

McGath, Carrie. "The Lyrical Landscapes of Joseph Yoakum at Carl Hammer Gallery," *Brufforce*, 29 October, 2015.

# BRUTFORCE

## The Lyrical Landscapes of Joseph Yoakum at Carl Hammer Gallery

Carrie McGath: October 29, 2015

Carl Hammer Gallery in the River North arts district of Chicago is exhibiting several unique works by Joseph Yoakum. These works solidly speak to the impetus that drove him to create his prolific body of work. The exhibition, *Spiritual Unfoldments*, showcases several drawings he created while living on the South Side of Chicago during the latter part of his life. These works came out of a dream he described as a "force." He said, "The Lord gave me instructions. My drawings are a spiritual enfoldment."

Yoakum's work unfolds in a grand way once you realize the depth in each of the seemingly simple pieces. The drawings he created with seemingly pedestrian instruments such as ballpoint pens and colored pencils, make for grandiose, intense, and lyrical landscape studies despite their small size. The paper he used was humble drawing paper before he switched to acid-free, but even the work on this low-cost alternative is captivating. It has changed color over the years, making it all the more organic and artfully refined.

In "Altai Mtn. Range-The Plateau of Mongolia", the paper has changed on a chemical level, muting it so perfectly into one of the most lauded landscape drawings by Yoakum, and definitely a true highlight of the show. The feathered lines within the sheer largess of the nature he depicted is one of his great talents. Yoakum's delicate use of his implements show how deeply he understood process, color, and shape to express how he reveled in the natural world created by God.



A vagabond throughout most of his life, Yoakum also worked as a valet for the Ringling Brothers and travelled around the world in the military. His work is a kind of visual journal of his excursions around the globe and his admiration for everything surrounding him on these travels is apparent perusing this show. Carl Hammer, the owner of the eponymous gallery, explained the significance of this exhibition, particularly in relation to the space. "[Yoakum's] work is quintessentially Chicago in that he seemed to have an immense amount of influence on the 'insider' mechanisms of Chicago collecting and curation." This artist is a cornerstone of the space. Hammer continued, "The work by Joseph Yoakum is very special to this gallery, as it was one of the artists which helped cement for us the kind of quality and visionary components we wished to feature by the artists we would be showing here over the years."



The Chicago Imagists played a large part in giving Yoakum exposure to the world. They thumbed through stacks of his work when visiting his South Side home, buying drawings for five or ten dollars each. His work is now highly valued both economically and aesthetically, and they are sought by major collectors and institutions all over the world. Hammer told me, "Joseph Yoakum had also made Chicago his final residence and, because of that, he was soon discovered by the art mainstream, especially by the Imagist artists who flocked to his studio to collect his work en masse." He continued, "We've had several gallery exhibitions of this artist's work, but this one was special because we've succeeded in recalling much of the history and time-line of his track record here in Chicago."

After 25 years as a Humanities teacher at Evanston Township High School, Hammer knew he had an attraction to a particular aesthetic – "artwork which dealt with the depiction of the human figure. Chicago has, once again, been the perfect breeding ground for nourishing that preference." During those years as a teacher, he developed a love of the "elements of Outsider Art." He continued, "All of the stuff that was happening during the Civil Rights Movement really changed and challenged my thinking and my life philosophy as well."

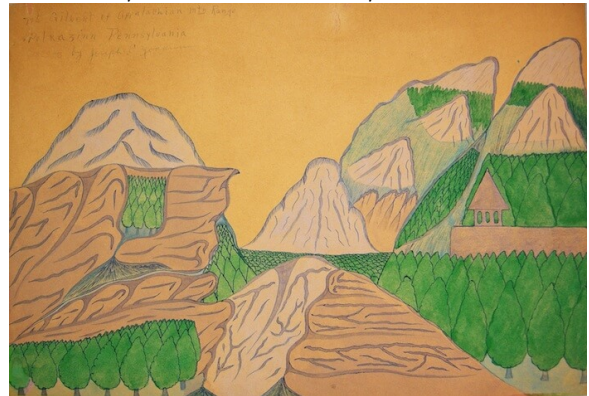
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With summers off, he and his then-wife were able to travel extensively, and they discovered Outsider Art, and began to collect it in earnest. "We bought strictly on a basis of collecting only what we liked, which in time refined itself and gave to us an ability to talk about these pieces, both anonymously created and by names we had never heard about before."

As with any gallery, the early years were spent proving themselves to the public and to the art world. Their discovery of Bill Traylor's work during a visit with a collector in Montgomery, Alabama helped make Carl Hammer Gallery a respected space on a national level, particularly as a place devoted to this raw and intuitive type of art. "From that point forward, Carl Hammer Gallery became synonymous with the collecting of Outsider Art," he said. "Chicago was an art environment which seemed to embrace the work by these self-taught artists."

Even though the focus continues to be Outsider Art, Hammer has folded in a number of academically-trained artists into the collection including Roger Brown, Mary Lou Zalazny, and Ed Paschke. The result is a consistently stimulating collection and engaging exhibitions. During my visit that afternoon, the gallery was participating in a gallery walk, where visitors go gallery to gallery for a brief tour of the space and current exhibitions. As I walked with Hammer through the group show, I immediately noticed a fascinating work and asked him about it. "I am excited by the addition of a 30-year-old Cuban artist by the name of Misleidys Francisca Castillo Pedroso. She is autistic and does not speak and cannot hear." Pedroso's subjects tend to be beefy, almost human-scale portraits of bodybuilders.

These hyperbolic, muscle-bound men and women are tacked onto a paper background with brown packing tape, adding a surreal texture. Hammer explained that she has wallpapered her home with these figures of strength. Pedroso's fascination with the sinews of the body, and with the rich color she employs to create them makes her work distinctive. Her choice to use tempera and watercolor only makes the work more surreal as these muscled figures look animated as they float on the paper they are taped to and in their nimble illustration that beckons a colorful cartoon quality.



The small, feeble hands on the body builder in "Untitled" are positioned alongside the figure's huge, bulbous figure. The charged, tightly rendered forms in her figurative works belie her humble media.. Adept and fascinating, the discovery of Pedroso illustrates the continued importance and emergence of new outsider artists through Carl Hammer Gallery.

Images:

"Altai Mtn. Range-The Plateau of Mongolia," Colored Pencil, Ballpoint Pen on Paper, 12" x 15"

"Blue Mounds Highest Point of Kansas State," Pen, Colored Pencil on Paper, 12" x 18".

"Mt. Gilbert of Appalachian Mtn. Range Polkazinn Pennsylvania," Pencil, Pen, Colored Pencil on Paper, 12" x 18".