



**IF YOU
BUILD IT
THEY WILL COME**

10/7/23-9/1/24

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

IF YOU BUILD IT THEY WILL COME

Visionary artists and their environments

The drive to create and build a unique personal “sacred” space -- one that speaks to our deepest desires and wildest dreams, telling the tale of who we are and revealing our inner world -- is inherent in the human spirit. From cave paintings at Lascaux, to the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles, to the poster-draped bedroom walls of teenagers across the world, humans from time immemorial have surrounded themselves in their homes and workspaces with objects that are reflective -- literally, in Louis XIV’s case -- of their inner selves, their life stories, their hopes, and their dreams. The living and working environments that we create reveal the narratives of who we are and who we hope to become.

In AVAM’s upcoming mega-exhibition "If You Build It, They Will Come: Visionary Artists and Their Environments," we take you on a journey into the spaces of exceptional artists who have built their own dream worlds. We 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.

Whether outdoor spectacles, hidden Gardens of Eden, or idiosyncratic landscapes to which the artists have given monumental creative energy, these environments -- originally constructed by self-taught artists and visionaries -- were conceived and brought to life through intuition, creativity, and purpose. They encapsulate our visionaries’ ability to see not only what is, but what could be. Ultimately, these spaces are shining examples of how to push the limits of creativity and perseverance, using materials that are readily available to us.

*“We are a landscape of all we know.”
—Isamu Noguchi*

I. Exhibition Overview: "If You Build It, They Will Come"

Ideas often begin with a still small voice from within or beyond. The seven visionary artists in this exhibition: Vollis Simpson, Leslie “Airplane” Payne, Zebebee Armstrong, Gayleen Aiken, Ruby C. Williams, Devon Smith, and Loring Cornish, attended to that voice and created, often from the most humble of means, remarkable, inspired visionary environments each a hand-made legacy to a devoted, impassioned life full of resourcefulness and creative self-reliance, despite age, education, income, or life circumstances.

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. These life works show us that we all can be empowered to re-build and transform our world just by the burning desire to do it and listening to that still small voice.

If You Build It, They Will Come: Visionary Artists and Their Environments features singular one-of-a-kind art environments sparked by the passion and dreams of truly unique builders, inventors, and creators who demonstrate the powers of perseverance, of following one’s unique passions, and the importance of being one’s true self. These individuals rarely see themselves as artists, but rather as tireless builders working to fulfill a very personal dream or vision of an ideal place—a wonderland. For example, Leslie Payne dreamed of being an aviator, Devon Smith imagined the world’s first Robot Family, and Gaileen Aiken brought to life playmates and family for her beloved childhood home. Each of our artists worked tirelessly, even obsessively, with just the materials at hand, to make their purest visions come to life.

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 in a walk around our own neighborhoods — with the hope that we can look at an unconventional life with fresh eyes and an open heart.

We hope that these life works show you that any individual has the power to transform his or her entire world just by the desire to do it.

"Great things are done by a series of small things brought together."

–Vincent Van Gogh

II. Featured Artists and their Environments

- Leslie Payne
- Gayleen Aiken
- DeVon Smith
- Zebedee B. Armstrong
- Ruby C. Williams
- Loring Cornish
- Vollis Simpson



Loring Cornish, Photo Courtesy of Ted Degener

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.

“Even if I fail, I can say I did try.”



Gayleen Aiken, Photo Courtesy of Ted Degener

Gayleen Aiken (1934 – 2005): A self-taught artist from Vermont, Aiken introduced audiences to her imaginary group of playmates, "the Raimbilli 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.

"Artist, Musician, Camper."

"I like nickelodeons, xylophones, organs, player pianos, old country houses."



Vollis Simpson, Photo Courtesy of Ted Degener

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.

"I had a lotta junk, and I had to do something with it."

PLANT CITY
RUBY C. WILLIAMS
FLORIDA



Ruby C. Williams, Photo Courtesy of Ted Degener

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 a "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.

*"I do everything from the bottom of my heart—whether shelling a bucket of beans
or making a painting."*



DeVon Smith, Photo Courtesy of Ted Degener

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.

“Can you believe I made myself a family for less than \$39.95?”

THOMSON
ZEBEDEE ARMSTRONG
GEORGIA



Zebedee B. Armstrong, Photo Courtesy of Roger Manley

Zebedee B. Armstrong (1911 – 1993): 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.

"The end is near."

LILLIAN
LESLIE "AIRPLANE" PAYNE
VIRGINIA



Leslie "Airplane" Payne, Photo Courtesy of the Virginia Museum of Fine Art

Leslie Payne (1907 – 1981): 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.

"Old Airplane Builder, Homemade.

SAFTY FIRST TAK NO CHANCE "

III. Key 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. This exhibit showcases his lifelong fascination with airplanes and his ability to transform everyday objects into whimsical works of art.
- Gayleen Aiken's Raimbilli Cousins: Delve into the world of Gayleen Aiken's Big Country Home, where she developed her imaginary group of playmates, the Raimbilli cousins. Explore the power of imagination and the joy that can be found within one's own creative universe.
- 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. Marvel at the ingenuity and vision behind his "World's First Family of Robots" in its original setting.
- 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. Gain insights into the intersection of spirituality and art as his work reflects deep-seated beliefs and explores themes of faith and the end of times.
- Ruby C. Williams' Vibrant Produce Stand Gallery: Explore how Ruby C. Williams' unique fusion of art and commerce transformed her fruit and vegetable stand into a roadside gallery adorned with brightly painted signs. Discover the beauty that emerges from the intersection of necessity and creativity.
- 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. Experience the transcendent power of faith and artistic vision.
- Vollis Simpson's Whirligigs: Extending Vollis' on-site presence beyond our plaza, experience some of the best examples of Vollis' works from our permanent collection.
- 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 in our Jim Rouse Visionary Center featuring not only artists in the exhibition but artists across the world who have created their own amazing environments.

In tandem with the new artworks on display, we will also be recontextualizing some of the most beloved works from around our campus that come from amazing art environments, such as Dr. Evermor's Phoenix, documentation from Axel Erlandson's tree circus, and a collaborative miniature recreation of Leonard Knight's Love Balloon.

At the core of "If You Build It, They Will Come: Visionary Artists and Their Environment" is a rich educational experience designed with students in mind. Through this exhibition, young learners will discover the limitless bounds of imagination, understanding how creativity can be a beacon of hope amidst life's challenges. Students will delve into the art of transformation, seeing how everyday materials, often discarded, can become masterpieces, teaching them the importance of sustainability and resourcefulness. They will be inspired by the story of Ruby C. Williams, who used her artwork to promote and sell produce, drawing lessons on the fusion of practicality and passion. This educational journey also exposes students to the audacity of self-taught artists who dared to dream differently, breaking societal molds to redefine the space around them. As they navigate Leslie Payne's passion for taking flight, to Zebedee B. Armstrong's spiritual predictions, students will explore a wide array of inspirations, encouraging them to find and follow their own. They'll learn about the significance of challenging the mainstream, understanding the value of diverse perspectives and thinking beyond conventional boundaries.

"It always seems impossible, until it's done."—Nelson Mandela

QUOTES

"[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*

"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*

"To accomplish great things, we must not only act, but also dream; not only plan, but also believe."

–*Anatole France*

"In America, nobody says you have to keep the circumstances somebody else gives you."

–*Amy Tan*

"Monuments are supposed to commemorate kings and religions, heroes, dogmas, but in the end the person they commemorate is the builder."

–*Jacob Bronowski*

"Learn to see, and then you'll know that there is no end to the new worlds of our vision."

–*Carlos Castaneda*

"We are a landscape of all we know."

–*Isamu Noguchi*

"My life is my message."

–*Mahandas Gandhi*

"We must play what is dealt to us, and the glory consists not so much in winning as in playing a poor hand well."

–*H.T. Leslie*

"All genuine creation more or less stems from an act of faith that precedes all definition, and sometimes the artist's moment of inspiration is almost prophetic in nature."

–*Laurent Danchin*

The transcendental face of art is always a form of prayer.

–John Berger

“Hope lies in dreams, in imagination, and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality.”

–Jonas Salk

“Dream no small dreams for they have no power to move the hearts of men.”

–Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

You see things; and you say, ‘Why?’ But I dream things that never were; and I say, ‘Why not?’”

–George Bernard Shaw

A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.”

–Lao Tzu

“You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.”

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.”

–Samuel Beckett

Great things are done by a series of small things brought together.”

–Vincent Van Gogh

“It may be that when we no longer know what to do,
we have come to our real work
and when we no longer know which way to go,
we have begun our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.”

– Wendell Berry