

Forbes Life

Landlord's Fantasy

Finn-Olaf Jones, 04.25.05

Your mysterious tenant dies, leaving behind \$2 million in odd art. Talk about nonrefundable deposits.

What was he up to all those years in that cold and shabby room? Other tenants could hear him shouting late at night, arguing--though Henry Darger lived alone. When the old man wasn't working as a janitor, he kept to himself, rooting through trash cans in his dirty overcoat and Scotch-taped glasses. He attended mass compulsively, sometimes several times a day. To say he was a mystery to his landlords, Nathan and Kiyoko Lerner, would be an understatement. In the pantheon of squirrely renters, Henry Darger deserved a niche all his own.

"Other landlords told Nathan he should evict Henry," recalls Kiyoko. "Even his priest told us he would understand it if we got rid of him." Instead the Lerner's, as a Christmas present to Darger one year, reduced his rent from \$40 a month to \$30, despite the fact that the neighborhood, Chicago's Lincoln Park, was gentrifying.

In 1972, at age 80, Darger was starting to have difficulty climbing the stairs to his apartment. The Lerner's moved him to a charity nursing home. They then went back to his room to start to excavate four decades of Darger's accumulated junk--chest-high piles of magazines, used Pepto-Bismol bottles, balls of twine, shoes and other flotsam.

That's when they discovered what Henry Darger had been up to all those years: In the rubble were 300 drawings, collages and watercolors--many of them 10 feet long and painted on both sides. There also was a typed, single-spaced 15,145 page manuscript entitled *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. The former appeared to illustrate the latter.

The oversize novel describes the adventures of seven prepubescent Catholic girls on another planet leading an uprising against a godless empire of Gladelinians, males bent on enslaving and killing children. The girls have penises. Other than Darger himself, the Lerner's were the first people ever to behold these mind-boggling works.

"When Nathan saw the paintings," says Kiyoko, "he knew immediately this was something very special." The Lerner's asked Darger what he wanted done with the stuff. He replied, "It's yours. Just throw it away."

A day short of his 81st birthday, Darger died and was buried in a pauper's grave, leaving no living heirs. And that's the last anyone might have heard of Henry Darger had it not been for the fact that Nathan Lerner, in addition to being an uncommonly tenderhearted landlord, was also a photographer, designer and artist well-connected in Chicago's arts community.

He and Kiyoko set about seeing that Darger's work got the recognition it deserved. In this they were helped unwittingly by the late artist himself: In his final days Darger had told at least one other person at the nursing home that he was giving the Lerner's all his property. That freed them from the notification and waiting requirements most landlords must observe before taking possession of abandoned property.

As word spread about the *Vivian Girls*, art students, scholars and artists started dropping by to see the work and visit Darger's cluttered room, which the Lerner's had kept intact as a kind of shrine. After five years they arranged an exhibit in a tiny South Chicago gallery.

The first paintings sold for a few hundred dollars. But interest grew as the Lerner's donated works to various museums that deigned to exhibit "outsider" art (pieces done by self-taught or buggy artists): the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago and the American Folk Art Museum in New York.

Today Henry Darger is the most bankable outsider artist since Grandma Moses, his pictures fetching up to \$100,000. "The thing to remember about Darger's success," explains New York gallery owner Andrew Edlin, "is that he is a great crossover artist between the outsider world and the contemporary art world. Outsider art is a small pool, while the contemporary art world is the Pacific Ocean." Indeed, Darger's repetitive use of borrowed images (traced versions of the Coppertone Girl make frequent appearances as one of the Vivian sisters), screaming colors and hieroglyphic compositions are just as much at home amid the expensive pieces at modern art museums as among the traditionally lower-priced items in folk art galleries.

The Lerner's lives were forever changed by their strange tenant. By the time Nathan died in 1997, he had been devoting greater and greater amounts of his time to academics, journalists and gallery owners wanting a piece of Henry Darger. "Nathan was one of the most intelligent, creative men I ever met in my life," says Carl Hammer, one of the first gallery owners to sell Darger's work. "I think it must have been hard for him always being known as the man who discovered Darger."

After Nathan died Kiyoko had to cope with this same clamor, which impinged on her career as a pianist. Until 2000, when her stepson bought the building that had contained Darger's old apartment and gutted it for remodeling, she even hosted overnighting Dargerphiles in "the room."

Under her stewardship half a dozen books have been published about Darger and his work. The American Folk Art Museum has opened a permanent Henry Darger Study Center replete with two dozen pictures plus the original manuscripts. Pulitzer Prize-winning poet John Ashbery wrote a book of verse inspired by Darger, and the story of the Vivian girls has been told in ballet and opera.

An 82-minute documentary on Darger, *In the Realms of the Unreal*, was released

in 2004 to critical acclaim, and a more ambitious feature film is in preproduction. Kiyoko says she was paid \$20,000 on the option for the latter. Sales of Darger paintings have brought in revenue conservatively estimated to be in the low seven figures--perhaps \$2 million. Some of the money goes to a foundation established by the Leners that provides instruction in fine arts to the mentally ill.

Last year Kiyoko announced she would not be selling any more Dargers. "I feel enormous responsibility with all this work, both to Henry and to Nathan ... but it was taking too much time," she explained. "I wanted to get back what was important to my life. I had been a musician, and now I want to return to playing chamber music."

In a frenzy, dealers and investors sought to buy up all the Dargers they could get their hands on before the Dec. 31, 2004 deadline. In some cases, prices rose 50% in the span of a few months. Says Andrew Edlin, "Kiyoko's announcement had a noticeable effect. I've sold four paintings in four months."

Among the many ironies of Darger's life the greatest may be this: that an impoverished man who fantasized about rescuing girls in distress ended up providing for his landlord's widow.