

## Art

# A Museum Salvages Artistic Visions in Full

The Art Preserve in Wisconsin collects environments, without using curatorial guideposts.

By MARY LOUISE SCHUMACHER

SHEBOYGAN, WIS. — Charles Smith preaches with sculpture, hundreds of hip-height figures that he's been reworking, repainting and rearranging for decades, first at a small house in Aurora, Ill., and now at his home in Hammond, La. Every time this self-taught artist repositions his work he testifies anew to the unfolding history of racial violence in the United States, connecting it to personal traumas, including what he believes was the racially motivated murder of his father when he was 14, and his own combat experiences in Vietnam.

"Long before Black Lives Matter, Dr. Smith's art was telling what's the matter," said Smith, who refers to himself as "Dr." and effectively delivers a free-form sermon whenever he speaks, a combustion of belief and ideas. "Without a museum, as a culture and a people, you're like a piece of paper rolling down the street without any destination. A museum teaches you who you are."

On June 26, the 80-year-old artist will star in a new and experimental museum in Sheboygan called the Art Preserve, awaiting his instruction on how his concrete figures will be shown. The preserve is the first museum in the country to focus on artists known as "environment builders," whose worldviews take immersive and physical form, and who often turn their entire homes into works of art.

A rough-hewn bust of an unknown slave and a portrait of Malcolm X that seems to float on a pillow of white are among the 200 sculptures that sit on metal shelves in a top-floor space devoted to Smith's self-styled "African-American Heritage Museum + Black Veterans' Archive." Most were rescued from his Aurora site, where the little house he once lived in and vacated in 2001 was recently demolished.

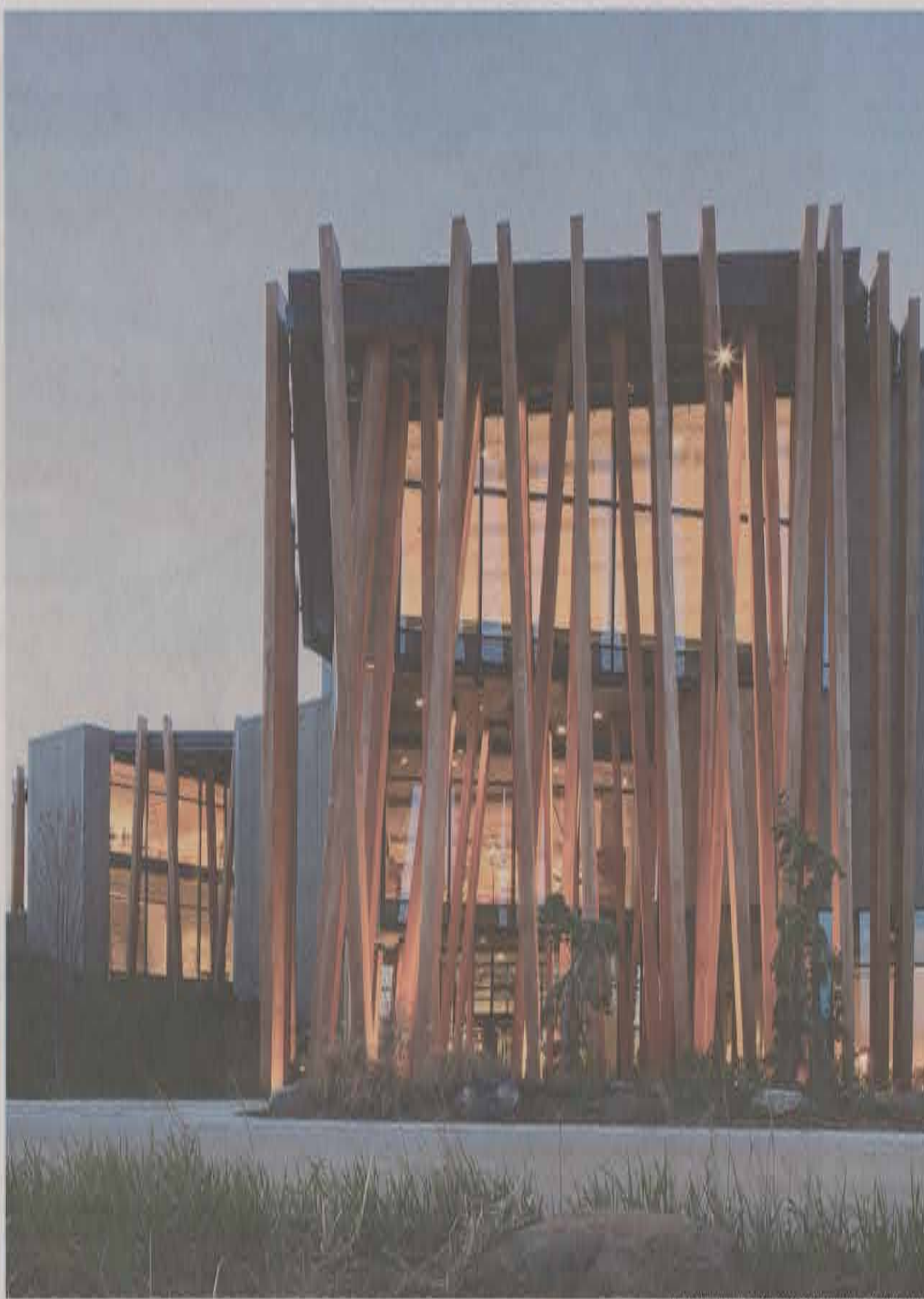
"That'll be there forever," Smith said of his work at the Art Preserve.

"God took what was left of you and brought you to the light of the art world in such a way that you are a blessing to your people," he said, speaking of himself.

The sculptor's dynamic way of working and the long-term storage and study of fragile works such as his are central to the creation of the Art Preserve.

It is a hybrid: a museum open to the public and an unconventional storage facility for a collection amassed over nearly 40 years by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, a small museum named for the plumbing-ware magnate in this picturesque home of the bratwurst. The preserve, a second site operated by the center, is also a study center for the genre — artworks often lumped into categories that don't quite fit or tell the whole story, including "outsider," "self-taught" or "folk."

While other institutions are typically interested in individual objects by these makers, the Art Preserve is focused on entire environments — which might include thousands of objects, ephemeral materials and



PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN MAZUR FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Labels like 'outsider art' don't always fit or tell the whole story of works.



architecture, said Laura Bickford, curator for the arts center and the preserve.

The arts center, in cooperation with the Kohler Foundation, a nonprofit known for rescuing art sites, has acquired and preserved more than 30 such environments. Urban as well as rural, the discoveries range from the resin library that Stella Waitzkin (1920-2003) created for her room at the Chelsea Hotel to the glitter-encrusted suits, dentures and home of the Mississippi artist Loy Bowlin (1909-95) who, inspired by the Glen Campbell hit, called himself "The Original Rhinestone Cowboy."

The preserve is a place to "walk into somebody's vision," said Leslie Umlinger, curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian

Top, the Art Preserve in Sheboygan, Wis., a new site designed by the firm Tres Birds. Above, some of the more than 200 concrete figures by the self-taught artist Charles Smith. Above right, a facade, paintings and woodland creatures, right, from Mary Nohl's cottage, along with whimsical sculptures by the dairy farmer-artist Frank Oebser.



American Art Museum and the Kohler Art Center's senior curator of exhibitions and collections from 1998 to 2012. "The context and the layers and the organic processes of this type of art is something you can't really understand when you come to an artist through one or two or even five of their works."

The environments, with about 25,000 objects, are on view in a three-story structure that its architect, Michael Moore, of the Denver firm Tres Birds, describes as "hunkered down like a fox" on 38 acres of former farmland a short drive from the Kohler Art Center and an hour north of Milwaukee. The project cost \$40 million, including a \$5 million endowment, paid for by a collection of people, corporations and foundations, more than a few bearing the Kohler name.

Inside, the light is low, there are no museum labels, and objects are sometimes set right onto the floor, as they would be in a storage facility. Some visitors who previewed the in-progress installations in recent months found the lack of curatorial guideposts bewildering, said Amy Horst, associate director of the preserve and arts center. "Organizationally, that led us to double down on not doing that," she said, adding that she hopes visitors will be inspired to trust their own instincts more.

The preserve wants to "undo the need" for the kind of curatorial hand-holding that's typical of museum experiences, said Bickford, the curator.

## Artist's Rescue Mission

The first floor of the preserve is rooted in the origin story of the arts center and its rescue of artist-built environments in the Upper Midwest, a legacy linked to Ruth DeYoung Kohler II, the longtime director of the arts center until 2016. Kohler envisioned the preserve at least 15 years ago and died in November as it was being completed.

"If I could do it again," Kohler told me in an interview last year, "I would still proselytize for this organization forever, with my last breath."

A functioning bar at the entrance of the preserve honors one of Kohler's earliest discoveries, Fred Smith's tavern in Phillips, Wis., the Wisconsin Concrete Park, which remains a spectacle from the road, surrounded by larger-than-life concrete sculptures of Ben Hur and Paul Bunyan, glinting with inlaid glass from beer bottles.

It was Kohler's fortuitous trip to Eugene von Bruenchenhein's pocket-size home in 1983, based on a tip from a police officer, that broadened the center's focus from contemporary art and craft to the work of environment builders. She and her colleagues discovered a suburban Milwaukee home overrun with apocalyptic paintings, clay crowns, spindly sculptures delicately constructed from chicken bones and sweetly erotic photographs of the artist's wife, Marie.

"It was an originality that I hadn't seen before," Kohler said of EVB, as he's now known

in the art world — largely because the arts center stepped in to preserve his work, as well as his notebooks, audiotapes and writing. "Each one, for me, has a voice that tells a slightly different story," Kohler said of the little thrones made of bones.

At the preserve, these things are organized in a tableau that evokes the artist's basement, attic and greenhouse spaces. EVB's portraits of his wife, in which she's the muse and radiant queen, often wearing a crown, her eyes drifting up as if to another world, are projected in one room.

The arts center also spent more than 30 years trying to rescue the reputation and cottage of Mary Nohl (1914-2001), whose home beside Lake Michigan is a legendary drive-by, called the "witch's house" by local folk, in the Milwaukee suburb of Fox Point. Beloved as an oddity but unrecognized as a work of art, Nohl's cottage was bedecked, inside and out, with carved wooden faces she turned toward one another, as if in conversation, and cheerful woodland creatures made of concrete, with stones for eyes and smiles agape.

Part of the home's facade is now at the Art Preserve along with a wall of Nohl's tools, rolling pins, vises and hammers worn from a lifetime of use. But her gathering of comfy chairs flecked with paint, bright patches of flooring, and a carved serpent zigzagging its way across her mantel remain at the original site, where conservation continues.

As one of the few known intact envi-



## Art

ronments created by a woman, Nohl's cottage, owned by the arts center since 2012, is significant, Bickford said. Indeed, for some years, the Kohler collection of environments consisted largely of work by white men. There are reasons for this imbalance, Bickford said, including that women and artists of color have been historically less likely to own property that can be transformed into art, though an art-historical reconsideration is called for, she added.

Fronted by a screen of timbers, the museum is near the Sheboygan River and made from the same humble materials that inspired the artists inside. A towering concrete stairway orients visitors in spaces otherwise meant for meandering and discovery, with glimpses of woods and an upper meadow.

If the first floor of the Art Preserve lays a foundation for what environment builders do, the second upends misconceptions that these artists tend to be untrained or from rural places. Lenore Tawney (1907-2007) and Ray Yoshida (1930-2009), for instance, were urbanites and part of the mainstream art world, though both collapsed the distance between their lives and their art-infused surroundings in a way that makes them a fit for the preserve.

Tawney's New York loft studio is faithfully recreated, including a floor painted white and its smooth stones, shells, pottery and wooden forms. Inspiration for her gauzy textile works. Her rack of thread spools sits beside her furniture and the ceramic forms made by her close friend Toshiko Takaezu. Several of Tawney's dimensional textiles were being prepared for hanging, some rigorously woven, others slack and expressive, at times intimating the female form.

Yoshida, the Chicago Imagist whose influential teaching career at the School of the Art Institute spanned four decades, created a kaleidoscopic museum of sorts in his apartment — though it was a stretch for the arts center to acquire the majority of his home collection in 2012 since most of it was not made by him.

The appeal, though, was in the spirit with which he reshuffled his collection, like a material in its own right. Shelves and wall space were jammed with the work of artists like Jim Nutt or Lee Godie alongside whirligigs and pop-culture paraphernalia.

Bickford hopes to keep Yoshida's working practice alive by inviting contemporary artists to rearrange his things in the future, and the preserve has invited others, including two of Wisconsin's better-known artists, Beth Lipman and Michelle Grabner, to re-

spond to the collections, too. They created ceramic-tile installations in the washrooms inspired by flora and gingham patterns.

### Feeling the Spirit of Creators

Infused with sunlight, the top floor of the Art Preserve is home to some of the more intact environments, including the largest repository of concrete figures by the self-taught Indian artist Nek Chand (1924-2015) and the Nebraska artist Emery Blagdon's "Healing Machine," a shed festooned with intricate, radiating constructions made of baling wire, copper, small paintings on wood, minerals, Christmas lights and other oddments.

Relocating art environments, in whole or in part, can be an "act of violence," Bickford said, since the original sites are awash in meaning. The curator noted that issues of property rights and long-term care can make saving them in situ unworkable. The absence of these visionary artists, who so deeply inhabited their environments, is poignantly felt, too.

Fred Smith can't pour a pint of lager or play his fiddle. The wooden menagerie of real and mythic beasts by Levi Fisher Ames (1840-1923) sits quiet, divorced from the tent shows, storytelling and banjo playing that accompanied them. Waitzkin's wordless library will never again be animated by the writers and painters who kicked around her Chelsea Hotel room, sampling her chicken soup and taking in her numerology.

"I'll tell you, though, you get a concentration of work like that, and their spirit is there," said Gregory Van Maanen, 73, a New Jersey native and Vietnam veteran, whose own raucous paintings of skulls, glowing orbs and floating eyeballs are represented in the collection by the thousands.

"I've seen the spirit go from the work into the people," said Van Maanen, who makes art seven days a week as a healing deliverance to keep the "spirits" and memories of the Vietnam War at bay. "It's not art. It's medicine."

The constant remaking that's typical of environment builders is a point of inspiration at the preserve, which will be in a similar state of intuitive, open-ended exploration, a place for artists, conservators, scholars and its staff of about 100 to upend the kind of formal presentation of American art found in many museums for something more personal. It's also why visits from Charles Smith and Van Maanen are eagerly anticipated.

"What you're doing is opening up a book that's 80 years old that can talk," Smith said. "I am a witness."



Above, a re-creation of Stella Waitzkin's Chelsea Hotel apartment, including the installation "Details of a Lost Library," with old books and other objects cast in resin. Right, works from the curated collection of the artist Ray Yoshida.

