HENRY DARGER

Contributions by
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with
HENRY DARGER’S The History of My Life

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A great plane flew across the sun,
and the girls ran along the ground.
The sun shone on Mr. McPlaster’s face, it was green like an elephant’s.

Let’s get out of here, Judy said.
They’re getting closer, I can’t stand it.
But you know, our fashions are in fashion
only briefly, then they go out
and stay that way for a long time. Then they come back in
for a while. Then, in maybe a million years, they go out of fashion
and stay there.
Laure and Tidbit agreed,
with the proviso that after that everyone would become fashion
again for a few hours. Write it now, Tidbit said,
before they get back. And, quivering, I took the pen.

Drink the beautiful tea
before you slop sewage over the horizon, the Principal directed.
OK, it’s calm now, but it wasn’t two minutes ago. What do you want me to do, said Henry,
I am no longer your serf,
and if I was I wouldn’t do your bidding. That is enough, sir.
You think you can lord it over every last dish of oatmeal
on this planet, Henry said. But wait till my ambition
comes a cropper, whatever that means, or bursts into feathered bloom
and burns on the shore. Then the kiddies dancing sidewise
declared it a treat, and the ice-cream gnomes slurped their last that day.

—John Ashbery, excerpt from *Girls on the Run* (1999)
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American Innocence

KLAUS BIESENBACH

1: POINTS OF DEPARTURE

In her video *We Are All Made of Stars* (2002), Laurel Nakadate puts herself in the hands of truck drivers: waiting at a truck stop, scantily clad, she follows them into their cabs, protected only by her innocence and a small video camera recording the situation.

I first experienced Nakadate’s work in 2004 when, as one of a team of curators from P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in New York City and the Museum of Modern Art, I was researching the second *Greater New York* exhibition, held at P.S. 1 in 2005. To prepare for this overview of emerging talent in the five boroughs, we visited hundreds of young artists’ studios in the greater New York area. It was extraordinary to note how many of them were aware of Henry Darger’s work, as Nakadate was, talked about Darger, pinned up images of his work, or even directly referred to him in their own artworks.

Henry Darger continues to be regarded as an “outsider” artist. I am not going to attempt to prove that he was not, but instead describe Darger in his motivations and his inspirations, explain when and how he worked, and point to other artists who lived and worked through the same decades and had the same points of departure or used similar source material. Which artists arrived at similar results? Or contrary ones?

There are parallels between Darger and his better-known, more widely accepted contemporaries. As much as Darger was outside of the typical social class that artists very often come from, as much as he was outside of the educational trajectories that artists normally go through, as much as he was outside of a family structure or conventional value system, he nevertheless created a body of work that resonates with what we now see as primary themes and concerns of artists in recent decades.

One must look at common motifs in Darger’s work, such as those derived from his beloved *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Heidi*, and the Oz books by L. Frank Baum. One must also consider Darger’s obsessiveness and compulsions, from his interminable, numbingly detailed battle descriptions and casualty lists for the civil war that is the subject of his vast unfinished novel, *In the Realms of the Unreal*, to the hundreds of pages of weather reports he compiled late in his life.

An overview of recent art production inspired by Henry Darger’s work or reflecting his imagery will shed light on his continuing impact. Why is Darger so relevant today? Perhaps it is because his focus on war and violence, belief and despair, and the heaven and hell of human interaction seem all too contemporary and speak to the deepest anxieties of our media-driven society.

Obsessed with ideas of vulnerability and protection, control, power, and freedom, Henry Darger thought about adoption and slavery. *In the Realms of the Unreal* is the history of an epic war fought between an alliance of four great...
Catholic nations, led by Abbieannia, and an evil empire, Glandelinia, that practices child slavery. The heroines of the novel are the seven innocent, prepubescent Vivian sisters, daughters of the emperor of Abbieannia, who help to free kidnapped children enslaved in Glandelinia, a nation of corrupt, evil adults.

When Darger, born in 1892, was still a baby, his mother died in childbirth. Arriving in the absence of his mother, Darger’s new baby sister did not trigger normal feelings of sibling jealousy. There was no mother to fawn over the new infant. In a way, he suffered an exchange of his sister for his mother. However, soon after her birth his sister too was taken from him, given up for adoption, leaving Darger doubly disappointed, doubly frustrated. Perhaps Darger’s life would have had a very different trajectory if he too had been adopted. When Darger, born in 1892, was still a baby, his mother died in childbirth. Arriving in the absence of his mother, Darger’s new baby sister did not trigger normal feelings of sibling jealousy. There was no mother to fawn over the new infant. In a way, he suffered an exchange of his sister for his mother. However, soon after her birth his sister too was taken from him, given up for adoption, leaving Darger doubly disappointed, doubly frustrated. Perhaps Darger’s life would have had a very different trajectory if he too had been adopted.

Given up by his father, denied the possibility of being adopted or adopting a child himself, Darger would spend much of his life creating—and defending—imagined children. His work begs the questions, Who “owns” the child and its labor? Who defends the child’s innocence and life? The American Dream, understood as a positive, shared, but still individual goal in the American mentality, could only be attained by reestablishing a certain state of innocence after colonialism and widespread slave labor laid the foundation of this country’s economic success. Darger’s interest in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and his extensive knowledge about the American Civil War demonstrate his awareness of the history of slavery in the United States and its circumstances. In Realms, one sect of Glandelinians, known as the Hooded Gargolian Kurds, is explicitly compared to the Ku Klux Klan. Borrowing from Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Darger introduces as a character Stowe’s own Evangeline St. Clare, the angelic little girl who befriends Tom. Appearing unexpectedly in Darger’s novel, she explains that she has just escaped from the Glandelinians and recalls, “I . . . lived with my father for ten years and saw all kinds of slavery among the poor colored, and they killed poor old Uncle Tom. I’m the same little Eva you have read about and have become a Catholic two months ago. The child slavery here is worse than the slavery of the poor creatures in the United States.” To explain the appearance of little Eva, Darger reimagines her death in Stowe’s novel. “Did you not die from consumption?” asks one of Darger’s generals. “I did not die but fainted when the sickness got at its worst.” and Darger adds, “(BEG PARDON TO THE WRITER OF UNCLE TOM’S CABIN).”

Despite his deep love of and fascination with recorded history, Darger was wary of it. He discovered early on, when he encountered conflicting accounts of Civil War casualties, that history can be unreliable. Writing his autobiography, Darger, then in his mid-seventies, remembered: “I once told my teacher, but the one, Mrs. Dewey at the Skinner school, that I believed no one truthfully knew the losses in the battles of wars (including our Civil War), because each history told different losses, and I had the histories and other stories to prove it, and let her see and go over them.”

The creator of Realms, however, a long, all-consuming text, seemed to tolerate inconsistencies in his own war history up to a point, despite his painstakingly assembled lists of battles, characters, and casualties, and this actually tells us something about his working method. For example, one of the protagonists, a boy named Schoefield Penrod, is inspired by Booth Tarkington’s Penrod novels, which follow the boy-hero Penrod Schoefield, growing up in the Midwest before World War I. When we first meet Schoefield in Realms, he is introduced as a French-Canadian: the Glandelinians call him the “black haired little Frenchie Imp, Schoefield Penrod.” Later in the story it is explained that he is “not a Canadian as many thought he was,” but a native of Abbieannia. Another of Darger’s heroes, Walter Starring, is depicted in a collage-drawing as a little boy. However, in the text he is described as a scientist and general commanding his own armies. Some time after a massive explosion sends a large part of the city of Abieann into the ocean, Starring dives down to explore the ruins and account for lives lost. Darger explains the boy’s seemingly adult abilities with a single sentence: “Walter Starring was more of a man than a boy, despite his young age and five feet tall.”

Darger’s reliance on found materials in the creation of his art, and on characters and texts adapted from published sources in the writing of his novel, persistently forced him to reconcile depictions or statements and plot points that seemed inconsistent or even contradictory. This basic challenge is the cause of the convoluted structure, as it required Darger to move episodes around in his attempts to rationalize the narrative, and may have led to the ultimate abandonment of the novel. Darger bound the first seven volumes of Realms, but did not finish binding the remaining eight. As Michael Bonesteel has suggested, a likely reason “is that the reshuffling of episodes had caused a chronological nightmare that he was never going to resolve.”

The weather journals Darger maintained for exactly a decade, from 1957 to 1967, reveal his continuing obsession with inconsistencies. Recording conditions at predetermined times each day, Darger vigorously disputed daily
newspaper weather predictions, basking in the weatherman’s mistakes and carefully noting them in the journals.

Darger compares his task of writing the history of the Glandeco-Angelinian War to Glinda the Good Witch’s keeping of her record book in the Oz books by L. Frank Baum. Darger’s private library included first editions of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and its thirteen sequels.⁹ A model for his own fantasy universe, Baum’s series imagines histories of nations with their own flags and maps. The prominent illustrations featured in the Oz series as storytelling tools likely influenced Darger’s own decades-long illustration project, in which the text is embellished and rewritten through illustration.

While a devoted fan of Oz, Darger was conscious of his own work’s departure from Baum’s utopian landscapes. In volume VII he writes, “I have read many of the beautiful Oz books, and have read that in that kind of a country no one, whether man, woman, or children, or beasts, ever become sick or die. . . . This is one of the reasons Oz was a fairy land.”¹⁰ Darger suggests that his universe is more like the real world, full of death and destruction. He continues, “I was just wondering lately what would the people of Oz do if their country had been somewhere in Calverinia . . . and Glinda would see in her great record book, ‘Great Glandelinian army advancing on the Emerald City. Rebel army pursuing Angelinians. Glandelinian army one hundred million strong.’”¹¹

The publication in 1900 of Baum’s first Oz book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, illustrated by W. W. Denslow, marks a time at the opening of the twentieth century when many new utopian ideas took hold of the American imagination through technical inventions and intriguing fiction. The second volume of the Oz series, *The Marvelous Land of Oz* (1904), illustrated by John R. Neill, drew on such a utopian dream.¹² Although the Oz books were banned by many libraries in the 1920s (one cited reason being the ambiguous political world view they communicated to young readers), many fell in love with Baum’s imaginary world, infused with the author’s own experiences living on the American frontier, in the Dakota Territory in the 1880s. In this second volume about Oz, a powerless little boy, Tip, is eventually revealed to be a girl called Ozma, the rightful ruler of Oz, who had been transformed into a boy by the witch Mombi when she was an infant. His destiny is to be Ozma, the “transsexual” queen of Oz. The seemingly bizarre sexual confusion of Darger’s characters thus may not have seemed so strange to the legions of American readers who grew up with the Oz series. This tale also features an all-girl Army of Revolt, anticipating Darger’s intrepid soldier girls, as well as benevolent dictators and bewitched creatures.

Baum was married to Maud Gage, daughter of the radical feminist activist Matilda Joslyn Gage, and his mother-in-law’s politics find their way into Oz and, through the beloved books, into Darger’s *Realms*, albeit at a far remove.

Darger closely guarded his privacy, only allowing guests into his art- and junk-filled room when absolutely necessary. When he moved out of his apartment on the North Side of Chicago and into St. Augustine’s Home for the Aged in November 1972, his landlord, the artist Nathan Lerner, found Darger’s artworks in the two-room apartment at 851 W. Webster Avenue, where he had lived since 1931. David Berglund, a young student helping clear out the apartment, had already removed piles of trash from the compulsive collector’s home when he came across three immense hand-bound albums, each approximately two feet high and roughly twelve feet wide, containing the panoramas and polyptychs for which Darger is now famous. Within old trunks he found the story these drawings illustrate, in fifteen volumes totaling more than fifteen thousand typewritten pages. This immense novel provided a context for the dozens of framed collages and painted photographs on the walls, found and altered pictures de-
Darger never trained as an artist. His formal education ended at age twelve, when he was abruptly sent to the Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Lincoln, Illinois. An early reader, he had skipped from first to third grade upon entry to St. Patrick's Catholic School. When he was eight, his father became ill and entered a home for the aged. Darger was sent to a Catholic boys' home, the first of many interruptions in his education. After causing frequent disruptions in his classes with outbursts and aggressive behavior, he was deemed “feeble-minded” by a Chicago physician and sent to the Lincoln asylum. Though he described his five years there positively in his autobiography, Darger attempted two escapes following the news of his father's death in 1907. His third escape was successful. At age seventeen, he ran away with two other boys, catching a train to Decatur, Illinois. From Decatur, Darger walked the approximately 175 miles to Chicago, alone. In his autobiography, he recalls the journey’s many days and nights.

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Darger adopted an institutional routine, with the hospital, his workplace, and the church as the important sites of his life. Remembering that confinement in an asylum shaped him as well, the next stage in the critical evaluation of Darger’s work should be informed by Michel Foucault’s examinations of the power institutions wield in shaping discourse. Often, before and after his work as a hospital janitor, he attended Catholic Mass in his local church. After retiring in 1963 due to extreme leg pain, he attended Mass and Communion every day, recording each visit in his diary.¹⁵ If we were able to look at the imagery that surrounded him in the architectural environment of the church sanctuary, we would likely see a nearly nude person being crucified, winged creatures, and aureoles surrounding other figures’ heads. We also might see in the stained-glass windows the dense color composition prevalent in Darger’s work, which displays many reds and yellows, and, especially in the later work, presents very little unused space.

In a recent documentary on Andy Warhol, his screenprinted portraits are compared to the grid of icons he used to look at every Sunday morning attending Mass in his local church in Pittsburgh.¹⁶ While this speculation provokes an intriguing stream of speculation, the parallels seem even more evident in Darger’s work, since religious iconography is directly reflected in the repertoire of Christian motifs in Realms.

His apartment must have been a dense world of images, with its collection of framed, unframed, and cut-out pictures, small figurines standing on his mantel, his own works in progress, and the innumerable piles of newspapers, magazines, illustrated children’s stories, and found photographs he accumulated, creating the setting of an artist’s studio as image archive.

Examples of magazines and a painting manual featuring reproductions of fine art found in his apartment suggest Darger’s non-hierarchical approach to images. The manual, A Step-Ladder to Painting, published in 1939, includes black and white reproductions of well-known paintings by Rembrandt, Titian, Cézanne, Eakins, and others. Michael Bonesteel has recognized the presence of a photographic reproduction of a nineteenth-century American landscape painting in Darger’s At Jennie Richee. While sending warning to their father watch night black cloud of coming storm through windows (see pages 144–45). In this watercolor, the girls watch a lightning storm from three large windows. While two of the windows reveal a typical Darger storm, a third one, at the left, is actually a clipping of a painting by the artist Martin Johnson Heade. Darger’s reproduction of Thunder Storm on Narrangansett Bay (1868) appeared in the February 1945 issue of Ladies’ Home Journal, not long after the work was rediscovered and featured in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art on the Hudson River School.

After Darger’s death, Nathan Lerner showed his work to unsuspecting friends and visiting curators, who had actually come to Webster Avenue to see Lerner’s own important photography, beginning with work from the 1930s and including his influential experimental photos produced at the New Bauhaus and Chicago’s Institute of Design, as well as in New York in the early 1940s.¹⁷ Esther Sparks, head of the Prints and Drawings Department at the Art Institute of Chicago at the time, was one of the first curators to see Darger’s preserved apartment and the expansive repository of watercolors. Darger’s work was introduced to the public at Chicago’s Hyde Park Art Center in 1977. Fifteen years later, it traversed the globe in the 1992 group show Parallel Visions, traveling to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Madrid’s Museo Nacional Reina Sofia, Basel’s Kunsthalle, and Tokyo’s Setagaya Art Museum. The watercolors made headlines in a 1996 solo show at the Collection de l’art brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, where a large selection remains on permanent view. Also in 1996 a substantial survey, The Unreality of Being, was...
organized by Stephen Prokopoff, director of the University of Iowa Museum of Art, where the exhibition of sixty-three watercolors originated. It traveled to the American Folk Art Museum in New York in 1997. Kiyoko Lerner donated Darger’s manuscripts and personal archive, including the ephemera found in his room, to the museum in 2000. The opening of this new resource coincided with the first English-language publication of Darger’s writing. The endlessly fascinating collection of excerpts, edited and introduced by Michael Bonesteel, provides a view into Darger’s decades of work. The art historian and psychologist John MacGregor’s seven-hundred-page critical study, published in 2002, breaks the life and works down to thematic chapters that provide a framework for understanding Darger. The award-winning 2004 documentary film In the Realms of the Unreal, by Jessica Yu, brought Darger to a much larger audience.

As the first retrospective in New York of Darger’s work, The Unreality of Being became a pilgrimage site for artists familiar with Darger’s watercolors only from reproductions and those previously unaware of the artist. It was here that the artist Tony Oursler introduced me to Darger and I first became intrigued by his work. At that time, Oursler had just created several sculptural video installations that dealt with multiple personality disorder, split personalities, and the “acting out” or visualization of traumatic experiences. I remember looking at the polymorphous, hermaphroditic children with long hair, dressed like little girls, and instantly recalling some of Jake and Dinos Chapman’s sculptures that had recently been on view in an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

In 2000, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, an affiliate of the Museum of Modern Art, organized the exhibition Disasters of War, juxtaposing a selection of Darger’s watercolors and the cycle of etchings by Francisco de Goya titled Disasters of War as well as What the Hell I–IX. Jake and Dinos Chapman’s large-scale photographs of their 1999 sculpture Hell. Part of the Saatchi collection, the sculpture was famously destroyed in 2004 in a fire at an East London art storage warehouse. Hell, a diorama populated by thirty thousand two-inch figures, portrayed Nazis and mutant warriors engaging in apocalyptic battle scenes. It was originally displayed in nine glass vitrines assembled in the shape of an inverted swastika.

Visiting the Chapmans in their London studio when preparing the show, I saw the artists and a few assistants painting by hand each individual face of the thousands of soldiers in the apocalyptic, panoramic sculpture. Jake Chapman mentioned that the consuming process of working on the piece was like writing a monumentally long text or working on the detailing of a gigantic print pattern.

Even more shocking than the notorious Chapman piece were the Disasters of War. Los Desastres de la Guerra is the title that the Academy of San Fernando gave to Goya’s set of eighty prints depicting horrors of the 1807-14 Peninsular War, in which Spain fought for its independence against Francisco de Goya, Grande hazaña! Con muertos! (Heroic feat! Against the dead!) [Disasters of War], plate 39, 1810–20. Etching and lavis, 6 ¼ x 8 ¼ in. S. P. Avery Collection, The New York Public Library

Henry Darger, Untitled (detail). Pencil and collage on pieced paper, 24 ½ x 102 in. Collection de l’art brut, Lausanne
Napoleon’s armies. Published by the Academy in 1863, the prints were labeled by Goya as “Fatal consequences of the bloody war in Spain against Bonaparte and other striking caprichos.”¹⁸ They depict a great deal of spilled blood on both sides. The viewer witnesses executions of monks and women raped amid corpses. In some prints, the Spanish are the victims, in others, the French. The socialist historian Gwyn A. Williams describes the depiction of graphic brutality in the prints as conveying the absurdity of war: “The impression is of mountains of corpses, flight, wrecked groups of wounded: people are almost portrayed as victims of natural disaster.”¹⁹ Accordingly Goya seemed perfect company for Darger. The graphic nature of Darger’s violence is only heightened by his seeming naiveté. For example, Darger does not appear to have understood rape, explaining it as an act of disembowelment.²⁰

At P.S. 1, Darger’s watercolors, Goya’s prints, and the Chapmans’ photographs shared the third-floor galleries, three large rooms with dark blue exhibition walls. In Darger’s writing and watercolors, brutal violence is often juxtaposed with playful pastoral scenes. Drawing from accounts of some of the bloodiest wars in American history, Darger painted executions and dead soldiers. Hangings and strangling of young girls, their figures adapted from coloring books, and epic battles accompanied by mounds of bleeding corpses convey war’s senselessness. As in Goya’s prints, the startlingly horrific violence is deeply alienating and at the same time affecting. John MacGregor describes the role of violence in the artist’s oeuvre: “While Darger’s vision of war incorporates elements of romanticism and patriotic idealism, even allowing for occasional humor, his ultimate objective is the portrayal of a world wrecked and torn, of civilization destroyed, earth in upheaval, and mankind inundated with its own blood.”²¹

After the Chapman photographs finally arrived at P.S. 1, many viewers commented that this was the first exhibition that showed Darger within the canon of the fine arts, in a historical framework embracing Goya’s prints but also contemporary practice. The P.S. 1 exhibition had originated at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, where the press feedback was immense and the audience extraordinarily large. The Darger portion of the exhibition toured to Sweden, Japan, Poland, and Switzerland, among other countries, and a modest book was published that reproduced the watercolor panoramas in a cartoonish, quasicinematic, animation-like way, emphasizing Darger’s fictive realm rather than the materiality of the works as art objects, thus allowing insight into a very complex, intricately detailed visual world.

The book explicitly aimed to place Darger outside of the outsider context. “Perhaps it is not so much a matter of whether or not Darger belongs in the Outsider art category, but more a matter of whether that category can truly contain him,” Michael Bonesteel had written in the
introduction to his survey of Darger’s work.²² Following
the unexpected discovery of Darger’s stockpile of diaries,
manuscripts, and illustrations, and the first exhibitions of
his work, Darger was only gradually recognized as one of
America’s most important self-taught artists. This is per-
haps surprising; at first glance, Darger’s biography is that
of the consummate outsider. He suffered a difficult and
lonely childhood without the benefits of a stable family
life or complete formal education. He spent his adult life
transcribing the world of his imagination, working menial
jobs and keeping mostly to himself. He painted without
any formal training, inventing new techniques as his work
required them. He was eccentric and self-involved in the
eyes of neighbors, who remember him talking loudly late
at night, alone in his third-floor apartment. For Darger,
talking in voices was a way of having company.

Darger can now be found in catalogs and exhibitions of
American outsider artists alongside Joseph Elmer Yoakum,
whose landscapes in pencil, pastels, and watercolors share
a certain kinship with Darger’s expansive landscapes, and
J. Richardson, whose Civil War drawings, dating from the
early 1920s, resemble Darger’s war scenes.²³ However, as
the range of his watercolors and the sensibility revealed
by his autobiography suggest, Darger does not quite con-
form to the conventions of the outsider artist, and some
of the earliest writing on his work struggled with its char-
acterization as outsider art.²⁴

Darger was certainly not outside American popular
culture; he read every newspaper, magazine, paperback,
and comic he could get his hands on. Like so many of his
contemporaries, he clipped pictures of celebrities from
newspapers and magazines, incorporating the visage of
the star football quarterback Joe Namath into one collage.
Far from the romantic image of the solitary artist work-
ing from his imagination in isolation, Darger had an insat-
able appetite for the novels of Charles Dickens and L.
Frank Baum. Drawing on works from the whole spectrum
of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular
literature, many of the passages in Realms read as the work
of a hyperaware media flâneur or (early) data dandy, dig-
esting his culture through the act of daily recording and
fictionalizing.

As an adult poring over newspapers for material, Darger
read horrific accounts of World War I, the sinking of the
Titanic, the Great Depression, World War II, the bomb-
ings of Dresden and Coventry and the detonation of the
atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the as-
sassination of John F. Kennedy. One cannot imagine that
the extreme violence and national pain described in the
newspapers did not find their way into Darger’s imagina-
tion. One watercolor depicting kidnapped children con-
tained by a high barbed-wire fence is ominously titled, At
Jennie Richee. They are placed in concentration camp with crowd
of child prisoners (page 17). His descriptions of child slavery
lack the humor of his other chapters. He explains that the
rise of child slavery in his imagined world “drove many to
insanity, and also hundreds to commit suicide. Mothers
fearing the horrors of child slavery, and that their own
would be victims, murdered their own children and then
themselves,” returning to the double loss he suffered as a
child, torn from both mother and sister.²⁵

The full extent of Darger’s sources will never be known.
The materials discarded as trash before the discovery of
his artwork cannot be recovered. The songs and poems
Darger invented in Realms reflect his appreciation of pop-
ular music. But Darger’s extensive phonograph collec-
tion, never cataloged, was sold.²⁶

The poet John Ashbery, whose 1999 book-length poem
Girls on the Run (the opening lines appear on page 7) was
inspired by a visit to Darger’s 1996 exhibition in Lau-
sanne, Dans les raynaumes de l’irréel, identified with Darger’s
interest in little girls. Interviewed in 1999, Ashbery seem-
ingly channels Darger, recalling, “I was fascinated by lit-
tle girls when I was a little boy, and their clothes and their
games and their dolls appealed to me much more than what little boys were doing. Therefore I was sort of ostracized.” The poet, who has also made found image collages for decades (exhibited for the first time in 2008 at Tibor de Nagy Gallery), explained the role of children’s literature and comics in his early life: “I read Nancy Drew books and the Oz books and comics like ‘Little Orphan Annie.’ I use a lot of imagery from comic strips like ‘Popeye’ and so on, because lying on the floor looking at these huge colored comic supplements was the first literary and visual art experience I ever had, and in a way it has somehow remained one of the strongest influences.”²⁷

The Abstract Expressionist Adolph Gottlieb described a similar artist’s education in a 1967 interview. Asked if there was any exposure to art in his family background, he replied, “Not at all. No, I was brought up with comic strips and the Gibson books on the library table. Charles Henry Gibson. . . .” The interviewer, Dorothy Seckler, asks: “Where did you begin? By copying any of these things?” “Oh sure,” answers Gottlieb, “I copied Mutt and Jeff.”²⁸ A long-running daily comic strip created by Bud Fisher in 1907, Mutt and Jeff is prominent in Darger’s collection of cut-out comic strips. The bumbling friends also appear as characters in Realms. Though unrelated to the comic-strip figures, they are often compared to them. In one passage, Darger even suggests that his Mutt and Jeff characters, Professional International Spies known as Mr. Mutt and Mr. Jeff, inspired Bud Fisher to create his strip.²⁹

When considering the canon of twentieth-century American art, one has to ask why the untrained Darger is more often than others considered an outsider. If the word “outsider” is replaced by the term “self-taught,” as a first step, and as a second the word “self-taught” is replaced by “autodidact,” the whole discourse shifts. Then we might look at the oeuvres of Joseph Cornell or Jean-Michel Basquiat. Like Darger, Cornell and Basquiat never graduated from high school and never formally studied art. In any aspect of his life, Darger seemed most engaged with the world around him through his art. He was an outsider as a poor custodian working at Chicago hospitals. Few noticed him working long hours and obsessively performing repetitive tasks like wrapping bandages. Barely making a living, he poured every spare cent into his art-making. All of his life, Darger existed just beyond traditional institutions like school and family, growing up with very little of either. He depended on regular church attendance for a weak association to a world he had committed to in his mind and art but had little contact with in his everyday life.

Joseph Cornell’s life mirrors Darger’s in certain aspects, though, unlike Darger’s, Cornell’s artworks were widely exhibited during his lifetime. It is in his emergence as an artist that Cornell is most like Darger. As a child, Cornell, born in 1903, was extremely protective of his youngest brother, Robert, who suffered from cerebral palsy. When Cornell was fifteen, his father died of a red-blood-cell disease diagnosed as “pernicious anemia,” and the tight-knit upper-middle-class family had to come to terms with this trauma. Responding to this trauma, Cornell became meditative and withdrew from age-appropriate activities. Describing a Houdini-inspired magic show Joseph performed for his family four months after his father’s death, the biographer Deborah Solomon writes, “Already he had taken refuge in what might be called a fantasy of eternal innocence, imagining a world untouched by time or adult experience.”³⁰ At the urging of his father’s former employer, Joseph entered the Phillips Academy, the prestigious preparatory school in Andover, Massachusetts. Enrolled from age fourteen to eighteen, Cornell never graduated and unlike his ambitious peers, he did not apply to colleges in his third year.

The earliest known work by Cornell is a Mutt and Jeff cartoon drawn in the margins of a letter sent to his brother Robert while Joseph was away at school. While Darger’s interest in comics is shared by Cornell, he developed a mature technique that had little in common with Darger’s. Both may have scavenged publications for images to incorporate in their art, but Darger was primarily a drafts-
man who sometimes employed collage and Cornell almost never drew. Cornell’s well-known boxes generate a shallow depth through their actual interiors, while Darger depicts illusionistic space, sometimes deeply receding, in his watercolors.

The Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama lived and worked in New York from 1956 to 1973. A friend of Joseph Cornell, and his “lover” at one time, she suffers from hallucinations, translating them into large-scale sculpture and installations, as well as paintings and drawings. While living in New York she would work obsessively, day and night, for extended periods. Her symbolic order, derived from her visions, involves the repetition of polka dots, transforming a cute, decorative gesture into an obsessive, viruslike motif. Like that of Cornell and Darger, Kusama’s art has been rapidly assimilated into art history. Asked by the interviewer Grady Turner how she may have been affected by being eclipsed by male artists like Claes Oldenburg, Warhol, or Lucas Samaras, working in the American Pop movement at the same time as she did, Kusama replied, “Those male artists are simply imitating my illness.” She recalled that Oldenburg’s wife admitted to borrowing one of Kusama’s ideas for Oldenburg’s entry in a 1962 group show at the Green Gallery.³¹ The Pop movement itself was defined by appropriation, although not necessarily of this kind. Nevertheless, Kusama thrived on the energy of New York and its rapidly changing art scene as it responded to American popular culture. One must not forget that Henry Darger was a contemporary of Walt Disney and a witness to the rise of Mickey Mouse. Disney was an artist and entrepreneur who changed the perception of American pop culture and had a lasting effect on how the visual world of the twentieth century evolved; his cell animation style is reimagined in Darger’s repetition of figures in a single plane. A watercolor like [Storm] brewing . . . (see page 19) is animated by an entire sequence of action beneath the ominous rain clouds. Darger populated the scene with many girls, though the horizontal tableau also can be read left to right like the Eadweard Muybridge photographic motion studies that gave birth to modern animation.

Born in 1901, Walt Disney also never completed his formal education, leaving school at sixteen to enlist in World War I. Rejected because he was under-age, he joined the Red Cross, driving an ambulance in France and witnessing the war’s worst horrors. Returning home, he started his first company, making animated commercials and beginning his revolutionary series of innovative contributions to the animation and movie world. Returning to our title, “American Innocence,” one may imagine that without Disney an entire spectrum of current practice is scarcely imaginable, from the surgically self-designed figure of Michael Jackson (who in some mug shots published when he was accused of child molestation looks like a three-dimensional portrait of Mickey Mouse) to an artist like Laurel Nakadate. In Jeff Koons’s Michael Jackson and Bubbles, Jackson is redone in porcelain as a giant plaything with his arm around Bubbles, a monkey. Like the giant castle that welcomes visitors to Walt Disney’s theme parks, Koons’s sculpture evokes America’s libidinous fascination with the big toy. The coloring-book imagery of Darger’s watercolors similarly recalls the libidinous character of a toy object, instantly associating his project with the children’s activity of filling in coloring-book pages, yet on an epic scale.

Walt Disney acquired the rights to eleven of Baum’s Oz books in 1954. He sought repeatedly to make film adaptations of them over the rest of his career, beginning many versions that were later abandoned. The Rainbow Road to Oz, Disney’s most nearly realized Oz adaptation, would have starred the child actors of the Mickey Mouse Club. Annette Funicello was set to play Ozma.

The question of film’s influence on Darger’s work is largely speculative. Looking at one watercolor in which the Vivian girls try to escape by rolling themselves in floor rugs, Michael Bonesteel points to a similar scene in the 1925 film adaptation of the comic strip Little Annie Rooney, starring Mary Pickford. The female protagonists of Realms, particularly Annie Aronburg, with their curly blond locks and eternally adolescent faces, remind one of Pickford and Shirley Temple, stars with whom America had its own obsession. One might consider Darger’s worshiping of little girls as an antecedent of the child beauty pageants, objectifying girls as young as four or five, that became notorious with the murder of JonBenét Ramsey in 1996. Darger explicitly mentions Charlie Chaplin and Ben Turpin in Realms.³² One prominent reference to motion pictures may indicate Darger’s awareness of early pornographic media, including film reels. Describing the treatment of pretty women and children enslaved by the Glandelinians, Darger writes that despite being “worse than the vilest villains, . . . none of the Glandelinians tried to force their love on the pretty women and girls as is written in other books and particularly in moving pictures stories.”³³
Much of the hardship in *Realms* was created by Darger in response to the loss of an image, a photograph reproduced in a newspaper. The character of the tragic heroine Annie Aronburg is based on Elsie Paroubek, a kidnapped and later murdered girl whose picture, clipped from the paper, Henry Darger cherished and lost. John MacGregor presents evidence that Darger covered his walls with newspaper stories of kidnapped and murdered children.³⁴ The violent details of the children’s deaths in *Realms* suggest that he may have embellished newspaper accounts with his own frequent visions of disembowelings and beheadings.

A collage-drawing fragment of Glandelinian soldiers infiltrating downtown Chicago is one of the few depictions of Chicago’s architecture in his art. Despite the fact that Henry Darger lived in Chicago for most of his life, the vast majority of his depictions do not reflect the vertical nature of the city. Along with the urban view reproduced on this page, *At Battle of Mic-Hollester Run . . .* (see page 48) is a rare example in his work of a vertically oriented watercolor. During Darger’s lifetime his native city pioneered the building of skyscrapers. Darger must have seen them on the horizon from his apartment on Chicago’s North Side, whose porch looked south toward the Loop. But in his illustrations, verticality is limited to gigantic flowers, the stalactites and stalagmites in the few depictions of caves, and the jagged flashes of lightning he renders in scenes with storms.

This again tells us something about the connection between Darger’s working methods and his compositions. Because of the processes he used to reproduce his figures, it was extremely difficult for Darger to compose in perspectival depth, since that would have required the capacity to flexibly scale the figures at an array of sizes. But he had no practical way of doing this. He didn’t have the confidence to draw figures freehand, and his method of photographically scaling them was laborious and expensive, requiring that he send material out for photo-processing and enlarging. Thus he was forced to adopt a shallow horizontal format that would permit him to present many figures at just a few standard sizes across an entire composition.

Although the narrative panoramic format of his watercolor tableaux may be a byproduct of necessity, it nevertheless suggests an affinity with cinematic vision, which may help to explain our attraction to his work. When he repeatedly uses the stenciled, photocopied, and traced motif of a specific girl in one scene, the sheer multiplication of the image with minor variations, often lined up or staggered, necessarily reminds the viewer of techniques of stop-motion film animation, in which continuous movement is created by filming the same figures repeatedly, with slight changes from one image to the next. The dominant role that cinematic narrative and imagery, loops, repetition, and exaggeration play in today’s society has certainly contributed to making Darger more of an insider as all too many (media) images battle for more than short-lived attention.
Henry Darger’s writing and illustrating projects, devoted to illuminating an imagined world, consumed practically his entire adult life. Based on the records he kept, he rarely went a day without writing or painting. Nathan Lerner, in his foreword to John MacGregor’s 2002 study of Darger, describes this manic private life: “Every minute counted for him, and he did something, not necessarily something of any importance, but he just worked.”³⁵ Listing Darger’s furious activity—scavenging, cutting and collaging, creating scrapbooks, recording the inaccuracies of daily meteorological reports, finding string to wind into balls, writing, rewriting, and illustrating—Lerner concludes, “Somewhere he got the idea that you must not waste a minute.” So much so that if he could not find anything else to do, Darger would “take out the Bible and just start copying it.”³⁶ Darger filled every waking moment before and after his hospital work with these endless tasks. After describing the conclusion of the war, completing In the Realms of the Unreal, and binding the typewritten draft in 1932, he returned to the text, rearranging and adding to the narrative over many years.

Darger wrote that he didn’t want to grow up, and he seemingly got stuck in the process of working on his major work. Like a tape recording on a multiple-decade loop, he didn’t finish Realms, choosing instead to rewrite and recombine, creating alternative plots and endings. In 1963, the deteriorating condition of his legs and his poor eyesight, which had been the ostensible reason for his dismissal from the army during World War I, finally made it impossible for him to continue working. It was as if his life had been moving in cinematic slow motion. One may imagine that as long as Darger didn’t finish, he might remain the child he wished to be. To identify with the poor girls in his writings, he needed to give them penises in his depictions of them. For this lonely man, art-making was a way of living.

The daily necessity of simply dealing with life as a period of time to be spent can produce innovative artistic strategies. The Taiwanese-American artist Tehching Hsieh has only made eight works over his career, five of which were one-year-long performances between 1978 and 1986. In an interview with Adrian Heathfield, he discusses the long duration of his works: “It doesn’t really matter how I spend time: time is still passing. Wasting time is my basic attitude to life; it is a gesture of dealing with the absurdity between life and time.”³⁷ If one were to watch one of these performances unfold over a year, one would be painfully aware of watching life itself transpire. Earlier in the same interview, Tehching expresses the basic premise underlying all of the One Year perfor-
mannes: “life as a life sentence.”³⁸ Darger’s obsession with all-encompassing tasks can at times remind one of Sisyphus. One might look at his weather journal, maintained daily for ten years, and consider it a waste of time. But as Tehching explains, living itself is an act of wasting time. One merely chooses activities to fill it with, Darger’s being no more arbitrary than any other.

Darger started his daily weather journal late in life, maintaining it for a decade from December 31, 1957, to December 31, 1967. The American artist Ad Reinhardt decided to create only sixty-by-sixty-inch monochrome black paintings for the last decade of his life, from 1957 to his death in 1967. From 1966 to the present, the artist On Kawara has created Date Paintings. Each white-on-black painted date is the same format and each is completed on the date depicted. An ongoing project born in 1969 out of his work on the Date Paintings, Kawara’s One Million Years records sequential years in book form, currently spanning twenty volumes. Like In the Realms of the Unreal, One Million Years could span any number of volumes, relinquishing any structure that requires an end.

To mark the passing of time in such a purposeful way is an unusual practice in a society that is characterized by attention-deficit disorder.

Other examples of long-term strategies include those of the German artist Hanne Darboven. In a representative work, 7 Tafeln, II (7 Panels, II) of 1972/73, she drew the same wavy lines on every line of 245 pages of paper. The pencil lines form an index of the artist living; they are simply the evidence of her living, breathing, being in time. The Polish-French artist Roman Opalka has been working solely on the painting series OPALKA 1965/1–∞ since 1965. For this epic work, he began counting aloud in Polish in 1965. Each day he loads a paintbrush with white paint and records his counting across the canvas until the paint thins. He then reloads the brush and starts with the next number in the sequence. Today, he has passed five million and will continue until his death. Daily photographs, sound recordings of his counting, and the canvases are all part of the counting project.

Sean Landers’s work in the 1990s can be seen as the uncontrollable byproduct of male hysteria, as that term is described by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker.³⁹ It fits with Darger’s incessant drive to work. In his text paintings and videos dating to the early nineties, Landers’s stream-of-consciousness ramblings, at once embarrassingly intimate and distant, reveal an artist struggling with the act of making art. “Now I’m a happy victim of my own charade,” he wrote in the painting The Booty, an oil on linen piece from 1998. “I figure that it’s better to be a sucker who makes something than a wise guy who is too cautious to make anything at all.”⁴⁰

Disasters

All of this scenery of disaster may seem interesting, and worth exploring for, by many, I suppose, but it has left me a forlorn melancholic feeling, something of a feeling that tells of a sad occurrence of a dreadful event of the past which the world itself could not alone for.

—Henry Darger⁴¹

Much of In the Realms of the Unreal, and in fact Darger’s entire oeuvre, literary and visual, is devoted to describing disasters or weather or disasters caused by weather. The History of My Life, Darger’s handwritten autobiography, begun in his mid-seventies, is well over five thousand pages long (see pages 281–313). Just over two hundred of the pages address Darger’s life. On manuscript page 206, he finishes his life story and without interruption begins weaving a fantasy involving a tornado named Sweetie Pie that destroys real and imagined locations. His obsession with the apocalyptic storm is all-consuming.

As MacGregor notes, Darger’s writing style undergoes a transformation in the description of Sweetie Pie. Stuck on an endless loop, he returns on page after page to “the same events, images, the same questions and concerns, as though, caught in the tornado’s rotating funnel, he is spiraling wildly out of control.”⁴²

Having read Baum’s Oz books, Darger knew that extreme weather conditions could play a transformative role in fiction. In Darger’s landscapes, as in J. M. W. Turner’s, weather is inscribed with emotion and personality. Darger carried this belief in nature over into reality. The Sweetie Pie tornado is a natural event he supposedly witnessed in spring 1906. As the story of the storm balloons with more and more of Darger’s imagination, it reflects his late-life concerns. In this way, it might be more autobiographical than any factual account could be.

In the Bible, a change in the weather can be evidence of God’s presence. Storms and natural disasters punish sinners in Genesis, as when God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah. “Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of Heaven” (Genesis 19:24). As MacGregor writes, the tornado’s “wholesale destruction of religious institutions, churches, convents, and orphanages, along with the clergy and children who occupy them” prompts Darger to ask, “Why did the Good God allow the most greatest tornado catastrophe, the most destructive the world has ever seen?”⁴³ Throughout his life, Darger verbally questioned and argued with God. Neighbors recall hearing him yelling and cursing alone in his room. In his writing, the weather is a powerful force often equated with God. He writes in his diary, “Bad and insulting toward God because He is holding back the rain.” He blamed God for his own misfortune and declining health, recording in his April 16, 1968, diary entry: “Had trouble again with the twine. Mad enough to wish I was a bad tornado. Swore at God. Yet go to three morning masses. Only cooled down
by late afternoon. Am I a real enemy of the cross or a very very Sorry Saint?"⁴⁴ This diary entry dates from the time he wrote his autobiography, his final literary effort. He records working on it through 1971, and the incomplete manuscript was left behind when he moved to St. Augustine’s Home for the Aged in 1972.

Born in MacPherson, Kansas, in 1933, the artist Bruce Conner spent his childhood amid farmland threatened by extreme weather, from dangerous tornadoes to droughts. In Crossroads (1976), Conner loops United States government archival footage of the nuclear bomb tests at Bikini Atoll. The mushroom cloud grows to enormous proportions and then disappears twenty-seven times in Conner’s editing, somehow removing the sense of reality. Like Darger’s endless loop of Sweetie Pie, whose destruction is described for thousands of pages, Conner’s appropriation of the footage, repeating the bomb’s detonation at different angles and speeds, makes for a mesmerizing, dislocating film. Having lived through the period when Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed and read the newspaper reports of the consequent devastation and death, Darger may have internalized the destructive power of the mushroom cloud. His nickname for the tornado, Sweetie Pie, is, like “Little Boy,” the bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, an eerily endearing name for an instrument of mass death. The artist Robert Longo, whose studio is located in Lower Manhattan, created huge black charcoal drawings of mushroom clouds, recapturing the blasts that were reported to the world through black-and-white newspaper photographs. While not animated like Conner’s film, Longo’s drawings inevitably recall the clip in the viewer’s mind, even seeming to flicker.

In the New Museum of Contemporary Art’s 2008 exhibition After Nature, a postapocalyptic landscape as seen through smoke-filled air was projected on a large central screen. The work was Werner Herzog’s And a Smoke Arose—Lessons of Darkness (1992), composed from aerial
footage of a very real landscape, the flaming oil fields of Kuwait in the wake of the first Gulf War. Even with that knowledge, we can barely believe that we are watching a real place and not a computer-generated graphic. Herzog’s footage, displayed during the more recent war in Iraq, emerged as a damning postscript to it. As if he or she were a soldier in an invading army surveying damage, the viewer is taken on an aerial tour of hell on earth. One can see reflections of Darger’s own ideas of war in the burning landscape. In Realms, General Hanson Vivian explains to war correspondents covering what might appear as a noble fight for freedom, “Hell has no place here, and if it was here, it would literally flee from the horrors of this greatest of wars.”

Restagings

Dead Troops Talk (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986), a large-scale photo work by the Canadian artist Jeff Wall, presented as a transparency in a light box, appears at first glance to be an amazing piece of war photojournalism, the aftermath of a deadly ambush of a Red Army patrol. The figures vaguely recall art-historical poses and the rock-strewn, nearly monochromatic setting highlights the red blood trickling down the faces and uniforms of the soldiers. However, moving in closely, one becomes aware of the macabre surrealism of Wall’s staged scene: the casualties have come to life and appear to be talking with one another. The result of an elaborate production process involving sets, makeup, costumes, and actors, the work is a digital collage of small, staged shots. Wall, like Darger, builds his monstrous scene from his memory and imagination. He has internalized the conventions of war photography and military violence and created this absurdist tribute.

The Vietnamese-American artist An-My Lê’s photographs of the Iraq War are in a similar mode. Her putative documentary photographs of Iraq are shot in California at a simulated Iraqi village built for U.S. military training. Her 2006 exhibition Small Wars at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago took the Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan wars as its subject, wars that have changed our relationship to the kind of graphic violence depicted in Darger’s work. Heavily photographed and televised, recent wars brought into American homes violent images far more traumatizing than Darger’s brutal visions.

Most of the children’s stories found in Darger’s extensive library feature girl protagonists. Among his favorites were the Heidi series by the Swiss children’s author Johanna Spyri. He was apparently drawn to the precocious Heidi, an orphaned girl who is passed from her aunt to her grandfather, and he modeled aspects of his Vivian girls on her. Darger’s work exploits the clichés of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century children’s literature and his library reflects a keen appreciation of such narratives. Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley attack the conventions of such stories in Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abreaction Release Zone (1992). In this installation-video work the artists stage an adaptation of the narrative of Heidi living with her grandfather, exaggerating latent taboo themes of childhood sensuality and incest. The matter-of-fact depiction of family dysfunction and child exploitation in Heidi deconstructs the ideals inscribed in the Alpine setting of Heidi’s life with her grandfather. The staging of the performance was purposefully low-tech. McCarthy describes it as more like a puppet.
show than a traditional film, explaining that the intention is to highlight the illusionary aspect of film.

The cinematic appropriation and animation of fictional female protagonists emerges again in the French artist Pierre Huyghe's work with the figure known as Annlee. Collaborating with Philippe Parreno in 1999, Huyghe purchased the copyright to an anime figure from the Japanese agency Kworks, part of an industry in Japan that sells imaginary prefigured characters to be used for publication and animation in advertisements, comics, video games, and other formats. Huyghe and Parreno used her in their project No Ghost Just a Shell, in which the artists invited others to incorporate the character in projects. Bought and sold, Annlee lives and dies at the will of her owners. Huyghe set out to create a life to combat the short-term nature of creation in a haunting echo of the way our own lives take on meaning through work. Darger’s need to create speaks to this as well. Exhibited in 2002–3, No Ghost Just a Shell charted Annlee’s movement through the works of artists including Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Liam Gillick. Seeing the same figure appear in the very different contexts of these artists’ work comments on the very act of cultural appropriation and collage and what can be gained and lost in this process. By bringing together the Annlee-based works, Huyghe and Parreno create a collective work of art—a life cobbled together for the virtual girl. Annlee gives a name to the mass of visual information changing hands as an artist transforms found objects and images.

Other prominent contemporary painters come to mind for their use of found figures and illustration modes based in popular culture. Richard Prince’s Nurse Paintings, gestural appropriations of nurses depicted on the covers of pulp-fiction paperback books from the 1950s and 1960s, speaks to the life of these cultural objects blown up and worked into an artist’s symbolic order. Seeing the sexualized nurses on the canvas, we realize that the web of social constructions represented by these fetish images has become the subject of Prince’s work. The German painter Neo Rauch’s work continues this legacy of the cartoon. Born in Leipzig in 1960, Rauch marries the Socialist Realism typical of the former Eastern Bloc with the cartoon sensibility of capitalistic Western consumer culture, creating something that could be playfully called Cartoon Realism. The space of Rauch’s paintings is that of cartoons. His surreal costumed characters share Darger’s coloring-book aesthetic. Like Rauch, Darger does not create convincing three-dimensional relationships between the figures in his landscapes. Any reality in his watercolors is subjugated to the whims of his imagination.

The influence of newspaper comic strips on Darger is paralleled by their concurrent emergence in the work of some of the most influential artists of the later twentieth century, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol. Rauschenberg’s Red Paintings (1953–54) are visibly grounded in layers of cut-out comic strips; Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein’s early canvases are hand-painted fragments of comic strips featuring the likes of Dick Tracy and Donald Duck. Darger’s attraction to the comic strip as a powerful vehicle for storytelling approaches Lichtenstein’s well-known experiments with enlarging single panels of printed comics.

Obsession, disasters, and the reworking of popular images all come together in the legacy of Andy Warhol. Darger’s ceaseless appetite for collecting and the decades-old refuse found in his room didn’t nearly approach the collecting mania of Warhol, who filled 610 standard-size cardboard boxes with ephemera over thirty years, making no distinction between trash and things of value such as letters and works of art. And while Darger and Warhol may seem not to have much in common, both used newspapers as source material, combining the pages for accidents, murders, and other disasters. Warhol got his start in New York as a commercial illustrator in the 1950s. His illustrations for Nelson Doubleday’s 1958 Best in Children’s Books series feature innocent children and have remarkable watercolor effects. Just four years later, in the summer of 1962, Warhol used an image of a plane crash from the front page of a local paper for his first disaster painting, 129 Die in Jet. During the following three years, he created work based on newspaper images of car crashes, race riots, electric chairs, and celebrities. Darger’s obsession with the loss of his cut-out newspaper photo of the murdered Elsie Paroubek speaks to the power of such images—a power that Warhol also perceived in reproducing Marilyn Monroe’s image soon after she died. Like Jake Smith’s devotion to the actress Maria Montez, Joseph Cornell’s obsession with Lauren Bacall, and Warhol’s fascination with Monroe, Darger’s desire to protect the young girl Elsie Paroubek is channeled into his art.
To demonstrate the obvious, one may type the phrase “American beauty” into the Google search engine and it receives nearly 132 million hits.⁴⁴ The search for “American dream” returns about 65 million. The search for “American innocence” returns slightly more than 1 million, less than 1 percent as many hits as “American beauty.”

The movie American Beauty (1999) paints a depressing picture of American society at the end of the twentieth century, as a place of crisis and despair, longing and avoidance, and, in the end, lust and murder. The pursuit of individual happiness has become a search for what one might or might not want. It seems as if the American dream has come to a dead end. Modest wealth, a house, a car, a family are not enough any more. The individual search for self-expression leads to alienation, a state in which one wants to change body and mind, career and goals.

In the movie, a father shaken by midlife crisis is longing for the love of the underage friend of his daughter. The pursuit of happiness leads him to an insane admiration of adolescence, youth, and innocence. But in a certain way he only reflects tendencies in an American society obsessed by youth and seduction. The public’s gaze is currently fixed on the Disney kids, the Olsen twins, whose infantile lives were broadcast nonstop, American Idol, and Disney’s Hannah Montana, alias Miley Cyrus (who, by the way, returns over 50 million Google hits). These children are exposed to and owned by the public in a more radical way than was the child star Shirley Temple, who reigned in Darger’s middle age.

Desire in a certain way anticipates consumption, which, if not balanced by other cultural forces, can lead to a hedonistic, apolitical, overly individualistic society in which nothing but personal well-being counts. In the early 1990s the idea of an “end of history” was much discussed. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc supposedly had brought the region, if not the world, to a peaceful mix of democratic, liberal consumer societies. But the subsequent conflicts in Rwanda and Yugoslavia, to name only two of many, raised doubts. In the new millennium, the attacks of September 11, 2001, on the United States, and the repressive reactions that followed them, created new global political and economic tensions.

In 2008 the Western nations that share a capitalist, market-oriented culture precipitated a worldwide economic meltdown that has reminded many of the collapse of the former Eastern Bloc. On the cultural scene recently, discourse has been increasingly concerned with art and artists who deal with the consequences of recent history, who depict war and violence, corruption and exploitation. Child labor, slavery and sex trafficking, war camps and refugees, brutal torture, mutilation, and public humiliation appear daily on the news—not to mention cataclysmic weather events such as tsunamis, earthquakes, epic hurricanes, and global warming. Darger’s work, speaking to our deepest anxieties as a world community, remains strikingly current.

As the media play such a powerful role in contemporary society, it is important that Darger’s work and life are media-compatible. Jessica Yu’s award-winning documentary In the Realms of the Unreal (2004) provides views of Darger through his voluminous work that stand in sharp contrast to the fragmented glimpses of the man gleaned from recollections of neighbors and acquaintances. The film reveals discrepancies even in interviewees’ pronunciation of Darger’s name, some using a hard “g” and others the soft “g,” which seems to underscore the subjectivity of their impressions. His life story lends itself to oral history, making Darger a contemporary legend whose personality and work merge into a single entity. Some think he was a violent madman while others believe he was just an ordinary hospital custodian, making art to pass the time.

Darger’s work has had the same divergent impact, representing different things to different contemporary artists. Picasso is supposed to have said, “Good artists borrow, great artists steal,” but artists unaware of another’s work may be impressed by comparable ideas and images. Darger certainly has had a direct influence on the artistic production of the last decade or so, but artists may also have arrived at similar depictions and concerns in their work without being aware of him. Instead, an artist may have a common interest (the Wizard of Oz, Mutt and Jeff, etc.) or share the same artistic affinities and obsessions that connect Darger with so many artists today.

In 2008 the American Folk Art Museum organized the exhibition DARGERism: Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger, seeking to illuminate this dialogue between contemporary art and Darger. Selecting art by younger artists whose work in one way or another reflects Darger’s, the curator Brooke Davis Anderson sought to highlight the artist’s legacy in work by Robyn O’Neil, Grayson Perry, Paula Rego, Michael St. John, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Jefferson Friedman, Anthony Goicolea, Amy Cutler, Justin Lieberman, Justine Kurland, and Yun-Fei Ji. One might have added Melissa Brown and others to this list.

The dialogue between contemporary art informed by Darger and our view of Darger as it is informed by contemporary art can be investigated by placing the artists involved in a larger generational, cultural context to identify overlap and difference, similar points of departure and crass discrepancies. Grayson Perry’s ceramic objects have classical forms contrasting with their contemporary subject matter. Representations of Perry as Claire, his female alter ego, recur throughout this imagery, which also approaches such difficult motifs as sadomasochism. When he received the Turner Prize in 2003, he accepted it dressed as Claire. Included in the DARGERism exhibition was a glazed urn covered in religious iconography, including a little girl seemingly being offered up as a sacrifice;

with a bow in her hair and a little pink dress, she could have come straight out of Darger’s oeuvre.

“Henry Darger is my favorite artist,” Perry has said. “I have spent a life long playing out of his world and tried to emulate his technique.”⁴⁷ When Perry was seven years old, his father left home. To escape from a difficult family situation involving his stepfather’s violence, Perry would retreat for safety to his bedroom or his father’s shed, where he became absorbed in the imagery of his thoughts and fantasies. He took an interest in drawing and building model airplanes, both of which were to become themes of his work. He began dressing as a woman publicly at the age of fifteen. Perry studied fine art at Portsmouth Polytechnic and took evening pottery lessons. The themes and techniques of Perry’s work connect him to Darger, but there is more to the bond than that. Seeing Darger’s work early, at a 1979 exhibition in London, Perry grew to identify with the artist who “retreated to an imaginary world.”

The international exposure of Darger in exhibitions, publications, and the media over the last decade and a half has influenced many young artists. Like Perry, who credits Darger with giving him “permission to make works principally motivated by my obsessions and my inner imaginative world,” younger artists draw on both the art and the story of the man. Darger’s pervasive influence can be seen in the young artist group shows named after him, and in the songs and poetry that have been dedicated to him. Darger’s Vivian girls and reimagines their universe. Jesse Kellerman’s 2008 mystery novel The Genius features a reclusive artist inspired by Darger. When the artist’s drawings, recovered from boxes of refuse in his apartment, go on sale, a policeman recognizes the depicted children as possible murder victims.

Darger only became influential after his death and after the efforts of Nathan and Kiyoko Lerner and many devoted curators and writers researching his life and works. Today his themes and imagery are much more digestible, nearly common, decades after he moved out of the Chicago apartment where he did most of his work. Documentary images of history unfolding and the immense flood of created, animated, and recorded images in the mass media have exposed us to every kind of disturbing picture. That the imagery in Darger’s work still retains some shock value, in a time when the artist Damien Hirst works with real sliced-in-half animal corpses, begs further investigation. That the “look into the body” as depicted by early paintings of medical operations is ubiquitous today does nothing to lessen the hit. Darger, Hirst, and the Chapmans have the ability to edit and single out the monstrous in their imagery so that it stays with the viewer. In Hirst’s The Virgin Mother, installed at Lever House in New York, one senses echoes of Darger’s most effective illustrations. Hirst’s large-scale anatomical model of a pregnant woman is Dargeresque

because our mind associates the cut-open female body with the brutal scenes of crucifixions, disembowelments, and mutilations in Darger’s watercolors. When the toylike, innocent, cartoonish quality of the bodies collides with immediate, brutal violence the effect is unbearable.

Realms once thought to be limited to children alone—graphic novels, Japanese manga, and the video-game industry, rivaling film—are influencing artists, filmmakers, and musicians. Imagery that is cartoonish or gamelike is one of the dominant visual languages of today. The scale of invention required to create the immersive world of new games seems almost to require a confusion of life and imagination on the massive scale achieved by Darger. He would change the names on letters and photos to match his fictive stories. The world of In the Realms of the Unreal is meticulously crafted through the accumulation of details and characters. bargerque images seem to galvanize how we perceive our times. Darger’s winged, dragonlike Blengins and tree-flowers now seem to rival the hybrid creatures of Matthew Barney’s world. In Cremaster 5’s famous scene filmed at the Gellért Thermal Baths in Budapest, Barney presents the Fudór Sprites, creatures that are half flower and half human, and look frighteningly real (page 29). This aesthetic is now the cutting edge, even on a global level.

On the other hand, Darger’s work can appear strangely reminiscent of a long-lost era in America. The sexual and media revolution and the liberalization of Western society, the mass accessibility of porn and brutality in all its specific niches, distributed first through video and then through the Internet and gaming culture, make Darger’s hermaphroditic, militaristic protagonists seem as tame as children’s-book illustrations again in the eyes of an increasingly jaded general public.

The veteran painter John Wesley plays off illustrational styles, subtly mixing “past and present Americana” but with a sexual charge, as critic Roberta Smith has said. Like Darger’s watercolors, Wesley’s paintings hover in an
alien time, somehow both a part of the confusions of the modern world and outside its ever more frenetic pace. Often relegated to Pop art, Wesley’s work has less to do with consumerism than with the Dargeresque themes of innocence and fantasy.

Returning to the first image of this essay, that of Laurel Nakadate in her truck-stop scenario, one encounters the idea of innocence embedded in the work of a truly American artist. Born in Austin, Texas, and raised in Ames, Iowa, her mother is American and father Japanese-American. Nakadate shoots video on unsure ground when she follows leering men back to their homes, inviting them to take part in her art projects. We note that she purposefully invites their gaze to shoot her work and wonder, Who is it that is really approaching whom? As she bridges Japanese and American culture in her own biography, Nakadate investigates the dance of innocence and seduction both in Japanese culture (in works such as Love Hotel) and American daily life.

Nakadate commented recently, “I am drawn to people who live alone and have complicated stories to tell. Henry Darger’s work has haunted and inspired me. I often think of Darger, working alone in his world—in secret and with such urgency and dedication. In my photographs and videos, I work with men who live alone and keep to themselves. We perform stories that are one part fact and one part fiction. We write these stories together. I have often taken on the character of a young, curious, and brave girl to navigate the worlds of these men and make these videos. I think about the Vivian girls. I think about American stories of men in hiding, and men who hide secret fantasy lives, and girls in ruffles, and pretend wars, and heroic motions taken to try and save the day. I think about...
Klaus Biesenbach

Henry Darger (rev.ed.)

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