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PRESS RELEASE

AVAM Introduces New MEGA-Exhibition
If You Build It, They Will Come: Visionary Artists and Their Environments

October 7, 2023 - September 1, 2024

"The experience of sacred space makes possible the founding of the world: where the sacred manifests itself in space, the real unveils itself, the world comes into existence."
—Mircea Eliade

For Immediate Release: October 2, 2023
Contact: greg@tuckercomms.com

(Baltimore, MD) – The American Visionary Art Museum debuts its latest MEGA-Exhibition—If You Build It, They Will Come: Visionary Artists and Their Environments—on Saturday, October 7, 2023. The exhibition, which will be located on the 2nd floor of the Zanyvl A. Krieger Main Building, will take visitors on a journey into the spaces of exceptional artists who have built their own dream worlds. It will recreate and showcase environments where visionary artists from all backgrounds have manifested—through sheer forces of will and extraordinary imaginations—reflections of their lives, their deepest desires, and their wildest dreams.

"What I love about these artists and this exhibit in particular, is that it is first and foremost the fulfillment of dreams—Airplane Payne’s dream of flight, Devon Smith’s and Gayleen Aiken’s dream of a happy family and good friends, Zebedee Armstrong’s dream of being able to predict the future—all created with the humblest of means," says Director of Design and member of the Curatorial Team at AVAM, Theresa Segreti. "Their life’s work is a lesson for all of us that our own hopes are just within reach."

This exhibition will feature powerful recreations, archival documentation, artifacts, and over 150 artworks from the environments of our 7 featured artists: Leslie Payne, Gayleen Aiken, DeVon Smith, Zebedee B. Armstrong, Ruby C. Williams, Vollis Simpson, and Baltimore’s own Loring Cornish.
The opening of If You Build It, They Will Come will also mark the launch of a new interactive feature allowing visitors to engage and more intimately connect with the gallery's main themes through the use of touch-screen maps that explore visionary environments across the country. At the core of If You Build It, They Will Come is a rich educational experience designed with students in mind. Young learners will delve into the art of transformation, seeing how everyday materials, often discarded, can become masterpieces, teaching them the importance of sustainability and resourcefulness.

This is an exhibition extolling human passion, resourcefulness and creative self-reliance despite age, education, income, or life circumstances. The visionary works of these artists are meant to engage, challenge, and encourage all of us to pay closer attention to the world around us:

"As we drive down backroads, turn off on detours, or even make discoveries in our own neighborhoods, these backyard "edens" are there to engage, challenge, and beckon us to pay closer attention to the world around us and examine the unconventional life with fresh eyes and open heart."

—The American Visionary Art Museum’s Curatorial Team

If You Build It, They Will Come: Visionary Artists and Their Environments opens Saturday, October 7, 2023 at the American Visionary Art Museum. Plan your visit at [www.avam.org/visit](http://www.avam.org/visit)

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James Harold Jennings | Photo by Roger Manley

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EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

At the heart of “If You Build It They Will Come” is a powerful message: everyone has a story, and every story has the potential to inspire. The showcased works are not just artifacts; they are living testimonies of the transformative power of imagination and love in the creative process. This exhibition isn’t merely about appreciating art—it’s about recognizing the potential for creativity within ourselves.

This exhibition will feature powerful recreations, archival documentation, artifacts, and over 150 artworks from the environments of our 7 featured artists. Other offerings for this exhibition include:

**Leslie Payne’s 16-foot Plane:**
See Leslie Payne’s workshop, constructed from discarded materials and anchored by one of his largest plane sculptures.

**Gayleen Aiken’s Raimbilli Cousins:**
Delve into the world of Aiken’s Big Country Home, where she developed her imaginary group of playmates, the Raimbilli cousins.

**DeVon Smith’s World’s First Family of Robots:**
Witness the creative brilliance of DeVon Smith who transformed his living space into a haven for his sculptures made entirely from scavenged materials.

**Zebedee B. Armstrong’s Doomsday Calendars and the room he made them in:**
Step into the world of Zebedee B. Armstrong and his prophetic calendars, which predict Judgement Day.

**Ruby C. Williams’ Vibrant Produce Stand Gallery:**
Explore how Williams’ unique fusion of art and commerce transformed her fruit and vegetable stand into a roadside gallery adorned with brightly painted signs.

**Loring Cornish’s Intricate Mosaics:**
Immerse yourself in the mesmerizing mosaic artistry of Loring Cornish. His work reflects his Baltimore Rowhome, adorned with intricate floor-to-ceiling mosaics, crafted from discarded materials, mirror shards, and broken tiles.

**Vollis Simpson’s Whirligigs:**
Extending his on-site presence beyond our plaza, experience some of the best examples of Vollis’ works from our permanent collection.
*Mona Webb's artist environment will be featured as one of the many available to explore through the interactive map selections—not as part of the physical exhibition.

**Interactive Map of Visionary Art Environments:**
Embark on a virtual journey across the United States with our interactive map, showcasing over 30 diverse and vibrant outdoor art environments crafted by prominent Visionary artists. Uncover the geographical heartbeat of visionary creativity and gain insight into the unique perspectives and stories of these remarkable artists.

**Archival Photos, Videos, and Audio Recordings:**
Dive into a collection of archival materials that offer intimate glimpses into the lives, processes, and inspirations of the featured artists. Hear their stories, see candid photographs, and witness their artistry in action. These invaluable resources provide a deeper understanding of their work and the resilience that fuels their creativity.

**Rotating Documentary Screenings:**
On view at our Jim Rouse Visionary Center, the film will feature not only artists in the exhibition but artists across the world who have created their own amazing environments.
FEATURED ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

DeVon Smith (1926 – 2003):
A former hitchhiker and junk trader from Pennsylvania, Smith transformed his living space into a haven for his "World's First Family of Robots"—sculptures made entirely from scavenged materials. His work reminds us of the potential that lies within discarded objects and the transformative power of art. He created an entire myth around this family, and made this myth a reality.

Gayleen Aiken (1934 – 2005):
A self-taught artist from Vermont, Aiken introduced audiences to her imaginary group of playmates, "the Raimbili cousins," through her pen and crayon drawings. An example of an artist finding solace and joy in her art despite life’s hardships, Aiken’s work is a testament to the power of imagination and creativity.

A fisherman and handyman from Virginia, Leslie Payne’s lifelong fascination with airplanes inspired his creation of a small-scale airfield composed of model planes, constructed from discarded materials and brightly colored with enamel house paint. This exhibition will feature a recreation of his workspace, along with his most significant sculptures, drawings, and smaller models.

Loring Cornish (1960 –):
A native of Baltimore, Cornish’s row home serves as both a gallery and a work of art itself. His intricate floor-to-ceiling mosaics, fashioned from discarded materials, mirror shards, and broken tiles, illustrate the transformative power of faith and artistic vision.

Ruby C. Williams (1928 – 2022):
Born in Bealsville, Florida, Williams combined her work as a fruit and vegetable seller with her artistic passion, transforming her produce stand into "walk-in" gallery adorned with brightly painted signs. Her work, born from the intersection of necessity and creativity, adds a vibrant and unique touch to the mundane.

Vollis Simpson (1919 – 2013):
Born in Lucama, North Carolina, Simpson was an intuitive engineer, transforming salvaged metal into kinetic sculptures, or "whirligigs". After a life of farming and machinery servicing, he started creating these structures post-retirement at age 60. His art, now housed in the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park in Wilson, is recognized as the official folk art of North Carolina.

Known for his doomsday calendars, Georgia native Armstrong's life and art were greatly influenced by religion. After an angelic visitation, Armstrong began creating wooden calendars predicting Judgement Day, a vivid representation of his deep-seated belief in the imminent end of times.
HOMEMADE WORLDS: ARTIST-BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

ANNALISE FLYNN

Artist-built environments – personal spaces like homes, gardens, and studios fully transformed into continually evolving, site-specific, and life-encompassing works of art – provide lenses into intimate creative processes. Created from every imaginable material, these exceptionally unique works of art are united by their connection to the place and time in which they were made. Regardless of the intention behind their making (of which there are many), they act as a time capsule, revealing not only the lives of their makers, but also reflecting broader cultural contexts.

Often created outside and with non-archival materials (glitter, adobe, household objects) – artist-built environments decay rapidly once the creator has left the site or passed away. Many artists who have created environments also belong to marginalized groups which has further hindered their chances of receiving the support necessary to preserve their work. As such, many environments have been lost forever. However, there are now several organizations dedicated to advocating for and preserving art environments, for example the Kohler Foundation, and many sites have been preserved or are in the process of being conserved and opened to the public.

This increasing interest in the preservation of artist-built environments upholds the essential value that the creativity of all people is important and allows us, the guests of these artists, to continue to experience their generous creative visions.
FROM WATTS TO WISCONSIN: THE HISTORY OF SPACES
SPACES – Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments

ANNALISE FLYNN

Photographer, curator, and cultural advocate Seymour Rosen (1935–2006) visited his first artist-built environment, Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers in Los Angeles, when he was just a teenager in 1952 – an experience he likened to “falling in love.” By the mid-1970s, Rosen had documented dozens more environments all over California – but he was beginning to see them disappear:

Grandma [Tressa] Prisbrey’s is up for sale again. Butler’s place in Calexico burnt down. Ruby Black is out there in the desert with no money, no water, no electricity...Sanford Darling is dead...I found out the Watts Towers even aren’t credentialized. They aren’t old enough, or historical enough, and nobody says they’re art. Before the Federal Government can save these things, the state has to take action... but by then it will be too late. They’ll all be gone, everything.\(^1\)

Rosen realized the necessity of acting quickly, so in 1978, he established SPACES (Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments), an advocacy organization dedicated to creating an interdisciplinary network of curators, artists, folklorists, preservationists, and more, committed to preserving artist-built environments across the United States. Rosen cared deeply for artists and used SPACES to increase their access to resources while they were alive and to protect their legacies after they had passed.

Throughout his many years of SPACES leadership, Rosen amassed thousands of documents pertaining to art environments, including photos, interviews, site plans, correspondence, books, and other ephemera. After Rosen’s death in 2006, art historian Jo Farb Hernández was appointed the director of SPACES. She and her team built upon Rosen’s collection for many years until SPACES (now both a physical and digital archive) became a preservation project of the Kohler Foundation in 2019 and was relocated to Kohler, Wisconsin, where it continues its mission to study, document, and advocate for the preservation of artist-built environments.

PHOTOS

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DeVon Smith | Photo by Susan Bobosky

Ruby C. Williams | Photo courtesy of Jeanine Taylor Folk Art Gallery
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"[I've been a] farmhouse mover, electric welder, carpenter, the list goes on. If you don't try something, you don't learn anything. Common sense. You come across a lot of these people that know so damn much, sometimes you find out they're dumber than I am..."

—Vollis Simpson

“I don’t know what I’m doing. But God does. And so I just keep doing it.”

—Leonard Knight

“My life is to look up and reach up and take somebody with me no matter what, make someone else happy, I think that’s what the art does.”

—Ruby C. Williams

“Once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward.”

—Leonardo Da Vinci

“We are a landscape of all we know.”

—Isamu Noguchi
CONTACTS

MARKETING OFFICE
marketing@avam.org

DIRECTOR OF MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT
Valerie Williams | valerie@avam.org

MARKETING ASSOCIATE
Frankie Marsh | frankie@avam.org

MEDIA CONSULTANT
Gregory Tucker | greg@tuckercomms.com