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Michael Stipe, Another Outsider at the Art Fair

The R.E.M. singer-songwriter is parting with works from his collection of Southern artists — but their inspiration lingers on.

By Karen Rosenberg

Michael Stipe, musician, artist and collector, at home in Athens, Ga., with his feet on a blue fox he made in 2008, bronze with powdercoat. He has had a long career as a visual artist, and a productive one since R.E.M. disbanded. Credit...Irina Rozovsky for The New York Times

In the video for R.E.M.'s first single, "Radio Free Europe," the band's members can be seen walking in slow-motion through the Summerville, Ga., home and yard of the self-taught artist and Baptist minister Howard Finster. A landscape of lush foliage packed with folk art sculptures and salvaged objects, Finster's "Paradise Garden" combined the regional traditions of evangelism and do-it-yourself object making and had become a popular pilgrimage spot for South Georgia artists, musicians and other creative types. The garden gave R.E.M.'s 1983 video a dreamlike quality and a recognizably Southern sense of place, setting it apart from the other hits on MTV at the time.

Finster, whose art was also featured on the cover of R.E.M.'s second album, "Reckoning," was one of several Southern outsider artists championed by the band and its frontman Michael Stipe during their early years in the vibrant indie-rock music scene of Athens, Ga. A drawing of an exuberant duck-like creature

by the rural Alabama artist Juanita Rogers can be seen on the back cover of the group's widely admired fourth album, "Life's Rich Pageant," and the hilltop installation of metal whirligigs at the Rabbittown, Ga., home of another self-taught artist, R.A. Miller, stars in a propulsive 20-minute experimental music video, "Left of Reckoning," directed by Stipe's art school professor James Herbert.

Stipe, who as an art student was responsible for R.E.M.'s graphic design and visual identity, was behind many of these collaborations. With teachers and classmates, he visited the homes of nearby artists like Miller, Finster, Dilmus Hall and St. EOM (Eddie Owens Martin), with some visits evolving into long-term friendships. Stipe picked up a few artworks along the way for inspiration or as gestures of support — among them Hall's portrait of the legendary gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, and colorful crayon drawings of wrenches and circular blades by the sawmill worker turned wood carver Leroy Person.
A selection of these objects from Stipe's collection will be shown and offered for sale March 3-6 at the Outsider Art Fair at the Metropolitan Pavilion in New York, in a special presentation titled "Maps and Legends" (after an R.E.M. song inspired by Finster). The display of about 30 works has been organized by the art dealer and curator Phillip March Jones, whose East Village gallery, March, is dedicated to Southern artists. (A current exhibition there highlights the Alabama-based sculptor Joe Minter.)

"People all over the globe were introduced to these artists through the records and music videos and experimental films that R.E.M. was doing," said Jones, who counts himself as one of those initiates. "You think about Southern rock and what that was, Lynyrd Skynyrd — it's a different thing."

Stipe, 62, has had a long career as a visual artist himself and, since R.E.M. disbanded in 2011, a very productive one; he has published three books of his photography, with another in progress, and is preparing for a multimedia show at the ICA Milano. He is also working on his first-ever solo album, for which he has been releasing songs on his website (the most recent, "No Time for Love Like Now," is a collaboration with Aaron Dessner's Big Red Machine; a new track, "We Are Who We Were, Who We Will Be (My Body's Not Dancing)," will be out this spring).

Howard Finster's "Thank God for an Empty Cross (2000 and 877 Pieces)," from 1983, painted on wood panel, will be in Stipe's display at the Outsider Art Fair, an example of work by a South Georgia artist who inspired him.Credit...via Outsider Art Fair

"Michael is this authentic voice seeking out other authentic voices," Jones said. "He's someone who's interested not only in Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol and Jack Kerouac and Arthur Rimbaud and Patti Smith, but also in R.A. Miller and Howard Finster and Dilmus Hall. I haven't met many people who are like that."

Stipe spoke about his collection from his house in Athens, Ga., where he has been spending most of his time during the pandemic. This interview has been condensed and edited.

How did you first become acquainted with these artists and their work?

In the early 1980s there was no internet; everything was word of mouth. I was deeply influenced by my professors at the University of Georgia — Art Rosenbaum, Andy Nasisse, and Jim Herbert — and through them I met other people interested in the work of outsider artists in the Southeast that were largely untrained, but doing this incredible work. For me that was a particular interest in art and music. I'm interested in that moment of ecstatic vision, the feeling of some greater power coming through an artist.

How did you start collaborating with some of these artists?

I wound up bringing their artwork into the graphic design, which was my job for R.E.M. So we worked with Howard Finster and we used pieces by Juanita Rogers and Ed Rogers, no relation. I struck up a friendship with Finster, and with R.A. Miller — I was invited to visit St. EOM at his home — he was this incredible

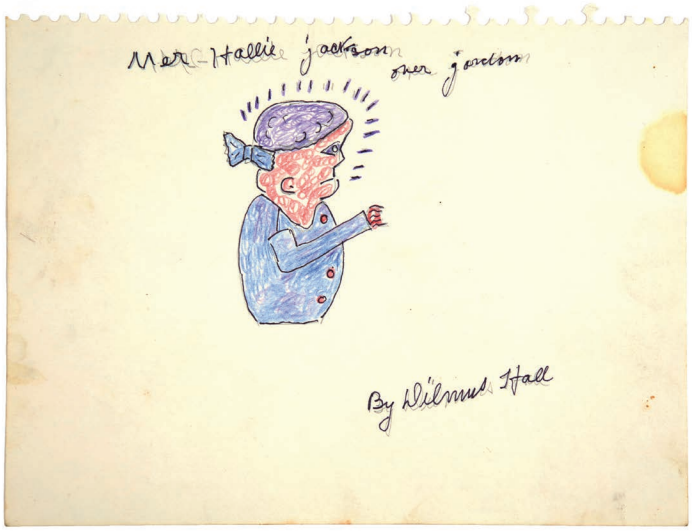
character, smoking giant fatties on his farm where he had created this concrete, South Georgia version of the Taj Mahal. And then I would buy little pieces from these artists. I couldn't afford very much, but nothing was very expensive. And so relationships were forged in this organic way.

What made you decide to showcase the art in music videos set in Finster's "Paradise Garden" and Miller's transporting landscape of metal whirligigs ("Left of Reckoning")?

The video for "Radio Free Europe" was probably more of a reaction to MTV and what music video was supposed to be. We were just like, "Screw it, we're not going to do that. We're going to do what we want." But we needed to have, in today's parlance, "content." And "Paradise Garden" is this incredible place, filled with all these beautiful, magical moments. So we hired a film crew and drove to Summerville and hung out with Howard, and someone came up with a little story line about us walking through the garden.

James Herbert, the director of "Left of Reckoning," was my drawing and painting teacher and he collaborated with R.E.M. to make several short films. The one filmed on R.A. Miller's hill of whirligigs was meant to be three minutes long, and Jim was so excited about the footage that he made this 20-minute film.

These artists were, whether by choice or not, fiercely independent in their vision. And R.E.M. was fiercely independent in our vision, for the most part, and I'm really proud of that.



Dilmus Hall, "Untitled," 1980s, colored pencil and pen on paper, from Michael Stipe's collection coming to the Outsider Art Fair next month. Credit...via Outsider Art Fair

Juanita Rogers, "Untitled" (1980s), in watercolor and graphite on paper, from Stipe's collection. Her work appears on the back cover of R.E.M.'s fourth album, "Life's Rich Pageant."Credit...via Outsider Art Fair

Were these artists evoked in the music and the lyrics or in other ways? For instance, there's a song, "Maps and Legends," that's supposed to be a tribute to Finster.

I wouldn't say it's about him but it's inspired by him. I was a singer and lyricist who didn't know how to sing and write lyrics, and I grew up in public doing so with this very impressionistic style, or non-style. I realized by the second album that I needed to develop my writing skills, and I started experimenting with narrative. I used the people around me to create those narratives. You start seeing that on the second album, "Reckoning." And then the third album, "Fables of the Reconstruction," is all stories, and mostly of characters that are based in the South.

In the text for the Outsider Art Fair presentation, you say: “I have always been interested in people living on the fringes. In the South, they are not only tolerated but often honored and embraced.” What draws you to the fringes, and why do you think the South is better at celebrating these figures?

From a very young age I regarded myself as an outsider. I’m queer, and I realized that very early on. I was in a military family that picked up and moved around all the time, so we had this very different lifestyle from other people. I was different, and I’m attracted to people that are also different. I don’t even really like the term “outsider,” but there is an embracing of people being themselves that historically runs through the South — certainly in the case of artists. There are other histories where we could question a lot of this.

Thornton Dial, “Untitled,” early 1990s, in graphite, pastel, watercolor, and gouache on paper, one of the works for sale in the Stipe collection. Credit... via Outsider Art Fair

Eddie Owens Martin, “Untitled” (no date); mixed media on paper. Stipe collected early drawings by the artist St. EOM, who later built his Pas-aquan compound in Georgia.Credit...via Outsider Art Fair

You could have identified with any number of different places, but you adopted Athens as your home. Why is that?

I was born in Georgia. My uncle went to college in Athens — he was an activist who was deeply involved in a lot of things in the 1960s and early ’70s here. And my grandparents lived here in their retirement, and when my father retired from the Army he and my mother moved here. I was living with a punk rock band outside of East Saint Louis and I ran out of money, and I came to Athens. I was not happy about it at first. But through the art school I would find this community that really acknowledged me — and within it I could blossom as an artist.

How has Southern outsider art influenced your artwork, from sculpture to your recent books of photography?

I would say there are two things that absolutely helped me immensely as an artist and a lyricist. One was to trust your instinct, to go your own path. And the other was to acknowledge and recognize the mistakes. If I can use the parlance of many of these artists, God lives in the chaos — in the things that are not quite what you expected them to be.

I'm very object-based, and that also finds its way into my work — there's an acknowledgment of artists like Thornton Dial and Lonnie Holley. Holley is a great example of someone who's a polymath expressing himself in all of these different ways, with music and objects. In my upcoming show at the ICA in Milan, there will also be a combination of sound installation and objects. I like that balance of the tangible and intangible — there's a magical place where they meet.

Why are you parting with the works that will be in the Outsider Art Fair?

I'm just at that point of my life where I'm letting go of things and pushing things out into the world, rather than bringing them in. For my entire adult life, I would stop, drop my bags, and pick up and go somewhere else to do the next thing. Over the years my home here became a landfill of my own making. I'm now just reallocating a lot of things, some of them quite precious and beautiful and inspiring.

Is there is a piece of Southern outsider art that was too meaningful to part with?

In my studio I keep a piece by Leroy Person, a sculpture made out of broken chairs that he carved and used crayon to color, next to a postcard of a Brancusi sculpture. To me there is a very clear connection between the two artists.

I also have a little carved figurine that Howard Finster gave me. It was a piece he had carved — whittled, he would say — for one of his children or grandchildren, before he had his ecstatic vision that set him on the course of becoming an artist. But he recognized my interest and the friendship. I'll keep it forever.

Michael Stipe at home in Athens, Ga., with small carved sculptures, some of peacocks, made in the late 70s by Leroy Person from discarded furniture with crayon coloring. Credit...Irina Rozovsky for The New York Times