

Michael Stipe on His Collection Exhibition at the Outsider Art Fair

By Andy Battaglia



Juanita Rogers, *Untitled*, n.d. Image courtesy of Outsider Art Fair.

When Michael Stipe first started engaging with outsider art, he was a young buck learning the curious folkways of Athens, Georgia, while on the cusp of fronting the storied rock band R.E.M. Now, with more than 40 years of worldly and otherworldly experience behind him, he is channeling his initial inspiration into other forms—with an exhibition of artworks from his decades-old collection on view March 3–6 at the Outsider Art Fair in New York.

Among the fair’s offerings presented by some 65 galleries from all over, a special booth titled “Maps and Legends: Featuring Works from the Collection of Michael Stipe” includes paintings, drawings, and sculptures by Thornton Dial, St. EOM, Dilmus Hall, Bessie Harvey, Howard Finster, R.A. Miller, Royal Robertson, Juanita Rogers, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, and other artists engaged by Stipe beginning in his early days as a student at the University of Georgia. The exhibition was curated by Phillip March Jones, founder of the new March Gallery in New York’s East Village and formerly a director at Andrew Edlin Gallery, the namesake shop of the Outsider Art Fair’s director. (Jones also founded Institute 193, a nonprofit art space in Lexington, Kentucky.)

While he was working on gathering works for the exhibition, Stipe spoke with ARTnews from his home in

Athens, Georgia, about his history with different kinds of folk art, his visual work with R.E.M., and what he learned from teachers he still reveres.

ARTnews: What initially interested you about the prospect of showing outsider artwork from your collection? What was the genesis of the idea?

Michael Stipe: I've had a long interest in what we would call outsider artists or untrained artists. I grew up here in Athens, Georgia, surrounded by them and integrated that into the work that I did as the visual deputy for R.E.M., bringing work from several people who are part of the show into the artwork for different albums over the years. Andrew Edlin Gallery [run by the Outsider Art Fair's owner] is really close to my apartment in New York, and I've been stopping by for years to see what he's up to. Andrew approached me because he knew I had a collection. I don't think of myself—and never have thought of myself—as a collector, but I have bought things over the years that I found inspiring and wanted to live with. That became, over the course of my long life, quite a collection. The idea of being able to share it with people is really thrilling for me.

ARTnews: The title for the Outsider Art Fair show is “Maps and Legends.” What resonates most about that reference for you?

Stipe: That was [curator Phillip March Jones's] idea. The presentation is centered mostly on Southeastern artists, people I either met or whose work I came in contact with in the 1980s and '90s. “Maps and Legends” is a reference to the Southeast and clearly a reference to an R.E.M. song that I wrote way back—I don't remember which record it's on, but it's one of the early ones...

ARTnews: It's on Fables of the Reconstruction.

Stipe: That makes sense—that's in keeping thematically with that body of work.

ARTnews: How far back do you trace your interest in this kind of folk art or whatever we might choose to call it? What was the very beginning of it?

Stipe: It's what was available to me, not living in a city center. Traveling through cities, museums and galleries were available to me going back to 1979. I distinctly remember seeing a Peter Hujar photograph in a small show that I went to in New York that radically altered the way I thought about portraiture, the human body, portrayals of sexuality, and what have you. But my teachers at art school, at the University of Georgia, were very interested in the outsider artists who were available to us, like Howard Finster and St. EOM (Eddie Owens Martin) and Dilmus Hall and Billy Lemming (though I never met him—the one time I tried to meet him, he ran inside when he saw me; he was quite shy, and he wouldn't answer when I knocked on the door). I never met Juanita Rogers or Bessie Harvey, but I wish I had.

ARTnews: Who were some of your early teachers in this context?

Stipe: The interest really came from Andy Nasisse, who taught sculpture at the University of Georgia. He had a huge collection of outsider artists' work here in Athens. I would go to his house and ask him questions about the stuff he had. He and I traveled to Mexico in 1987, all around the Yucatan Peninsula with Jeremy Ayers. The three of us traveled around for three weeks and visited artists and Toltec and Aztec ruins. I found artifacts on the ground—it was insane.

Through Andy Nasisse, I met Jim Herbert—he was not as interested in outsider artists, but when we became acquainted with R.A. Miller, he followed the band up to Gainesville [Georgia] to R.A.'s house, which

was on this hill with all these whirligigs on it, like hundreds of whirligigs. At that point R.A. was just selling them locally. Jim followed the band up there to shoot footage for a video for us to turn into MTV. At the time, we were not creating video content that they were asking for. We just said, 'Fuck you, we're going to do our own thing.' Jim was so inspired by the footage that he got that he did an entire album-side-long film called *Left of Reckoning*, which you can find on YouTube. It's very beautiful. We decided to include it as a part of the [Outsider Art Fair exhibition] because it shows this environment at its absolute peak, with four handsome guys in our mid-20s wandering around. It's a beautiful Jim Herbert film. I'm so thrilled to have been able to collaborate with Jim as a filmmaker on many R.E.M. videos, but that one in particular is stunning.

ARTnews: Did you send it to MTV?

Stipe: Oh, yeah. And they showed it on the show on Sunday night that that was for indie music...

ARTnews: 120 Minutes?

Stipe: Yeah, I think it was. They wouldn't show it with their regular programming—it was too weird for them.

ARTnews: Who were some other formative influences, outsider-art-wise?

Stipe: There was Art Rosenbaum, who was also a teacher of mine. Art and his wife Margo are renowned throughout the folk-music world for having made field recordings all around the South, including *The McIntosh County Shouters: Slave Shout Songs from the Coast of Georgia*, which is one of the most stunning field recordings ever made. Their interests in that continue to this day. Margo is also an astonishing photographer—she recently released a self-published book that I've been looking through, and it's marvelous. It's unbelievable the mixture of people she photographed. There are all these legendary people going back to the 1960s that she and Art had access to—Elaine de Kooning and James Baldwin among many others.

I also met Tom Patterson. He's from North Carolina, and he traveled all through the Southeast; he would spend time in Athens and use it as a kind of base to go visit people like St. EOM, Howard Finster, R.A. Miller, J.B. Murray, and Athens's own Dilmus Hall. And then Roger Manley, who is now the director of North Carolina State University's Gregg Museum of Art & Design. I think the thing that all these people have in common is that their understanding of what these artists were doing allowed them to put it alongside contemporary artists who were trained, or modern artists who were exalted, and see the parallels between, for instance, a Jasper Johns and a Billy Lemming, or a Duchamp and a Leroy Person. They saw these incredible connections by not separating artists into "went to Yale, studied art" vs. "grew up in a shack, never had electricity." They acknowledged that these are people who, for whatever reason, had to create, and this was what was available to them, either through the mediums that they chose or the education that they had or did not have. That's something that was profoundly important to my art education: being able to look at something like a Leroy Person and put it in a timeline with a contemporary or modern artist who I also appreciated.

ARTnews: Who among these artists were you the closest with? Would it have been Howard Finster?

Stipe: Yeah, we had a true friendship. I believe it began when he came and gave a speech at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia in Athens. I went as a student. I think Andy Nasisse recommended it and said, 'Oh, you have to check out this artist. He's amazing.' That introduced Howard to the entire Athens punk-rock scene. And then R.A. Miller I had a friendship with. I went to his house time and again and would just hang out with him. He'd show me his chickens and we'd talk about how funny they looked.

I really loved that guy. He was he was an incredible, warm, gentle, very, very smart and very funny human being. And he was a preacher at one point: I come from a line of preachers, so I have a deep appreciation for that. You know, the kind of the levity of humor that comes men of God. Howard had that as well.

ARTnews: What was your relationship with Howard Finster like?

Stipe: Spending time with Howard was like spending time with me when I've had a double espresso. You just basically sat and listened. There was no real exchange—he was just jacked all the time. And he had “the sugars,” which was diabetes; he would have a couple coffees with sugar and just go. If you could connect the dots and follow along, then you were doing well. With R.A. there was much more of a give-and-take, and he understood that we were artists who were doing our own thing through music and working with them through the through the graphic art that was going along with the music. They understood that we were out in the world and that their work was going to be seen by a wider audience because of my interest. I was thrilled to be able to offer that to these artists who were doing incredible work and were sweet people.

ARTnews: Did they have did they ever share their thoughts on the band or the music you were making at the time?

Stipe: They had younger people around them who had a clearer understanding of what we were doing and where we sat in the lineage of American music. I think they had an understanding of it, but I don't know that they sat around and listened to it.

ARTnews: A drawing by Juanita Rogers features on the back cover of R.E.M.'s *Life Rich Pageant*, and Howard Finster's work features in the “Radio Free Europe” video and also the *Reckoning* cover art. Was there other such stuff that figured in the R.E.M. visual sphere?

Stipe: There was there was an early merchandise item that we sold that was completely designed by Howard, a handkerchief with a beautiful drawing of his that will be in the show. It shows the four of us, and it's the size of a record album—12 by 12. It's a very sweet and funny Howard piece.

ARTnews: Oh wow. Can you find any of those out in the world?

Stipe: I don't think you could...

ARTnews: Here's one on eBay, for \$349.99.

Stipe: Good Lord. Well... [Editor's note: The lot available at the time is no longer online.] Our friendship with Howard I'm really proud of. “Radio Free Europe” was our first music video and we were like, “We're not going to do what MTV wants—we're going to do what we want.” And what we wanted was to go to Howard's Paradise Garden and create a little narrative there. So that's what we did.

ARTnews: Some of the work in the Outsider Art Fair is for sale. What made you want to part with it after all this time?

Stipe: I'm at that point in my life where I'm getting rid of things and rethinking belongings and material things. I'm reexamining and rethinking what I have around me. I'm clearing out a bunch of stuff, getting rid of a lot of things.

ARTnews: You've spent a lot of time in Athens during the pandemic. Is there something about being in the

South that makes you commune with or think about this kind of work differently than you might elsewhere?

Stipe: I think there's an acceptance and understanding across the South that might surprise people. For people who take their own path and people who choose to live on the fringe or to follow certain urges, it seems like there's an acceptance here that is unwritten and [different from] other issues and other concerns that are often associated with the South. There's a tolerance within what we think of as a very intolerant place for people to be who they are and to allow for that, and that's something that I don't think has ever been really fully understood. I feel like I have to defend the South quite often, and sometimes I'm deeply embarrassed by the choices that are made by people here. But then I remind myself that, you know, the state of Georgia alone gave us Jessye Norman, James Brown, and the B-52s. Gosh, that's not bad. Throw in Jimmy Carter and Martin Luther King Jr., and Georgia's looking pretty good, along with a lot of a lot of people who are quite easy to disregard or hate.

An alternative response is to say that there's something in the water here in Athens. I don't know how to explain what it is, but there's something about here. It might be that we are at the end of a mountain range—a big part of Georgia and the Carolinas is the end of a huge, very old mountain range moving into the Piedmont. There's just something very special here. I can't put my finger on it. I don't know what it is, but I feel it, and it's very strong. For someone who has never felt at home anywhere, this place as a base for me is profoundly important. And I feel like that strongly resonates in the work of a lot of the people we're talking about.