

# CHICAGO JOURNAL

## **Outsiders in Biographies and art coalesce in this fascinating show**

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Outsider artists are defined as those without formal training or contact with the mainstream art establishment. Often they're marginalized in a larger sense, as in the case of mental patients and social misfits, whose work goes undiscovered until after their deaths. As is often the case with outsider art, the story of the creators behind the work can be as compelling as the works themselves.

This dynamic is clear at "Masters of Self-Taught Art," an exhibit of outsider works running at Russell Bowman Fine Art, 311 W. Superior, through August 22.

Some of the pieces are animated by the clearly naïve quality of their construction, while some are wonderfully strange, buzzing with an off-kilter creative energy. Charles Steffen's "Alisha Nude" is such a piece. It's a delicately drawn, marine-hued figure on a five-foot strip of brown wrapping paper, with bizarrely striated curves and a cheeky, cockeyed face. The bare space surrounding the figure serves as a sort of a diary, where Steffen alternately panned and celebrated his own work in a loopy scrawl. As a young man Steffen was institutionalized, and when released he began producing work at a prodigious rate, using whatever materials he had at hand as his canvas.

The exhibit's only photos belong to Eugene Von Bruenchenhein. His lovely, intimate nudes of his wife, Marie, whom he referred to as "the duchess Marie," were the outpouring of a rich internal life. He spun a crown for his wife out of tin cans; he hung backdrops for her to pose against. In one image he's scratched cat whiskers over her face, directly onto the photo paper. In another, her back is to the camera, and the effect is surprisingly modern.

Simon Sparrow, too, imposed his own version of reality on his life. He was a street preacher and self-taught artist who made intricate mixed media collages. His heritage was African and Native American — he claimed that his father was an African prince and his maternal grandfather a Cherokee chief. The Sparrow piece hanging at Russell Bowman is, at first glance, thickly glittered and littered with craft-store detritus: broken jewelry, plastic pendants. But the glitter coalesces into vaguely Egyptian-art-inspired faces, of an Anubis-like creature, a human profile, a man with a mouth full of bits of shellacked shell.

Also in the exhibit is a Gee's Bend quilt, "Bars," by Loretta Pettway. It incorporates strips of repurposed denim, and its shape is appealingly irregular. Gee's Bend is a small Alabama community dating from Antebellum times, and its residents' quilts were made for use, constructed from whatever materials they had.

For anyone as interested in art's process as much as art itself, this show shouldn't be missed.