Meager Means, Rich Imagination
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Published: November 4, 2010
The New York Times

The self-taught artist **Eugene Von Bruenchenhein** was a slight man of meager means. Born in Marinette, Wis., in 1910, the son of a sign painter and shopkeeper, he never finished high school, and once the family moved to Milwaukee, lived most of his life in a small house built by his father. He was too short to serve in the Army during World War II. He worked in a flower shop and then a bakery, and after health problems forced an early retirement in 1959, when he was 49, he got by on a Social Security check of $220 a month until his death in 1983. But Von Bruenchenhein (pronounced BROON-shen-hine) made the most of everything that came his way. Everything included his love of plants and his wife and muse, Marie; his ability to make ingenious use of all kinds of scavenged materials; and an outsize imagination apparently further expanded by recreational drugs.

When he died, he left a large and unruly universe of muliple mediums crammed into the Milwaukee house. Comprising photographs, paintings, sculptures and drawings, it was known only to family and close friends. After his death a friend, Daniel Nycz, brought his work to the attention of Russell Bowman, who was director of the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Von Bruenchenhein's hyper-productive creative existence is receiving its first in-depth museum exhibition at theAmerican Folk Art Museum. Organized by Brett Littman, a guest curator who is the executive director of the Drawing Center in SoHo, the show is overdesigned and ultimately too small and tame to do Von Bruenchenhein's achievement full justice; it especially scrimps on his luridly colored, slightly greasy looking hallucinaorty paintings from 1950s and early 60s. But it nonetheless reveals the artist as a kind of dazzlingly weird, subsistence-level Renaissance man, laying out the fruits of his labor with a clarity that makes them feel of a piece.

Near the beginning of the show a small sign that Von Bruenchenhein incised in foil-covered insulation and displayed in his kitchen announces the scope of his ambition: "Freelance Artist — Poet and Sculptor — Inovator — Arrow maker and Plant man — Bone artifacts constructor — Photographer and Architect — Philosopher." (This, in its entirety, serves as the exhibition's subtitle.)

Of this cavalcade of characters, "Plant man" seems to have come first and remained foremost, the energy source for all the others. But his stepmother was equally important. After his mother died, when he was 7, Von Bruenchenhein's father married Elizabeth Mosley, a former schoolteacher in Panama who had returned to the United States to become a chiropractor. A painter of floral still lifes and a writer of pamphlets on things like reincarnation, she fostered Von

Bruenchenhein's love of the natural world (and, it would seem, a certain kind of free thinking). He considered her his mentor until she died in 1938.

The time Mosley spent in Panama cannot be underestimated, given Von Bruenchenhein's subsequent emphasis on tropical and exotic flora. In the 1930s he built a greenhouse and grew cactus, joined the local Cactus Club, studied botany and often said he was a horticulturalist.

But his real artistic blossoming seems to have been inspired by Marie, whom he met in 1939, when she was 19 and he was 29, and married four years later. Over the next decade or so he took thousands of photographs of her in various states of undress, often wearing clunky heels, garters, scarves, and draped with pearls or flowers. When she dons dresses, they are floral prints. She is almost always seen against one of three or four floral backdrops, seated on small patterned rugs. Despite frequently bared breasts and thighs, the photos feel remarkably innocent.

Von Bruenchenhein's images belong to the complex history of set-up photography that gained critical mass in the early 1980s. Like a proto-Cindy Sherman, Marie assumes female, Hollywood-related roles. She serves as chaste pinup girl, Tahitian princess (or tourist), would-be starlet, Breck Girl, young Madonna (although they had no children) and much more.

Von Bruenchenhein's willing collaborator, Marie is, however, rarely completely at ease. There's an awkwardness, even a subtle deer-in-the-headlights alarm that registers in these images and is perhaps the most direct reflection of Von Bruenchenhein's personality available to us. It speaks to the intensity of his ambition, which one can imagine may have verged on the tyrannical, to her desire to please and to the undoubtedly claustrophobic quality of their enterprise. Marie Von Bruenchenhein was 63 when her husband died; she survived him by less than a decade.

In the 1950s Von Bruenchenhein, partly inspired by tests of the hydrogen bomb, began painting on small masonite panels or cardboard. At the rate of about one a day, he turned out slightly garish semi-abstractions, manipulating paint with his fingers, combs and other small objects, including brushes made from Marie's hair.

These combustible little images suggest exotic plants, strange sea creatures or cosmic fireworks, as well as cover art for science-fiction novels; they hint at visionary architecture. Unfortunately there are only three examples of the 1950s paintings in the show, and they are relatively quiet ones at that.

The mid-1960s brought a rash of drawings made with ballpoint pens, rulers and French curves that are the least known of Von Bruenchenhein's work. Many of them were glued into a large album of wallpaper samples that is also part of the

show, and that viewers can page through in digital animation. Their fine-lined forms oscillate among templelike buildings, floral designs, spaceships and outlandish stringed instruments — and often resemble distant cousins of Frank Stella's painted-relief series from the 1970s.

Meanwhile in the late '60s Von Bruenchenhein began concentrating on sculpture in two distinct mediums. From clay scrounged from construction sites he made ceramics baked in his coal oven and decorated with whatever kind of paint he could find. The show includes small, oddly tentacled flowers related to some of the sea creatures in his paintings (although not the ones here); individual concaved leaves whose mixtures of color are especially rich; and perforated vases assembled from smaller ceramic leaves that suggest laurel wreaths run amok. In these pieces Von Bruenchenhein's weirdness turns Victorian, especially in a flame-colored leaf-vase sitting on an ochre-colored pedestal that suggests an ornate occasional table.

There is a similar emphasis on the incremental in the little thrones and towers he made out of salvaged chicken and turkey bones, using airplane glue and paint. Oddly inhabited even though empty — thanks to the protrusions of bones — the thrones befit a man who sometimes referred to himself and his wife as the king and queen of his self-created realm.

A gold-painted tower, made mostly from vertebrae, is a creepier matter. But it does, however, dovetail with eight larger paintings from the late 1970s, when Von Bruenchenhein was painting exclusively on cardboard. Featuring lacy, visionary skyscrapers of an Art Deco sort, these works once more take advantage of mundane physicality, using the ridges and honeycomb of the cardboard, softened by paint, to suggest crenellated or brickwork surfaces or occasionally climbing vines.

The skyscrapers emerging from lush, tropical greenness do their best to tie things together. They connect to the bone tower and leaf-vases and the space-age designs of the drawings. They suggest the profound attraction of fantasy, the conjuring of other worlds that starts with the photographs of Marie.

But they lack the intensity and inventive paint handling of the paintings of the 1950s and '60s, which show Von Bruenchenhein unbound. They have a place in the history of postwar painting, as surely as Marie in her many guises has one in postmodern photography.

Von Bruenchenhein belongs among the great American outsider artists whose work came to light or resurfaced in the last three decades of the 20th century: Henry Darger, Martin Ramírez, Bill Traylor, James Castle and Morton Bartlett. But Von Bruenchenhein was not an isolate. He wanted people to see his work, wanted to sell it and approached galleries in Milwaukee without luck. One can imagine him being thrilled at the attention his work has received since his death,

just as one can imagine him perusing the careful Folk Art Museum show and saying, "More, more, more."