

The Double-Sided Dominions of Henry Darger

September 26 – November 7, 2020

Andrew Edlin Gallery is excited to present “The Double-Sided Dominions of Henry Darger,” the first solo exhibition of the artist’s work at the gallery in over a decade. The show features nine double-sided watercolor drawings, eighteen compositions in all, which were originally hand-bound by the artist into at least three separate gigantic pictorial albums. They represent three distinct periods of Darger’s development and trace the evolution of his art from the 1930s through the 1950s. The two earliest works in the show, likely made in the early 1930s, are two fragments of one complete piece — but because they had come apart, they were treated as two distinct artworks and originally sold separately. Now, for the first time since Darger initially created them, they are back together, so to speak, and are displayed side-by-side as they were meant to be seen.

Henry Darger (1892-1973) was born in Chicago. His mother died when he was four years old and his father was permanently disabled when the boy was eight. He was initially institutionalized in a Catholic orphanage, then sent to an asylum for “feeble-minded” children following an erroneous diagnosis at age twelve. He escaped from the latter when he was seventeen and secured steady employment as a maintenance worker at several Chicago hospitals that lasted throughout the rest of his life. Sometime between 1910 and 1912, Darger began writing an epic 15,000-page fantasy-adventure novel: *The Story of the Vivian Girls in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. He then spent the next ten to twenty years drawing and tracing portraits of the saga’s many characters and creatures, designing flags for its various imaginary nations, and plotting maps of battle lines and terrains.

Sometime around 1930, Darger began creating a number of stand-alone watercolor, graphite and carbon-traced drawings upon rectangular sheets of drawing paper that measured roughly nineteen by twenty-four inches, and sometimes a bit larger. These narrative scenes depicted his story’s heroines, the seven plucky Vivian sisters, and their prepubescent comrades embroiled in numerous exploits battling sadistic, child-enslaving villains known as the Glandelinians. Completely independent of the academic artworld, Darger pioneered a unique method of appropriating images from other sources—seamlessly tracing them into his artwork, a practice he had already perfected when he borrowed passages from other literary sources in his unpublished novel. Today, Darger is considered to be arguably the greatest Outsider artist America has ever produced.

After executing a number of smaller scenes, he decided to assemble larger, more complex, and panoramic compositions by horizontally joining two or three sheets together. Sometimes these would be fabricated from sheets of new paper. Other times, perhaps when he ran short of paper, he would take several of his smaller finished drawings, combine them into one diptych, triptych, or four- or five-paneled work, then flip it over and create a single new watercolor drawing on the unused verso side. Eventually, he joined together as many as six or seven vertical sheets together to create gigantic horizontal constructions. It is worth noting that he did not do this in order to fabricate diptychs, triptychs, or multi-paneled works per se, or even to make one long panorama on the flip side, or both sides. He very likely embarked upon creating double-sided works so that he could hand-stitch them into

pictorial albums where they would act as two-sided “pages” that could theoretically be turned — however difficult this may have been considering his largest “pages” were nearly twelve feet long. These enormous albums were discovered toward the very end of his life, after Darger had moved into to a nursing home; within a few months, he passed away.

Before adequate documentation of the pictorial albums could be made in the years following Darger’s death, his landlord Nathan Lerner, disassembled them into individual works of art and disseminated them through gallery consignments and museum gifts. The Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne has at least five possible dismantled pictorial album front and back covers. Working with just thin strips of remaining stitched together artwork from the only surviving spine of one early, smaller album, American Folk Art Museum Senior Curator Valérie Rousseau was able to identify many drawings on the forty-two double-sided sheets it contained. She determined that there was no chronological sequencing from artwork to artwork, or “page” to “page,” for that album. Still, it seems clear that Darger wished to present even his more monumental work as increments within the oversized picture books, and not as conventional two-dimensional works of art to be hung on the wall.

Each of the compositions on display will be elucidated by written texts from leading Darger expert, Michael Bonesteel. In addition to pointing out aesthetic and technical aspects, Bonesteel will help viewers understand who some of Darger’s key characters are, what their significance was to his life and story, and contextualize scenes within the broader narrative of *Realms of the Unreal*...

Michael Bonesteel is an independent writer, scholar, curator, contributing editor to *Raw Vision*, and author of numerous publications on Henry Darger, most notably *Henry Darger: Art and Selected Writings* (Rizzoli, 2000). He was previously adjunct assistant professor of art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, an art critic for *Art in America*, and managing editor of several newspapers, including the *New Art Examiner* in Chicago.