lands. Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, New York, March 24th – May 8th, 2016.