



# THE OUTSIDERS

The Southeast's most *eccentric* artists,  
an *against-all-odds* Baltimore museum  
and the search for the source of *pure* inspiration

*Story and photographs By Sam Polcer*



**COLOR WHEELS** Artist Robert Seven in front of his Emerge-N-See Art Ambulance Unit



**WILLIAM THOMAS** Thompson began painting because he saw the world on fire. It was July 1989, and the Pentacostal businessman was in an idyllic little church on the west side of Hawaii's Big Island, having come from South Carolina to regroup after the financial collapse of the silk flower import company he ran with his wife for more than 30 years, and to seek treatment for a rare nerve disease that crippled his hands and feet. There he was, a broken-down 54-year-old, ruminating on his once fortunate life, listening to a newly converted preacher endearingly bumble his way through Scripture—and then he wasn't.

The beautiful Polynesian-style church vanished—replaced by a vision, as he puts it, “of the world on fire.” And then, “a mighty angel circling the earth. An impression was branded into my mind forever.” As quickly as it arrived, the vision ended, and Thompson came to. No one, including his friends sitting beside him, was aware of what had transpired.

After this experience, Thompson had a new purpose: “To paint the vision and the entire biblical story from the Garden of Eden to Armageddon and

to the New Jerusalem.” Over the next three days, he visited an art supply store (the first two days, he says he “couldn't gather the courage or confidence to buy anything”), and finally walked out with paint, a brush and a canvas. At a picnic table just outside, he put brush to canvas with his shaking, disease-ravaged hands for the very first time, finishing three days later.

Back in South Carolina, 21 years after the fire was lit, Thompson hasn't stopped, averaging 100 paintings a year—many of which are inspired by his unconventional views on politics, religion and society. One of his collectors, a man in Washington, DC, is trying to get that first piece, *The Coming of the Lord*, into the Smithsonian. His paintings have been shown at galleries and museums around the world, including the most important museum in the US devoted to the kind of art that he makes, Baltimore's renowned American Visionary Art Museum, which commissioned him to paint seven 12-foot-by-16-foot works for its permanent collection in 2006.

I'm following Thompson upstairs to his studio as he tells me this story, and to my left is Rebecca



**SEEING VISIONS**  
(clockwise from left)  
Robert Seven's home; the energetic work of famed religious artist William Thomas Thompson; Brian Dowdall surrounded by piles of his colorful paintings



Hoffberger, AVAM's founder, director and frequent curator. This is day two of our journey through the Carolinas; she's here to meet with artists whose work she's considering for the upcoming exhibition *All Things Round*, and I'm here to get a crash course on outsider art.

Some call it visionary art, others call it self-taught art, intuitive art, raw art or art brut. And while scholars argue that there are differences between them, they are outweighed greatly by overlap, and I choose the name that, for me, seems to cast the widest net and speaks to its status in the art world. There's a high concentration of outsider artists—loosely defined as artists without formal training—in the Carolinas, so it seemed a good place to meet a few of them. I had a notion that there was something about the region's rich history of folk art that had so many of them crawling out of the woodwork. Mainly, though, I found it fascinating that these artists express something that comes purely from within. Some of them, I'd heard, were certifiably insane, others merely working in

isolation, but all producing art in a kind of state of grace—and I wanted to see it for myself.

Thompson, for one, has a demeanor and background that belie the primal, vitriolic, apocalyptic art that he makes. He's a well-spoken, well-dressed, business-minded entrepreneur, not the hermetic, wild-eyed, backwoods seer one would expect to be a visionary among visionaries. (In the world of outsider art, he is a household name.) But he is similar to the artists I have met so far in that they all describe their art as something that feels outside of their control in some way.

Thompson, for his part, says, "God has created the paint and somehow I just let it fall in place.... I stop painting a picture when I see nothing else to do." And as Brian Dowdall—a favorite artist of Hoffberger's for "his use of color and his benevolent subject matter," as well as a friend and neighbor of Thompson's—puts it, "I paint faster than my mind.... It's like I'm unconscious. I'm not there. I'll go to people's homes who have a house full of my work, and I'll look at 'em and go, 'I wonder who did those.'"



**WIND POWER** Vollis Simpson's whimsical whirligigs attract visitors from far and wide to Lucama, NC

## WORLDS APART

Four backyard paradises that put your treehouse to shame

### BOTTLE VILLAGE

Simi Valley, CA (48 miles from LA)  
In 1956, Tressa "Grandma" Primbrey started building a wall out of bottles and other items from the local dump—which became 13 remarkable structures now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.  
4595 Cochran St

### PARADISE GARDENS

Summerville, GA (101 miles from Atlanta)  
Howard Finster's 3 acres of evangelical sculptures made from recycled materials make up one of the most famous visionary environments in the world. Don't miss Finsterfest, May 14-15. 84 Knox St; [finstersparadisegardens.org](http://finstersparadisegardens.org)

### WINDMILL PARK

Lucama, NC (64 miles from Raleigh-Durham)  
About 30 of Vollis Simpson's rusty whirligigs tower over his metal shop on a North Carolina country road. If you're lucky, Simpson will be out front working on his next piece. Intersection of Wiggins Mill and Vollis Shop roads

### FOREVERTRON

Baraboo, WI (124 miles from Milwaukee)  
This 300-ton scrap metal kinetic sculpture by Tom O. Every (aka "Dr. Evermore") is made from a variety of 19th-century industrial age relics, including X-ray machines and carburetors. On US 12, behind Delaney's Surplus

**BEFORE HEADING** to the Southeast,

I familiarized myself with outsider art at AVAM. The current exhibition, *What Makes Us Smile?*, co-curated by *The Simpsons* creator Matt Groening, artist Gary Panter and Hoffberger, is a whimsical exploration of joy, from the dark (cartoons by the late quadriplegic John Callahan) to the immature (a bench covered in Whoopee cushions). Like every exhibit there, this one is made up of the accessible. Subtext, if there is any, isn't hard to find because the artists, well, just aren't concerned with it. It's the inspiration and the approach—oftentimes determined by whatever materials are on hand—that are important. Don't have a canvas? Paint on cardboard. Like beetle wings? Make something out of them.

"Look," said Hoffberger, a Baltimore native (who counts local celeb John Waters as a friend), when I gave her my first impressions of the museum, "we're not innately anti-academic. But we're saying that there's this kind of know-how, understanding and, ultimately, wisdom that comes from listening within rather than seeking."

For the record, Hoffberger is exactly the kind of person you'd expect to run a museum like this. On one hand, it's totally offbeat; much of the façade of the building is covered in mirror, cobalt blue glass and recycled dishes, and the grounds are dotted with bizarre

sculptures like a 55-foot-tall whirligig. On the other hand, it's one of Baltimore's most successful and important cultural institutions. (The city's new tourism marketing slogan even took its cues from the current exhibit: "Find Your Happy Place in Baltimore.") Hoffberger takes her mission very seriously, and not long into our first conversation, it's apparent that the museum is an extension of her. An answer to a single question includes a quote from the poet Rumi, an anecdote revealing that she was Marcel Marceau's first American apprentice, dismay about the current state of architecture and four separate versions of AVAM's mission statement.

It should also be pointed out that Hoffberger is constantly surrounded by a 10-foot-wide bubble of good cheer; conversations happen with complete strangers everywhere we go. Waitresses sit down and start talking. Surly rental car agents light up at the offer of Cinnabon. A flight attendant tells us her life story. It's no wonder she was able to raise \$7 million and convince the City of Baltimore to donate land in the downtown Inner Harbor for a museum that didn't play by the rules. And it certainly made a road trip through the Carolinas a wonderful proposition.

"**THE QUEEN** is here!" exclaims Robert Seven as Hoffberger and I pull up to his house in Asheville, NC, at dusk. ("The crack between the worlds, as the old shamans used to call it," Seven says.) He's wearing a hat made of what looks like plastic toys, a military-style coat adorned with homemade buttons and patches, and gloves reminiscent of Freddy Krueger's. He shows us his elaborate art-car ambulance and takes us on a tour of his house—a cracked-up old building in a flood zone next to a river—before showing us his studio, a big room that looks like a craft store exploded inside a high school shop class. With his wild, blue eyes, bizarre getup and house in the woods, he looks the part of the visionary, and seems mostly aware of his outsider status in terms of how it relates to mainstream society as a whole. Whereas the religious Thompson's mission is to communicate "the true message of the Messiah," Seven (his pseudonym "has to do with the seven visible colors produced by the white light of creation moving through the prism of the physical Earth plane") believes fervently in the power of art to transform lives. Because of this, he has a great deal of respect for Hoffberger, who is here to track down some crowns he's made out of forks and spoons.

"I saw Rebecca once at a holiday art show at the museum, and I don't even know her all that well, but I was struck with this deep, spiritual affinity for her," he says. "She has sustained AVAM against all odds, and is tirelessly devoted to its mission of inspiring, awakening and educating everyone who walks through its doors."

Does he think there's something about North Carolina that makes it easier to be an outsider artist? "I try not to intellectualize it too much," he says. "I mean, it's something that's found all over the world, but the Southeast does have a certain flavor of it.... People in the Southeast tend to celebrate their eccentricities a little bit more. They spend less energy trying to hide it."

The next day, I plan on leaving Hoffberger to set off on my own quest to see the whirligigs of Vollis Simpson, the former farm-equipment repairman responsible for AVAM's sculpture and whose property southeast of Raleigh is covered with the towering,

rusting structures. It's one of the most famous "visionary art environments" (large-scale installations that transform entire locations) in the country. Word has it that it'll soon be dismantled and put back together at a dedicated park nearby, which, Simpson, 92, later tells me, he'll "probably never get to see."

"A lot of outsider artists are driven by these huge concepts," Hoffberger says. "They may be not thinking about ever getting a huge show in New York, but they're driven. The single most common theme of visionary artists who build environments is to recreate the Garden of Eden in their backyard. There's this sense of utopia that I love."

When it's suggested that the museum is her self-made utopia, she demurs, saying she doesn't consider herself an artist. I disagree. It may not have appeared to her in a fiery vision, and it may sit smack dab in the middle of a bustling city, but everything about AVAM puts it outside the museum sphere. And with every exhibit, Hoffberger's singular vision brings the worlds of these hidden artists to the city, and in doing so, creates a place unlike any other.

Or, as Thompson put it earlier, "It seems to me [that] everyone is a visionary artist in their own way.... Some paint art and others build empires." ●

You can get great deals on car rentals with AirTran Airways partner, Hertz. Visit [airtran.com](http://airtran.com) for more information.



## FUNNY CARS FINISHING FIRST JUST MEANS THE RACE WAS OVER WAY TOO QUICKLY.

Meet Fifi, the giant poodle (above). She's just one of the human-powered works of art that compete in the wacky, eight-hour Baltimore Kinetic Sculpture Race. The event, hosted by the American Visionary Art Museum, bestows quirky honors such as the "Next to Last Award," the "Mediocre Award" (finishing in the middle) and "Best Costume." May 7, [kineticbaltimore.com](http://kineticbaltimore.com)