GLORIOUS CONSTRUCTIONS:

*The Struggle
to Preserve
Salvation-Themed
Visionary Art
Environments*

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ABSTRACT

GLORIOUS CONSTRUCTIONS: THE STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE

SALVATION-THEMED VISIONARY ART ENVIRONMENTS

Molly Elaine Sheehan

Salvation-themed art environments are a roadside rarity, built out of a strong visionary dedication to God, but the sites are disappearing simply because the work is misunderstood. The historiography on the subject is sparse, trending more toward coffee table books with big glossy pictures than real scholarly endeavors, but the consensus among all has been clear. The sites are a valuable part of the recent American cultural landscape, crossing several scholarly fields - art, architecture, and history - and uniting them into a cohesive preservation movement. On a series of trips to visit, see, and experience five of these sites, I began to understand the massive scale that each site required to assemble and exactly what it would take to restore and preserve each site. The preservation goal is not small, but it is not unattainable. There are federal grants, nonprofit groups and localized support committees from which to gather support so that the site may continue to be a piece of history.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Images	ix
Introduction:	1
Chapter One:	11
What is a folk art environment?	
Chapter Two:	17
Salvation Themed Folk Art Environments	
Chapter Three:	23
Reverend Howard Finster’s Paradise Gardens	
Chapter Four:	39
Reverend W. C. Rice and his Miracle Cross Garden	
Chapter Five:	49
Reverend H. D. Dennis Margaret’s Grocery and Market	
Chapter Six:	57
Kenny Hill’s Sculpture Garden	
Chapter Seven:	65
Leonard Knight’s Salvation Mountain	
Chapter Eight:	75
Preservation	
Chapter 9:	87
Conclusion	
Bibliography	93

List of Images

1. Salvation Mountain	1
2. Lawrence Harris Folk Art Map	3
3. Ave Maria Grotto	5
4. Art from Leonard Knight, Howard Finster, Reverend H. D. Dennis, W.C. Rice, and Kenny Hill.	8
5. Howard Finster	23
6. Art of Howard Finster	26
7. Art of Howard Finster	31
8. Art of Howard Finster	33
9. Art of Howard Finster	34
10. World's Folk Art Chapel	35
11. Howard Finster self-portrait	37
12. Art of W. C. Rice	39
13. W. C Rice's Miracle Cross Garden	43
14. Art of W. C. Rice	44
15. W. C Rice's Miracle Cross Garden	46
16. Margaret's Grocery Store	49
17. Art of H. D. Dennis	51
18. Art of H. D. Dennis	52
19. A Sign from H. D. Dennis	54
20. Kenny Hill's angels	57
21. Kenny Hill's Sculpture Garden	58
22. Kenny Hill self-portrait	59
23. Kenny Hill's Jesus	60
24. Kenny Hill's Jesus	63
25. Leonard Knight's Salvation Mountain	65
26. Gallery at Salvation Mountain	68
27. Interior of Gallery at Salvation Mountain	69
28. Interior of Gallery at Salvation Mountain	70
29. Exterior of the gallery at Salvation Mountain	71
30. Leonard Knight	73
31. Salvation Mountain	87
32. Finster's Hubcap Tree	87
33. Kenny Hill's angel	87
34. Art of W. C. Rice	87
35. Art of H. D. Dennis	87

Introduction:

As the sun rises in the southern California desert to the east of the Salton Sea, Leonard Knight climbs eagerly around his rough adobe artwork liberally applying paint. His work is never done at Salvation Mountain, but he would have it no other way. The oasis of vivid color rises from the flat wasteland declaring “God is Love.” Knight works tirelessly on the monumental creation, yet officially it is without a definitive art classification. It is not typical high art that can be produced and placed in a gallery; it is fully integrated into the barren desert landscape—it cannot be moved. In the realm of the arts, how do Salvation Mountain and other places like it fit?

The world of high art encompasses a much broader spectrum than the classically-trained artists whose paintings,

Photo 1: Leonard Knight's Salvation Mountain

sculptures, films, and photographs fill galleries and museums around the world. The traditional art world has grown to include art installations, sculptures created from found objects, and even art brut (raw art) a term coined by Jean Dubuffet in 1971. It is more commonly known in the United States as outsider art.¹ Outsider art has ballooned to encompass a wide variety of sub-groups—art produced by psychiatric patients, children, or other self-taught creators. The only commonality was that each group of artists produced their work outside the mainstream of society. The growth of Outsider Art has spawned entirely new categories of artistic classification like folk, grassroots, and visionary art. These variant art forms cannot be evaluated by the usual art-historical patterns of analysis. Outsider Art is a loaded term that not only is used to classify an artistic style but also includes "... aesthetic judgments with social, economic, psychological, and even political designations."² In the relatively short history of the field, it has grown to include a much wider swath of artists than many people ever even believed to be artists. These new additions to the artistic community are the untrained fringe, the insane, folk artists, and "backyard visionaries" who are expanding the very definition of art.³

1 Colin Rhodes, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2000) pg. 7. Jean Dubuffet, the French artist coined the term, but it was Roger Cardinal an art historian who began using the term Outsider Art in 1972, and it is his definition that we struggle to pin down today.

2 Lyle Rexer, *How to Look At Outsider Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2005) pg. 11.

3 *Backyard Visionaries: Grassroots Art In The Midwest*, Barbara

Their art does not hang on the walls—it *is* the walls, the floor and the ceiling. These artists are not trained in their craft, but instead they choose to create out of a drive or desire to make something. These "visionary grassroots environmental artists" are outside the mainstream of society and yet, they are cemented within its foundation, using discarded scraps of that society to erect monuments to the world that shunned them.⁴

The United States of America is home to a wide variety of incredibly diverse art environments which are spread from coast to coast. These sites have a multitude of interpretations surrounding them and dozens of themes by which to group them. In order to adequately narrow the field for appropriate comparison, restrictions on the type of art

2: Lawrence Harris has compiled a detailed list of the Folk Art Environments in the United States on his website, www.narrowlarry.com

Brackman and Cathy Dwigans, eds. (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

4 Molly Sheehan, "Concrete Wonderlands: The Quest to Preserve Grassroots Environmental Art", (Senior Project: Cal Poly, SLO: 2007) pg.19.

environment to be considered must be made. "Religion" as a theme, was too large, so qualifying the scope to confine it to "Evangelical religious-themed salvation sites" seemed to work best for the scope of this endeavor. Each site is built with a unique point of view, a specific evangelical intent. Religious-themed art environments are not unique to one county, state or country. Artists alter their own homes to proclaim their message. Some of the environments are laid out with precision, giving them a museum quality and feel, while others are arranged with seemingly no pattern or layout, merely on the artist's whim. All these environmental artists manage to construct a huge quantity of sculptures, buildings, or free-standing pieces on their property. These artists have a particular viewpoint, their take on the world, which they have shaped into art environments around themselves using fragments of the mainstream culture. These unique time capsules should be saved so that the mindsets of the artist and their relationships to society are preserved for the future.

Many visionary environmental artists choose religious themes. They do re-creations of church buildings or monuments, like Brother Joseph Zoettl's Ave Maria Grotto in Cullman, Alabama.⁵ A re-creation of a chapel, cathedral, or even basilica, is a great feat of architectural mastery but it is not intended to inspire a religious calling or

⁵ Roger Manley and Mark Sloan. *Self-Made Worlds: Visionary Folk Art Environments* (New York: Aperture, 1997) pg. 44.

conversion. A miniature cathedral does not attempt to convert its viewers to a life of Catholicism. Rather, it is simply a shrine, a reproduction of a place of worship. The salvation of the viewer's soul is not the creator's intent. Miniatures, shrines, and reproductions of other religious sites are created out of a personal artistic drive to re-create another's work, not their own visionary construction.

3: Brother Joseph Zoettl's Ave Maria Grotto in Cullman Alabama is an excellent example of non-salvation themed religious art. While Brother Joseph was a devoutly Catholic monk, he was not attempting to draw visitors into his site in-order to convert them to a life of Catholicism. He was purely a artist of the miniature-replica variety.

There are few artists whose vision is not simply to create, but to inspire a life-change in the viewers. Their work is not a re-creation of existing religious structures, but a completely original compilation of materials. They use found objects, cement, and adobe to elicit a salvation experience for the visitor. Some sites simply attempt to reveal the stories of the Bible, through sculptures and messages. Others of these "salvation" experiences are meant to be revelations of the true nature of God; they portray harrowing depictions of the sins or misdeeds of the visitors

and what will happen to them if they do not turn toward God. All the sites and their creators have one thing in common—a genuine desire to draw people toward their message of salvation and God.

The salvation-themed grassroots art environments that fit into this unique subset are very limited. The surprising fact about the sites is that they all fall within a wide swath of the American South.⁶ Howard Finster's Paradise Gardens in Summerville, Georgia is the home to thousands of angels and found-object buildings which beckon visitors by the thousands. The Reverend William Carlton Rice and his Miracle Cross Garden along the highway in Prattville, Alabama, warns of spiritual damnation and has turned many away from his work. Another preacher-turned-artist is Reverend H. D. Dennis, who used the small store that he owned with his wife as the site for his message. Together they created Margaret's Grocery and Market in Vicksburg, Mississippi, which has drawn visitors from around the world. In Chauvin, Louisiana, the town has embraced the sculptures of Kenny Hill and their Biblical messages. Visitors venture out into the desert to see Leonard Knight's Salvation Mountain in Niland, California, which pronounces that "God is Love." All the sites have a richly different take on how to save their visitors' souls.⁷

⁶ John Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*. New York and London: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1995. pg. 23.

⁷ There is documentation on several evangelical art environments that fit within this research criteria but which have been dismantled or have been allowed to decay over the years and are now gone. Several

The overwhelming drive to save their visitors' souls presents a problem when the sites are viewed by local authorities. The sites have been created out of a divine vision or goal within the artist, but to their neighbors, city council members, and regional planners, the sites appear overtly religious, offensive, and like large collections of trash. Adding another level of offense to officials is the fact that every artist preaches or professes some sort of divine calling from the site, making it a tool for evangelism in their ministry. The controversy lies in the salvation theme of the site and the evangelical speech of the artist, which makes the places more like religious sites than art environments. Therefore, decision makers feel that the government should have nothing to do with preserving them.

The question then arises, why preserve religious, salvation-oriented sites? Why not discard them like bits of religious propaganda disseminated by a zealot? The truth of the matter is that salvation-themed art environments are constructed out of an intense desire to save souls, while

sites also exist which have a non-evangelical religious bent that were considered for the project, but the limitation to like-sites with like-religious values seemed important. The interesting point is that the majority of both religious and non-religious folk art environments in America are in the south – from the east to west coasts and in the plains states—extending from Wisconsin in the north, through Louisiana in the south. There are many sites that have a religious bent, bias, or inclination. Some artists choose to create religious imagery alongside their artwork. Many sites contain Catholic icons, statuary, and shrines—but the shrines used in a Catholic worship service are for the converted, not the conversion of the new believer, so those places did not fit the project. For more information on the locations and names of other sites please visit Lawrence Harris's website: <<http://www.narrowlarry.com/index.html>> (accessed 20/10/2009).

the art of it is just the means to that end. Nevertheless, their value lies in the fact that these sites provide records of the unique experiences and purposes which drive these artists. That is what makes it imperative that these sites should be included in governmental preservation efforts.

In Chapter One, I define classifications of art environments, explore artistic intent, and discuss the place of salvation-themed visionary art environments in the current art world. Chapter Two details the manner in which a person is converted to a religion, the necessary state of mind that such a feat entails, and how the environmental artists seize upon the conversion mentality. Chapters Three through Seven will discuss each site in detail, starting with my personal reflections toward each place and ending with how I felt after leaving (the personal reflection sections are offset from the main text in italics). Chapter Eight covers overarching preservation issues, the debate regarding church versus state, and the various preservation societies at work in this field. The final chapter

will attempt to offer some ideas for the future of these environments and their preservation.

4: Art from Leonard Knight, Howard Finster, Reverend H. D. Dennis, W. C. Rice, and Kenny Hill.

Chapter One:

What is a folk art environment?

Defining a visionary grassroots art environment is a daunting task. Determining which characteristics to include, aspects to highlight or minimize, and the added uncertainty regarding the inclusion of the creator's thoughts towards the work, and the artistic intent all aid in the formulation of a cogent definition.

Seymour Rosen, the founder and director of the folk art environment preservation society SPACES, helped to introduce the genre to mainstream society. While he worked to encourage interest in the non-traditional arts, Rosen photographed the sites and struggled to define exactly what made large-scale art environments special. Rosen's definition is lengthy and somewhat unwieldy, but it has served as the best summation to encompass all or most of the sites. Rosen's definition states that

Folk art environments are handmade, personal places containing large-scale sculptural and/or architectural structures built by self-taught artists generally during their later years. These environments usually contain a component of accumulated objects, often those discarded by the larger society, which have been transformed and juxtaposed in unorthodox ways. The spaces are almost always associated with the creator's home or business and have developed without formal plans. The sites tend to be immobile and monumental in amount of components or in scale. Owing less allegiance to popular art traditions and more to personal and cultural experiences and availability

of materials, the artists are motivated by a need for personal satisfaction rather than by a desire to produce anything marketable or to gain notoriety. Most sites in this country have been developed by people who are in middle age to old age, and represent a substantial and sustained commitment of time and energy.⁸

Although some sites are considered folk art environments that are not covered by every aspect of the Rosen thesis, that was not really the point. If a site was created by someone young or middle aged who then fulfilled the other qualifications then the site is still a grassroots art environment. Rosen was not attempting to exclude but to include, which is why the definition is so extended. The latter chapters of the paper will refer back to the Rosen definition frequently to help underscore the various qualities of each artist and his site.

The religious / salvation-themed environments fit exceedingly well within Rosen's definition. Many of the "artists are motivated by a need for personal satisfaction" which comes from sharing their religious convictions with the people around them. While some people have chosen to look past the religious slogans of the artists to see the sites as purely art environments, they are missing the message and the meaning that is so obvious. These religious sites are both art and religion; they are meant to be viewed as

8 Jay Laurence Piatt, *Fixing Dreams: Preserving America's Folk Art Environments* (MS Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1996) pg. 6. Seymour Rosen, *In Celebration of Ourselves* (San Francisco: California Living Books, 1979).

artistic conduits to salvation. To strip away the element of faith is to disregard the essence of the site.

Susan Sontag, noted art critic and 1960s intellectual, discusses the concept of art interpretation and the inherent difficulties associated with it in the artistic community. She outlines how the arts have succumbed to the "rules of interpretation" which have succeeded in stifling the literal meaning of art works and excavating a new meaning behind the surface. The "digging behind" to find the true meaning of the art work is offensive to Sontag who argues that, "interpretation makes art manageable, conformable, but the very purpose of art is to "make us nervous" or to challenge in some way."⁹ Art is not simply about the content of the work or the explanations of it - art is the summation of it all, everything that went into creating it and defining it. While her opinions regarding the over-interpretation of art relaxed during her later years, the idea of "viewing the art as it is," is a viable stance today.

Folk or grassroots art environments are constantly undergoing revisions so that those who attempt to pigeonhole them into a specific artistic genre fall short. The "folk artists recycle the world around them, recasting both themes and materials of daily life" to replicate the world from their imaginations on their property.¹⁰ Grassroots art

9 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation And Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1961) pg. 8.

10 Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993) pg. 83.

environments take a piece from several disciplines: art, architecture, landscape design—and yet they are completely individualized. Rosen's definition is bolstered by the application of Sontag's anti-interpretation rhetoric, because essentially Rosen argues for acceptance and lenience in judging all sites, while still evaluating them on their artistic characteristics and intrinsic value.

The "artist's intent" is the motivation behind their creation; it is what they wish to convey with the work, what they want the artwork to *mean*.¹¹ Artistic intent can be hard to determine, and it can go unknown unless the artist discusses it or is interviewed regarding the artwork during their lifetime. Even then, the artist may not fully know what they have created or why, and as time passes, it becomes increasingly difficult to sort out the intended meaning from the perceived meaning of the art. The overall unusual character and relative sparse sprinkling of the sites across the country have somewhat guaranteed heightened interest. But, generally the seclusion of the creators of grassroots art environments makes discussing their site and its meanings difficult. The noted exception in the community of environmental artists are those with a religious impulse in their work. The religious artists tend toward openness with the surrounding communities and welcome visitors so that

¹¹ Hospers, John. "The Concept of Artistic Expression." Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. New Series, Vol. 55 (1954 - 1955), pp. 313-344. Blackwell Publishing on behalf of The Aristotelian Society. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4544551>. Accessed: 02/04/2010.

they may come to "see the message." Therefore many of the religious artists end up speaking to journalists, authors, historians, preservationists, or friends regarding their motives in creating the sites, solidifying their intentions for the site and why they created it for the future.

Visionary grassroots art environments are unique places where artistic expression and extreme endurance have met to create incredible architectural wonders, but acceptance as part of the art world is not always easy. The sites are, more often than not, filled with cast-offs and trash, the artists are usually in rural (or formerly rural) areas, and they are not typically the most educated set—all of which presents a stark contrast to the professionally-trained artist whose work fills upscale galleries across the country. People like Seymour Rosen have worked tirelessly to reform the boundaries of "high art" to include these art environments. The ideas of Susan Sontag are influential in that she helps to break down the earlier errors in artistic interpretation.

Chapter Two: Salvation Themed Folk Art Environments

In the post-industrial revolution era the idea of leisure time has expanded to a level that was never even considered in previous centuries. Hunting and gathering, agricultural farm labor, and early manufacturing all began with the rising sun and ended at sunset, but the advent of electricity, namely the light bulb changed everything. People were not simply working during the day hours but during the night hours as well, but this idea was so offensive that laws were enacted to restrict the amount of time that an individual should and should not work. With that the industrial world created leisure time. The advent of leisure time directly influenced the manufacturing industry by providing a market for newly created goods.

During the twentieth century a unique consumer culture was created that required people to purchase what was new and different, especially in the post World War II era. While the manufacturing companies are profiting off the desire to “keep up with the Joneses” the artists who found inspiration from the inevitable trash heaps flourished. It is no wonder that nearly all the grassroots art environments were built in the last 110 years, and all of the sites discussed herein, in the last 70 years.

According to Tom Patterson, Howard Finster’s biographer, the Protestant work ethic took stronger hold in the southern

portion of the United States and fed a desire to continue working beyond the usual workday to improve one's own home. Eventually, according to Patterson, these artists, especially Finster, took the notion farther than their neighbors—instead of just replanting flower beds, they built aboveground planters made from recycled car parts. Some artists used the materials to spread their religious convictions—their way to combine continual work with efforts to spread salvation.¹²

The differences between a religious and non-religious site are distinguishable at first glance and only grow as a visitor walks through the environment. The salvation-themed grassroots art environments are unique because, along with the goal of completing the task of the building project, the artists are also striving to preach their faith and convert souls. Signs, messages, and Biblical depictions in statuesque form loom overhead, all detailing the need for salvation from sin or the omnipresence of God's love. The artists who created the environments knew exactly what they were attempting to bring out in the visitor's belief, repentance, and conversion. The desire to convert people to a particular religion is specific to only a small number of sites, while the use of religious artifacts, replicas and statuary, as previously stated, are very common. The difference lies in the communication of the message.

In order for a religious conversion to occur it is

¹² Spriggs, Lynne E., Joanne Cubbs, Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, and Susan Mitchell Crawley. 2001. Let it shine: self-taught art from the T. Marshall Hahn Collection. Atlanta: High Museum of Art. pg. 54.

generally accepted among theologians that several steps be fulfilled. The person must first feel anxiety about their religious perspective (or lack thereof) and then they must desire to change that aspect about themselves. They become a "religious seeker."¹³ Each of these events must occur at a pivotal moment in the person's life when they are especially receptive to new or different religious ideas. The person forms great attachment to the new, while shedding the old.¹⁴ The person has been converted, in that "religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy."¹⁵ Despite the seemingly formulaic and unemotional progression, the conversion of millions around the world and in this country have fallen closely along these lines.

Each of the salvation-themed art environment creators was attempting to create an environment which would encourage conversions at their sites using these steps, although it is doubtful that they were conscious of any steps or rituals. The artists simply hoped for viewers to visit and believe. Some of the artists were clergy, others were just known to those in their communities as the "holy man," but all believed that they knew the true path to salvation.

Salvation has a different definition for everyone. For

¹³ John Lofland, Domsday Cult: A Study of Conversion, Proselytization, and Maintenance of Faith (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966) pg. 8.

¹⁴ Lofland, pg. 7-10.

¹⁵ William James. The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study In Human Nature. New York: Random House, 1902. pg. 193.

some it is simply a saving grace or good luck, but for others the idea of salvation from this world and into a heavenly one is literally life-saving. The following five examples are environmental artists who devoted large portions of their lives to saving the souls of others through their artwork. Despite the differences in materials, slogans, and rhetoric the emphasis on saving the visitor's soul is clear for each artist. But that steadfast, unwavering goal of salvation muddies the waters for preservationists. The art should be protected and preserved and there is federal funding for it, but when the lines between art and religion are blurred and fears of mingling church and state are raised, who should pay for the preservation fees, the government or a non-profit organization?

Chapter Three:

Reverend Howard Finster's Paradise Gardens

5: Howard Finster life-size self portrait, sitting in the eves of the World's Folk Art Chapel.

In a rural town two hours outside of Atlanta, Georgia sits the former home of prolific outsider artist Howard Finster. The drive north out of the capitol city was long and I nearly passed through Summerville before I realized I had made it into the small town. As I pulled into the parking spaces the artistic effect was underwhelming, with only a few store-bought ceramic deer in the front yard and a large hand painted sign in

sight, but as I moved through one of the converted homes and the visitors center, everything became clear. The backdoor of the center opened onto the rest of the property, which filled the suburban street block, with Howard's art, massive building structures, and spiritual words. I had arrived!

The Reverend Howard Finster is a well known outsider artist, who was “discovered” in the outsider art craze of the 1970’s.¹⁶ He has been known to “describe himself as a ‘Stranger from Another World,’ and a ‘Man of Visions,’” and his art has illuminated his lofty claims, but all was not always so easy.¹⁷ Finster rose from a hard early life to world-wide fame for his artistic vision. He was born into poverty as one of a family of thirteen children in Valley Head, Alabama, in 1916, the son of a sawmill worker.¹⁸ The Finsters were “humble, and self-sufficient country folks, ‘hillbillies,’” who kept to themselves and did not attend church regularly.¹⁹

At the age of three, Finster had a life-altering vision of his sister Abbie while looking for his mother in one of the family’s tomato patches. Abbie Rose had died from complications with rabies and the family had kept it from Finster because he was only three years old. He recalled the vision vividly while discussing his life with Tom Patterson for the book, *Stranger From Another World: Man Of Visions Now on This Earth*. As Finster remembered the vision it began when he was crying out for his mother and he continues:

16 As previously discussed in the introduction to this work, the term “outsider art” is derived from the French term art brut, which came about in 1971. The subsequent art craze has spanned decades as the gap between traditional-art and untrained-art closes.

17 Howard Finster and Tom Patterson, *Stranger From Another World: Man Of Visions Now on This Earth* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989) pg. 9.

18 Beardsley, Gardens, pg. 76. and Finster and Patterson, pg. 9.

19 Finster and Patterson, pg. 9.

I looked up in the sky, and I seen my sister Abbie wearin’ a white gown comin’ down outta the sky on these steps. There was three steps behind her and three steps in front of her, and ever’ time she’d walk down a step, the last one behind her’d disappear and another one’d appear in front of her ... And when I first seen Abbie, she was about fifteen or twenty feet high - about the height of a house - and I watched her walk down them steps ... and after she got down that far, she turned right back up and started walkin’ back upwards. I called her name. I cried, “Abbie! Abbie!” I thought she’d help me since Mama wasn’t there. I don’t know why I didn’t think it was strange that Abbie was up in the air. But when I called her name as she was goin’ back up them stairs, she looked back at me over her shoulder, and it seemed like she said somethin’ to me, but I couldn’t understand what it was. And then she just disappeared. She was gone. And there I stood - no mother, no Abbie, no nothin’. So I was frightened, and all I could do was go home.²⁰

The young Finster returned home to search for his sister, but his mother told him of Abbie’s death and explained how it was impossible for him to have seen her. He never forgot or gave up believing that he had seen his sister in the sky that day, he said that, “it’s the basic vision of all visions I ever had since then. It was the foundation for my visions, and it stabilizes all my visions. It’s the hard rock o’ my faith in my visions.”²¹ At thirteen years old he “got saved” after a school-teacher suggested that he attend the Christian revival that took place in the schoolhouse during the

20 Finster and Patterson, pg. 32-33.

21 Finster and Patterson, pg. 35.

6: Hand-painted scriptures along with original pieces of Howard Finster's art fill the property.

He started his career in small Baptist churches, revivals, and at times off the back of his pickup truck in the center of town. During the early part of his ministry he used strictly Fundamentalist Baptist ideology that was, and still is, prevalent throughout the American South. He focused mainly on sinners turning away from their worldly lives to live for Jesus in order to avoid hell and its eternal damnation. Finster began with these types of messages but moved away from the heavy-handed "fire and brimstone" style of preaching as he developed his oratorical abilities.

²² Tommy Littleton, Howard Finster's Paradise Gardens Park and Museum: A Georgia NonProfit. Updated 4 June 2010. Accessed 19/6/2010. < <http://finstersparadisegardens.org/howardfinster.html> >. and Finster and Patterson, pg. 9. and Finster and Patterson, pg. 58.

²³ Finster and Patterson, pg. 59.

evening.²² He was baptized the same year and "everything just seemed different" from then on.²³ He dropped out of school shortly after he committed his life to Jesus but he was not done with education, instead of being the student, Finster says he distinctly felt God calling him to preach. A few years later, at the age of only sixteen he gave his first sermon in the same church where he was saved, and he never stopped.

Howard Finster married Pauline on a borrowed five dollars along with an offer to continue living and working at his parents' farm. The pair lived happily until better work opened up in Trion, Georgia where his sister had also found work. She offered the young couple a place to live. The family grew while living in the small shared house, so that eventually they needed to add on more space to accommodate their five children.²⁴

All the while, he continued preaching in tent revivals, river baptisms, and small churches, but none of the jobs lasted for more than a few years. In 1950, he settled into a steady preaching job at the Chelsea Baptist Church in Menlo, Georgia which lasted for fifteen years. To supplement the meager income he earned by preaching, Finster did odd jobs like carpentry, some mechanic work and small appliance repair. He even worked a long stint in a textile mill, but through it all he always found time to do projects at home.

In the late 1940s, Finster began constructing what he called "a museum park" on his home property in Trion, Georgia, where he wanted to showcase all of the creations of mankind. He worked for nearly a decade on the backyard park but he ran out of space for all he had hoped to accomplish. Eventually he uprooted his family and relocated to an old house, which he promptly rebuilt, in the town of Pennville, just south of Trion.²⁵ Finster attempted to relocate all his

²⁴ Finster and Patterson, pg. 73.

²⁵ The small hamlet of Pennville is located between Trion and Summerville, but due to the growth of Summerville, Pennville is now

sculptures from his first museum park in Trion, but the lot was not large enough for a house and his sculptures. Over the next few years Finster purchased several adjoining lots, which in total added up to over two acres of property. He worked every day to support his family either by preaching or working as a handyman in the shop he built on the property, but always finding a spare minute to fill in the marshy swamp land in order to construct a larger display area for his sculptures and miniature buildings.²⁶ The garden came together easily for Finster and he claimed that once he "got to workin' on that garden it seem like the whole thing was blueprinted by God..."²⁷

Initially, Finster saw the garden as an example of "God's creation," saying that "the world started with a beautiful garden, so why not let it end with a beautiful garden?"²⁸ He planted fruit trees, flowers, and bushes, and attempted to attract wildlife so that the garden would be similar to the Garden of Eden. He called his garden the Plant Farm Museum.²⁹ He collected bits of discarded things, anchoring them into mounds of concrete, forming them into hubcap trees, mosaic walkways, bottle buildings, and miniature houses throughout the two acre garden. Finster channeled the swamp water into

considered an outlying part of the town. The Paradise Garden can be found using Summerville for the official address.

26 Beardsley, Gardens, pg. 76.

27 Finster and Patterson, pg. 107.

28 Finster and Patterson, pg. 106.

29 Sloan and Manley, Self-Made, pg. 59.

streams and pools, added hand-painted signs, and constructed raised planters. In the early years of construction, Finster "had a vision of a large man floating over the garden, commanding him to 'get on the altar.'"³⁰ It was this event that changed the purpose of the garden. Finster began to use the site as an extension of his evangelism saying, "I built this garden to tell folks about Jesus.... to do the work I'm supposed to do for God on Earth's planet."³¹

A few years later another event occurred that shifted his focus away from the pulpit toward his garden. One Sunday evening, in 1965, Finster requested that his congregation recall a Sunday morning sermon, and "no one did!" The inability to truly reach his audience struck him deeply and he gave up "church preaching," retiring from the Chelsea Baptist Church permanently.³² He turned his focus to improving his small "Plant Farm Museum," and doing repair work to support his family.

In the same year, Finster's art began to receive some national acclaim on the folk art scene and the demand for his sculpture took up much of his time. The backyard collection of found objects was still ridiculed by neighbors and the locals who saw it, not as art, but as piles of trash and junk, but art enthusiasts were purchasing the

30 Beardsley, Garden, pg. 77.

31 Quote from Howard Finster on the wall of the Visitor's Center at the Paradise Gardens. and Finster and Patterson, pg. 107.

32 Finster and Patterson, pg. 85. See also: Littleton, < <http://finstersparadisegardens.org/howardfinster.html> >.

pieces at a rapid pace. The local people thought of him as crazy and Finster likened himself to the Biblical Noah building his ark while everyone around him watched with scorn.³³ But vindication came for him when his little garden began to receive national attention outside the art world from magazines like *Esquire*, *People* and *Life*. It was his appearance on the Johnny Carson Show that silenced his neighbors' concerns permanently.³⁴

The latter part of the sixties and into the seventies saw most of the serious construction occur at the two-acre lot. But Finster claims that he "didn't have no idea to be an artist till [he] had a that vision in 1976." One day when he was working as an appliance repairman fixing televisions, lawn mowers and whatever else people brought him, Finster had a vision that united his religious convictions with his artistic passions permanently,

One day I was workin' on a patch job on a bicycle, and I was rubbin' some white paint on that patch with this finger here, and I looked at the round tip o' my finger, and there was a human face on it. I could see it plain as day. And right then a warm feelin' come over my body, and a voice spoke to me and said, "Paint sacred art." And I recognized that feelin' as a holy feelin', and I knew that was God talkin' to me, and I didn't think I could do it. I didn't think I was capable. And so I says, "I can't." I says, "Others can do it, but not me." ... And that voice come to me again and says, "How do you know?" And I says, "How do I know?" It pays people to talk to

³³ Beardsley, Garden, pg. 80.

³⁴ Beardsley, Garden, pg. 80. See also: Finster and Patterson, pg. 121.

their self once in a while, if they got somethin' talkin' to 'em.³⁵

Finster immediately took a dollar bill out, taped it to a board and attempted to paint a portrait of George Washington from the dollar bill. He discovered, right then, that he could paint, and he has "been paintin' ever since."³⁶ It was this vision that

7: A George Washington portrait painted by Finster on an old refrigerator.

shifted his focus from sculptural garden elements to painted artwork. Finster painted sacred art for the remainder of his extensive career. Prior to the 1976 vision, Finster created within his garden as an

extension of his evangelism, but the command to "paint

sacred art" shifted his focus toward reaching people with the art itself, from the garden to the painted artwork as the evangelical tool. Almost immediately the paintings included scripture verses and religious ideology as either the focal point or an addition to the subject (as in the portrait of George Washington, Finster added scripture around Washington's face).

The art that Finster created meshed his beliefs about the end-of-the-world and the imminent second coming of

³⁵ Finster and Patterson, pg. 123-124 and also found as a quote on the wall of the Visitor's Center at the Paradise Gardens.

³⁶ Finster and Patterson, pg. 124.

Jesus, both ideas directly out of the Fundamentalist Baptist tradition. But Finster was also a man of the American South who celebrated American inventiveness and creativity, along with the nation as a whole. He celebrated the lives of the presidents, people of the Bible, celebrities, popular heroes, and musicians equally throughout the garden to unite the “broken pieces to try to mend a broken world of people.”³⁷ Finster took scraps of discarded materials to create an incredibly unique space that still manages to tie in completely with the Rosen definition of a folk art environment.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s Finster continued to create new paintings and sculptures. In the early 80's Finster began selling art specifically to raise money to purchase a small church on the backside of his property that had been placed up for sale. He used money from the National Endowment for the Arts grant and the monthly commission checks he was receiving from a gallery owner in Chicago who was selling his artwork. The church was crumbling when he bought it and he “had a vision to build that big steeple on top of it and a big solar heat room on the back with windows all over it.”³⁸ He worked tirelessly to complete the work on the “World’s Folk Art Chapel” which he described as a place for “ever’body’s art, not just mine. It’s a art headquarters.”³⁹ The chapel was completed in 1986 and filled with artwork

37 Beardsley, Garden, pg. 78.

38 Finster and Patterson, pg. 149.

39 Finster and Patterson, pg. 153.

done by Finster and others from the surrounding community, including some of the Finster children and grandchildren.

8: One of the human-size Coca Cola bottles that Finster was commissioned for.

was “impressed by God to do 5,000 pieces o’ art... in 1976” and nearly ten years later he completed his mission, but he did not plan on retiring from art just then, he wanted to “keep makin’ enough art for all these people that want it.”⁴¹ During all

40 Littleton, < <http://finstersparadisegardens.org/howardfinster.html> >.

41 Finster and Patterson, pg. 202.

of his artistic success Finster never lost sight of his focus on spreading the Biblical message which he did with fervor during all public appearances until his death on October 22, 2001. Howard Finster was one of the most prolific folk artists that has ever lived. The sheer quantity of his painted work and quality of the craftsmanship of the sculptures in his garden speak to his talent.

After his death his descendants sought to maintain the Paradise Gardens. The huge notoriety and success of Finster led to an increased need for security around the house, chapel and surrounding two acre property because outsiders would sneak in and steal whatever seemed sellable on the folk art scene. The Garden has been stripped of its former glory by both vandals and the family members who have removed pieces of art to have as keepsakes. While some of the art pieces have been moved inside some others have been

9: The famous original entryway to the Paradise Gardens that has been fenced off and is now nearly grown over with kudzu.

sold off during times of financial crisis in order to provide funding for the site. The family formed a nonprofit *Howard Finster's Paradise Gardens Park and Museum*, to direct and oversee the

site and all funds donated for its preservation.

Along with the official board of directors came changes to the layout of the Paradise Gardens to control the flow of visitors and to curb theft. Major fencing was added with barbed wire, the entrance and exit was moved to the corner of the property to allow visitors to pass through a small gallery in order to enter the Gardens. While these changes are cosmetic they have left a lasting toll on the layout of the site. The original entrance, once a grand cement entryway, is now fenced in with chain-link, so that visitors are simply unable to see the immense amount of work that went into its creation. In order to maintain the site the board has sold several large sculptural pieces to galleries and many of the small individual works to collectors. What is left has been picked over by looters, leaving a rather vacant feel when compared to older photographs. Iconic Howard

10: The beautiful World's Folk Art Chapel from afar.

Finster sculptures like the Hubcap Tree have been nearly lost to the kudzu vine, but the board of directors has begun an extensive Chapel restoration project that according to

Finster's grandson Andy Wilson, has taken up most of their recent attention.

The revival spirit has diminished throughout the grounds since the death of Howard Finster. The few pieces of original artwork that remain have been bolted down and several areas have been repainted by Finster's descendants. Although some of the most notable areas are present, like the old main gate, the swamp has reclaimed the majority of the property, making it unpassable. The huge success that Howard Finster achieved on the folk art scene and in the national media spotlight allowed for the family's unique method for site preservation, but it doesn't seem to be working. The remaining Finster generations and the devotees of the site have proven themselves unable to raise enough funding to keep the nonprofit afloat or do much needed restorations to site structures. Earlier this year the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation put the Paradise Gardens on the 2010 Places in Peril List. In March of 2010 Chattooga County received a \$70,000 grant from the Appalachian Regional commission to be used for purchasing the property from the nonprofit officially. Although the full purchase price is unknown, the county plans to use no taxpayer dollars and to privately raise the rest in order to assume control of the site. Tommy Littleton, the current head of the board of directors for the Gardens, is positive about county ownership, stating that he believes it will

make the site more "stable and secure."⁴² Littleton believes that more people will be willing to donate to a site that is government-owned than a nonprofit with little oversight. Despite the current preservation questions, the one thing that is not being debated is that the site needs help in the form of more money and volunteers, and a state or federal designation as a historic site.

11: Finster self-portrait with a favored quote.

Prior to leaving the amazing site I got to talk with Howard Finster's grandson Andy Wilson about the chapel restoration project, the future goals, and his memories of his "Pappy." He expressed deep-seated fears about the future success of the site, citing current cash flow issues. I was most deeply touched by his admission that he had sold all of his original Howard Finster paintings to make money, and now

only had reproductions hanging on his walls at home. The future for these environmental artists and their sites is up in the air without some sort of official designation as a valued place deserving of preservation!

⁴² Ginger, "Howard Finster Is Back Home In Alabama" Deep Fried Kudzu (posted on Tuesday August 17, 2010) < <http://www.deepfriedkudzu.com/2010/08/howard-finster-is-back-in-alabama.html> > (accessed: 8/19/2010).

Chapter Four:
Reverend W. C. Rice and his
Miracle Cross Garden

12: Rice built hundreds of crosses and painted messages on most types of discarded household appliances.

It took a long time to find the right place. It was mid afternoon and the sky was rapidly darkening with big, grey, thunderheads—it looked like it was going to rain but I had not even figured out exactly where I needed to be. The directions I got were sketchy, "both sides of County Road 86, near Prattville, Alabama." It was not exactly an address. Once

I figured out what I was doing, I was on my way and it did not

take long for the site to appear looming over the street. The impression made by the huge crosses and old appliances stained with red paint made for an oddly interesting afternoon.

William Carlton Rice was born in 1930 in rural Woodstock, Alabama just north of Montgomery. His early years are relatively unknown outside his immediate family. What is known is that he attended public school through the eighth

grade, but then dropped out to find work in the mid-forties. As a young man he married his wife Marzell and fathered four children. He lived a normal life, without consequence or calling until April 24, 1960 at 2 am; the day that W. C. Rice recalls as the exact time of his religious salvation. He had been suffering from stomach ulcers, when early in the morning hours Rice prayed for the pain to stop and to be saved from his sins. He explains it like a bolt of lightning, "I came out of that chair, I spit tobacco all over the refrigerator, it went all over the floor, and he healed my ulcerated stomach."⁴³ He was miraculously cured of the stomach pain, and he refers to that day as his "spiritual birthday" dedicating his life journey to save others from their sinful ways.⁴⁴

Rice began his ministry by painting a small Datsun truck red and adorning it with black crosses and scriptures.⁴⁵ He would drive through the small towns of rural Alabama to preach to passersby and anyone who would stop to listen. Rice devoted his life, after his spiritual birthday, to evangelism. The red pick-up truck still sits on the property but it is no longer the focal point for visitors.

The Miracle Cross Garden did not begin with his personal spiritual birthday, but the deathbed conversions to

43 Timothy K. Beal, *Roadside Religion: In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005) pg. 123.

44 Barbara Knight, "On a hill far away... Cross garden reveals Prattville man's faith." *The News Record: The Montgomery Advertiser*. Wednesday, September 15, 1999. <http://www.thecross-photo.com/William_C._Rice%27s_Cross_Garden.htm> (accessed: 12/6/2010).

45 Harold Blank, *Wild Wheels*. (Berkeley, CA: Blank Books, 1994) pg. 24-25.

Christianity of his parents; Annie Mae Hyde Rice died in April of 1976 and Carlton Rice in January of 1977. The deaths were a great loss to W. C. Rice and in his grief he "felt called by God to put up his first cross."⁴⁶ The initial shrine started small in the Rice home above the back door, where he had placed small tracts in the shape of a cross. One had a Bible verse on it, John 3:16, the other two had the names of his parents, like tombstones. The three pieces of paper that form the first cross of the garden are "both an acknowledgment of death ... and a proclamation of victory over death" in Christian salvation.⁴⁷ According to Timothy Beal, author of *Roadside Religion* and interviewer of W. C. Rice, the loss of both of the parents within one year of each other, coupled with their last minute conversions, created great "inner tension between grief and joy that goes to the very core of Christian faith and that is symbolized most profoundly by the Cross." The cross is a symbol of a horrible death but, it is also a symbol that Jesus overcame death through the Resurrection. Rice was dealing with the emotional issues of grief for the loss of his parents but also joy at their salvation. The cross was his beacon of hope.⁴⁸

In 1977, soon after the initial interior memorial, Rice had a divine calling to "move the symbols of his faith outside" but he was dismayed because it was "not something

46 Beal, pg. 124.

47 Beal, pg. 125.

48 Beal, pg. 125.

that people are used to seeing in a man's yard."⁴⁹ But he followed what he was called to do and planted three large black crosses, like those at Calvary, in his front yard. His concern about the shrine remained but he continued to get divine "calls to plant more and more crosses," and the anxiety about neighbors disappeared over time.⁵⁰ The ideas for the layout and materials come from vivid dreams that Rice believes are from God saying that he would "see a whole new installation in minute detail, as though already completed: air conditioner housings, for example, painted with specific messages about how there's no ice water in hell, running up his driveway." The revelations were not limited to Cross Garden layouts but also the eventual salvation of the whole Rice family. He had been known to make direct correlations between his life and the life of the Biblical Noah, detailing how they both shepherded their families to salvation from a dying world.⁵¹

Rice spent the remaining 27 years adding to the original three crosses. He expanded along the roadside in front of his home, down to the property line on both sides, and

49 Knight, <http://www.thecross-photo.com/William_C._Rice%27s_Cross_Garden.htm > (accessed: 12/6/2010).

50 Beal, pg. 126.

51 Noah is a very common theme throughout the salvation folk art environmental community. Biblically, Noah was ostracized from his neighbors when he began following God's call to build a huge ark in order to save his family and livestock from the impending rain. The contemporary environmental artists associate with the idea of being different and shunned from the people around them, but at the same time they feel that they are doing what is right, what is necessary and required by God - just like Noah.

across the street where he built a small chapel. All the crosses and signs are lettered with white, red, or black paint which symbolizes the the purity, the blood, and the death of Christ in this world.⁵² Each sign harkens to the need for redemption with sayings like "Heaven or Hell Jesus or the Devil," and "Hell is Hot Hot Hot." The lettering is cast on nearly every type of discarded household appliance, including refrigerators, ovens, radiators, air conditioners and washing machines. Above the appliances stand the wooden crosses, each with a message, and according to statements made by Rice they are meant to point the way to heaven. As the site grew Rice expanded his project to include a replica of

13: The three highest crosses above the property along with the red paint decorated rocks that lined the roadside.

the manger scene from the Bible, headstones with his parents epitaphs, a warning against the ills of drunkenness, and about the evils of sex "used wrong."

During the twenty years of primary construction the site became a local and international attraction for people seeking everything from photographs of the "religious zealot" to salvation for their souls. Rice kept a guest book in the living

52 Debora Gordon, "The Pilgrimage: Visionary Worlds in Six Southern States" No39: Number: An Independent Journal Of The Arts, The Visionary Art Issue (Memphis, Tennessee: Number: Incorporated, a non-profit, 2001) pg. 14.

room of his home that kept an informal record of the people who came to visit, gawk, learn, and talk with the well known creator of the Miracle Cross Garden. Although his work had received some accolades, Rice was adamant about the his lasting intent to “warn people that they better get ready to die” and to save their souls for Jesus.⁵³ He delivered sermons from a bench in front of the small chapel and people from the surrounding countryside would gather to hear him speak. Rice also printed a small newsletter, the *Centerville Press*, that detailed the many souls that the site had rescued, many of the saved were from his own family.⁵⁴ Toward the end of his life he was considerably limited in his movements but he still welcomed people into his home to

14: At one time Rice distributed his newsletter from these mailboxes.

53 Knight, <http://www.thecross-photo.com/William_C._Rice%27s_Cross_Garden.htm > (accessed 12/6/2010).

54 Frederic Allamel, “Sacred Spaces and Mythmaking: A Sociological Perspective on Southern Environmental Art,” *Sacred and Profane: Voice and Vision in Southern Self-Taught Art*. Carol Crown and Charles Russell Eds. (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) pg. 25.

newspaper, the Montgomery Advisor, reported then that the family, including the widow Marzell, wished to “keep the Cross Garden going” and that they may want to add on in the future.⁵⁵

The fiery language that W. C. Rice used in the environment and in his preaching is typical of the fundamentalist wing of the Baptist Church. The fear-based sermons, that pressed all people to turn toward Jesus in order to be saved from the fires of hell, were typical in the South and can be found as the basis for many art environments. There is a wide spectrum of beliefs within the Baptist denomination, the fundamentalist fringe concepts are expressed by Rice, while the more mainstream beliefs are represented by Howard Finster, with his adherence to a more love-based ideology.

Preserving Reverend W. C. Rice’s site, which to most people consists of what seem to be haphazardly strewn broken household appliances and crosses all covered with splattered red paint and frightening hellish slogans, is problematic. It is incredibly susceptible to weather deterioration, vandalism, and the ever-present creeping kudzu vine that threatens to eventually take over everything. Adding another piece to the preservation puzzle for the site is the fact that after the death of W. C. Rice, his family made public statements about continuing to build and add-on with their own artistic elements, thus making it an ongoing environment. Not a preservation issue at all! The hindrance

55 Knight, Accessed 12/6/2010. <http://www.thecross-photo.com/William_C._Rice%27s_Cross_Garden.htm >.

is that the family may want to change the existing site so much that it no longer resembles the original environment that drew so much attention, criticism, and acclaim. Its deterioration or destruction would be a serious loss.

Halfway through photographing and touring the unique site, a massive thunderstorm rolled in and I was trapped outside in the Alabama rain. The warm mid-afternoon showers only added to the ominous feeling that the site evoked from the outset. As I sat in the car and waited out the heaviest of the rain, I pondered just how many of the declarations of "24 saved" were because of the site or because of the boisterous personality of W. C. Rice. How is this site considered "art" compared to that of Finster? But in the end I decided that W.C. Rice had just as much drive to create as Finster, despite his prevalence for broken appliances. Who am I to judge which art is better?

15: View of one side of the Cross Garden.

Chapter Five:
Reverend H. D. Dennis
Margaret's Grocery and Market

16: The front of Margaret's Grocery Store.

Vicksburg,
Mississippi
has a rich
historical past
that constantly
juxtaposes
antebellum
with art deco,
traditional with
modern, and the
past with the
present. As I
drove into town I
passed a national
cemetery for
the soldiers of
the Civil War
along with a

sixteen mile strip of the Vicksburg battleground site and the
historic downtown district arrived and faded into residential
housing in a blur. I continued on until the houses grew less
dense and there on the outskirts of the town I came upon my

destination. On the side of the road a bright yellow, red, pink and blue building with cinder block spires appeared with a small sign, "Margaret's Grocery."

Howard D. Dennis was born in 1916 as the only surviving child of nine born to his mother, who herself died giving birth to him. He was raised by his grandmother until the age of twelve when his grandmother died, leaving him an orphan twice over. He ran away to work for a cotton grower, and at the young age of nineteen he began preaching.⁵⁶ At twenty-two, in 1938, he became an ordained Baptist minister. He preached for a few years before being shipped off to the South Pacific with the Army for duty during World War II.⁵⁷ After the war Dennis moved to Atlanta to pursue an education on the G. I. Bill, but high wages in the Detroit, Michigan auto industry pulled him to the Midwest. He lived there for twenty-one years before returning to his home state of Mississippi in the early 1970s.⁵⁸

Reverend Dennis's life was turned upside down when in 1980 he met Margaret Rogers, the proprietor of a small grocery store on the north side of Vicksburg, Mississippi.

⁵⁶ Jantje Blokhuis-Mulder, "Folk Art Life: Deep South Preaching: Margaret's Grocery Store." Online, Accessed 12/07/2010. < <http://www.folkartlife.com/articles/margaretsgrocery.shtml> >

⁵⁷ Frederic Allamel, "Sacred Spaces and Mythmaking: A Sociological Perspective on Southern Environmental Art," Sacred and Profane: Voice and Vision in Southern Self-Taught Art. Carol Crown and Charles Russell Eds. (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) pg. 28.

⁵⁸ Roger Manley and Mark Sloan. Self-Made Worlds: Visionary Folk Art Environments (New York: Aperture, 1997) pg. 74.

After a short while the Reverend proposed a deal, "if she would marry him, he would turn her store into a palace."⁵⁹ She became his fifth wife. He subsequently worked to construct a roadside attraction, grocery store, and house of worship all together in one building, and he was able to create a place which has become known around the country and the world.

17: The thirty foot tall cinder-block towers stood throughout the property.

The site is constructed mainly of cinderblocks and cement painted various colors to create a toy-building-block effect. He collected many formerly discarded objects which have become permanent parts of the landscape and the building's structure. Dennis understood that he needed to lure drivers off the road in order to preach his message of salvation, so he used bright colors and interesting signage.⁶⁰ Once he had visitors off the road the Reverend would move them to sit in his old school bus, where he would stand at the helm to preach. He discussed

⁵⁹ Manley and Sloan, pg. 74.

⁶⁰ Manley and Sloan, pg. 74.

18: Dennis created and hand painted scripture filled billboards.

the “evils of the modern world” and the sins of gambling.⁶¹ The messages and ideas are mirrored in the signage on which Dennis hand-painted Bible versus and personal ideology.

The artistic, patriotic, and spiritual leanings of Dennis are similar

to both Finster and Rice. Dennis and Finster each chose to honor the United States in their artwork, but all three show the same dedication to God and a focus on evangelical salvation through preaching to the visitors at their site, so they are very similar in that way.

Along with his fervor for preaching, the Reverend is also an active member of the Prince Hall Masonic Lodge, a local branch of the Masons, and has been for many years. Dennis’s Army experience gave him a lasting love for his country which was continually bolstered by his work with the Masonic Lodge. The site is full of Biblical messages, Masonic symbols, and Americana, making it an interesting amalgamation of the, at times, discordant source doctrines.

⁶¹ “Mississippi Folklife and Folk Artist Directory.” “Margaret’s Grocery: Vernacular Art Environment, Vicksburg.” Mississippi Arts Commission. 2002-2009. Accessed 11/06/2010. < http://www.arts.state.ms.us/folklife/artist.php?dirname=margarets_grocery >.

But Dennis is adamant about sharing his faith with everyone who ventures a stop into the grocery store. He wants to share about his life and how God saved him for purpose, and how God will do the same for them if they only believe.⁶²

In 2004, Margaret Dennis died, leaving the Reverend without a muse for his ongoing art project. Shortly thereafter the ailing Reverend Dennis moved off the property. He now lives offsite, visiting the site regularly, but it has fallen into disrepair without a vigilant caretaker. The omnipresent kudzu has overwhelmed the tallest tower and has begun to grow into the old school bus. The signs proclaiming the message to the drivers on US Highway 61 are so faded that they have become illegible. On Monday August 16, 2010, the local paper, *The Vicksburg Post*, ran an article about what the city of Vicksburg is doing to preserve the site.

The death of Margaret sent “ripples of concern about the future of the unique Vicksburg attraction” throughout the art community and around the world.⁶³ The official duty of determining what to do with the site has fallen to Mary Margaret Miller, the Heritage Program director of the Mississippi Arts Commission, who typically deals with Civil War relics, not art environments. The site is officially owned by the Cool Springs M. B. Church which the Reverend

⁶² Jantje Blokhuis-Mulder, “Folk Art Life: Deep South Preaching: Margaret’s Grocery Store.” Online, Accessed 12/07/2010. < <http://www.folkartlife.com/articles/margaretsgrocery.shtml> >.

⁶³ Pamela Hitchins, “Community Trying to Save Vicksburg Attraction”, *The Vicksburg Post*. Monday, Aug. 16, 2010. Accessed 17/08/2010. Online archives: <http://www.sunherald.com/2010/08/16/2408468/community-trying-to-save-vicksburg.html> >.

19: One of the handcrafted signs created by Dennis to pull people off the highway.

and Margaret Dennis attended. They sold the property under the condition that they were able to live and maintain the property as long as they were able, and then the church would get it

when they could not. But the church members are now pressing for the creation of a non-profit to help with the funding needed to preserve the site. The Arts Commission could be a valuable resource for preserving Margaret's Grocery by making sure that it gets seen just as much as the other art galleries in the downtown district.

I stood across the street taking in the whole of the site, from the old school bus to the ornate store front, and I could see the remnants of how it used to look at its peak. I managed to take a picture of the front, but I left feeling that the spirit of the place was not what it once was without Margaret and Howard Dennis.

Chapter Six: Kenny Hill's Sculpture Garden

20: Kenny Hill's angels look like they are effortlessly flying thorough the air.

Driving south through Louisiana Cajun country into the Mississippi River Delta feels like sailing without touching the water. Nearly everywhere I went was on a series of interconnected bridges that rose above the water, the water was still close enough so that the drowned remnants of trees could be seen silhouetted on the skyline. It had an eerie quality and I felt as if I shouldn't be here; people were never meant to drive here. But I continued on. I drove south along the shrimp boat-filled Bayou Petit Caillou and stared at all the homes on stilts. At times I felt like I was below the water-line as I

drove parallel to the delta and then I saw a lighthouse through some trees. There was a small lot filled with brightly colored statues. I had made it to the Sculpture Garden!

Kenny Hill led a mysterious life before settling on a small plot of land to construct his sculpture garden. He was born in 1950 and married at the age of twenty to a girl of only fourteen. The pair had three children in a small town 60 miles west of the town of Chauvin. In 1988, Hill left his family and moved into Chauvin. He rented property on the bayou for \$250 a year but it had no dwelling so he lived in a tent. Hill did various masonry and bricklaying jobs to support himself and he eventually built himself a small shack.

21: Looking back from the bayou side of the property on all the sculptures.

In 1990, Hill began to sculpt religious scenes outside his small home without explanation or encouragement. He scavenged most of his sand and bricks from his job sites and other nearby construction areas. Hill even outsourced some welding that he did not know how to do to a neighbor who constructed the metal underpinning for several of the sculptures.⁶⁴ Over the years Hill created one hundred individual statues along with the

22: Two images of Kenny Hill: in the foreground as the horseman to the apocalypse; in the background he is freeing an eagle surrounded by angels.

⁶⁴ The shack is no longer on the property and none of his personal possessions have survived. The house he built was removed and the lot it sits on is now used to display other works of art that Nicholls State owns.

him as a horseman of the Apocalypse and in another he is seated near the gates of hell. The Sculpture Garden takes each visitor on a journey through the personal emotional and religious torment of Hill. It evokes feelings of condemnation and salvation, of fear and joy, good and evil, all of which speak to the personal history of Kenny Hill as a man. In statements he made during construction he declared the site a "story of salvation."⁶⁵

After a small fight with the landlord over the issue of mowing the grass, Kenny Hill concluded his artistic endeavor in Chauvin, Louisiana in 2000. He decapitated the Jesus Christ

23: The figure of Jesus carrying the cross.

⁶⁵ Leslie Umberger, *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007) pg. 413.

⁶⁶ Pegi Taylor, *The Art Of Disappearing: Folk Artist Kenny Hill Left a Decade's Work on the Banks of a Louisiana Bayou, Then Vanished*, Salon.com. Accessed 17/07/2010. <<http://www.salon.com/people/feature/2001/01/24/hill>>.

was a loner who was not well known to his neighbors or the other people in town except as the builder of the statues, so no one noticed when he left permanently without packing. The couple who owned the land that Hill had been renting put it up for sale immediately after he left town, but few were interested in it with the huge sculpture garden.⁶⁷

Hill has been put into several categories of art, "environmental," "outsider," and even "psychotic" because of his sense of urgency with the project stemming from his belief that the world was coming to an end. He was a recluse who believed he saw angels everywhere, but even his delusional statements and rants did not detract from his creations which are strangely beautiful. When word spread that Hill had relocated, immediate efforts were made to secure funding to preserve the site. Several scholars and artists had taken interest in the site during its construction, most notably Dennis Sipiorski, the head of the art department at nearby Nicholls State University. It was he who contacted the Kohler Foundation, which is based out of the professor's home town of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, to plead for the site's immediate preservation.⁶⁸

The Kohler Foundation visited in February 2000, and they helped to purchase the land and do all necessary restoration at the site. Nicholls State University agreed to be the long-term steward of the site, to maintain the vegetation, and to

⁶⁷ Currently the Jesus figure in the Sculpture Garden is undergoing restoration on one arm which was damaged in the recent hurricanes.

⁶⁸ Umberger, pg. 414.

establish a visitor's center across the street. Both Nicholls State and the Kohler Foundation worked to acquire permits from the Army Corps of Engineers to reinforce the bayou that abutted the property so the site could retain the land it had and not lose it to the water. The cohesive team of the University and the Foundation worked to bring in metal working experts and masons to ensure that the site will be able to withstand the forces of nature for a long time. The site still uses private funds from the Kohler Foundation to cover operating costs but the university prevails on preservation matters.

Kenny Hill was not a personable or outgoing man but in his absence his sculptures have brought together the people of Chauvin in an unlikely way. In 2006 the Nicholls Division of Art and the Friends of the Chauvin Sculpture Garden organized the Chauvin Folk Art Festival which brings together artists and musicians from all over Louisiana. The event also includes a blessing over the fleet on the Bayou Petit Caillou. The yearly celebration has grown since its inception and now it is one of the larger art festivals in the state.⁶⁹

As I wandered through the interlaced angels, archways, and Jesus figures, Kenny Hill's vision was overpowering. It

⁶⁹ "Kenny Hill Sculpture Garden" Chauvin Sculpture Garden: Nicholls State University Art Studio: Kohler Foundation and Nicholls State University. < <http://www.nicholls.edu/folkartcenter/exhibit.html> > (accessed: 15/4/2010).

was obvious that Hill believed that human sinners needed salvation through Jesus with the help of the angels that were all around. It was all visually stunning and I could not stop circling the tower, despite the stifling heat. I could not help but consider the contrast between the sites I had just seen, Rice and Hill, completely different and yet so similar in evangelical motivation. Kenny Hill's site was wondrous.

24: The figure of Jesus carrying the cross.

Chapter Seven: Leonard Knight's Salvation Mountain

25: Leonard Knight's Salvation Mountain

Driving to Salvation Mountain feels like leaving civilization and driving through hours of nuclear wasteland. The site sits adjacent to the Salton Sea in California's southern desert. As I approached the town of Niland I grew fearful that there had been some sort of wrong turn, that I had gone astray. The small, single level older homes, intermingled with mobile homes, RV's, and various travel trailers made up the bulk of the buildings. A few small store

fronts and a bar were the only signs of commercial life. The beacon of hope was a small, hand-painted, directional sign nailed to the roof corner of one of the few buildings that said "Salvation Mountain" with an arrow. I turned down the road quickly to find that the pavement ended soon thereafter. A bumpy few minutes later the object of the journey was visible in the distance. In the monotone brown flatness shone a bright colorful hill!

Leonard Knight began building Salvation Mountain, two miles outside of Niland, California in 1984, but the story as to why he felt compelled to construct a giant monument to bring people to God begins much earlier in his life. He was born across the country in Burlington, Vermont on November 1, 1931, as the fourth of six children. The mid-sized family farm of 32 acres was full of activity and chores which Knight recalls as, "too much work and not enough play."

Knight went to a small elementary school and high school but he dropped out after his sophomore year to work in the factory where his father was the foreman. He worked there until he was drafted, at the age of 20, to fight in the Korean War. Although he would have to leave home, the idea of travel was appealing, so he packed up and moved to Fort Knox, Kentucky where he was trained to be a tank mechanic and shipped out to Korea. Ten days later the war ended. He returned to Vermont after getting discharged from the Army.

The major turning point in Knight's life occurred on a

trip to visit his sister Irene in San Diego, California, in 1967. She had become a devout Christian and Knight was growing tired of her constant preaching. He resigned himself to sit in his van where he found himself repeating the sinner's prayer (footnote), and he recalls that on that Wednesday, at 10:30 in the morning, at age 35, his life was different. "His passion has been unwavering. His dedication is intense."⁷⁰

After returning to Vermont, Knight attempted to connect with church officials in his area but none of them believed that religion was as simple as he was trying to make it - "accept Jesus into your heart, repent your sins, and be saved."⁷¹ He was disheartened until one day in 1970, when he saw a hot air balloon fly over the town. Everyone was interested in the advertisement on the side and Knight, "had a lightbulb moment. I have to get one and put the words 'God is Love' on the side of it!"⁷²

For ten years he worked and prayed for the means to get a hot air balloon to spread the message of God's Love. Eventually he realized that he could make it himself, and he began his trip west in his van with a sewing machine and a dream. He stopped where he could, doing odd jobs and buying fabric. Over time he had managed to construct a huge

70 Bob Sims, "Salvation Mountain," <http://www.salvationmountain.us/index.html>, (Accessed 15/01/2010).

71 Bob Sims, "Salvation Mountain," <http://www.salvationmountain.us/index.html>, (Accessed 15/01/2010).

72 Leonard Knight, personal interview at Salvation Mountain, 28/12/2009.

balloon, all white with giant red letters proclaiming the message "God is Love."⁷³

In 1984, Knight moved just outside Niland, CA, to continue work on his balloon, but his labor of love was too unmanageable

26: The exterior of the new gallery addition to the site, with a portion of the donated paint in the foreground.

73 Bob Sims, "Salvation Mountain," <http://www.salvationmountain.us/index.html>, (Accessed 15/01/2010).

74 Slab City is an interesting place where people live for free on government land. There is no running water, sewers or electricity. Originally part of an army base, the slabs were poured to allow for RV camping once the base was decommissioned. It now sees many temporary visitors, seasonal "snowbirds," and a few hundred permanent "slabbers" who live there year round. The small community is home to a church, library, and communal showers, which keep the residents in close contact with one another despite the general aversion to others that drove them out there in the first place.

after he was gone.⁷⁵ Twenty-six years later, he continues working on his project, primarily using donated materials—free clay from the desert, donated hay to make the adobe, found objects collected from his Slab City neighbors, and, of course, the donations of paint that arrive almost daily.

27: The interior of the gallery with the fanciful trees.

Currently Knight is working to build a large gallery out of adobe to display the many accolades that Salvation Mountain has received. He is fashioning a forest with trees made of stacked tractor, truck, and car tires which he then fills with large branches and tree limbs from the desert. The whole sculpture is then plastered over with adobe mud and meshed into the adobe brick walls, ceiling and other trees. Then he paints each branch a different bright color, adding flowers, and decor as he sees fit. The effect looks like a Dr. Seuss world come to life.

75 "A Lifetime of Childlike Faith: The Leonard Knight Story". DVD. HeuMore Productions, produced by John Moore and David Heustis.

28: The tree trunks, covered in flowers, are constructed from old tires.

Although the site is a continuing environment, it has been through preservation scares which threatened to destroy it permanently. After working on his lasting monument for ten years, the site had gained limited notoriety, however the small dose of fame drew governmental intervention. In 1994, the Imperial County Board of Supervisors began to inquire about charging a fee for camping in the dismantled and generally deserted Fort Dunlap World War II Marine training base, known as Slab City. Salvation Mountain was an unwanted "religious monument" at the entrance to the new county campground. The County Supervisors determined that the site was full of hazardous waste and that it must be shut down to test for soil contaminants. Scientists arrived at the site to drill ten test wells and take water samples from all around the Mountain, but the county had signage posted immediately that warned people about the

Although the site is a continuing environment, it has been through preservation scares which threatened to destroy it permanently. After working on his lasting monument for ten years, the site had gained limited notoriety, however the small dose of fame drew governmental intervention. In 1994, the Imperial County Board of Supervisors

"toxic nightmare" and cautioned them to stay away. The County asked the State of California for funding to remove the toxic mess and relocate it to a nuclear waste dump in Nevada.

Knight was devastated, but he did not believe his monument to God could poison the groundwater or the land, so he took his own soil samples. He drove them to San Diego to have them tested by an independent lab and they came back clean with "no unacceptable levels of any contaminant."⁷⁶ The only paint that he had used that had any lead content had been given to him by workers from CalTrans.⁷⁷ With new, impartial test results and hundreds of signatures from local residents near the Mountain, Knight appealed to the Imperial County Board of Supervisors and was finally given permission to continue his project. He has continued, daily adding paint and sculptural elements.

29: The adobe gallery is under construction.

⁷⁶ Bob Sims, "Salvation Mountain," <http://www.salvationmountain.us/index.html>, (Accessed 15/01/2010).

⁷⁷ Leonard Knight told this story during our brief interview. He claimed that he has since attempted to get rid of as much of the old CalTrans paint as he could.

In 2002, after years of being left alone to build and talk about the site with visitors, the government stepped in again, but with good news for Salvation Mountain. Senator Barbara Boxer had heard of the site and its peril in the 1990s. She drafted a petition which outlined a brief history of the site and why it should be protected as a “national treasure,” and presented it to the 107th Congress on Wednesday May 15, in Washington, D.C.⁷⁸ It was approved and now it sits as the only federally protected folk art environment in the country.

Currently the site is more popular than it has ever been, because of recent footage in the film “Into The Wild,” in which Knight played himself. In addition, the site has been placed on both Google Maps and Google Earth. According to Knight, the number of visitors has increased from roughly forty per day to over one hundred. Giving each individual or group a “three minute tour” takes up most of his time.⁷⁹ He does the majority of the new painting and construction work in the early morning before the tourists arrive or after they leave with the aid of a flashlight. His age has caught up with him somewhat, so he moves a bit slower than he used to, but when, in February, an Imperial County Adult Protective Services social worker appeared at the site to check on Knight he was doing just fine, “scampering up his mountain as usual,” and she deemed him fit to continue.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Barbara Boxer, “Congressional Record” Salvation Mountain: Bibliography. < <http://www.salvationmountain.us/bibli.html> > (accessed 06/07/2010).

⁷⁹ Interview with Leonard Knight 28/12/2009.

⁸⁰ Tony Perry, “Salvation Mountain: One Man’s Monument to God’s Love,”

30: Leonard Knight poses in front of his creation.

After several hours at Salvation Mountain I found it hard to leave. I wanted to follow Leonard Knight all afternoon to listen to his stories and watch him work. Everywhere I went at the site I saw a different aspect of the art, his amazing craftsmanship, and Knight’s need to share God’s love with every visitor. It was an amazing adventure into the desert.

Los Angeles Times (20 May 2010) < <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/may/20/local/la-me-out-there-20100520> > (Accessed 15/08/2010).

Chapter Eight: Preservation

The preservation movement in America is subject to the American people and their unique historical world view as it pertains to the particular place or building that needs conservation. According to Robin Winks, former professor of history at Yale University, the very character of the nation is revealed in what it chooses to preserve out of the historical record. He argues that because of the comparatively short national history of the United States of America the push has been to preserve positive collective memories and that the "nation's pride is marked by that which it preserves."⁸¹

Throughout the history of the United States we have chosen to preserve some excellent things that recall our shared past and shine beacons into a desirable future—national parks, war battle sites, document archives, buildings, and art works—artifacts both great and small. Within each of these categories are dozens of subgroups that help officials and historians classify exactly what is being preserved and how to do it. In some instances a place fits more than one group, like a Civil War battleground with an intact plantation house on site, or an old church with a

⁸¹ Robin Winks, "Conservation in America: National Character as Revealed by Preservation" *The Future Of The Past: Attitudes To Conservation 1174-1974*. Jane Fawcett, eds. (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1976) pg. 142.

basement full of town archives, or a church that has been converted into an art gallery. These are all examples where the government has to decide if the site is going to be preserved at all. Over the last several decades more of an effort has been put forth into preserving sites which had formerly gone unnoticed or neglected. The benefit to future generations has come at a high cost financially to the federal government, and many times the sites will receive National Historic Site placards but no funding at all. While the absence of funds has been seen all over the nation in every area with historic landmarks, the detriment has been felt especially in the preservation of religious sites.

Throughout history buildings have been erected as shrines, monuments, and places of worship to nearly every deity. In the Judeo-Christian tradition within the United States, temples and churches are typically constructed to honor God. As time progresses, the sites become beautiful examples of architectural styles long lost. Current generations press to salvage them despite the overwhelming religious connotations because of their gothic design, adobe brickwork, or classic craftsmanship. There is not an inherent shift in the usage of a gothic style cathedral or a small two hundred year old parish church, but the age of the buildings has qualified the sites as historic and worthy of preservation efforts. The buildings lose some of their strictly religious affiliation and pick up other associations that relate to their surroundings in city centers or as

neighborhood cornerstones. In many instances a small group of dedicated people who are well connected to the building pressure local, state, and national organizations like the National Trust or the National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property (NIC) to garner special historic place designation for the site.⁸²

The national government designates old churches, synagogues, and burial grounds as historic sites and even grants federal funding toward preservation efforts after a 2003 move by the Justice Department to end the strictly separationist stance between church and state required by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. The Supreme Court ruled that the historic religious sites were eligible for funding based on their secular benefit to the communities and that the funding would only be provided to maintain the structures.⁸³ In order to receive funding a site (most commonly the non-profit associated with the building or site does the application) must apply for a grant through the Save America's Treasures program (SAT), which is administered through the National Park Service (NPS). One of the major qualifications of the SAT grant stipulates that the property has a "clear public benefit" as determined by the Office of the Legal Counsel of the United States Department of Justice.

82 National Institute for the conservation of Cultural Property, Inc., *Historic Buildings: A Study on the Magnitude of Architectural Conservation Needs in America* (Washington, D. C.: National Institute for the conservation of Cultural Property, Inc., 1984) pg. 1-4.

83 Caitlin Kramer "Moving Toward Neutrality: The Establishment Clause and America's Historic Religious Places" (MS Thesis, Historic Preservation: University of Pennsylvania, 2009) pg. 2.

The requirements go on to clarify that the benefit cannot be strictly

based on an assessment of the public value of the religious activities or character of the church, or for that matter of any of its current activities; it is based on the public value of being able to view, and learn from, the building and its place in our nation's history—on its accessibility to ordinary Americans. The conclusion that viewing the structure would be beneficial to the public derives from the structure's historic value not its religious value.⁸⁴

The addition of a public value assessment within the SAT program has allowed for the reevaluation of historic sites in a more holistic manner. Prior to the 2003 changes the sites were evaluated for aesthetic historic purposes, but now a site can be judged for its contemporary "economic, social, ecological" and historic values.⁸⁵ Every site has different characteristics that tie it to the human social network in which it sits and the SAT emphasis on public value places a finger on the pulse of that human connection. It provides a framework for evaluating connections so that conservation efforts can be made.

While assessing the public value of a particular building or place can be difficult, the ramifications of the landmark

84 U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Legal Counsel, Memorandum Opinion for the Solicitor, Department of the Interior. Authority of the Department of the Interior to Provide Historic Preservation Grants to Historic Religious Properties such as the Old North Church. 30 April 2003. pg. 88. . < <http://www.usdoj.gov/olc/OldNorthChurch.htm> > (Accessed 17 July 2008).

85 Kramer, pg. 3.

2003 shift in Supreme Court precedent makes a way for other religious sites, mainly environmental art sites, to gain preservation funding. In the case of Howard Finster's Paradise Gardens, which in the past was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant, can now in the artists absence, the site can apply for federal funding under SAT to help preserve it. While this example refers to an overtly artistic religious site, the idea that it should qualify for funding as an "asset to the secular public" remains valid. The religious nature of the art is overshadowed by the other elements within the site and the fact that preaching no longer occurs there means it adheres to the SAT guidelines.

The same interpretation of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause can be used to elicit federal funding for Reverend H. D. Dennis's Margaret's Grocery and Kenny Hill's Sculpture Garden, because neither site has ongoing religious services. Instead, Dennis has moved off site to a nursing home and Hill disappeared from Chauvin upon completing the sculptures. What remains are environments of colorful art with some Bible-inspired messages. The two art environments that are borderline for SAT funding are Leonard Knight's Salvation Mountain and W. C. Rice's Miracle Cross Garden. Knight still lives and preaches at Salvation Mountain, which causes a problem for some preservationists who choose to see it solely as a religious site and not as an artistic endeavor. The Miracle Cross Garden is a different preservation quandary. He died and left the site

to his family who wish to continue the vision. As an ongoing religious art environment the site is not really in the correct stage for preservation at this point. Perhaps when the site is completely finished it will be properly preserved.

Despite leniency from the national government on the issue of the strict separation of church and state when it pertains to religious site preservation, individual states have chosen to follow their own guidelines. The National Register of Historic Places detailed the exact qualifications necessary for a site to receive recognition and many of the states use the checklist in some form when determining the preservation qualifications of a site. The Georgia Historic Preservation Division (GHPD) incorporates state and local history into the National Register standards in order to preserve the significant aspects of Georgian history.⁸⁶ The combination of national and state guidelines create a two-pronged approach which has been used to diversify the sites saved throughout the state apart from the typical military or plantation arenas. But the guidelines are too narrow for art environments to pass, so Howard Finster's Paradise Garden remains unprotected as a historic Georgia site.

The Alabama Historical Commission (AHC) works in a similar fashion to that of the GHPD, closely following the recommended guidelines of the National Register along with

⁸⁶ Georgia Historic Preservation Division, "National Register & Georgia Register basic information" Updated: 8/11/2009. < <http://gashpo.org/content/displaycontent.asp?txtDocument=124> > (Accessed 12/04/2010).

state and local history to determine which sites should be designated as landmarks. Although the requirements for acceptance as a state historic landmark are less demanding, many sites that are unusual or atypical are excluded. The Miracle Cross Garden of W. C. Rice is a prime example of a site that has garnered world-wide attention but has yet to be recognized in its own Alabama backyard.⁸⁷

The Mississippi Department of Archives and History follows the evaluation system of the National Register of Historic Places when designating sites like the previous states. The difference is that Mississippi privatized the historic marker system, so that when a site is granted its historic status the organization applying must pay for the placard and do all its placement and upkeep on the site instead of the State Parks Department. They have found that this system has cut back on underfunded or poorly managed historic sites throughout the state, but it has also limited the number of sites that can afford the high cost of becoming a state historic site. Margaret's Grocery in Vicksburg has had huge interest from around the state, country, and world, but without the necessary funding to buy an official historic marker, the site remains in peril.⁸⁸

The Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and

⁸⁷ State of Alabama Historic Preservation Office "Alabama Historical Commission," < http://preserveala.org/alabamaregister.aspx?sm=f_b > (Accessed 12/04/2010).

⁸⁸ Mississippi Department of Archives and History, "Historic Preservation," < http://mdah.state.ms.us/hpres/nrhp_nom.php > (Accessed 12/04/2010).

Tourism oversees the Office of Cultural Development and the Division of Historic Preservation which determines the historicity of sites within the state. To do so it applies a strict five point nominating and eligibility system that uses the National Register almost exclusively as a reference. The rigid requirements have succeeded in restricting applicants for admittance into the Louisiana Register of Historic Places to traditionally historic sites. Meanwhile the sculptures of Kenny Hill in Chauvin are left unmarked as a historic site or even as a Louisiana place of interest. It has no special state or regional governmental accommodations at all to point visitors toward the fascinating site.⁸⁹

California has, by far, the most inclusive definition of what constitutes a historic site. Places that have significance within anthropological, cultural, military, political, architectural, economic, scientific or technical, religious, experimental, or other value, have the right to apply for and receive historic designation by the state. Despite the generally loose definition the paperwork process that either the landowner or the non-profit seeking historic status has to go through is rigorous and time consuming, and many sites lose patience before completion. Others, like Leonard Knight have never tried to apply for a State Historic Marker because he does not own the land on which his Salvation Mountain sits; without the proper title and deed

89 Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, "Office of Cultural Development and the Division of Historic Preservation," < <http://www.crt.state.la.us/HP/> > (accessed: 12/04/2010).

he cannot go through the process. The interesting point in this case is that the State of California owns the property, so if a historic site designation were going to be made, the government would have to do it for themselves. The only special governmental honor the site has received has been the Boxer congressional appeal to have it designated as a national treasure.

Overall, the five states involved have taken a different stance toward preservation and cultural heritage for the people and places within their borders, but each has fallen short in protecting the unique art environments that have been built. The odd nature of the art at the sites makes them ideal candidates for preservation, but it is exactly those qualities that drive some people into legal frenzies trying to get them bulldozed into the ground. Each environment was constructed from different materials and is subject to regional weather conditions so a standard preservation code that is applicable for all sites is unrealistic. Michael D. Hall, admirer and scholar of folk art, states, "For all their heroic size and formidable physical presence, the environments seem to be highly fragile and are vulnerable to vandalism and natural deterioration in a way that makes them among the most fugitive of folk art forms."⁹⁰ Each site needs special care and attention that can only come from a core group of people concerned with its

90 Michael D. Hall, "Memory and Mortar: Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park," in *Stereoscopic Perspective: Reflections on American Fine and Folk Art* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1988): pg. 174.

preservation on a local, day-to-day basis, but also needs a broad protection umbrella that would come from state historic site status and placement on the National Register of Historic Places.

Not one of the five sites has any state or national protection in the form of a historical marker or designation,⁹¹ but each has a separate group that has sprung up alongside it to see that it is somewhat cared for. Most the groups are local people who step in once the creator becomes unable to continue or dies. They are people who may have known the creator personally, family members or close friends, or strangers who are drawn to the artwork, and they work to file papers, fundraise, and maintain the properties until something more stable can be arranged.

The stability comes from large non-profits that, at times, span multiple states and offer large bankrolls to help the smaller local groups influence city officials, gather financial support, and unite people behind the cause. The best example of this unity is the case of Kenny Hill's Sculpture Garden in Chauvin, Louisiana, whose creator deserted the site leaving neighbors and townspeople at a loss for what to do. Several scholars and artists had taken interest in the site during its construction, most notably Dennis Sipiorski, the head of the art department at nearby Nicholls State University. He contacted the Kohler Foundation to plead for

91 Aside from the special recommendation from Senator Boxer that Salvation should be considered one of America's National Treasures, the site has received no funding, historic marker, nor does it appear in any state or national registry of historic places. Therefore the congressional recommendation was simply a way for Leonard Knight to continue operating without interference, but no real effort to assist in the conservation or future preservation of his site.

the site's immediate preservation.⁹²

The Kohler Foundation was able to use its considerable power as a large, multi-state, non-profit organization to convince the landowner to sell, to secure work orders from the Army Corps of Engineers, and to bring in the top experts in the fields of metallurgy, sculpting, and conservation to address the needs of the statues—so that the site is now available for public visitation. The Kenny Hill Sculpture Garden is monitored and maintained regularly by Nicholls State, but it is still part of the Kohler Foundation's holdings, so both organizations have a vested interest in the site's continued preservation.

Large non-profit organizations are not common, but several have grown to protect projects at the state, regional, or in the case of the Kohler Foundation, national level. Other prominent groups are SPACES in California, begun by Seymour Rosen, and the Kansas Grassroots Arts Association. Each of these preservation societies work alongside the local groups to advocate for necessary funding or support. Without the combined effort and support from local and regional networks of steadfast preservation groups, sites would be lost. The best way to ensure that art environments are being preserved for future generations is by using the network of nonprofits to garner a historic designation from the county or state. The historic designation makes it possible to apply for additional federal funds for preservation.

92 Leslie Umberger, *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007) pg. 414.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

31: The view back toward the Salton Seathrough an archway at Salvation Mountain. 32: Howard Finster's hubcap tree. 33: One of Kenny Hill's angels. 34: Oven born message from W.C. Rice. 35: Dennis' cross of cinder-block.

Salvation-themed art environments are products of immense creative drive, spiritual passion, and at times, divine intervention. Traditional homes are transformed into uniquely artistic collections of found objects with an evangelical message that can be awe-inspiring or terrifying. The religious artists do not necessarily fit into Seymour Rosen's definition of the folk artist in that they are not societal

outcasts as many others tend to be. These people actively seek a connection with their families, communities and visitors to their sites.

Rosen's definition includes all the sites in one way or another though, linking them under the banner of environmental folk art. Each of the artists began with no formal training or plans, building on his home or business site with found or discarded objects. The one area that sets these five artists apart from the vast array of other environmental artists in America is their evangelical motivation, their basic desire to save the souls of everyone around them through their words and through their artistic creations. The religious element and the precarious nature of the construction makes for incredibly interesting artwork, but the combination makes preserving the sites inherently difficult.

Some elements can be cleaned, the cement can be remolded, the vegetation can be trimmed and cleared, the kudzu can be killed, visitors can be redirected through set pathways, buildings can be retrofitted—everything that is necessary can be done—at a price. The cost is the only barrier that hinders the preservation of many sites. Securing funding is an uphill battle when dealing with a non-religious site, but the addition of evangelical Christianity—where the artist's intent was to save the souls of visitors—adds another layer of issues. But all is not lost simply because the art has a religious overtone. While the religious elements could hinder the gathering of support from both small and large donors,

non-profit funds and federal grants are still available to help preserve the sites so that future generations may see them in all their glory. The best preservation efforts are a combination of the two, working in concert, to do all repairs plus the day-to-day maintenance and up-keep for the sites.

The basic religious element of the sites, the drive to convert visitors, diminishes with the death of the artist. While the art, the painted slogans, and even the scriptures are all still at the site and able to be viewed, the artist is no longer there preaching. The preaching is the evangelical tool, not the painting or lettering on an old board—it is the artist, in his created environment, that brings people in to save their souls. When the artist is gone the site is just religious-themed art, which should be preserved like any other themed art environment or installation.

After the death of Howard Finster, the site became a tourist attraction. Yes, it had religious themes, but it also had Americana, Coca-Cola, and Presidential themes mixed in; without Finster there to teach each visitor the meaning behind the art, the religion is lost in a sea of other ideas. The death of W. C. Rice has had a different effect on his site, in that his family does not want to condense it or remove the pieces, but add to them. Rice's Miracle Cross Garden is a continuing, growing environment that—from a preservation standpoint—is still a work in progress. The death of Margaret of Margaret's Grocery slowed the motivation of the site's creator. The Reverend

H. D. Dennis has not continued to construct now that his muse is gone. The site sits, a colorful puzzle to visitors, but now even the religious messages have faded and become unreadable. His preaching days are over. Farther south in the Louisiana bayou, the site of Kenny Hill sat abandoned by its creator until outsiders stepped in to take over. Hill may not have died but he left his site to the river waters, never to return. Leonard Knight is alive and working daily at Salvation Mountain. His site has been protected by the Federal Government but when Knight is no longer able to care for it, who will? Perhaps Salvation Mountain will be granted the same fortune as Kenny Hill's Sculpture Garden and outsiders will step up to preserve the entirely unique site in the middle of the desert.

These sites start as unique salvation-themed art environments, but after the artist is gone the site is no longer primarily a religious site. The focus shifts from having the evangelical religion as the primary purpose, to the art as the main attraction. The religion becomes secondary to the art. While the artist was alive they ensured the primaricy of their message, but without them the art takes first billing. In order for these sites to be preserved as the environmental art sites that they have evolved into, historical preservation efforts need to be made. Religious art sites are consistently overlooked as historically significant places because many people do not understand the change that occurs at the sites when the creator is absent.

In order to properly preserve these sites the National Register of Historic Places along with the individual states must seek to understand the diverse cultural landscapes that dwell within our nations borders. While not all people appreciate an evangelical religious site, a vast number would be able to acknowledge its value as historic record. Changes must be made to all levels of the preservation program, from historic markers to the National Register, so that all sites are given the consideration that they deserve and the funding that is necessary to properly preserve.

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