

The Primary Source

Volume 32 | Issue 1

Article 4

2013

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Callie Wiygul

University of Southern Mississippi

Barbara Johnson Ross

Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art

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Recommended Citation

Wiygul, Callie and Ross, Barbara Johnson (2013) "Visions: Art Outside the Box at the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, Mississippi," *The Primary Source*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

DOI: 10.18785/ps.3201.04

Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/theprimarysource/vol32/iss1/4>

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Visions: Art Outside the Box at the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, Mississippi

By Callie Wiygul, Graduate Research Assistant and MLIS candidate at the University of

Southern Mississippi, with

Barbara Johnson Ross, Curator of Collections, Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art

The Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, Mississippi, is the preeminent repository for the works of visionary Biloxi-born pottery master George E. Ohr (1857-1918). During his youth, Ohr was an apprentice to potter Joseph Fortune Meyer for approximately one year in New Orleans. It was during this time that he began to hone his artistic skills and to learn the mechanics of the pottery trade. After his apprenticeship, he traveled to potteries in sixteen states and numerous World's Fairs to learn about techniques and glazes. He came back from his travels and assisted Meyer once again in New Orleans at the New Orleans Art Pottery, which was formed to glaze and fire pottery for the Ladies Decorative Arts League and operated under the auspices of Tulane University. Through this combination of traveling and apprenticing, Ohr developed his own vanguard style and manipulation of the clay medium. His once unappreciated and unvalued ceramic art pieces were embraced by the art world during the latter part of the twentieth century and exhibited in such venues as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Ceramic Art and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. Converse to aesthetic notions that were pervasive during the late-nineteenth century, Ohr's whimsical and abstract ceramic masterpieces are injected with a delightful sense of humor; he did, after all, proclaim himself as "The Mad Potter of Biloxi". He is widely considered to be a pioneer of the Modernist movement, and his inimitable art pieces continue to expand the boundaries of American art as a whole. While Ohr's aesthetic originality and expert craftsmanship have been embraced only since the late-twentieth century, the Ohr O'Keefe Museum of Art stands to bear witness to a host of innovative artists for years to come. In tandem with the innovative spirit of George E. Ohr, the Museum proudly presents its newest exhibition, *Visions: Art Outside the Box*, which encompasses the self-revelatory work of five artists with deep Mississippi and Louisiana roots: Theodore Brooks, Martin Green, Charles W. St. Julien, Dr. Charles Smith and Willie White. These artists inhabit various mediums but all exemplify the visionary artistic experience of self-reflection, inventiveness, imagination and expression. This culturally rich and exceedingly diverse collection provides insight into the artistic heritage that pervades the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Like his predecessor, George Ohr, Theodore Roosevelt Brooks (1916-1996) was an artist who envisioned a life in which art and spirituality were its centrifugal forces. After years of service in the military, Brooks returned to his hometown, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to create art and collect objects, from junk to antiques. He used these objects to create mixed media pieces, some of which can be found in private collections, that are as diverse as their origins. Arguably the most obscure of the artists in the *Visions* series, Brooks sold few pieces during his lifetime, but that should not undermine his prolific artistic output. He once extolled that he created something new every day (T. C. S.- Wixon, personal communication, undated).

New Orleans-native Martin Green (1923-1987) used bright colors to create his realization of planetary landscapes and galactic visions on giant poster boards. He did not begin studying art until the age of forty-two, when he began to study with New Orleans artist Dawn Dedeaux under the tutelage of a visiting New York artist who was renting space from Dedeaux's family member. It was through this connection with Dedeaux that his stark abstract works were seen in exhibitions in both New Orleans and New York. From there, his popularity in the art world ballooned, as he joined an artists' supper club called the Secret Society Supper Club O and found a fan in Robert Tannen, a New York artist who relocated to New Orleans. Although many of his works were destroyed in Hurricane Katrina, Green's revelatory spirit lives on through the collection of Robert Tannen and Jeanne Nathan who have graciously loaned four of his pieces for

inclusion in this exhibition (D. Dedeaux, personal communication, April 7, 2013).

Charles W. St. Julien (1925-1987) studied briefly at the Philadelphia Museum of Art during his youth before returning to his native Lafayette, Louisiana. After being told by his parents that he could not study art abroad, St. Julien suffered the first of many breakdowns. Described by his sister after his death as suffering from schizophrenia, his graphite and mixed media works were noted by Mark Bercier, to whom St. Julien would later donate the contents of his studio. When Bercier visited St. Julien late in his life, he noted approximately seventy-five metal buckets all filled with crayons in one room of his home. Each bucket was filled with one specific color and was interspersed among the many 30 x 40 inch white boards on which he had drawn cubist illustrations. Julien's profound artistic sensibilities continue to provoke conversations and inspire artists years after his death (M. Bercier, personal communication, December 12, 2012).

Dr. Charles Smith was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1940. Although not a doctor in the traditional sense, Smith added the prefix *Dr.* to his name as a representation of his experiences in the "school of life"-- and rightfully so. Smith was a United States Marine during the Vietnam War, an experience that would unequivocally influence his subsequent artistic output. Smith's sculptures have been widely lauded and exhibited across the United States. Desiring to create art for minorities, Smith states that, "I'm going into the heart of Mankind-- Blacks, Whites, Hispanics-- wherever ignorance separates us I want to be there. My act is that of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. having a dream, a vision, and a hope for our people and place in this world with respect, where one is judged by character, not color." As an artist, historian and minister, Smith continues to advocate for artists and desires to inspire children to study both art and history.

Willie White (1908-2000) was a native of Cranfield, Mississippi, who lived in New Orleans, Louisiana, for most of his life. Employed as a waiter and janitor, among other trades, White began his artistic pursuits when he tried to mimic the techniques of artists he would observe in the French Quarter. Initially he used house paint, but by the 1960s he crossed mediums and began to work with felt tip markers and poster boards to create vivid iterations of still life forms such as fruits and vegetables. Later, he began to incorporate facets of his rural Mississippi childhood into his art, but also began to draw horses, dinosaurs and visions from his dreams. In addition to their inclusion in the *Visions* exhibition, his drawings can be seen in the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, Louisiana, the New Orleans Museum of Art and Intuit: The Center for Intuitive & Outsider Art in Chicago, Illinois.

Amongst the pottery of George Ohr and various art exhibitions, the Museum highlights the significance of the African-American experience in southern Mississippi during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century through the lens of craftsman Pleasant Reed at the Pleasant Reed Interpretive Center. Reed was an African-American Mississippian who settled his family from the Hattiesburg area to Biloxi in the late-nineteenth century. Reed proceeded to purchase land and build a home for his family, working as a craftsman to pay back his land debt. Although the original Reed home was destroyed during Hurricane Katrina, a replica was built and opened in 2010 on the Ohr- O'Keefe Museum of Art campus. Named the Pleasant Reed Interpretive Center, it offers visitors the opportunity to witness how an African-American family lived and succeeded during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in Biloxi. Both the *Visions* exhibition and the Pleasant Reed Interpretive Center are open to the public Tuesday- Saturday, 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi. The *Visions* exhibition runs through November 20, 2013 in the Ohr O'Keefe Museum of Art's Beau Rivage Resort & Casino Gallery of African American Art.

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