

C I V I L

A CHRISTIANS IN THE VISUAL ARTS
Traveling Exhibition

Ordained to Create

The Self-Taught Art of Southern
Preachers, Prophets and Visionaries



Howard Finster, Planet Kerlein – City of Lebial

A Selection from the Sage and Steven Pattie Collection of American Art

Unfettered and Unfiltered

Sage and Steven Pattie

At the forefront of some of the most exciting self-taught art on the American scene are religious visionaries, preachers and prophets. Fueled by an unwavering sense of mission, these artists are brimming with passion for their God and pushing the boundaries of art as they color outside the lines.

Most did not begin to create art until nearing an age when many people are approaching retirement. However, each person's lifetime of experience, rooted in years of keen observation and passionate living, has been their hardscrabble academy. Astonishingly, in many cases it has taken them from the margins of society to the epicenter of the contemporary art world.

Speaking with unbridled voices, these artists are making a stir not just in the world of self-taught art. While created outside the established salons and traditional mainstream of art, these expressive outpourings "unmuddied by artistic training or received knowledge" as described by British scholar Colin Rhodes in *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives*, are at the same time influencing what is happening in the so-called art world-at-large.¹ As Alice Rae Yelen suggests in *Passionate Visions of the American South*, "Unencumbered by preconceived ideas or outwardly imposed models of what art should be, they are free to create without external expectations or guidance."²

Historically, the art of such self-taught creators has been broadly defined as folk, primitive, or naïve. In recent decades, other terms such as "outsider," "art brut," and more recently "vernacular" have also been introduced. However, individual descriptors are not completely accurate and often fall short of clearly describing an individual and his or her work. Unlike the traditional folk art of native and unschooled communities (such as we might find within Oaxaca, Mexico or New Mexico's Zuni Pueblo), this art is different and particularly innovative. These works are only remotely related (if at all) to the surrounding cultures' creative traditions, whether living and working within a major metropolitan environment like Atlanta or the southern Appalachian foothills. These artists create unique works coupled with a personal iconography and style all their own, clearly raising them above the confines of "traditional" folk art.

Lowery Sims, former curator of 20th century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, noted in an issue of *ArtNews* that the art establishment has had to "revisit the whole primitivist paradigm." Authors and New York art dealers Frank Maresca and Roger Ricco, take it one step further in their most recent book *American Vernacular*. They rightly suggest that the boundaries "between 'high' and 'low' or elitist and popular art" should be altogether erased.³ As they correctly note, there has often been a simple and spurious opposition between what they call "vernacular and mainstream art." Ideally we should be able to talk about both Jean-Michel Basquiat and Howard Finster, William Edmondson and Henry Moore, or Pablo Picasso and anonymous African art, without hesitation or qualification in the same breath. The bottom line is that on the vast continuum of art, "insiderness and outsiderness are often matters of circumstance and cultural construction."⁴

Bearing a mantle of religious zeal, each of the artists featured in "Ordained to Create" express their art in very direct, passionate and frequently idiosyncratic ways. Following instructions received from God, Elvis, angels, dreams, visions or from what they read in their well-thumbed Bible and the local paper, they are, as Yelen notes, "obsessively driven by unarticulated, internalized sources of inspiration" as they unwittingly, but often successfully, "create the best of artistic infractions."⁵ She goes on to suggest that those who are ordained preachers generally operate "on the fringe of the church hierarchy" and are as "out of the mainstream there as they are in the art world," often presenting a self-avowed state of spiritual authority.⁶

In addition to individual works of art, a surprising number of these artists are compelled to create wondrous and unusual environments that are sincere, powerful, and challenging declarations. Artists creating such handmade universes include Howard Finster, Ruby Williams, R. A. Miller, W. C. Rice, Anderson Johnson, Benjamin Perkins, Mary T. Smith, and others. As John Beardsley notes in his book *Gardens of Revelation*, these environments are "a form of rhetorical speech." Generally not designed for habitation, these unique gardens are above all "artistic and symbolic places" as well as fertile seedbeds of moral and theological opinion.⁷ Such didactic environments are

their billboards, not unlike a roadside sign on a remote highway warning people to repent. Providing these historically marginalized people an enormous soapbox upon which to tell their story, they are a logical extension of their preaching.

Made using the coarsest of materials and with an organic sense of having unfolded over many years, they are not in any traditional sense beautiful. They range from the attractive, optimistic, and whimsical – like Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden or Anderson Johnson’s Faith Mission – to the rude and haunting, such as we discover in W.C. Rice’s Cross Garden. Whether standing before Rice’s somewhat sinister three acre garden filled with hundreds of primitive signs and crosses, or wandering amidst the whimsy and declarations of Finster’s Paradise Garden at its creative zenith in the 1980s, one has the sense of having entered another world “governed by its own rules ... its own particular illogic, and world of demiurges.”⁸

For all these artists’ acclaim, they have stayed true to their calling. Neither constrained by the academy or the expectations of their neighbors and families, their work has created a stir in the world and in people’s hearts. They have reached deep into the soil of their own souls and mined those recesses in order to produce an art of the most authentic variety. While occasionally registering social protest, posting wildly autobiographical commentary, or celebrating the world of nature in their midst, they are more likely preoccupied with preaching about their God, wherein his promises point to a better life in this world and the next.

Steven Pattie is an active visual artist, writer, collector, and more recently executive producer of a film about Howard Finster. His passion for contemporary self-taught art has led him and his family to building a collection that is among the largest in the United States. The former president of New College Berkeley, he is currently a management supervisor with the Russ Reid Company, the nation’s leading marketing and communications firm serving not-for-profit organizations. He is a graduate of Westmont College (B.A.) and Fuller Theological Seminary (M.Div.), and has done special studies at the American Film Institute and Stanford University. Pattie is a member of CIVA’s National Board of Directors.

Sage Pattie is a licensed psychotherapist in private practice. She is a graduate of California Polytechnic State University, receiving her B.S. in dietetics and food administration, and from Fuller Graduate School of Psychology where she earned her M.A. in psychology. She is a member of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists and the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. Sage and Steve have two sons, Nathan and Lucas.

Footnotes

1. Colin Rhodes, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), p. 8.
2. Alice Rae Yelen, *Passionate Visions of the American South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993), p. 17.
3. Frank Maresca and Roger Ricco, *American Vernacular* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2003), p. 7.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
5. Yelen, *op.cit.*, p. 17.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
7. John Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), p. 8.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Sage and Steven Pattie would also like to thank the following people for helping make “Ordained to Create” possible: Sandra Bowden of CIVA, for her vision and leadership in steering this exhibit towards a reality; Roff Graves of Graves Country, an art dealer and frame maker who always knows the best way to present an individual work, who personally made many of the frames for this exhibit, and who remains a constant source of inspiration to artists and collectors alike across America; Frank Pattie, whose engineering and

construction talents helps make possible being able to present and transport “Ordained to Create” from one venue to the next throughout the United States and Canada; Roberta Lawrence, who did the design for this catalogue; Nathan and Lucas Pattie, for their editorial input, creative insight, encouragement, and loving the art they live with; and finally, all the passionate and hard-working artists featured in this exhibit who remain a constant source of inspiration and without whom this exhibit would not be possible.

Ordained to Create

The Exhibit

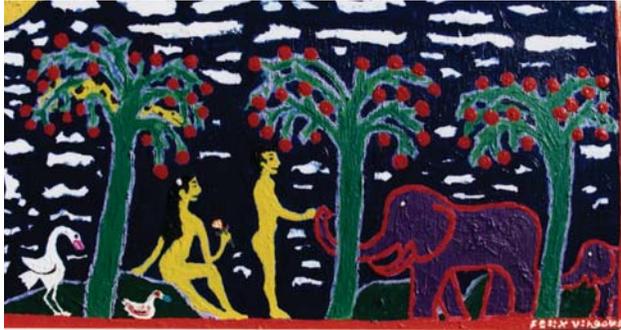


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1. **Rev. Howard Finster** (Georgia, 1916 – 2001)
Love Not the World (1 John 2:15), Oil on Plastic Panel in Wood Frame Created by the Artist with Enamel and Pyrography, 20" x 29" (including frame), 1982 (#2,257).
Howard Finster is considered by scholars, curators, and historians of art history to be among the most important self-taught artists of the 20th century. Many have said he will be remembered as not only a major self-taught artist, but as one of the most influential contemporary artists of his day. Finster's journey happened to accelerate along "sympathetic developments in art ... graffiti art, 'fun' and 'Wild Style' painting, punk rock, the 'new figuration' (and) Neo-expressionism, as noted by critic Tom Patterson.
It all began one day in the late 1970s. While painting a bicycle frame, a smudge of enamel looking like a face appeared on his finger. It told him to "paint sacred art" in order to plant the word of God "on every brain cell." Honoring that instruction, Finster cemented all his tradesman's tools into the walkway of his garden to mark, and insure, his allegiance to this new call. "Working night and day for you all," he went on to create more than 50,000 works of art. Rivalled in quantity only by Pablo Picasso, he produced more individual works than any artist in recorded history and is considered by many to be the most widely exhibited artist in America today.
2. **Rev. Howard Finster** (Georgia, 1916 – 2001)
Planet Kerlein, City of Lebial, Oil on Wood Panel and Framed by the Artist in Found Frame, 24.5" x 28.5" (including frame), June 1 (5:58 Past Midnight), 1986 (#5,308). **Illustrated**
3. **Rev. Howard Finster** (Georgia, 1916 – 2001)
Saten is After You, Oil and Marker Pen on Wood Panel, 21.5" x 26", January 28 (12:00 Midnight), 1990 (#13,507).

4. **Rev. Howard Finster** (Georgia, 1916 – 2001)
The Devil and His Wife, Oil on Wood Panel, 11" x 27.25", March 4 (9:14 PM), 1988 (#7,416).
5. **Rev. Howard Finster** (Georgia, 1916 – 2001)
Coca Cola, Oil/Marker Pen on Wood Panel, 10.5" x 34", July 15 (12:15 Past Midnight), 1990 (#15,478).
Alongside spiritual and political references, artists like Finster occasionally draw on secular resources to help spread their message, employing popular culture to their advantage. With Finster's involvement or explicit permission, his works have been commissioned or utilized by Coca Cola, Disneyland, Time, Absolut Vodka, U2, and MTV, in addition to creating album covers for such major bands as Talking Heads and R.E.M. In 1985 he received *Rolling Stones'* "Album Cover of the Year" award for his art and design for Talking Heads' album, *Little Creatures*. For Finster, the employment of such means is an intentional ingredient of his overall missionary strategy to the culture-at-large.
6. **Rev. Howard Finster** (Georgia, 1916 – 2001)
I Can Still See, I Can Still Smell (Self-Portrait), Oil/Marker Pen on Wood Panel, 14" x 16.5", May 21, 1996 (#40,013). **Illustrated**
Finster worked night and day and over 25 years created more than 50,000 works of art. In this rather vulnerable and introspective work, we get a clear picture of Finster's obsession to keep track of each and every work of art he produced, an example of which is a scrap of cardboard in this exhibit, *Howard Finster Numbers his Pieces of Art*.
7. **Rev. Howard Finster** (Georgia, 1916 – 2001)
Howard Finster Numbers His Pieces of Art, Marker Pen on Cardboard Fragment, 5" x 15", 1990.
This is a record of paintings 13,616 through 13,674, as listed on the front and verso. While records like this were usually noted in a spiral notebook or on scraps of cardboard or paper, he also kept such information on doorjambs, furniture, and on about



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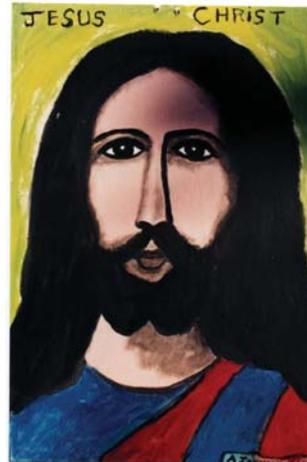
- anything nearby and available if necessary to keep his numbering in order.
8. **Felix Virgous** (Tennessee, 1948 –)
The Garden of Eden, Oil on Canvas Panel, 13" x 24", c. 1985. *Illustrated*

Felix Virgous comments on life as an African-American by combining biblical stories with images from popular culture in his paintings. After only a few years of schooling, an accident at the age of about age 12 led him to take up art. According to the *Encyclopedia of American Folk Art and Artists*, he reports that the "Lord crawls into my head each day and tells me what to paint." His expressionistic and often narrative, brightly colored paintings "are about the teachings of Jesus and Moses and against the anti-Christ."

9. **Elder Anderson Johnson** (Virginia, 1915 – 1998)
Jesus Christ, Oil on Canvas Panel, 20" x 30", c. 1985. *Illustrated*

Elder Anderson Johnson was born and raised in Lunenburg County, Virginia. At the age of eight, while working in his father's cornfield, he had a vision that began his lifelong pursuit to preach. Johnson had very little formal schooling, but was a student of the Bible. At age 12, he began preaching, and spent his career as an itinerant preacher in churches and on street corners for the next 40 years. However, in the early 1970s after an accident left him partially paralyzed, he moved to Newport News, Virginia.

Resettled in Newport News and believing God had healed him, in gratitude Anderson converted a portion of his living quarters into a church. Called Faith Mission, Johnson created a major folk art environment, decorating the walls, inside and out, with colorful paintings of biblical, political and national heroes, visionary images, signs, and an occasional landscape. Most were done on salvaged plywood and cardboard. During his days as an active preacher, Johnson told me he would "play the steel guitar, the Spanish guitar,



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- organ, piano and harmonica," and "not getting behind a bush," preach amid floor to ceiling paintings behind a highly decorated pulpit.

Jesus Christ is a powerful work and was originally nailed to one of the interior walls of Faith Mission. His iconic gaze fixed upon the viewer, one can still see nail holes at the top of the canvas from when it was affixed to the wall of his church.

10. **Elder Anderson Johnson** (Virginia, 1915 – 1998)
Abraham Lincoln, Oil on Wood Panel, 24" x 24", 1997. *Illustrated*
11. **Elder Anderson Johnson** (Virginia, 1915 – 1998)
Jeremiah 29:11, Oil on Wood Panel, 12" x 35", 1997.
12. **Elder Anderson Johnson** (Virginia, 1915 – 1998)
Woman in Blue, Oil on Wood Panel, 11" x 31", 1998.

On one of my personal visits to Faith Mission, I once asked why alongside paintings of Jesus Christ and political heroes he always had so many paintings of women – not men. He explained that "as a preacher you have to honor women, cause when we honor women, we honor our own mother, we honor our own sisters. Without Mary, Christ is not the man he would be." In the Bible it is recorded "how disappointed God was with men and he really liked women – she goes on by the man. My paintings of women give them something to look forward to."

13. **Myrtice West** (Alabama, 1923 –)
Who is Worthy to Open the Book? (Painting #3 from the Artist's "Second" Revelation Series), Oil on Canvas (stretched over window screen frame), in Frame Decorated by the Artist, 34.5" x 55", c. 1994.

Myrtice West has lived her entire life in the small farming towns of Cherokee County, Alabama. Her work, referred to by some as a cross between Grandma Moses and Hieronymous Bosch, has emerged as among the most important work in contemporary American self-taught art.

A tragedy in her life – the murder of her only child at the hands of her son-in-law – caused her to



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dive more deeply into painting for consolation, something she had dabbled in since the early 1950s. But this time was different, and she was more invested in painting than ever before. Focusing on the Book of Revelations, reading and interpreting this book helped her survive, and even beat, some of the pain.

She eventually stretched fabric furniture covers across the frames of discarded window screens and began painting the Revelations Series in 1978. She created 14 major paintings illustrating the book as she felt it was being revealed to her. The completion of this major series would take her seven years, her intention to explain the mysteries of the Apocalypse.

"Not knowing what had come over me," she illustrated the Book of Revelations as her first major work, painstakingly producing large, complex, and extraordinary paintings. Within a few short years they eventually found their way into major museums and private collections, and became the basis for an entire book, *Wonders to Behold: The Visionary Art of Myrtice West. Who is Worthy to Open the Book?* is a rare work from the artist's second Revelation Series (a copy for herself of all 14 paintings from the first series which she spent about one year producing).

14. **Myrtice West** (Alabama, 1923 –)
Ezekiel 1,2,3, Paint, Glitter on Wood Panel, 24" x 34.5", 1996. **Illustrated**

In preparation for each new series since, West engages in intensive Bible study in order to produce the complex works she eventually composes. Complementing her study, she regularly depends on visions and dreams to fuel her work, enabling her to produce various series of paintings based on other prophetic books of the Bible like Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel.



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15. **Myrtice West** (Alabama, 1923 –)
Building Noah's Ark, Oil and Glitter on Wood Panel, 28" x 39", 1998.

Many of West's paintings are also focused on narrative scenes from the Bible. While her favorite themes tend towards the prophetic books, she regularly paints scenes depicting the Creation, the Garden of Eden, Noah's Ark, Jesus' birth, Jesus' ministry, religious commentary on current events (particularly as they relate to Israel), and more. Various depictions of Noah's Ark are a favorite theme of West.

16. **Myrtice West** (Alabama, 1923 –)
Zechariah, Ch. One, Oil and Glitter on Canvas (stretched over window screen frame), in Frame Decorated by the Artist, 34.5" x 55", c. 1993.

Illustrated

West's paintings are much more than literal translations of biblical stories. Such as we witness in *Zechariah, Ch. One*, she often depicts biblical events as though they were occurring simultaneously, giving her work a somewhat surreal quality.

17. **Rev. R. A. Miller** (Georgia, 1912 –)
Devil, Oil on Wood Panel (discarded cabinet door), 15.75" x 39", c. 1980. **Illustrated**

The Rev. R. A. Miller built a forest of whirligigs on a nearly barren hill next to his house. Littering the hillside are tin cutout representations of Uncle Sam, strange animals, dinosaurs, angels, devils, American flags, and a colorful character called "Blow Oscar," a neighbor who for many years blew his horn every day he drove by the Miller residence. A proud American, he has had a variety of occupations, but was eventually ordained a preacher in the Free Will Baptist Church.

He speaks about how one day a guardian angel told him to build all this and "people will pass by and buy 'em." Miller's guardian angel was right. He has emerged as an important self-taught artist represented in many museums and major collections around the world, even though he "can't believe people buy this



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stuff." In his own words, he "makes a lot of people pleased and talks to people from all over the world."

18. **Rev. R. A. Miller** (Georgia, 1912 –)
Lord Help USA, Oil on Tin/Wood Panel, 24" x 48", c. 1987. *Illustrated*

Frequently woven into the fabric of these artists' work is the presence of patriotic and national symbols. A preacher as well as a patriot, Miller is among those who use such images. *Lord Help USA* is an evocative image featuring a large American flag on tin being held by Blow Oscar and a devil, and with the scribbled words "You Won't Burn This Flag."

19. **Rev. R. A. Miller** (Georgia, 1912 –)
Lord Love You Cross, Oil on Tin/Wood Construction, 4" x 36" x 76", c. 1990.
20. **Rev. R. A. Miller** (Georgia, 1912 –)
No Cusin, No Lyin, No Beer, Oil on Corrugated Tin, 25.5" x 54", c. 1990.
An original sign from his environment.
21. **Rev. R. A. Miller** (Georgia, 1912 –)
Untitled Environmental Whirligig with Snake and Dinosaur, Oil on Wood/Metal Construction, 17.5" x 17.5" x 45", c. 1980.

This rare construction was part of an original group of whirligigs and signs placed on the hill next to his home, and from before the days he was "discovered." One of R.E.M.'s earliest music videos was filmed on this site amidst this forest of whirligigs and signs, bringing national attention to his work. At about this same time, R.E.M. also produced a music video at Finster's Paradise Garden.

22. **Rev. R. A. Miller** (Georgia, 1912 –)
R. A. Miller House, Oil on Metal Can, 11" x 11" x 14", 2001.

This work from his yard identifies his rather humble abode as his home.

23. **Rev. J. L. Hunter** (Texas, 1905 – 1999)
In Hell, Enamel/Glitter on Wood Construction, 17" x 5" x 11", c. 1988.

The Rev. J. L. Hunter was born in Taylor, Texas.

Going into the ministry in 1938, he eventually pastored the True Light Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. His constructions are made of tree branches, popsicle sticks, wood shavings, and glue. Most often, they are painted in straightforward, primary colors. Human figures may have screws for eyes, with other details like fingers, eyebrows, and mouths burned into the wood with an ice pick heated over a gas flame.

24. **Rev. J. L. Hunter** (Texas, 1905 – 1999)
Untitled, Enamel on Wood Construction, 14.5" x 8.5" x 2.75", c. 1988. *Illustrated*
25. **Rev. Benjamin (B. F.) Perkins** (Alabama, 1904 – 1993)
Home of the Brave, Land of the Free, Oil on Canvas in Frame Made by the Artist, 18" x 24", 1991. *Illustrated*

The Rev. Benjamin Perkins painted colorful patriotic and biblical themes on traditional surfaces as well as on gourds, furniture, and other items on hand. "People love the American flag" and as he once said, "if you can talk about Jesus or have a church also on the painting, people will like it even more." In 1929 he became a minister in the Assembly of God, and in 1949 joined the Church of God, rising to the rank of bishop in the church. This particular painting is a good example of the artist's work. Cherishing the American's freedom of religious choice, Perkins is especially known for his incorporation of patriotic and religious imagery, particularly the American flag, Statue of Liberty, and his depictions of the treasures from Tutankhamen's tomb.

26. **Rev. Benjamin (B. F.) Perkins** (Alabama, 1904 – 1993)
If Our Mothers and Fathers Could Speak, Oil on Wood Panel, 22" x 26.26", c. 1980.

Like other self-taught artists, Perkins also created an environment that included numerous signs at his home in Fayette, Alabama. This work, *If Our Mothers and Fathers Could Speak*, is a rare work from the original environment that has since burned down. On the verso in the form of a rhyming poem we read the



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following: John 3 – 3: You Must Be Born Again, or You Cannot See the Kingdom of God.

27. **Missionary Mary Proctor** (Florida, 1960 –)
Sticks and Stones, Enamel/Assemblage on Panel, 30.25" x 12", 1996.
 Artists such as Finster, Perkins, Miller, West, and Proctor often lace their art with didactic messages about the authority of God, the centrality of the Bible, the importance of morality, eschatological visions, and personal advice thrown in for good measure. Missionary Mary Proctor's work began while grieving over the death of her grandmother, aunt and uncle who died in a house fire. A voice directed her to paint the door – "that the door was the way."
 Living in Tallahassee, most of her work is painted on doors small and large, as well various pieces of discarded lumber. In addition to enamel, she also uses fabric, sticks, bits of glass and mirror, bottle caps, and other available materials. On every painting she writes messages about what she wants the world to know based on her personal journey as an African-American woman.
28. **Missionary Mary Proctor** (Florida, 1960 –)
Thank You Sir, Enamel/Assemblage on Panel, 11" x 12.5", 1996. *Illustrated*
29. **Missionary Mary Proctor** (Florida, 1960 –)
Train Up a Child, Enamel/Assemblage on Panel, 11.25" x 9", 1996.
30. **Lorenzo Scott** (Georgia, 1927 –)
The Devil Steals Time, Oil on Canvas in Frame Made of Wood and Bondo and Carved by the Artist, 18" x 24", 1997. *Illustrated*
 Lorenzo Scott, a fervent and enthusiastic member of a Holiness Church, paints mostly classical religious subject matter. In the art of Lorenzo Scott the viewer experiences a hint of Giotto, a bit of Leonardo, and a touch of Baroque styling.
 He once told me, "I be doing painting and repair work for about 38 years." However, the Lord spoke to

him, "just like you talking to me," in a powerful way "to witness unto him, and told me where to move." He believes that God was instrumental in telling him to make more art because he suddenly started selling a lot of his paintings and "then I on television, at the Smithsonian Institute, and all that goin' on..."

A bachelor all of his life, Scott has always enjoyed his sojourns to museums and to this day spends a good deal time "learning from the masters." An Atlanta resident, Scott still spends many solitary hours at the High Museum of Art looking at religious art, and then, "goes home and paint 'em again, only a little better." He makes his own frames, fashioning them from wood and applications of Bondo. Before the Bondo completely dries, he carves designs and rosettes into them "to make them more beautiful." After his frames are spray-painted gold, they closely resemble the baroque frames he sees in the High Museum.

This unusual painting, *The Devil Steals Time*, he describes as "being 'bout a man that don't do what they're supposed to do in their lifetime, and they be weeping because time is running out, and they gonna have a hard time sometime in the mind..."

31. **Lorenzo Scott** (Georgia, 1927 –)
Holy Family, Oil on Canvas in Frame Made of Wood and Bondo and Carved by the Artist, 20" x 24", 1997. *Illustrated*
32. **Bernice Sims** (Alabama, 1926 –)
Picking Cotton, Oil on Panel, 9" x 32", 2000.
 Born in 1926 in Alabama, Sims raised six children and was active in the community, particularly in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. She supported herself and her family as a domestic, seamstress, and insurance saleswoman. However, it was not until her 50s that she was able to return to school and earn her high school diploma. Introduced to museums through class field trips, she became interested in art and immediately focused much of her work on the activities and events of rural black life, including work in the fields, family



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life, and going to church. However, she also paints her memories of the civil rights movement, as we see in *Civil Rights March*.

As noted by Kathy Kemp in the book *Revelations: Alabama's Visionary Folk Artists*, Sims says that "Mostly I'm conveying the history of blacks, the things we're accustomed to... I paint the civil rights pictures because I like to keep it alive. There are some things my children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren should know about. And since I can't do any writing, I tell the story in my paintings."

33. **Bernice Sims** (Alabama, 1926 –)
Civil Rights March, Oil on Canvas, 18" x 24", c. 1998.
Illustrated

Black history, especially the struggle for civil rights in Alabama, is the focus of much of her work. She has painted the defiant march across Edmund Pettus Bridge at Selma, Klan activities, as well as the horror of the fire hoses and police dogs in downtown Birmingham, such as we see in this painting.

34. **Linda Bruton** (Georgia, 1960 –)
Jesus' Walk, Oil on Wood Panel (Discarded Ironing Board), 14" x 61", 1998.

Linda Bruton's drawings and paintings mirror her faith and arise mostly from her dreams. After a series of personal challenges, she came to art with a desire to make it a witness for God. Her passion is to help children and adults learn the Bible. While she occasionally draws a landscape or domestic scene, creating art with a religious focus is her calling. This particular work on a discarded wooden ironing board she describes in an essay on six recipe cards as the story of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

35. **Mary T. Smith** (Mississippi, 1904 – 1995)
Untitled, Oil on Wood Panel, 24" x 48", c. 1985.
Illustrated



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Mary T. Smith was the daughter of poor black Mississippi sharecroppers, and grew up with only a minimal education. Smith worked for many years as a tenant farmer and cooking for other families in the community. By 1975, she had retired and moved to the small town of Hazelhurst.

About 1980 she decided to "pretty up" her one acre yard with painted tin panels in order to "please the Lord." Painting on rusted tin or discarded wood, her works are composed largely of bold strokes, using between one and three colors for each picture. She used to create up to two paintings a day, creating works that are elemental, primitive, and powerful.

She often painted animals, but is especially known for paintings of neighbors, self-portraits, and figures reminiscent of African masks, perhaps in some cases a form of spiritualized autobiography.

36. **Zebedee (Z.B.) Armstrong** (Georgia, 1911 - 1993)
Doomsday Calendar, Enamel and Felt Pen on Board, 8" x 18", 1988. **Illustrated**

Certain artists' work leans towards abstraction, but is fueled by the same passion and preoccupation with spiritual matters. A factory worker and field hand spending most of his days picking cotton, Zebedee Armstrong is an African-American who often told the story of how at 61 years of age an angel came to him and told him to "stop wasting time." This led him to making constructions and assemblages from found wood, metal, cardboard and other materials, the end result of his work being clocks and calendars. Working at an obsessive pace until the end of his life, he frequently incorporated a grid of red, black, and sometimes white using mostly magic markers, his goal to predict the end of the world.

37. **Rev. Ruby C. Williams** (Florida, 1930 –)
It Cost to Hate, Oil on Panel, 10.25" x 19.25", 1998.
Illustrated



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The Rev. Ruby Williams lives and works in Bealsville, Florida. A community founded by freed slaves, the property she owns has been in her family for several generations. From her ramshackle stand of wood and tin on Highway 60, she proudly markets produce grown on the land of her ancestors.

Several years ago she started selling paintings and signs, an extension of her painted advertisements alerting drivers to the fruits and vegetables for sale up ahead. She speaks of her creative calling as "an extra job," her primary responsibilities being to plow her field on an old John Deere, harvesting fruits and vegetables, taking care of the many children who have come to her for safe shelter, and preaching.

Many of the artists in this exhibit—Howard Finster, Anderson Johnson, R.A. Miller, W.C. Rice, and B.F. Perkins – carry on the peculiarly southern religious tradition of making signs. Williams is among that group, although she does paintings as well. Often, they boldly stand alone, such as we see particularly in the work of W.C. Rice. Influenced by hand-painted placards along highways pointing the way to God and to church on Sunday, Williams' and others' sign making ventures complement and reinforce their visual witness on canvases and panels. However, their handwritten texts often spill over into the overall composition of their paintings, and in this exhibit there are numerous examples of that. As noted by scholar William Ferris in *Passionate Visions of the American South*, some artists, often unconsciously, use texts "as a talisman to conjure and evoke the viewer's emotions. Perhaps also their intention is to make clearer those things about which they speak, and to make more visible what they see only through their own particular lenses, but darkly.

38. **Rev. Ruby C. Williams** (Florida, 1930 –)
Open (Yes), Oil on Panel, 12" x 11.75", 1994.

39. **Rev. Ruby C. Williams** (Florida, 1930 –)
Ruby's Art Here, Oil on Panel, 9.5" x 47.5", 1995.
40. **Rev. Ruby Williams** (Florida, 1930 –)
Love, Oil on Panel, 8" x 15", 1997.
41. **Rev. Ruby Williams** (Florida, 1930 –)
Mankind Can't Love, Oil on Panel, 5.25" x 35.25", 1995.
42. **Rev. W. C. Rice** (Alabama, 1930 – 2004)
Cross Garden: A Small Recreation of One Southern Environment (1976 – 1999). *Illustrated*

A former house painter and operator of a trailer park behind his home, the Rev. W. C. Rice created an environment in response to being saved and healed of an ulcerated stomach several decades ago. Spread over three acres and with a county road cutting between it, his environment is nothing short of apocalyptic and foreboding. It features a dizzying array of weathered, white-washed, and red-daubed crosses ranging from those made of telephone poles to much smaller ones dangling from the branches of weary trees. Scattered among the crosses, wild blackberries, and kudzu are scores of signs painted on throwaway items like discarded autos, rusting tin, and junked appliances calling people to repentance. "Hell is hot hot hot," "Jesus Saves," "Died from sex used the wrong way," and other signs are among preachments positioned wherever there is available space. But Rice always saw himself as a preacher – not an artist. Intense and disconcerting, as a whole it leaves a haunting impression along Road 86 in Autauga County, Alabama that is hard to forget.

In this special portion of the exhibit are more than a dozen original pieces from Rice's famous three acre "Cross Garden." Represented are weathered crosses as well as rusted signs of proclamation and warning. Painted on wood, tin, and a variety of throwaway items, one senses something of the intensity of this particular environment at its height in Prattville, Alabama.



Myrtice West, *Who is Worthy to Open the Book?*

Christians in the Visual Arts

Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA) is the premier Christian arts organization connecting the artist, the church, and the culture. Its membership includes artists, iconographers, graphic designers, liturgical designers, curators, theologians, art historians, collectors, museums, colleges, universities, and represents a wide variety of denominational affiliations. A non-sectarian and not-for-profit group, CIVA publishes a regular newsletter and directory of artists, sponsors traveling exhibits, and holds national and regional conferences.

For more information about CIVA, write to CIVA, 255 Grapevine Rd., Wenham MA, 01984-1813, or call 978.867.4124. The CIVA web address is www.civa.org.

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