

Maps & Legends

Featuring Works from the Collection of Michael Stipe

Michael Stipe introduced me to Howard Finster in 1996. I was fifteen years old.

More precisely, while driving across the Southern United States in a passenger van, two friends told me the story of a preacher turned artist who was building a garden filled with the “inventions of mankind” amid thousands of paintings of heaven, hell, aliens, and spaceships. They had first heard about Howard Finster from an R.E.M. music video filmed at the artist’s home. This somewhat hyperbolic game of telephone led me to Finster’s doorstep one year later and ultimately changed the course of my life. Artists, musicians, and writers are always sharing influences and making introductions to like-minded folks, but some have the power to do so on a different scale. Andy Nasisse, an artist and former U.G.A. professor, states it more plainly: “It is undeniable that Michael’s interest in the work helped put it on the national stage.”

In the early 1980s, Michael Stipe was an art student at the University of Georgia in Athens. His friend and professor, Art Rosenbaum, describes the local art and music scene of the time as “a kind of trading-off of vibes” and characterized by a general willingness among faculty and students to accept other aesthetics or ways of art-making. This was certainly true of Stipe who was quick to recognize and embrace the talents of his adopted home. Through introductions made by a community of friends and mentors including Rosenbaum and Nasisse, but also, Jim Herbert, Roger Manley, Tom Patterson, and Judy McWillie, Stipe met artists across the region, occasionally acquiring their works. In a recent phone call, he describes how these objects made their way into his life: “I bought things that I liked but never thought of myself as a collector. It was what was available. At first, I couldn’t afford art books, but I was able to travel and meet people. I remember J.B. Murray giving me some magic water in a bottle so that I could read scripture like he did. He told me that the best way home in the dark is the way you know. Back in art school, my friends and I would sometimes end long druggy nights by driving to sit and stare at R.A. Miller’s hill behind the house. It had three or

four hundred whirligigs; it was unbelievable.” Rosenbaum also remembers a birthday party they attended together for Dilmus Hall, immortalized in one of the professor’s paintings, and Manley recalls taking Michael to see Clyde Jones, Vollis Simpson, and other artists in North Carolina. And has the pictures to prove it.

Stipe’s motivation to meet artists feels both curious and genuine: “I have always been interested in people living on the fringes. In the South, they are not only tolerated but often honored and embraced.” From the beginning, Stipe and R.E.M. translated their natural affinity

for these artists and their shared geography into album covers, music videos, and objects that used works and environments by Southern artists including Howard Finster, R.A. Miller, Juanita Rogers, and Leroy Person, among others. Radio Free Europe was filmed at Paradise Garden in 1983; one year later, Jim Herbert directed *Left of Reckoning*, an experimental long-format music video, at R.A. Miller’s Whirligig Farm in Rabbittown, Georgia; Juanita Roger’s drawings were printed on the back of *Life’s Rich Pageant*, and so on. The cumulative effect of these projects was two-fold: the introduction of new artists to tens of thousands of people across the globe and an implicit transmission of the palpable appeal of a hidden South personified by artists and musicians who were both firmly grounded in the region but divorced from its problematic and stereotyped reputation.

Taking its title from an R.E.M. song dedicated to Howard Finster, *Maps and Legends* situates works from the collection of Michael Stipe within the larger context of the modern South and features 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 encountered by Stipe during his wanderings across the region.