

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Phantasmagorical Paintings 1957-61

December 5, 2020 – January 23, 2021

Employed for most of his life as a baker in a suburban enclave of Milwaukee, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910-1983) devoted his off hours to creating a dizzying array of ceramics, paintings, drawings, photographs and sculptures, which stuffed the modest home that he shared with his beloved wife, Marie. Despite his best efforts to gain recognition (including, somewhat misguidedly, sending letters of entreaty to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson), he remained completely unknown until after his death. It was only when a family friend brought his work to the attention of a curator at the Milwaukee Museum of Art in an attempt to ease the financial hardship of the recently widowed Marie that the world gained access to his astonishing treasure trove of art.

Since this discovery, Von Bruenchenhein's posthumous career has ascended at a steep trajectory. From the early embrace by the nearby John Michael Kohler Arts Center (Sheboygan, WI) and Milwaukee Museum of Art, to the subsequent championing by Chicago's Carl Hammer, and over the years, a plethora of other galleries specializing in Outsider Art, Von Bruenchenhein's oeuvre would come to defy art world categories with its appearance in internationally acclaimed exhibitions like the New Museum's *After Nature* (New York, 2008), the Hayward Gallery's *Alternative Guide to the Universe* (London, 2013) and *The Encyclopedic Palace* (2013) as part of the 55th Venice Biennale. **This exhibition features six of the artist's paintings that were shown in that landmark Biennale**, plus six additional rarely seen pieces. Exhilarating solo exhibitions were held at the American Folk Art Museum (New York, 2010) and at the Kohler (2017), and, more recently, the artist's work was included in The National Gallery of Art's group survey *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* (Wash DC, 2018).

Among the most beguiling works in Von Bruenchenhein's oeuvre are the tempestuous, phantasmagorical paintings on masonite board that he produced using an idiosyncratic finger-painting technique, miscellaneous baker's tools, drug store combs, and paint brushes made from his wife's hair. The resultant works are so resolutely original that they are almost without precedent. Their closest aesthetic relatives, and they are distant ones at that, hail from the family of works created by great Surrealist painters like Roberto Matta, Max Ernst, and Leonora Carrington, of which Von Bruenchenhein was almost certainly unaware. Like these painters, he stocked his electrically colored dreamscapes with a menagerie of mythical beasts and strange sea life, which he dredged up from the depths of his unconscious and from the pages of his beloved collection of National Geographic magazines. But unlike most of the Surrealists, with

the notable exception of Matta, Von Bruenchenhien enthusiastically pushed his work towards the edge of abstraction, subsuming his creatures in explosions of virtuoso paintwork, where they lurk like octopi occluded in clouds of psychedelic ink. Sometimes, he obliterated discernible subject matter altogether, indulging in riotous fireworks displays of line and color, which call to mind the vast structures of interstellar space. (This cosmic aesthetic was not arbitrary: Von Bruenchenhein was somewhat fixated on the fact that his birth year, 1910, was also marked by the appearance of Halley's Comet, which he took as a sign of divine providence.)

The world of Von Bruenchenhein's paintings is not all just stardust and daydreams, however. A menacing undercurrent flows through them, which stems from his justifiable fear of nuclear annihilation during the height of the Cold War. Nowhere is this terror more blatant than in his work *Atomic Age (No. 887, December 4, 1960)*, which features a towering, acid-hued mushroom cloud being kicked up by an explosion that is in the process of obliterating a hilltop city. But the specter of the atomic bomb haunts the edges of his other works as well, casting his creatures as radioactive mutants rather than storybook beasts, and his abstractions not as glittering celestial phenomena but infernal fire burning across the sky.

But this is perhaps too dark. Though they are certainly tinged with foreboding, Von Bruenchenhein's paintings, and his work as a whole, were always most firmly rooted in his reverence for the power of the human imagination, particularly his own. Known to his friends as "Gene", Von Bruenchenhein adopted for himself the nearly homophonic name "Genii" as a kind of alter-ego, occasionally inscribing his paintings with "Wand of the Genii" in lieu of a signature. This was no lark on the artist's part. Genii, plural of the singular "genius", was not merely a moniker that he deployed to indicate his artistic prowess, but an indication of where he thought his inspiration originated. In its ancient usage, "genii" referred a collection of helpful spirits who whispered in the ears of humankind so that they might hear the wisdom of the gods. Socrates, for instance, believed he was nudged along by just such a faithful friend. Von Bruenchenhein, for his part, took a slightly more modern, almost Jungian view of the situation. In a sprawling, imaginative treatise of speculative neuroscience that was found in his notebooks, Von Bruenchenhein explained the origins of artistic ability this way: "...one might desire to be a geneus (sic) and the many connections to the contained knowledge in the brain could show him how. He would be one in a million, who could force the brain to give up the many secrets it had inherited from thousands of years. Once opened to this communication, the creative ability would be simple to him."

- Chris Wiley