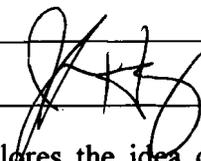


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Hiram Lucke for the Master of Arts

in English presented on April 25, 2000

Title: The Place of the Artist: Political Outsider Art from Twentieth-Century Kansas

Abstract approved: 

This thesis explores the idea of place or region and politics in art, specifically outsider art in Kansas. This thesis studies and compares three outsider artists from Kansas, S. P. Dinsmoor, M. T. Liggett, and Elizabeth Layton, to indicate how place has helped form their aesthetics and the political ideas within their art. An examination of the social and political history of Kansas demonstrates that each artist has a common ideology, uses many of the same mythological representations, and has much the same attitude towards art and society at large. The study suggests that place has a large impact on the art and artists discussed.

**The Place of the Artist:  
Political Outsider Art from Twentieth Century Kansas**

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**A Thesis**

**Presented to**

**The Division of English**

**EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY**

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**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Arts**

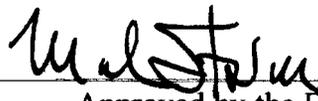
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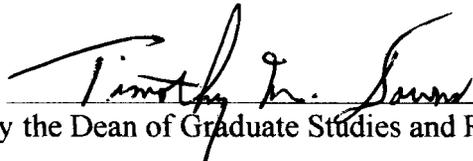
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Approved by the Division Chair



Approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

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I would like to thank the following people, in no certain order (other than alphabetical):

My greatest thanks to all the artists, living and dead, who are within this paper. Without their need to create and express themselves, my need would not have existed. Elizabeth Brooks for making me go back to school, for her support and love, and for being alive. Elizabeth, I would just like to paraphrase the wonderful Orson Welles, "I shall buy no six pack before it's time." I would like to thank committee member Phil Heldrich, whose humor and help have helped me make it through my two years at Emporia State University (how's that for alliteration). My thesis advisor, Jim Hoy, for his help in finishing this thesis. His insight and expertise have helped me appreciate my home state more than he probably knows. Richard Keller, for being there when I needed him. Rachel Thompson for her love and understanding during this last semester, for reading me *The Little Prince*, and helping me find poetry in Emporia. And, of course, all those people who listened to me explain this thing one hundred times and still listen to me when I was frustrated and felt like quitting.

This work is dedicated to my parents. Without their support, love, understanding, and help, none of this would have been possible. Thank you both for everything. Just think, now you can visit and I won't have to make you leave so that I can work on a paper. I guess I'll have to come up with some other excuse.

When Dorothy stood in the doorway and looked around, she could see nothing but the great gray prairie on every side. Not a tree nor a house broke the broad sweep of flat country that reached the edge of the sky in all directions. The sun had baked the plowed land into a gray mass, with little cracks running through it. Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same gray color to be seen everywhere. Once the house had been painted, but the sun blistered the paint and the rains washed it away, and now the house was as dull and gray as everything else.

When Aunt Em came there to live she was a young, pretty wife. The sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled, now. When Dorothy, who was an orphan, first came to her, Aunt Em had been so startled by the child's laughter that she would scream and press her hand upon her heart whenever Dorothy's merry voice reached her ears; and she still looked at the little girl with wonder that she could find anything to laugh at.

Uncle Henry never laughed. He worked hard from morning till night and did not know what joy was. He was gray also, from his long beard to his rough boots, and he looked stern and solemn, and rarely spoke.

--*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, L. Frank Baum

The minister smoked,  
and he drank,  
and there was that woman in the choir,  
but what really finished him--  
he wore spats.

--from *Religion Back Home*, William Stafford

The native, by contrast, has a complex attitude derived from his immersion in the totality of his environment. The visitor's viewpoint, being simple, is easily stated. Confrontation with novelty may also prompt him to express himself. The complex attitude of the native, on the other hand, can be expressed by him only with difficulty and indirectly through behavior, local tradition, lore, and myth.

--*Topophilia*, Yi-Fu Tuan

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

In the age of the internet, twenty-four hour news programs, authentic American apparel made in China, and the overall glutinous nature of commercialism, regional identity and regionalism seem almost dead. As Wright Morris wrote in 1957, “The region--the region in the sense that once fed the imagination--is now for sale . . . . The only regions left are those the artist must imagine. They lie beyond the usual forms of salvage. No matter where we go, in America today, we shall find what we left behind” (22). Kenneth Hanson wrote in 1975, “Regionalism is as dead as the carrier pigeon. . . . Given the facts, regionalism is an anachronism, and its reflection in literature is sentimentalism, an exercise in wishful thinking or nostalgia” (21). But, as postmodernity settles into the annals of history and is just another word to contemplate within context, identity is more and more a way to claim a piece of the social pie. Regionalism has both died and become a source of life. David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner, trying to come to terms with the idea of regionalism, write in the introduction to their book *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity*:

The uprooting, leveling nature of American experience evokes a counterdesire for stability and more intimate places of identity. We consolidate and disperse, unify and diversify at the same time. The sheer immensity of the United States engenders the need for subnational places of belonging, and regional loyalty often emerges as a conscious response to the emptiness of mass culture and the nation state. (7-8)

Region has become a way to identity. This identity is forged not by the whole, but by the part. A Texan is an American, but only through those identifiers that make a Texan

first. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes in his book *Topophilia*, “At the level of group attitudes and preferences it is necessary to know a group’s cultural history and experience in the context of its physical setting. The concepts ‘culture’ and ‘environment’ overlap as do the concepts ‘man’ and ‘nature’” (59). For Tuan, to know a culture, you must first know it within the context of its place. It is worthwhile to look at a small portion of a place as large as the United States to gauge its changing, or at other levels its unchanging, dynamics. Wrapped up in the sense of place is inevitably a sense of the sociopolitical<sup>1</sup> being as well; that sense comes through in art: “Art is political by its very nature. It has an ideology and reflects its creator’s value system” claims Amiri Baraka (Baraka 92). This marriage of the region and the ideology of politics is a fitting one for Kansas. Carl Becker writes that “Kansas is no mere geographical expression, but a ‘state of mind,’ a religion, and a philosophy in one” (Becker 6). For Becker, and for Kansans, their place and culture is one that encompasses their ideologies through their shared history. He also writes that “Kansas is America in microcosm” (Becker 6). At the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was written, this statement may have rung more true than it does today. However, the statement does maintain validity even as we have moved into the twenty-first century, as artists within Kansas demonstrate how the state is still representative of our age.

Carl Becker wrote of Kansas and Kansans in 1910 that “[t]he belief that Kansas was founded for a cause distinguishes it, in the eyes of its inhabitants, as pre-eminently the home of freedom. It lifts the history of the state out of the commonplace of ordinary westward migration, and gives to the temper of the people a certain elevated and martial quality” (36). This “martial quality” was displayed in the early residents of Kansas by their belief in a “free state” as opposed to the slave status of its neighbors in Missouri

and Arkansas. The offspring of those pioneers and the newcomers to the state kept that idealism intact by joining with the Populist movement and Socialism. James R. Shortridge writes, “Grassroots protest movements began in the 1880s as a series of farmers’ alliances. They grew rapidly, coalesced as the Populist Party in 1892, and found acceptance throughout the northern Plains” (122). Many farmers felt that the government held the interests of large, money-making corporations over their interests. This sentiment spread throughout the plains and flourished with the Populist party. The nation’s largest circulating Socialist newspaper, *The Appeal to Reason*, was published in Girard, in the southeast corner of Kansas. Within the *Appeal*, many writers practiced their craft; Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* was originally published here. The *Appeal* lost steam after W. W. I, for the same reason as the Nonpartisan League of North Dakota and other Socialist organizations: “[Socialism in the US became] a victim of its own success and of linkages made between its brand of socialism and that being practiced in the new Soviet Union of Vladimir Lenin” (Shortridge 122). The radical ideas of Populism and Socialism existed, sometimes hand in hand, with the more puritanical notions that have given the state the modern tag of backwards and antiquated. Robert Smith Bader writes that in the latter half of the twentieth century Kansas and the Kansan are seen as one of five things: “Rube, Drab, Irrelevant, Puritanical, and Traditional” (115). Prohibition, the Ages of Republicanism, and the insistence on the “good family values” of today’s Republican Party have all been a part of the political history of Kansas. Prohibition itself was made a part of the Populist platform to bolster support in the state and in the greater area of the Midwest. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the state became a leader in the civil rights movement. *Brown vs. The State Board of Education*, which allowed the

integration of African-Americans in public schools, took place in Kansas. But a state cannot survive on history and idealism alone.

Kansas has been represented as a place of extremes in both its landscape and its people; the landscape has been seen as everything from a garden paradise to a barren desert, its people seen as conservative, puritanical fanatics or maniacally liberal cranks. Leo Marx, in his ground breaking work *The Machine in the Garden*, writes that “Beginning in Jefferson’s time, the cardinal image of American aspirations was a rural landscape, a well-ordered green garden magnified to continental size. . . . This is the countryside of the old Republic, a chaste, uncomplicated land of rural virtue” (141). Shortridge contends that in the twentieth century there have been two reactions to outer society among residents of the Plains. The first was resistance to the outside world and was more common in the early years of Plains residents’ existence. The second, which was often simultaneous with the first, was an embracing of the industrial and technological dream that was held elsewhere in the nation. The yeoman myth in Kansas, that which was brought about by the pioneer farmers who lasted through the droughts of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, became popular early on, and even exists in Kansas to a certain extent today. But the impetus lies in Jeffersonian America:

In the egalitarian social climate of America the pastoral ideal, instead of being contained by the literary design, spills over into thinking about real life. Jefferson extends the root contrast between simplicity and sophistication to opinions on every imaginable subject. “State a moral case,” he says, “to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules.” The pastoral element in this famous anti-intellectual

homily is apparent. The true American is the ploughman, whose values are derived from his relations to the land, not from “artificial rules.”

(Marx 130)

Carl Becker wrote that for the inhabitants of Kansas, “misfortunes seemingly of man’s making arouse in them a veritable passion of resistance; the mere suspicion of injustice, real or fancied exploitation by those who fare sumptuously . . . touch[es] something explosive in their nature that transforms a calm and practical people into excited revolutionists” (30). William Allen White reiterated the idea of the yeoman and the revolutionary when he wrote “When anything is going to happen in this country, it first happens in Kansas” (qtd. in Averill 8). Of course, this notion of Kansas as the leader of a future America has become all but extinct. If anything, Kansas has become what William Least Heat-Moon describes as “a place to be seen in the light of its days and in the shadows of its history” (Heat-Moon 206).

I would like to examine the artists in this paper as representing some ideal akin to what Least Heat-Moon has just described. Artist and social critic S. P. Dinsmoor (and those who came after him) in Lucas and the surrounding area, M. T. Liggett in Mullinville, and Elizabeth “Grandma” Layton in Wellsville, all exemplify, and sometimes defy, the ideologies, myths, and pre/misconceptions of what it is to be from Kansas. These three artists defy as well those conceptions that exist within the academic and institutionalized world of art. While S. P. Dinsmoor was not a native Kansan, nor were many at the time he moved here because of its short history, his ideals were in line with the Kansas of his time. Dinsmoor and Liggett are true “outsider artists,” and, while Layton is usually considered a primitive artist of the elite and academic world (because she took one class, on contour drawing, at a small college in Ottawa), she too fits most of the criteria for the

“outsider artist.” All were of retirement age when they first started constructing their pieces of art. All were brought some attention to the state through their pieces, whether it be from the tourists who stop to see the Garden of Eden in Lucas<sup>2</sup>, from travelers who pass Mullinville and witness the grumblings of a curmudgeon, or from viewers of paintings of an elderly woman that contain her own personal statements and political views on life, love, America, and clinical depression. Each of these three persons is an artist who is both within and outside the world of academic art because of his or her own relative “primitiveness.”

Primitive culture and primitiveness is seen as the lowest form of culture by some within the academy. Noted folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand sets forth three levels of culture: “Elite, Normative, and Folk” (9). These levels, Brunvand writes, are typically viewed as having the following traits: elite culture is progressive and academic, normative culture is the popular, mass, or mainstream taste of a given group, and folk culture is typically conservative and traditional. For example, by analogy elites would read a “serious” novel, normative culture would read a popular romance, while folk culture would be entertained with a tall tale or anecdote of some sort. These levels are important to note because of the different “levels” each of the artists discussed seems to be working within.

Primitive artists, while working at a “folk” level may not necessarily be representative of their culture’s customs as a whole. Ray Wilber, of the Kansas Grassroots Art Association, states that they chose the term “grassroots art” because, “we wanted to separate it from folk art which seemed to have a cultural/regional tradition and this work didn’t have that. It was the visionary work of one artist” (*Rare Visions and Roadside Revelations* Vol. I). However, the “grassroots” or “outsider” art of these

Kansas artists does have a cultural/regional tradition. It differs from the folk art of the Pennsylvania Dutch, for example, because it is not uniform in its technique and appearance. The work of these artists is uniform in its portrayal of the region, mythology, and history of Kansas, even if it is not uniform in materials used and technique.

The study of outsider art began in the early twentieth century. The term “l’art brut” is attributed to the French artist Jean Dubuffet, who began gathering a collection in 1945 of art made by “primitives,” or those unschooled in art, “much of it produced by institutionalized psychotics” (Danto 1). Dubuffet and other artists such as Paul Klee, Matisse, Picasso, and Gauguin, championed the works of less academic, folk and custom related art, but Dubuffet is famous for setting up one of the first collections of “art brut” or “raw art” in the world, in Lausanne, Switzerland. Dubuffet states,

We mean by “raw art” the works executed by people untouched by artistic tradition -- contrary to what occurs among intellectuals -- so that their makers derive everything (subjects, choice of materials used, means of transposition, rhythms, ways of patterning, etc.) from their own resources and not from the conventions of classic art or the art that happens to be fashionable. Here we find art at its purest and crudest, we see it being wholly invented at every stage of the operation of its maker, acting entirely on his [or her] own. (qtd. in Gutsak and Virshup 16)

Roger Cardinal, an authority on “art brut,” is credited with Anglicizing the term to “outsider art” in 1972. Cardinal writes,

Totally alien, the new art (an art that has always been) proliferates quietly round the outskirts of the cultural city. The present survey of what this

art can offer, being only provisional and partial, thus ends not with the complacent humming emitted by art books that fit snug next to what has gone before, but with the busy, uneven clattering made by the nameless creators presently engaged in erecting alternative realities, sounds which -- such is the present state of our sensibility -- are yet too disparate for us to apprehend as a single message. Whether or not the time will ever come when those untutored hands will fashion a Trojan Horse, the siege of the cultural city is underway. (180)

For Cardinal, the work of the outsider artist is one that belongs to the world outside of the norm. This art exists as a reminder to the people on the “inside” of a society that it is not as well as it seems.

Furthermore, Arthur C. Danto believes that the term “outsider,” “for all that the term suggests [of] a state of excludedness, does not correspond to a political boundary between enfranchised and disenfranchised. The true outsider is someone deeply outside the institutional framework of the art world” (1). The term “outsider art” is also closely associated with other terms such as “grassroots art,” “primitive art,” “naive art,” and “folk art.” Yet, even with all of these seemingly similar classifications, each connotes a different category. The idea of an “outsider artist” denotes someone who is outside the realm of the world of academic or elite art. Carl Magnuson writes that,

[t]he arts referred to as grassroots art [or outsider art] seem to have very little in common, yet they frequently share some characteristics.

Typically, many grassroots artists work with unconventional materials, such as concrete. Many use cast-off materials. Grassroots artists tend to be self-taught and to start creating art late in life, after they

are freed from the pressures of earning a living or taking care of a family. Grassroots artists begin their artistic careers without a definite audience beyond family and neighbors, whose expectations are not formed by academic training or tradition. Many grassroots artists are motivated by a vision or a desire to communicate a specific political or religious message, which they overtly express. (5)

One should not mistake the term “outsider” for “naive,” however, as is apt to be done within academic circles. Denigration seems to be inherent in the language of artists like Dubuffet who wanted people who were “crude” and not touched by “intellectuals” or the “conventions of classical art.” Many of the artists I will discuss were educated at institutions of higher learning. Both Liggett and Layton use allusions to Roman and Greek mythology, as well as to other artists, philosophers, and theorists. Dinsmoor uses images that were common in the Populist literature of the time, as well as Biblical allusions. Also, it is easy for some to claim that most people who build these pieces are “crazy” or “insane.” In truth, of the three artists that I will primarily discuss, only Elizabeth Layton suffered from a clinically diagnosed mental problem. As for Dinsmoor and Liggett, they are often seen as eccentric by others, either within their own smaller communities or within the larger, American community as a whole because of their need to build art. Ray Wilber states “People always ask the question, ‘Why did people make this art?’ and I think the question should more appropriately be ‘Why don’t more people make art?’” (*Rare Visions and Roadside Revelations* Vol. I).

Kansas has never been known as a center for art. William Allen White, Karl Menninger, and Milton Eisenhower have written essays that urge Kansans to become more interested in the arts and less interested in the ideas of “radical” politics and the

aesthetic of the hard worker. However, Dinsmoor, Liggett, and Layton, all created art after the age of retirement. This gives credence to the idea of the hard working yeoman who is also a thinker. The story of John Steuart Curry fits well with the history of the arts in Kansas and its mythos of the hardworking, no nonsense yeoman. It also points to the distrust of the outsider, which Curry came to be viewed as for leaving Kansas as a teenager. Curry was indeed a native Kansan who may have left the state, yet he never forgot his home in his work. This fact also contributed to his low repute in the eyes of some Kansans. His pieces depict images that he remembered. As Robert Smith Bader writes, “No literary work captures that spirit [of the mythos of Kansas] quite so poignantly as the icon of the frenzied John Brown staring out from the mural on the Statehouse wall. John Steuart Curry’s personal relationship with the homeland serves as a haunting and ambivalent echo” (130).

Curry’s role in the triumvirate of Regionalism (Curry, Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton) became, as *Time* magazine noted in 1934, “destined to turn the tide of artistic taste in the U. S.” (“U. S. Scene” 25). The work of the Regionalists, containing scenes of the heartland and America in a “realistic” light, was seen as an opposition to the “crazy parade of Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism” that was dominating the American art scene of the day, according to *New York Times* art critic Edward Alden Jewell (qtd. in Kendall 24). Thomas Hart Benton later reflected upon the Regionalist movement and its promotion of an “American” art form:

We came in the popular mind to represent a homegrown, grassroots artistry which damned “furrin” influence and which knew nothing about and cared nothing for the traditions of art as cultivated city snobs, dudes, and assthetes [sic] knew them. A play was written and a stage erected for

us. Grant Wood became the typical Iowa small townner, John Curry the typical Kansas farmer, and I just an Ozark hillbilly. We accepted our roles. (qtd. in Kendall 26)

But the truth of the matter was that Curry disliked the people of Kansas (who in turn disliked Curry's work), who didn't "understand" his art. In fact, Curry lived in an artist's colony in Connecticut with Wood. The photographs from the *Time* article were staged pieces with the two dressed in bib-overalls, Wood smoking a pipe, while they stood around the scenic artists' colony.

In 1931, Curry had an exhibit in Topeka's Mulvane Art Museum. Maynard Walker, the organizer of the traveling exhibit, said that the showing in Topeka was a flop. Kansans resented Curry for his depictions of life in the state as cruel, strange, and puritanical. Kansans did not want their own state's weaknesses to be portrayed for all the world to see. Curry's depictions of lynch mobs and fanaticism were too much for the citizens of Kansas to handle. M. Sue Kendall writes

[a] Topeka spokesman, L. T. Hull, wrote to Ferargil Galleries that "the public resented the so-called crude angle towards Kansas" they sensed in paintings such as *The Tornado*, *Holy Rollers*, and *Manhunt*. It seemed that most Kansans found little pleasure in seeing their miserable weather, their religious fanaticism, and their lynch mobs captured in paint for all the world to see. (26)

But, through the writings of such prominent Kansans as William Allen White, the feelings about Curry had changed somewhat for the better. When the Kansas Murals Commission was set up to oversee the procedure of painting the statehouse, they asked, in 1937, Curry to paint a set of murals in the state's capital building. However, the agreement was

to remain tentative until Curry submitted a series of sketches to the committee. Only then would they give final approval.

The decision to paint murals on the state capital walls caused two different factions to form within the state; those who wanted the murals to portray the history of Kansas within its own people such as John Brown, Carry Nation, and Sockless Jerry Simpson, and another group that wanted a toned down approach of buffalo and Coronado and the conquistadors. After coming back to Kansas in August of 1937, Curry sent the Kansas Murals Commission the following note:

The theme I have chosen is historical in more than one sense. In great measure it is the historical struggle of man with nature. This struggle has been a determining factor in my art expression. It is my family's tradition and the tradition of a great majority of Kansas people. And though I fully realize the importance of Kansans in the fields of politics and the various phases of education and human welfare, these phases are removed from my vital experience and that experience is necessary for me to make a forceful art expression. . . . I have been accused of seeing only the dark and seamy side of my native state. In these panels I shall show the beauty of real things under the hand of a beneficent Nature . . . so that we as farmers, patrons, and artists can shout happily together, "Ad Astra Per Aspera."

(qtd. in Kendall 44-46)

Curry's "forceful art expression" turned out to be what everyone had hoped it wouldn't be, however. Curry was going to paint one of the most well-known persons from Kansas, John Brown, as a mad prophet. He painted pieces about soil erosion and the harsh weather conditions that farmers in Kansas must face. Curry had decided to paint

both Coronado and a Native American with a herd of buffalo, a tornado and landscape, and a farmer and his farm. As W. G. Clugston wrote in the November 12, 1937, *Kansas City Journal-Post*:

The never-ending prohibition struggle is ignored. The Populist uprisings are passed over. Also, "the Brinkley phenomenon." Carry A. Nation is "out." So are the crusades against the cigaret [sic], the Landon presidential campaign, the war on the public drinking cup and the legal ban of snake meat. . . . But there is a cyclone in the background of the John Brown scene which no one can overlook. There is a plainly depicted dust storm, and a record of what is happening through soil erosion. (qtd. in Kendall 47).

The people of Kansas showed their dislike for the murals while they were in the process of being painted. Many hated the fact that Curry was painting the state in such a way that showed Kansas to be full of crazies (John Brown) and soil erosion. The Kansas Council of Women issued a statement that read in part, "The murals do not portray the true Kansas. Rather than revealing a law-abiding, progressive state, the artist has emphasized the freaks in its history--the tornadoes, and John Brown, who did not follow legal procedure" (qtd. in Kendall 131). Cattlemen in Wichita ridiculed Curry because his grazing bull in the *Kansas Pastoral* section of the mural "resembled more the grazing position of a horse than a bull, and that Curry's sketch showed a 'bull standing wrong'" (Kendall 126). Representatives seeking reelection in 1941 started to back their constituents. Those opposed to having Curry paint the murals were finally having their way. Curry was falling more and more out of favor. The incident that finally finished Curry was the removal of some marble panels in one of the Rotundas of the statehouse.

The marble had been imported from Italy forty years prior to the Curry murals. This left many taxpayers, whose reactions to Curry weren't favorable, with a bad taste in their mouth. In April 1941, Senate Resolution 20 was passed in response, stating that the Italian marble would not be removed. Thus Curry's murals would remain unfinished. Curry issued the following statement as he left the state of Kansas for the last time in 1941:

The work in the east and west wings stands as disjointed and un-united fragments. Because this project is uncompleted and does not represent my true idea, I am not signing these works. I sincerely believe that in the fragments, particularly in the panel of John Brown, I have accomplished the greatest paintings I have yet done, and that they will stand as historical monuments. . . . [To those that believed in me] I wish to express my appreciation and to assure you that I have done the best I could with the space at my command. (qtd. in Kendall 132)

The irony of Curry's statement is that his paintings in the capital have become his best known work and do stand as historical monuments to the state of Kansas even though he didn't sign his name. Curry's insistence on creating his art, on displaying his intensity of feeling, and on showing the history of Kansas links Curry to Dinsmoor, Liggett, and Layton by a bond that is political and social. Each artist works out of what he or she feels is the truth about Kansas and its inhabitants. The artists exist outside the realm of society in the region as well, while they simultaneously exist within its mores and customs, reporting what they see.

One of the things that separate Curry from the outsider artists Dinsmoor, Liggett, and Layton is his reluctance to remain a part of the region and its people. His

remembrances are at times nostalgic for the past and at others accusatory of a place that he seems to resist in his life outside his art. Dinsmoor, Liggett, and Layton all use their life as Kansans in their art to represent their region and its history. It is this immersion in place that helps to set them apart from Curry and, ultimately, leads to their own artistic truths.

## Chapter Two

### S. P. Dinsmoor, Lucas, and the Grassroots Art Capital of Kansas

William Carlos Williams, in his five-book poem *Paterson*, uses the dog as a metaphor for the poet/artist, “a tapestry hound / with his thread teeth drawing crimson from / the throat of the unicorn” (Williams 126). In this scene, the dog (artist) is killing the unicorn (myth, fantasy) and by doing so it is taking control of its own domain and its own art. “No ideas but in things” Williams exclaims in the first pages (6). These “things” that he is speaking of are the tangible, everyday pieces of life that form the basis of knowledge and beauty, the indigenous materials that are the foundation of Williams’ poetry. In much the same way that Williams’ Dr. Paterson searches for a new language and finds it by using resources unique to the area and by “In venshun,” (Williams 184), so Samuel Perry Dinsmoor and the other grassroots artists of Lucas and the surrounding area have found their own distinctive voices through native products, their own imagination, and an affinity for eccentricism. Most of the artists would not want to be called artists at all, and some people would argue that they are not artists. However, these people have created works that represent their life and their society. Barbara Brackman, in a brochure for the Kansas Grassroots Art Association, states that “grassroots artists work outside the academic structure of fine art with little formal training. They often use conventional materials, like concrete, in unusual ways. Many of the artists construct environments which are meant to be viewed as a whole” (Brackman, *Kansas*). In an interview, Rosslyn Schultz, Director of the Grassroots Art Museum in Lucas, added, “most of our people around the area that do or did the art are retired and have a lot of time on their hands.

They remain very active in their later years” (Schultz). Perhaps the best-known of these artists was S. P. Dinsmoor, a man who opened the way for other local artists to follow in his footsteps. Using indigenous materials Dinsmoor created pieces of art that reflect his own Populist views on history and Christian mythology. Like other Kansas artists, the region and all that comes with it, played a large part in his work.

Samuel Perry Dinsmoor was born on March 8, 1843, in Ohio, and died in Lucas in 1932. He served as a member of the Union Army in the Civil War in the 116th Ohio in over twenty battles, and he claimed “to be present at the surrender of General Lee” (Fisher B1). He moved to Lucas, a stop along the railway, from Illinois upon retirement as a school teacher in 1888. Dinsmoor was a Populist; Populism was a political party that was founded because of “dire economic times coupled with a population already intent on social and financial experimentation” (Hachmeister 33). The diverse platform included liberal ideas such as “women’s rights, monetary reform, government regulation of banks and railroads, and the dissolution of ‘trusts’ or monopolies” (Hachmeister 33). In 1891, Dinsmoor began, with his first wife, Frances A. Journey (whom he married on horseback), to build what was to be called “The Cabin Home.” This home was not made from wooden planks or even logs, but rather from limestone, or “post rock,” a soft, plentiful rock that is found only in north central Kansas. As Dinsmoor writes, “The floors, baseboards, and window stools are concrete. The second story is built of stone logs on the old log cabin style” (Dinsmoor 5). By 1907 the house was finished. Many of the limestone “logs” of the cabin home reached 27 feet in length (Amundson 2). However, after completion of his “Cabin Home” Dinsmoor didn’t stop building.

With money made from visitors to the cabin and money left him after Frances died in 1917, Dinsmoor created over the next twenty years even stranger structures, sculptures of concrete. The structure is a fence, of sorts, that encloses most of the building. On the west wall, Dinsmoor created an interpretation of the Judeo-Christian Creation story. The other pieces of his sculpture depict his Populist vision of American politics and history. Within this “fence” he also created a mausoleum, trees made of concrete, strawberry beds in the shape of a pyramid, a tool shed, a pool, a bestiary (“my Badger, Owl and Pigeon Roost,” as Dinsmoor put it), and a walkway trellis that leads to the yard. And all of this is made from concrete, a relatively new product at the time which, according to John Hachmeister, was not as widely used then as it is today: “At the same time that Dinsmoor was constructing his concrete porches and trees, Thomas Edison was attempting to cast a concrete chicken house, a concept that amused his skeptical family until he proved he could do it” (Hachmeister 128).

“The Cabin Home,” Dinsmoor’s first project, built with limestone and concrete, contains “eleven rooms on three floors” and used “3,000 feet of molding,” inside the home (Amundson 2) [pictures 1-4]. Each window ledge and doorway on the first floor is of a different size. The top floor has a concrete balcony that overlooks the east yard and the mausoleum. The basement, although having a low ceiling, contains the kitchen and canning area. He also created furniture for the house. One piece, still inside the house, is a table with a checkerboard design that, as a sign informs, was created from 343 pieces [picture 2], “scrap[s] of trim saved during construction.” Dinsmoor fashioned other furniture in the same style for his home. He believed, “It’s waste that makes man poor”

(Hachmeister 35). There is also a large fireplace with impeccable woodworking that adorns the main living room. The house is a showcase for Dinsmoor's craftsmanship.

Outside of the faux log cabin is a balcony that overlooks the entire yard. A lintel underneath the balcony has created by using beer bottles as molds. In the home state of Carrie A. Nation, Dinsmoor built this lintel at the height of prohibition. As Dinsmoor tells us, "You can't drink booze any more. You can only use the contents of beer bottles on those shelves, jugs and mugs on the corner posts to look at" (Dinsmoor 7). To create the border, he filled beer bottles with concrete and then broke the bottle [picture 4].

After finishing the house, he began to create the sculptures-as-fence that are known as "The Garden of Eden." The fence on the west side of the yard is the Judeo-Christian Creation story. Here, a visitor can see the tale of Cain and Abel [pictures 6-9]. What makes the visual portrayal interesting, however, is not the story so much as the way that Dinsmoor created a long, interconnected, and flowing piece of art. The sculpture moves from the murder of Abel toward the north wall. The west fence has Satan, the Eye of God, the Angel of God, the serpent, Adam and Eve, and two storks, who are the bearers of both light and the children. As Dinsmoor says:

Moses never said a word about them [the storks]. He just wrote up enough to bring down the fall of man. All the preachers talk about is the original sin. There must have been many things in the Garden of Eden that Moses didn't mention. I have substituted some things that I know were there. The storks were there, because the kids were there; Cain and Abel. The storks always bring the kids. Nowadays they bring them in baskets in

their mouths, but the Bible says, “There was darkness on the face of the earth,” and these storks had to have lights in their mouths to see which way to go, so they carried the babies under their wings. (Dinsmoor 19)

For Dinsmoor, just as the myth of a stork bringing a child into the world does not tell the truth of natural childbirth but rather a fantastical story, so the Bible does not tell the whole truth about original sin. Later, Dinsmoor’s interpretation of the United States government’s actions parallels this logic; as the fence’s story moves to modern man he points out how the government is wrapped up in the interests of money making corporations rather than the interests of the common man while pretending to care for the worker. Satan, with pitchfork in hand, lights up at night as well, suggesting that evil is as much a part of life and myth as rebirth. With the ingenious placing of light bulbs in the head of Satan and the mouths of the storks that carried Cain and Abel, the Garden of Eden became the first structure with electric lights in the town of Lucas<sup>1</sup>, something of which Dinsmoor was very proud.

The story of Cain and Abel progresses to the northwest corner where Cain and his wife stand [picture 10]. This progression is significant as the sculpture moves towards its representation of modern society and the murder of the working person. The Populist belief in small government and the rights of the common people, a trait of Kansans pointed out by Carl Becker and others, comes into focus at this point. Dinsmoor depicts Cain trying to ease his wife over to the side of the wall. To Cain’s immediate right, stands the form of “The Trusts” or what might now be termed “multi-national conglomerates” or

perhaps “big business.” The Trusts have octopus tentacles wrapping around people of the modern world, represented on the north wall,

Popular reform literature of the time used the octopus as the symbol of both social Darwinism and large corporations in general. The . . . flag . . . symbolizes Dinsmoor’s and Populist anger over the federal government’s active role in monopolistic practices. When state legislatures passed laws protecting local citizens from the predatory practices of the monopolies, the United States Congress nullified them. (Hachmeister 35)

The tentacles are also grabbing a “bag of bonds, a sack of interest, the North Pole, the Panama Canal, and a signboard listing the chartered rights that have gone to the trusts and created monopolies. Above the octopus is a concrete, American flag, built to swivel in the wind” (Hachmeister 42), pointing to the Trusts being involved in matters that pertain to all of society. The tentacles even intertwine with the snake of the Creation story on the west wall, suggesting the trusts are evil incarnate. These trusts (the tentacles of the octopus) meet their end at the “Tree of Life” by the “Goddess of Liberty” [picture 13]. As Dinsmoor explains:

There is the Goddess of Liberty with one foot on the trusts and a spear in her hand going through the head of the trusts. The trusts’ claws are getting nothing. Down below is a man and woman with a cross-cut saw marked ballot, sawing off the chartered rights limb that the trust stands on. That shows how we can get away with [from] the trusts and if we don’t get

away with [from] them with the ballot, they will be shot away with the bullet, as they were in Russia. (Dinsmoor 37)

Hachmeister points out that Dinsmoor, as a Populist who believed in the main tenets of the party, was influenced by the ideas of Sarah E. V. Emery, a worker for the Women's Rights movement, a major Populist proponent, and the author of *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People*. Dinsmoor paraphrases her when he refers to "her call for peaceful change through the ballot to avoid the necessity of violent change through the bullet" (Hachmeister 46). He quotes from her again in *Pictorial History of The Cabin Home in Garden of Eden Lucas, Kansas*, when he asks, "The flag protects capital today better than it does humanity. It drafted the boys but asked the money to volunteer. See the difference?" (35). For Dinsmoor, the "capital," or money, runs the country. It is to the interests of money that the government responds rather than to the people who have died in war and those who die poor as workers.

Below the tentacles of the Trusts on the north side, Dinsmoor gives us his version of the modern food chain, or what Hachmeister calls Dinsmoor's look at social Darwinism [picture 11]. Social Darwinism, to put it simply, is the belief that those who are the strongest (i.e. those with the funds to support themselves) will be the ones who rule and survive. This belief overlooks those outside of the norm, the outsiders, of the monied, white, male establishment. Those outside would be the working class, women, people of a different race, etc. The octopus has both a woman and a soldier in its grasp, the woman by the waist and the soldier by the knapsack. The woman is chasing the soldier, who is

pointing a gun at an Indian on the next tree. The Indian has an arrow leveled at a dog. The dog is after a fox, which is after a bird which is after a worm eating a leaf. For Dinsmoor, this chain represents modern civilization. By equating society and social Darwinism with animals in nature, Dinsmoor points out with a sarcastic practicality that those without power in society must fall to the trusts in the same way that the worm will fall to the bird, the bird to the fox, etc.

Dinsmoor, without a doubt, was a Populist who believed in the rights of the individual and saw that the problems of the country came from the presence of monopolies and big business and too much government interference in society. His embrace of the Socialist revolution in Russia points to his belief that the rights of the workers should be in their own hands. Dinsmoor's acceptance of liberal thought and practices to rebuild the government and his insistence that if peaceful means fail then violence must be used puts him in a strange position for his day, as his thoughts were seen as controversial, even agitative, by the society around him, thus making him an outsider within the community.

As the fence moves across the north from the west to the east corner of the yard telling the story of the trusts in America, the east wall becomes the "Crucifixion of Labor," the only unfinished piece in the Garden, left uncompleted because Dinsmoor went blind in 1929 [picture 14]. Hachmeister claims that this was a popular image of labor for the Populist party. In the middle of a concrete tree hangs a man in the familiar pose of Christ on the cross. Underneath the feet of this man is a sign reading "Labor." To the figure's right are a Doctor and a Lawyer. To the left are a Preacher and a Banker.

“I do not say they are all grafters, but I do say they are the leaders of all who eat cake by the sweat of the other fellow’s face,” Dinsmoor explains (47). Once again, Dinsmoor’s belief that the workers should control their own lives surfaces, this time even more clearly.

The movement of the sculptures from the Creation story to the crucifixion gives Dinsmoor a common center with which to open his discussion of Populism with the people who lived around him. Just as James Joyce used the *Odyssey* as a reference for *Ulysses* or Bebop Jazz musician Charlie Parker used “Cherokee” to anchor his own work to embellish upon, Dinsmoor used the Bible. He would not have blasphemed the Christian God, as most believed, but instead used it as a way to communicate modern problems facing Labor and the common man. This tactic was lost on most of the community around him, it seems. By using Biblical references and not fully disclosing his own religious beliefs, Dinsmoor became an outsider.

Dinsmoor’s Garden also holds his own mausoleum, made of limestone. With this building, he has taken control of his own fate once again [picture 12]. In the mausoleum, Dinsmoor himself is encased in glass, along with his first wife, whose coffin is encased completely in concrete below his. Above the mausoleum, there is an angel that hangs over the edge and inside the building there is a concrete jug, which can hold two gallons of water, in case “I have to go below” (Dinsmoor 43). For a nominal fee, you can still view the body of S. P. Dinsmoor as he slowly decomposes.

Architecturally and aesthetically amusing as these works may appear, there is more to Dinsmoor’s story. While eccentric to say the least, he was ingenious and crafty in

his communication. Dinsmoor conducted his own tours of the Garden until his death in 1932. He created his world for show and to make money from the visitors (the worker taking care of himself). But, in his search for attention and expression, he inadvertently re-created a town in his own image. While he worked on the “Cabin Home” and the Garden, local children frequently would watch him build. Some of them even played with Dinsmoor’s children. One person remembers tying his family’s horses at the Garden while they were attending school. Rosslyn Schultz relates a story from Florence Deeble, a woman who would later create her own environment from concrete: “Miss Deeble’s aunt lived about where her house is now. Well, all of the block was Deebles. Anyway, when she would go over to her aunt’s house, she could sit on her aunt’s lap and watch Sam [Dinsmoor] building the Garden of Eden. So I imagine that that had an influence on what she began doing in her later life.” (Interview)

Within Lucas and the surrounding area, there are five other artists influenced by Dinsmoor. Within the last few years, the town of Lucas, along with the Kansas Grassroots Art Association, has created the Grassroots Art Center in downtown Lucas, two blocks from the Garden, which houses pieces by artists from Lucas and other Kansans. One block away lies the house of Florence Deeble and her Dinsmoor-influenced rock garden. In the nearby towns of Luray, Wilson, and Portis, Leroy Wilson, Ed Root, and Inez Marshall used materials common to the area to create their own Dinsmoor-like environments. In a sense, the art in and around Lucas became the reality of John Fiske’s statement, “Consciousness is never the product of truth or reality but rather of culture, society, and history” (Fiske 307). Because of the atmosphere of creativity that Dinsmoor

fashioned, the other artists in the area were seen as odd, but were able to create without the interference of the community. Also, because of the relative isolation of the area in which these people lived, the art both grew from Dinsmoor and from their own sense of individuality within their small communities, causing their eccentricities to prosper. Because of Dinsmoor, many other people have become artists.

One block from both the Garden and the Grassroots Art Museum lies Florence Deeble's backyard rock garden, one of the most prominent works influenced by Dinsmoor. Her garden has landscapes that resemble postcard snapshots of actual places, such as Mount Rushmore, Mount Eisenhower, and an "Indian Pueblo Village." A young Deeble created these pieces, like Dinsmoor, out of concrete. She, too, gave tours of her yard until recently, describing and telling stories about each piece [pictures 15-20]. Although Deeble was not as controversial as Dinsmoor, many in the community felt that she was eccentric and therefore outside of the norm.

In her later years, she has become a historian for the town of Lucas. As her abilities diminished, she relied on busts and figures that she finds at auctions and sales to represent the people of her works, homages to the forebears of Lucas and Kansas. She created a piece that she calls the "Kansas Mount Rushmore." On it she placed a Bacchanalian figure to represent Dinsmoor, and the local Lucas Opera singer, Bess Heine, represented by a wild, hollow-eyed, crazy-haired woman. One neighbor felt that maybe Deeble had gone too far with her environment, but this seems to be the only objection to her work. Florence Deeble died at the age of 99 in the fall of 1999.

The ruins of Miller's Park lie on the western edge of Lucas and represent yet another Dinsmoor-influenced artwork. Although less political than Dinsmoor, Roy Miller and his wife created replicas of Colorado's Royal Gorge, the Rocky Mountains, and a city's jailhouse out of rocks and concrete. During its time, Miller's Park was more than an artful oddity, as it was created to be a rest area on K-18 with a water fountain and picnic benches. Sometimes, it even competed for tourists with the Garden of Eden. Rosslyn Schultz explains:

People would go there for their birthday parties or for their anniversaries. The Millers would let anyone do that. It was a rest stop for K-18. Once, the people who were giving tours at the Garden didn't have any business and they were wondering, "Where is everyone?" So, one of them went out to the street to look down the road and there were about fifteen cars sitting around Miller's Park. Someone was having a party and others were just stopping there to rest and look at everything. (Schultz)

The piece was a part of Americana that functioned as gathering place for families and weary travelers. In this way, it helped to concrete the community of Lucas by being a point of congregation. Borrowing from Dinsmoor's showmanship rather than his political leanings, the Millers created a communal piece of art where talk could occur, rather than a piece that would be talked about. Sadly, like most environments created by grassroots artists, Miller's Park has since been destroyed. Some sections were moved to a local museum in Hays, some were taken by the artist's family, and others have been lost

forever. The park only exists as a whole in pictures that adorn the walls of the Grassroots Art Center in Lucas.

In the Art Center, there are also exhibits by three people who lived outside of Lucas, but were close in both spirit and location. Sculptress Inez Marshall, of Portis, Kansas, in the neighboring county to the north, was a jack-of-all-trades and once a truck driver. She was an independent woman in an age when women weren't independent. Her career as an artist began during her recovery from injuries sustained in an accident. One day, out of boredom, she decided to carve a piece of limestone. In Portis, she created the Continental Sculpture Hall, a storefront in the downtown area. "Visitors paid admission for a tour of the environment, guided by the artist herself. Marshall's carefully rehearsed tour -- with dramatic gestures, special lighting, and tape-recorded recitations -- was a performance to remember" (Dwigans and Wilber 122). Inez created a miniature schoolhouse as well as a hospital, three dimensional sculptures with people inside and outside the buildings, and a painting of the "Last Supper" on a piece of limestone, complete with frame. Inez created the people and other smaller pieces of her works from "composition rock," as she called it, a combination of dust from larger pieces of limestone and special, secret ingredients that Inez wouldn't reveal. She created from limestone, "a one-quarter-size Model T, adult and cub polar bears . . . figures of Abraham Lincoln and his family . . . a full-size Harley Davidson wheel that was to go on a full-size Harley that was never finished," as well as a hold-up scene with a wagon that stands about four feet tall, a playable guitar, paintings and portraits, and many other pieces (Dwigans and Wilber 122) [pictures 21-23]. Some of Marshall's works are in Topeka, at the Kansas

Museum of History, some she gave as gifts, and others were bought by admirers. But none of her pieces of art are at the bottom of Wilson Lake, as are the larger pieces of Ed Root's "trash art."

Ed Root lived in the area between Wilson and Lucas, where the Army Corps of Engineers in 1964 completed work on Wilson Reservoir. He created hundreds of pieces of sculpture from concrete and from pieces of everyday material--glass, china, wheel rims--lying around his property. "[He] regarded all objects around him as raw material to be incorporated into his pieces. The surfaces read like an archaeological record of the Root family . . . he rolled family photographs and entombed them in slender glass jars, and then fastened the jars to a concrete base" (Blasdel 7). Root, like Marshall, gave away many pieces, but he is the only one of the group who made duplicates of some of his works, an anomaly in the field of grassroots art because most works are unique. Root's pieces are marvels not only because of their surfaces of glass and other materials in concrete, but because of their construction from molds. Root constructed pieces from crepe paper and metal as well. Tragically, "A three room environment in Root's house at the original site was lost [because of the construction of Wilson Lake]" (Dwigans and Wilber 120). He made hundreds of pieces, and as with most of these artists, they were bunched together to be viewed as an environment rather than as separate pieces [pictures 25-27]. The construction of these pieces seems easy, but, as Rosslyn Schultz attests, it isn't as simple as putting pieces of broken glass into concrete. "When we were making the sign that is outside of town [a sign that announces Lucas as the "Grassroots Art Capital of Kansas"] we had a lot of trouble putting the pieces into the concrete because they would just sink

to the bottom. You couldn't keep your design because it keeps disappearing." Root's use of native, cheap materials reflects Dinsmoor's own use of such materials. He also was not as political as Dinsmoor, but by creating these pieces, he became an outsider as well; an eccentric against the norm.

While Root and Marshall have significant representation in the Grassroots Art Museum in Lucas, one of the smallest displays in the Lucas museum is that of Leroy Wilson. It has two walls, a sink, a set of stairs, and a mirror. Unlike the other artists, Wilson didn't create these items out of concrete or by gathering rocks. He painted and re-painted his basement walls for years with intricate designs and bright colors. Not a person in his house knew of this basement until the Wilsons were killed in a car accident in 1991. Then, his sons went downstairs and discovered their father's pastime. "During holidays and family dinners, Leroy would always before leaving say that he was going to go home and paint. His relatives would always wonder if they were going to get these landscapes for Christmas or whatever, and they never did," Rosslyn Schultz explained. Mr. Wilson came close to having his painting seen by the public before his death, but his wife refused. "He wanted to paint his truck once, and his wife wouldn't let him. So he missed his chance at local fame" [picture 24].

What is it about this area of the country that causes people to create these environments? Is it something in the water? The air? A mystical force that hovers somewhere in the clouds? Or is it the fact that most of these people worked as farmers or other labor intensive fields and, upon retirement, had to keep their hands and minds occupied? And why concrete? Of course, not all of these questions can be answered

easily. In the late 1980s, a Kansas Humanities Council on Lucas, headed by Jennie Chinh, was formed to answer the question, “Why Lucas?” The council found that Lucas, unlike the neighboring towns, had a diverse group of settlers and immigrants from Russia, Poland, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. This diversity led to a freedom of personal choices for all involved because each group left the others to function on their own (Schultz). However, these ideas don’t fully answer the question. What would drive a person to create a piece of art out of his or her home? Dinsmoor liked a good argument and less government involvement. Florence Deeble was a school teacher driven by her need to teach the people of Lucas about their past. Leroy Wilson worked in paint rather than concrete or rock, keeping everything hidden. However, what is important to remember is that Dinsmoor’s ingenious use of indigenous materials (limestone rock and the newly available concrete) led others to experiment with their creativity, a creativity manifest in farming and construction itself. “Being a farmer takes a lot of creativity. If a piece of machinery breaks down, the farmer may have to take a piece of wire and find a way to use it in fixing the machinery,” Rosslyn Schultz adds. In a world that contained no billboards for communication, Dinsmoor, as well as the others, created their ways for their soul to speak in the world.

Dinsmoor created his own art out of everyday materials in order to communicate to those people whom he was trying to reach, the workers. Dinsmoor used the maxim of William Carlos Williams, “No ideas but in things,” to its greatest potential. The things that he used: limestone, concrete, the Bible, labor, a belief in the people of society, the pioneer spirit, were all “things” that were indigenous to his area. Like Williams,

Dinsmoor used these as the basis of his art. Myths tend to build themselves around people, especially for an artist. The stories of Dinsmoor's craziness grew and grew until "in the 1960's, [he] was remembered as an eccentric, libidinous crackpot and a religious fanatic . . . to better fit the mold of 'quirky' and 'weird'" (Hachmeister 28-9). Similarly, Williams writes of the inhabitants of Paterson:

. . . It must be a great  
thing to have such a pastime.

But you were always a strange  
boy. . .

Your father was such a nice man.  
I remember him well . . .

Or, Geeze, Doc, I guess it's all right  
but what the hell does it mean? (114)

These are the people who find the artist strange. Such sentiments can be expressed about Dinsmoor as well. His building skills, as well as his ability to create a piece of art that people can discuss in an open debate, should far outshine his antics. His art also influenced many others to feel as if they were free to express themselves in art. His closeness to the era of Populism may have helped those who were alive in his day to understand his stance, but as time builds a larger gap between the past and the present, his decision to create continues to foster more creation and thought.

## Chapter Three

### M. T. Liggett and the Absurdity of Living

--The work of art is born of the intelligence's refusal to reason the concrete.

--What is a rebel? A man who says no.

--The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. --Albert Camus

Myron Thomas Liggett, better known as M. T., is fond of paraphrasing Camus in interviews. "Albert Camus said that the only way to get along in this life is to accept the absurdity of living it" (Liggett) [picture 2]. For Liggett, the absurdity of living comes when you can't accomplish what you want to do or change what you want to change; living is a Sisyphean struggle against politicians. Liggett has accepted this absurdity and done something to tell others how he feels about it. He has created pieces of art out of spare metal and paint that represent the way he feels about government and its absurd actions. Similar to S. P. Dinsmoor, Liggett has turned his social commentary into an art environment for all to see, even if those viewers may find it absurd.

M. T. Liggett was born in 1930 and was reared, along with six siblings, in the town of Mullinville, Kansas, a small blip on the road with a population of approximately 290. In 1948, Liggett joined the Navy. After quitting the Navy, he joined the Air Force, from which he retired in 1971. But, Liggett is not just a military man. He has degrees in history and political science from Ft. Hays State University and a degree in criminal justice from the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. He also worked for awhile in a saw mill in New Mexico. Unlike most outsider artists, he considers himself an artist because he

sells pieces around the country. However, he very much considers himself an outsider, perhaps a rebel.

You know, goddamn, if I had to go out here and work at one of these gas plants. Say if you get a job workin' at a grain elevator. You worked there all your life. Why don't they call you Mr. Grain Elevator? You don't have a real name cause all you are is a lackey for the management of that, therefore you're an automaton conformist. All your life you do what someone tells you to do. If I had to live my life like that, I'd jump off the elevator. No shit. (Liggett)

Frederick Jackson Turner said, in 1893: "As successive terminal moraines result from successive glaciations, so each frontier leaves its traces behind it, and when it becomes a settled area the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics" (Turner 34). Kansas, formerly the gateway to the frontier of the West, still resonates with such frontier characteristics and spirit. As William Allen White says: "[t]he first Kansans were crusaders, intellectual and social pioneers, converts of various sorts; which if you like to live comfortably upon your soft yesterdays, means that Kansas was full of cranks" (53). William Least Heat-Moon echoes White's remarks: "The truth is that Kansas history is a tumbling of guns, torches, hatchets, and knives. It is a tale that has always cut to the bone, and that sharpened edge is not reviled by the people" (205). The modern representation of Kansas and its people is one of the following: a place of puritanical conservatism; a place, historically, of political turmoil; a landscape that seems to have imprisoned people who are both naive and boring; a place that turns out its share of "cranks," both of the curmudgeonly and crazy varieties. The outsider artist, Myron T. Liggett, could easily be considered a "crank." Liggett deals with the sociopolitical aspects

of our modern world humorously and, I believe, in a manner that is quintessentially Kansan, both from an outsider's view of the state and from one that aligns itself with the mythology and history of the "Bleeding Kansan."

Along his 100-acre property that lines U. S. Highway 54 on the outskirts of Mullinville, Liggett has created a row of what he has deemed "totem poles." The totems are made of scrap metal, farm implement parts, springs, and stop signs. They are statements about politics and politicians (both national and local), current events, Greek and Roman mythology, comic book heroes, friends, neighbors, and family. Liggett has never taken an art class. As he says, "It would take you years to unlearn what they've taught you" (Liggett). He didn't start working as an artist until he had retired and moved back to Mullinville in 1986. But Liggett is an outsider within his own community, at least the way he tells it. Once, the attorney general was called on to take care of some business in Bucklin, something about which Liggett also had something to say: "One of her [attorney general Carla Stovall's] assistants came down here and he told 'em [the people of Bucklin, who had lodged a complaint against one of Liggett's totems], 'You guys may not like that son of a bitch over there in Mullinville, but there ain't nothing we can do about him'" (Liggett). This alienation (self-imposed or not) comes from the expression of his views in such a public forum; you don't have to analyze his art too hard to find out that he has some strong opinions on just about everything.

Liggett does not create his art in a vacuum. His art represents his views on a community, whether it be a global community or, as William Faulkner called Oxford, Mississippi, Liggett's own little postage stamp of that larger community. As Carl Magnuson notes.

Individuals rarely produce art in isolation. Each work is a statement of the

artist's understanding of beauty, but no artist is truly separate from the society in which he or she lives. . . . What is different in grassroots art is that these components and techniques are combined in innovative ways to communicate to audiences who did not take part in shaping the art form. Therefore, it should not be said that grassroots art is always separate from a community, but that the finished art form does not have precedent in a community. (1-6)

The art of Liggett reflects his views on the community. The ideas that Liggett wishes to put forth may not be those of the entire community, but they are an integral part of the community. Societal norms may be worked against in Liggett's work, but they are still the norms that he himself must keep in mind when he creates.

We should also keep in mind, as Barbara Brackman points out, that “[t]erms such as ‘outsider artist’ emphasize the gap between artist and community” (20). The sentiments of Liggett may reflect those of his neighbors, or they may not, but no one else in his community is creating art from scrap metal to voice those views. Among the many totems on Liggett's land are pieces that show a blue dress with a white spot reading “Monica's Dress Be Proud of Slick Willy,” another is a pig with “Health Care Plan” painted on it, underneath that a sign reads “4012 Pages Liberal Vomit,” and two caricatures of the human form, one reading “Politician” (with its thumb in its nose) and the other reading “Right Wing Republican” (its thumb in a lower orifice) [pictures 3 and 4].

Tracing the cultural roots of outsider art is a tricky process, according to Barbara Brackman. “Relating cultural traditions to imagery, materials, and forms in grassroots art involves relating traditions that are by nature obscure and out of the mainstream to the

rare backyard environments” (Brackman 22). Brackman recalls the research of Sheldon Posen and Daniel Ward, who “called attention to the parallels between the distinctive form of the Watts Towers and that of structures originating in the folk traditions of Nola, Italy, a town near [creator Simon] Rodia’s birthplace” (21). However, I think that Liggett’s work does not reflect European traditions as much as American traditions, especially Kansas ones. If Simon Rodia’s Watts Tower harkens back to the immigrant’s birthplace in Italy, then Liggett’s work harkens to the place that he was born, and consequently, it is in the same place in which it exists, the state of Kansas.

S. P. Dinsmoor, one of the biggest “cranks” of Kansas and an influence for other creators of outsider art, directly influenced Liggett’s work.

There wasn’t nothing wrong with S. P. Dinsmoor. That’s what everybody wants to think. Everybody. In other words, if I don’t like the way you think because it’s different than what I think, there’s a five letter word, it’s called bigot.

*But I mean also, uh, did you ever find inspiration from that?* [interviewer]

That’s the reason I like Dinsmoor. Hell, Dinsmoor did what he wanted to do. If he wanted to be buried like that and go dig up his wife and do crazy things like that, that’s his business. (Liggett)

But even indirectly, Liggett has been influenced by the Garden of Eden and the state of Kansas. His work seems to embody every major political movement that has shaped the state: Populism, Socialism, Republicanism. His stances are fiercely independent, not partisan. He has no fear about letting someone have it, in conversation or in his art, if he feels he or she has made a mistake:

You know, people say I’m a Republican. I’m not a Republican, I’m not

anything. I'm M. T. Liggett, I walk in there and I vote for who I want to. And Bob Dole, who is honest to god, you know his folks were fucking for fun when they got him. But anyway, that's what the NY Times asked me, they asked me what I thought of Bob Dole. And I said, "There's not a nickel's worth of difference between Bob Dole and Clinton," and there isn't. They don't give a shit. They don't care about you [the voter].

They really don't. (Liggett)

This fierce independence and, at the same time, puritanical bent for justice, I believe, comes from a life in Kansas. Although Liggett lives by the words of Camus, his life has been shaped by the region in which he grew up and to which he returned, Kansas. As Carl Becker wrote in 1910, sentiments still true today,

It thus happens that while no people endure the reverses of nature with greater fortitude and good humor than the people of Kansas, misfortunes seemingly of man's making arouse in them a veritable passion of resistance; the mere suspicion of injustice, real or fancied exploitation by those who fare sumptuously, the pressure of laws not self-imposed, touch something explosive in their nature that transforms a calm and practical people into excited revolutionists. . . . A people which has endured the worst of nature's tyrannies, and cheerfully submits to tyrannies self-imposed, is in no mood to suffer hardships that seem remediable. (30-31)

Liggett's pieces are like placards for grassroots politics. For example, heading south from Emporia on Highway 99 and then east on 54, are hand painted signs that read "No BFI Here." These signs protest the local government wanting to place an open landfill in their county. Additionally, in Manhattan recently, there was a furor about a plaque containing

the Ten Commandments being removed from Riley County's District Court. The angry citizens of the county wanted to recall a council person who had voted for its removal, so they placed signs in their yards announcing how they felt. I think that Liggett's work is like these protests. However, I think that Liggett creates his with more artistic aplomb and creative zest than the average sign waver. Imagine a postmodern version of these signs for recall votes, one in which the creator is so disgusted with government and politics that all he can do is create monuments for the tearing down of the faulted system and offer no conclusions. "The Kansas spirit," Becker notes, "is the American spirit double distilled" (49).

Liggett's non-partisan stance is evident in some of his larger pieces. One event that Liggett worries about is the bombing of the Branch Davidian's compound in Texas. An oven door stabilizes the piece on which the words "Auschwitz" and "Waco" appear [picture 5]. Above that he has faces representing someone named Higgins<sup>1</sup> and Janet Reno. Beside the oven door is a pole approximately 18 feet high with the Christian symbol of a cross atop a heart, but on the heart is a swastika. Below the heart is a sign that reads "?Never Again?"; the sign has two swastikas jutting out from either side. Lower still on the totem is the word "Gestapo" and "Final Solution." To the left of the "Never Again" totem is another that has the letters "ATF" on the top and a small, metal placard reading "Storm Troopers" underneath. In front of these pieces, a cross has been erected that reads "Davidians" and has the numerals "86" on either side. The piece questions the role that the government took in the storming and burning of the compound, and Liggett equates it with the killing of the Jews in W. W. II. Another totem has Janet Reno, whose head is sticking out of her posterior, holding a heart and wearing a swastika on her arm [picture 6]. Underneath her body, Liggett has written "Queen of Waco, Bitch

of Buchenwald.” Beside Reno stands a body made up entirely of a swastika that holds a hammer and sickle, the symbol of communism, and underneath are the words “Hillary Clinton, Sieg Heil, Our Jack-Booted Eva Braun.” Liggett’s questioning of the Waco incident calls into question the attitude of the government and its actions. By doing so, he follows in a heritage of Kansans and their politics. Liggett stands in a direct line of heritage to Dinsmoor.

The hammer and sickle, as well as the words socialism and communism, show up a lot in Liggett’s work. A totem for “Greenpeace” shows a figure with the body of a tree whose left hand is holding a cross and whose right is the aforementioned symbol for communism [picture 7]. Another totem [picture 8], one that rotates in the wind, has two pieces that are facing up that read, respectively “PETA” and “Scum.” Underneath are the words “Liberals” and “Socialist Bums.” These pieces would seem to make Liggett a conservative. But, when asked about his comments on socialism, he gives new insight into the work.

Good old Karl Marx. Hell, he wasn’t all wrong.

*I couldn’t tell because you’re always equating Marxism with something bad it seems like.* [interviewer]

No. What I put on those totem poles is not necessarily what I believe.

Now, what Karl Marx thought and what the Soviets thought are two different things. The parallel between the two is very little. But you can go down here to one of these small town cafes, in other words you can go to the best college in the world, say the University of Pennsylvania, which is a really good one, or to Lawrence, and you can get some guy who’s a philosophy expert and he could use all the blackboards in the joint

and he could never write down the true meaning of Marxism, but you can go down to one of these local cafes and one of these fucking farmers can tell you in two or three sentences what it was. (Liggett)

This sentiment reflects that of many Kansans. A reliance on the common man, the worker, is one that is deeply embedded within the history and mythology of Kansas. It also relates directly to the spirit of the Populist party and the belief in Socialist ideals. Liggett's independent spirit and insistence on not being labeled seems to come from the state as well. He would rather be able to discuss his own life and views without the interference of an outside source. His political ideas exist in several different realms of political thought, much like Kansas politics were both liberal and conservative at the same time.

His views vary on a number of other political subjects as well. A pelican swooping down on a fish marked "taxes" is a reminder to "Vote Democrat" if you want to have your taxes raised. A totem with a representation of Newt Gingrich says "Repeal the 19th Amendment." The nineteenth amendment gave women the right to vote. The piece, knowing Liggett's sense of irony, is most probably an attack on Gingrich's leaving his first wife for a younger woman while she was dying. Liggett's response to Gingrich, according to the *New York Times*, was "Best thing he could do is pack his stuff and go back home. He's lost it" (Pierce 19). A totem with a piece in the shape of a bomb adorned with "UNA" reads "Elect Ted Kaczynski Governor of CALIF" with an arrow that reads "Folsom" beneath it. For Liggett, the anti-technology message of the Unabomber manifesto holds weight against the absurdity of living, even if Kaczynski's methods of revolution were morally unjust. He also has a totem telling the public to vote

for Rush Limbaugh for president (from the 1996 presidential election). Liggett feels both men are honest and stand by their convictions.

But not all of the totems deal with politics, at least not directly. One totem, that of Athena, the Greek “battle-goddess . . . and protector of civilized life” (Hamilton 29), became both a political and mythical work, and not completely by accident:

So I just put a totem pole up over there [Bucklin, Kansas] and it really wasn't her [the mayor, who had become embroiled in controversy]. At first, there was a guy in Bucklin who said he wanted a totem pole. So I said I'll make you one, so we set the cement pipe and I went over there and I made this woman and she ain't got much clothes on, holding this club with a big spike in it and I set it up over there in Bucklin outside the city limits about 35 feet 6 inches, which we had all this planned. But anyway, I got over there and I forgot the chain mail, it was really the Athena Abteros [Minerva], the goddess of war. So goddamn I got home and the phone was ringing. “MT Liggett, you dirty son of a bitch. You put up the mayor of Bucklin.” Well, set the phone down and walked out of the house, phone rang again. Same stuff. So the third person called. “MT Liggett you stay out of Bucklin and the mayor of Bucklin's business.” I said, “You want that to be the fucking mayor of Bucklin, it's the mayor of Bucklin.” So I come over here and I got this real quick set paint, takes about, oh hell, it dries just as soon as you get it on. I put the mayor of Bucklin right over it<sup>2</sup>. (Liggett)

Bacchus is portrayed as a figure with his arms outstretched and two bottles on each hand [picture 9]. Proteus holds a key and further on a Valkyrie holds a knife. Hecate has a

pole of her own, because, as Liggett says, “Everything that’s bad in the world, you blame it on a woman and Hecate was the worst of all” (*Weird Homes* videotape). A totem labeled “Aphrodite Cupid” has hearts for hands with another coming out of the head. Two arrows are crossed on the heart of the head. A newer piece shows the Christian symbol of the cross with the inscription of “INRI” and three nails in it, yet the body of Christ is not on the cross, perhaps a statement of the absence of the true meaning of Christianity and an indictment of its reliance on symbols [picture 10].

Liggett also creates pieces for his friends and family. His brother James W. Liggett has a totem all to himself [picture 11]. So does Liggett’s girlfriend of the last ten years, Marilee, the “Honey Haired Temptress,” whom he takes dancing “at least twice a week” (Liggett). The first piece Liggett made was a gargoyle [picture 12]:

I had a old horse out here and I believe in, everybody believes in spirits, so I made a gargoyle to protect my horse and I put on this pole right here “les chavaux” which is the horse I guess in French, or they say it is. I put that sign up and it attracted some attention and then I made the biggest mistake I ever made, I sold the horse for some crazy reason, but I’ve regretted it every day that I sold that horse cause that horse is what got me started.

(*Weird Homes* videotape)

French is not the only language besides English that appears on his totems. There are seven in all including Spanish, Chinese, Italian, Korean, Latin, and Greek, as well as in English, although “the Chinese and stuff, you wouldn’t dare to use it” (Liggett). Other pieces exist just for the sake of a joke, albeit sometimes a bad one. One piece called the “Three Faces of Eve” shows a woman who in one hand has a sharp saw-like object, in the other an apple, and on top of her head there lies a cross. Another piece shows a woman

with a knife on her head and the word “Circumcision” above that. Below the head, the totem reads “Doctor Lorena Bobbitt No Hard Recovery.” Liggett even created a piece for the New York Times when they came to interview him in May of 1997. The piece simply lists the names of those involved with the article and the newspaper’s staff. The article focuses on Liggett’s peculiar politics and his “stark scepticism that transcends labels” (Pierce 19)<sup>3</sup>.

Liggett also has two Jayhawks guarding his gate facing the highway. The idea of a Jayhawker is typically Kansan, of course, but at the same time, it is also purely Liggett. The refusal to be a slave state won Kansans the name of Jayhawks, and Liggett has earned his Jayhawk totems by his refusal to partake in the slavish mentality of the “automaton conformist,” something that he feels is like death itself. Camus thought that a rebel is a person who says no to the concrete reality, whether that concreteness lay in the ideals of politicians of both parties or in the ideals of a world that seems more and more absurd through its uses of violence as entertainment and a lack of communication among fellow humans. Liggett says no to that lack of communication and wants to have open discussions on what it is to be a human, even if he feels that he is right most of the time. As Liggett is fond of saying, “A man isn’t remembered for what he didn’t say” (*Weird Homes* videotape). This belief in the need for dialogue comes through in his creations. He believes that creativity is not something that is a gift of the few, but of everyone. “There is no such thing as a non-creative mind. There’s only two non-creative minded people, those people who are totally out of it with Alzheimer’s and those people who are laying over there on the hill” (Liggett).

Liggett works within the region of Kansas both physically and metaphorically. His pieces display the independent spirit of frontier life against the absurdity of living in

a world that is not much different from the days of Dinsmoor and Populism. Government, according to Liggett, still does not hold the interest of the common man in its dealings, only the interests of politicians themselves. “All those goddamn people [politicians] care about is getting reelected, they don’t give a shit about here [Kansas], that’s all of ‘em” (Liggett). While relating to the world in a gruff manner, there is one thing that is obvious about Liggett, he cares about how the United States is functioning. His belief in the political freedom of the individual of any background is a trait of Kansans, whether they be outsiders or not.

## Chapter Four

### Grandma Layton: Grandmother of us All

Q: Do you think of yourself as an artist?

A: Not really, I think of myself as a woman who makes art. I'm really a very ordinary, everyday sort of person. People often contact me, wanting to come and talk to me about my drawings. I tell them not to visit me, to visit any old woman, maybe a neighbor. (Soppelsa and Lambert 1-2)

Elizabeth Layton, better known as "Grandma" Layton, took her one and only art class at the age of 68 at the urging of her sister. Within fifteen years of Layton starting to create her artwork, she had an art show at the Smithsonian National Museum of American Art. Some of the messages from the Smithsonian guest book display the many ways that Layton's work affected people:

--Came to Washington to see older, more tempered-by-time art. These rooms of your work have brought me to lots of tears and yelps of laughter.

--I am going through a hard time right now and it takes some effort to remember that it's all a part of life. Your drawings are helping me to do that, and they remind me that other people feel pain and ecstasy, rage and glory. Thank you for celebrating.

--You are a candle to the world.

--You are more than "the grandmother of us all." You are our conscience, the voice from within our hearts that reminds us of what is right and good and true.

--Thank you for giving us hope. (Lambert 9)

Additionally, a woman from Tempe, Arizona, wrote to Elizabeth, "I made my once-a-

month visit to the Phoenix Art Museum. On my way to the main gallery I passed your drawings. I stopped to take a closer look, and before I knew it, over an hour had passed. I was captivated. In that time I laughed aloud, shed tears, experienced anger--the entire range of emotion. Thank you” (Fadiman 2). Art critics, too, have had much to say about Layton and her work. Lucy Lippard writes,

[Layton is] one of the most original and most feminist artists in the United States today. . . . By using her own image to stand for all of denigrated, invisible, abused humanity, she has raised the universal from the particular. . . . It’s not as “high” about it all as art is supposed to be--it’s right down here with us. Its breadth and intimacy must touch something in the lives of everyone who sees it. (qtd. in Lambert and Licata 28)

Lowery Sims, Associate Curator of twentieth century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, notes that Layton’s drawings display an “unprecedented iconographical syntax for old age that neither romanticizes it nor apologizes for it” (qtd. in Lambert and Licata 28). Also, critic Kay Larson says “Given her background, I am tempted to call Layton a genius” (qtd. in Fadiman 2). How could a elderly woman with one art class to her credit elicit such responses from patrons of art galleries and art critics alike?

Layton moves viewers of her art by displaying a brutal honesty within her drawings. They are primitive by the standards of the academy. She is not a master realist nor is she an abstractionist schooled in forms. Most of her drawings are done in colored pencil; some are done with crayons. It is her attention to detail and an unswerving eye that Layton is known for; her “merciless self-portraits executed in quavery lines and pastel colors” (*Star* 5A) hold the viewers’ attention, draw them in from outside the frame

of the drawing and into the world of a socially and politically conscious grandmother. Probably most important of all, these pieces “speak to viewers who have rarely looked at art,” those people in small town America, and small town Kansas, whose time is not concerned with the appreciation of art (*Star 5A*). In this way, Elizabeth Layton has come to create an honest art that speaks to the common person. Her work tells of everyday problems in a straightforward manner. As Michael Bonesteel notes, “The drawings of Elizabeth Layton transcend the term ‘folk art,’ test the limits of ‘outsider art,’ and effectively defy the category of what we would like to neatly define as ‘naive’” (126). It is the added layer of overcoming personal demons through art that makes Elizabeth Layton’s artwork all the more extraordinary. Her pieces helped her through a lifetime of crippling depression and her life has been studied by the Menninger Institute in order to create better programs and bolster support for art therapy. Her work, like the work of Dinsmoor and Liggett, calls into question the ideas and political agendas of the norm. She subverts society through her art work. Like Liggett, she also uses Greek and Roman mythology in her art, but she uses these mythological figures with a feminist perspective.

Elizabeth Layton was born in 1910 in the town of Wellsville, Kansas. Her father, Asa Converse, served as a member of the Kansas House of Representatives from 1935-1942. He was also editor of the *Wellsville Globe* for nearly 45 years. Elizabeth’s mother, May Frink Converse, was a poet. She was chosen Poet Laureate of Kansas in 1926. She also wrote a weekly column in the *Globe* entitled “Conversations.” Elizabeth’s Aunt May opened a photography shop in Wellsville in 1904. With this background Elizabeth was primed, and expected, to go on to college, and bigger and better opportunities. However, after two years at Ottawa University in Ottawa, Kansas, she abandoned her parents’ expectations and dreams to marry her first husband, Clyde Nichols, “the man of

her dreams,” as Don Lambert writes (11). But soon after “the marriage (within months, she once commented) Elizabeth realized that the marriage would not and could not work” (Lambert 11). After five children, Layton finally left her husband. Since this separation occurred in an age in which divorces were few, the divorce took ten years to finalize .

Elizabeth’s depression, which had formed in the early part of her doomed marriage, followed her throughout her life. She received thirteen shock treatments and was constantly on prescribed drugs and therapy. As Lambert describes:

Years later, she described her depression to a friend. “Sometimes it was a tremendous homesickness. Sometimes it was a great tiredness, when I’d sleep twenty hours out of the day. I couldn’t move. Sometimes I’d scream, the top of my head hurt so bad. Years ago, I’d try one way or another to die. Sometimes just listless, I never got happy or excited. My brain spun round and round. I used to beat my head and yell, ‘You’re stupid. You’re stupid.’ Sometimes I’d get panicky and hide in the closet. When I felt this way I often hated the town and everybody in it. Frustration, I expect. No sleep. Then I used to throw away all but one or two of my clothes because I didn’t deserve them, anything good or bad. I lived quite a few years on amphetamines. Then I got to taking downers, too. I feel that I inherited a lot of this depression and that I passed it on to my kids. It wasn’t that I longed for death, it was that I felt unworthy for life. (12-13)

Her torturous life would have many disappointments. In 1976, one of her sons died from liver problems caused by alcoholism. Even a second marriage to Glenn Layton, who later, along with Elizabeth herself became the models for her art, did not help her mental state,

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although Glenn was a good husband. She later claimed that “[d]uring their first two decades together, Elizabeth often spent entire days crouched in her closet with one hand over her face. Several times she went a week without saying a single word to Glenn. ‘I wasn’t mad at him,’ she says. ‘I felt unworthy of speaking to him.’” (Fadiman 2). During this time, Elizabeth was not completely idle. She tried free-lance writing with a detailed piece on her thirteen shock therapy treatments that were rejected by all the women’s magazines that she sent them to. She also wrote poetry, which was also rejected.

After the death of her son to liver problems, which she thought was inevitably brought on by her passing down her own depression and her first husband’s alcoholism, her own debilitating depression became more and more acute. Elizabeth was encouraged by her older sister, Carolyn Misselwitz, to take up art. “Carolyn had taken up oil painting during her retirement. On Saturday mornings she joined other retired women in art classes on the West coast. . . . Carolyn suggested that it might do Elizabeth some good to get out of the house and try her hand at oil painting” (Lambert 13). Layton signed up for a nine-week course in life drawing at Ottawa University. She was the only one in the class over the age of 22. As her teacher Pal Wright recalls:

I was teaching something called contour drawing. You look at the subject you’re drawing and not at the paper, except to orient the pencil from time to time. It’s a technique that uses the right brain--the nonrational, intuitive side--and because you stop thinking, you tend to start feeling. I told the kids to go home and draw what was around them, so Elizabeth drew her porch swing and her trellis and her toaster. Then she got bored with those and started drawing herself. One day she brought in this incredible picture

of herself in a see-through nightie, with her elderly breasts hanging there and her elderly stomach and about a thousand wrinkles. I don't know if it was the best drawing I'd ever seen, but I'll tell you, it was the most honest. (Fadiman 2-3)

The people in the class started to call her "Grandma," with affection of course, and Layton signed her first painting for the class that way.

From that point on, Elizabeth Layton would draw from ten to fourteen hours a day. "I didn't know where it was coming from. . . . I just had to keep on doing them. [One night] I realized that the depression had gone. In fact, it had left a few weeks after I started Pal's class, but I'd been so busy drawing I hadn't even noticed" (Fadiman 3).

Robert Ault, an art therapist at Menninger Foundation in Topeka, notes,

Elizabeth's self-portraits over the years are a chronological map of her recovery. You can see her resolving her problems one by one--her son's death, her own old age and mortality, her sexuality, her marriage, and finally the larger social issues of politics and feminism. I've seen this kind of transformation in other art students, almost always women. When they start the class they introduce themselves as Mrs. John So-and-so or as So-and-so's mother. They've never taken claim to anything in their entire lives. After a couple of months of drawing ideas that are entirely their own, their chronic depression begins to lift. The only difference between them and Elizabeth is that she's also got that other thing--you know, what the philosophers called the gift of the gods. (Fadiman 3-4)

Don Lambert began a relationship with Elizabeth around this time. At first he was drawn to her drawings because of the expressional range of Elizabeth's eyes. He

wanted to find this woman and write a story about her for the *Ottawa Herald*, the paper he was working for at the time. As he puts it, “I was looking for a good story. Little did I realize that I was about to find the story of my career” (15). Lambert began a career as the champion of Elizabeth’s work. He began to put together traveling exhibits of her work. The exhibits were called “Elizabeth Layton: Drawing of Life,” a pun on her usage of her experiences within her art, and “Through the Looking Glass: The Art of Elizabeth Layton,” referring to Layton’s practice of looking at herself in a small, hand held mirror in order to complete her contour drawings. In the spring of 1980, Lambert entered two of Layton’s pieces in the Mid-Four Annual Juried Exhibit. The Exhibit had approximately 600 entrants that year and was won by Layton for her piece, “Skipping Down Christo’s Walkway” [picture 1]. The piece was drawn after “reading in the Kansas City Star about [conceptual artist of monumental scale] Christo’s wrapping of sidewalks in Kansas City’s Loose Park” (Lambert 20). The drawing portrays Layton wrapped in the gold cloth that Christo used, flying high above the earth and the sidewalks with butterflies above her head. As Lambert writes, “The fabric had become a cocoon, her feet, arms and head emerging so she can join the butterflies above” (20).

This was Layton’s “beginning,” or at least the start of her career as an artist. She soon garnered national attention through articles in *Time*, *Life*, *People*; she was on television shows like ABC’s “Good Morning America”; and she was interviewed on National Public Radio. But none of these phased Elizabeth; she remained down to earth and shunned the limelight. When her pieces made it to the Smithsonian, she didn’t go. As she said, “It’s wonderful, and, yes, I’m impressed. But I’m impressed if the exhibit goes to the hometown library because people will see it there, too” (Lambert 22). Layton died

at the age of 83, March 15, 1993. At the time of her death, she had had “her works exhibited in 170 galleries and museums nationwide” (*Chicago Sun-Times* 5A).

Layton used herself, and occasionally her husband Glenn, as the models for her art, in much the same way that Frida Kahlo and the photographer/artist Cindy Sherman used themselves as the models for their own art. She would place herself within pieces of literature as well as within other, more famous, paintings. She recreated herself in her art as various mythological figures. She also painted scenes from her own life, most dealing with her bout with depression. In this way, she differs slightly from Dinsmoor and Liggett. But, by placing her own ideas within former paintings and works of art, she has placed her own views on these pieces. Just as Dinsmoor grafted Populism onto the Judeo-Christian creation myth, Layton uses feminist ideas to redirect the meaning of these older pieces of art and literature. Her art is typically Kansan in that she uses her independent spirit to point out injustice through the representation of women in art. She takes on the issues of aging and being a woman, as well as larger social and political issues. She uses the subjective “I” to show the worlds of an objective “we.” As Layton herself stated, “The personal is the universal; the universal is the personal. It goes both ways” (Lambert and Soppelsa 3). Don Lambert and Elizabeth Licata write:

The sociopolitical content of Elizabeth Layton’s art fairly explodes its autobiographical frame. . . . Layton subverts her own image by using it again and again in her work, surrounding it with props, costumes, and fictional situations. Layton addresses the disjunction between the individual female image and popular representations of that image. Traditional grass-roots cliches are reversed, achieving a down-and-dirty acerbity [.] (26)

Many times, Layton uses literature as a taking off point for her art. In “My Own Gulliver in Lilliput,” Layton draws herself tied down to the ground as miniature representations of herself eat junk food, sit in a chair with a large dunce cap on, box, blow bubbles, has her dress tugged on by many small children, rocks in a chair, and, standing on her chest, stands on a box marked “Ivory Soap” and points at the Gulliver-like Layton. Underneath the picture reads,

Oh, me! What she couldn't do if so many characteristics didn't hold her down. Sexuality, gluttony, her childish ways, motherhood, her infantile habits, greed. She's stuck up, has temper tantrums, is self-righteous, lazy and sheds crocodile tears. She's timid, quarrelsome and full of hate. From her soapbox her conscience (or her mother) berails [sic] and blames her.

She's idiotic and does stupid things. She looks down her nose at herself, a poor self-image. (Lambert 91)

In another take off on *Gulliver's Travels*, this one entitled “My Own Gulliver in Brobdingnag,” Layton is seen falling from a cloud as hands point accusingly, shove, and stab at her. A digital clock in the bottom right hand corner reads “11:55 1:30:1984.” Layton writes “[t]hese are the things that overwhelm her, still she does the best she can. She has one foot in the grave. Hunger, infirmities and poverty nag. Guilt points to blame and shame. Irretractable pain slashes her. The pitiful plights of others haunt her. Isolation and loneliness wrack her” (Lambert 95). In “Eliza Crossing the River,” Layton has placed herself in the role of the slave Eliza from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, running across pieces of ice upon the river as Simon Legree, whip in hand and bloodhounds at his feet, stands at the shore of the river. Behind him lie modern day tract homes. As Layton describes, “The houses are modern day, suburban homes, pastel colors, TV antennas,

shades drawn. Unwelcoming places” (Lambert 97). Behind the houses, disguised as mountains, stand figures in sheets, the trademark of the Ku Klux Klan. This piece seems inherently Kansan. Kansas was established as a free state, one in which African slaves could not be owned. Kansas was the state in which *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, the first case brought to the Supreme Court about the matter of segregation of schools according to race, occurred. This piece seems especially Kansan in its attitudes toward race and justice.

In two paintings, Layton takes on both Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton by reversing their images of the heartland with her own take on gender roles. By doing so, Layton subverts the traditionally viewed role of women on the frontier, pointing out that women also helped create Kansas and America. In her own version of “*American Gothic*,” Layton reverses the positions of the man and the woman [picture 2]. The woman, the subservient one within Wood’s painting, is now in the foreground in Layton’s. The woman stands with a screwdriver in her right hand and a large fork in the left. In her belt is a pipe wrench. In her right hand is also a half smoked cigarette, “positioned at an alarmingly phallic juncture” as the pack peeks out of her shirt pocket (Lambert and Licata 26). A baseball sits in place of a bolo and her belt buckle reads “Winchester Repeating Arms.” The husband, who stands slightly behind the woman, holds his hands out, with palms down, and wears a dress while the woman wears pants. Elizabeth notes “Everybody does a take-off on Grant Wood’s wonderful bit of Americana, so I did one, too” (Lambert 38). In Layton’s take on Thomas Hart Benton’s “*Persiphone*,” instead of an old man spying on a beautiful woman, Elizabeth has drawn herself as an old woman spying on a man, her husband Glenn, from behind the bushes as he is floating down the river nude and a car waits in the background. His genitals have

been blacked out with a triangle. On the beach lie the man's clothes, a box of Milk Duds and a Green Giant Peas can filled with worms for fishing.<sup>1</sup> These drawings show Layton's own wish for a better place in the world, both real and that of art, for women. Her ideas resemble those of earlier women like Carrie Nation and Elizabeth and Katy Stanton. Her placement of the woman in the foreground of pieces try to show the importance of women in the world and is an aggressively political act within itself. In fact, the picture that faces "Persiphone" in Lambert's book is entitled "Victory." It shows Layton's hand being held up by her husband, dressed in a tuxedo, while a woman in the background has a bag that reads National Museum of Women in the Arts.<sup>2</sup>

Layton also places herself in the personae of mythological beings. In "Pandora's Box" she is trying to place the lid back on a box while bugs, bats, and rats swirl around the house marked with words like "PEST," "WAR," "APATHY," "SPITE," and "RACK AND RUIN." Glenn, looking like a punk rock George Bush, is at the bottom of the drawing. His shirt reads "NO HOPE" and contains a small rainbow in the first "O." Another piece has Glenn as Narcissus in a garden of narcissus flowers at a pool looking at himself in the reflection. His reflection shows him as a younger man. A Polaroid Instamatic camera lies beside the pool and photographs lie scattered about. Layton's face is within the flowers of the background and is also the face of the fountain at the side of the pool. She wrote:

I call it Narcissus. It's off that old myth. The water that he is looking into is kind of a fountain of youth. People now days, they worship youth a lot. But the idea is that he sits there by the water looking at himself until he turns into a Narcissus. But the idea I've tried to bring out is that he has grown old there, but he still sees himself as young and beautiful. In the

myth, Echo is the one who died of love of Narcissus, because he couldn't return her love. So this is her, the flower with the face on it. I didn't know how to draw a sound. (Lambert 66)

Another piece, called "Nike, Winged Victory" is both a play on art and on the myth of Nike, as well as the modern world. In this piece, Layton, like Dinsmoor and Liggett, uses mythology to meet her own political agenda. Nike, the goddess of victory, was immortalized through sculpture, yet the arms and head of the sculpture are now missing. But in Layton's drawing the arms are again apparent, as the goddess stands atop a flight of stairs in a see-through nightie, arms outstretched into space and a pair of Nike running shoes slung around her neck. Layton writes of the piece that Nike "has struggled and toiled up a lifetime of steps. Now she is where she wants to be, has taken off her running shoes, and is ready to fly. Scars, where the arms and head of the statue were broken off, now are only hallmarks of the new and everlasting growth" (Lambert 75).

But some of the most memorable pieces from the collection of Elizabeth Layton are the ones that take on society's, and her own personal, demons. Unlike Dinsmoor and Liggett, Layton's pieces contain more than political and social commentary. She uses moments from her own life to represent feelings that are universal. One of the most striking images is that of the closet that she would hide in during her long years of depression [picture 3]. Scared and scarred eyes peek out of a half-open closet door. An empty pill bottle and empty purse lay on a table in the foreground of the drawing. The door is locked with a padlock, the whole photograph is a study in brown with the exception of a small portrait on the wall that has a rainbow and the sea. The drawing is called, simply, "Fear." "Void" finds her in a world of black, her figure done in pencil, as she hangs motionless in her world. In "Stroke," half of her face is part of the same black

void, while a wide-yellow-eyed creature resembling a human looks from afar. In “Without Relish, but With Gusto,” a naked Layton tries to hold her sagging, aged body in as she steps on a bathroom scale. All around her are little notes to herself that read, “Do Not Eat on Monday,” a cow tapestry, holding pencils to mark a “Weight Watchers Weekly Diary” weight loss chart, reads “Holy Cow Are You Eating Again?” On the floor lie Layton’s clothes and medications for dieting. In her hand is a magnifying glass. It sits atop a pile of papers, but the word that shows up in the glass is “Die,” with the “t” slightly obscured by the metal of the holder. Her eye looks at the viewer; it is large and both accusing and scared, her mouth puckered in both determination and in the motion of trying to hold in the weight of her body. Layton writes of the piece that “I am standing on the scale. I had the magnifying glass so I could see what the scale said . . . and this magnifying glass is showing through . . . it’s supposed to say diet, but all you get is die. If you don’t diet you are going to die” (Lambert 27). Dieting is a worry for most women and men. Weight is the largest source for discrimination in the country. Layton is pointing to the insistence by the majority of society that women who are overweight should diet or they will die. This insistence also leads to death through diseases like bulimia and anorexia, diseases that strike those who feel that they must be thin in order to exist.

There are four visually related drawings within Layton’s oeuvre that deal with her collection of buttons. These buttons contain sayings that relate to Layton’s life. The first is a drawing entitled “In Recognition of Phyllis Schafley’s Lady Pin” [picture 4] In it, Layton sits on a stool in a kitchen in a small, black dress. She is adorned with jewels and a crown and has a large blue button with the word “Lady” written on it. Glenn is pictured in a chef’s hat holding a warmed-up Weight Watcher’s meal, the box of which is

sitting in the trash. The most telling part of the piece is the ankle bracelet that literally chains the woman in the drawing to the stool in the kitchen. For this piece, Layton wrote, "Shades of the Victorian ERA." In a second piece, simply titled "Buttons," Layton is flexing her muscles as buttons adorn her blouse [picture 5]. Some of the buttons read, "Justice for All," "Be Ye Kind," "I am Loved," "ERA: The battles not over," "It's nine o' clock, do you know where your cat is," and "You Gotta Have Art." The largest and most clearly visible is one that reads, "Seeker of Truth." All around her there are rays of light. She is literally bursting at the seams of her dress, wanting to come out of the skin that she is in because of happiness and might, like the Incredible Hulk. A third drawing shows her with more buttons on a blouse [picture 6]. This time, they deal with age, as the piece is called "Old Age Advocates." The buttons read "Aging--Aren't We All," "Enjoy Your Age," "AARP," "How Dare You Presume I'd Rather Be Young," and, as in the other drawing, one simply states "Courage." In her blouse pockets are two pieces of paper, one marked "Vote," the other "Poem." In the drawing "Censored," there is a darker meaning to the buttons [picture 7]. "You gotta Have Art" has been crossed out. The same for "Free Communication," "Free Speech," "Right -to read -to see -to learn -to know," and the "Right of Choice." All have been x-ed out. Her mouth is gagged and her hands are tied. Layton writes

This old woman is bound and gagged and can no longer draw. Her principles have been X-ed out. I guarantee you she feels like a zilch. In the background, from top left, counter-clockwise; Interstate 70 billboard art by Tillie Woodward, of a Nazi soldier hanging two Russian resistance fighters, which was censored and plastered over June 5, 1985; the Goddess of Liberty falling broken in China's Tianeman [sic] Square; a pile

of the old woman's drawings torn up and censored; quotation, "The first exception (to the First Amendment) will not be the last"--Ira Glasser; sheaf of CLASSIFIED papers, beginning and ending with LIED. (Lambert 127)

By creating these drawings, Layton has once again placed her own life within a political context. By placing on these innocuous buttons political slogans, she affirms her own beliefs as a person, a Kansan, and her connection with Dinsmoor and Liggett.

Layton, like Dinsmoor, places women and minorities within her works to show their own injustice at the hands of society. For Dinsmoor, those oppressed could win their freedom through voting. For Layton, remembering those who have died is a way to right any injustices done. In "Commemorative to Artist of the Holocaust," there are faces and burnt children's drawings while doves carry a small banner which reads "Dear Anne Frank, Brothers and Sisters, Too late we answer. Forgive us. We, of the unseeing eyes and deaf ears, salute you." Layton's first line of her introductory paragraph for the piece reads "This is a picture of denial" (Lambert 113). This is represented by the repeated image of Layton within the drawing without eyes. Another drawing shows Layton adding a block to the AIDS memorial quilt. The globe behind her is covered with renditions of actual blocks from the AIDS memorial quilt. She also takes on the right to die, the treatment of the old through a piece in which two Native Americans are shown to be shunned from the tribe because of their age, and homelessness.

Of course, not all of Layton's pieces are depressingly political or pedantic, strewn with images of death and destruction. Even in pieces like "Equal or The Golden Rule," a piece which shows Elizabeth and Glenn as one person eating a piece of pie, she points to her belief in understanding. Her humor shines through in the fact that each has a tape

measure of some sort on their respective bodies (or body halves), as Layton reminds us, “Both carry The Golden Rule--hers a sewing tape around her neck; his a carpenter’s rule in his pocket” (Lambert 59). “You Gotta Have Art” shows the two in matching hats with the titular slogan imprinted on them [picture 8]. Art seems to be pushing Glenn out of the picture, but he seems to have an understanding look on his face. This is Layton’s own paean to the miracle of art, and her belief in its healing powers<sup>3</sup>. In “Thanksgiving,” Layton and a granddaughter are seen at a table brandishing Kentucky Fried Chicken and olives. The granddaughter is praying while Layton holds her finger up to her lips as if to quiet everyone, or maybe to have them keep a secret. Over her shoulder, a turkey runs free by a window. “I hate to cook, so this is my Thanksgiving, because we have Kentucky Fried Chicken and Oreo cookies, and I didn’t have to work at it. I have cooked I don’t know how many family dinners. I’ve given up. So the turkey is outside there, strutting because he didn’t get killed. See, it’s better for everybody” (Lambert 31). Even in jest, her message comes across clearly. Women are relied upon for meals and cleaning. In her dream Thanksgiving, she would not cook or clean and could enjoy the freedom of not being yoked with the responsibilities, just as the turkey is free from death.

Elizabeth Layton, who started drawing late in life, does not have a polished, highly stylized method of art; instead she worked with what she had, her face, her body, the body and face of her husband, an imagination and mind of great depth, a social conscience, and a great compassion for those among us who are less fortunate. Like Dinsmoor and Liggett, she used cheap materials to create her art. Each of the artists feels a need to emphasize injustices, a trait that is fundamentally Kansan in its scope. By using their art as a commentary on these injustices, they each bring to light the need for change within society.

In the article written by Lambert and Licata, this critique of Layton's style is set forth:

Layton's careful use of details . . . gives her visualization a stylistic and narrative complexity that belies her lack of formal credentials. It is this very "lack" that makes it possible for Layton to create [her pieces]. . . . In spite of a profusion of literal elements that artists with more stylistic savvy might avoid, [her drawings deliver] a visceral statement of sledgehammer impact, driven by the central image of Layton's haggard and anxious face. (26)

Layton's work is outsider art. She is not an expert at line, space, or any of the other fundamentals of visual art. Yet she creates an emotional level within her art that is human in scope. By placing herself within the context of all of her drawings, Layton has placed a human face on the suffering of nameless individuals. Her popularity has come from her belief that the personal is the universal and viewers of her art can feel the emotional strength of Layton's convictions through her common and expressive face. By representing common people in both extraordinary and common situations, she transcends her label as outsider and simply becomes an artist.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusions

According to Wright Morris, “The region--the region in the sense that once fed the imagination--is now for sale. . . . The only regions left are those the artist must imagine. They lie beyond the usual forms of salvage. No matter where we go, in America today, we shall find what we left behind” (22). For Morris, the region must lie within the imagination of the artist. Through myth, history, and society, the artist must create a region of space and time through his or her art. As America is now a post-leisure society, travelers no longer have time to visit the small oddities of the road as they appear along smaller highways. These oddities, whether they be constructed for those who took the railroad as in Dinsmoor’s day, or for those who just happen to travel 54 highway today to pass through Mullinville where Ligget’s work becomes a place of interest for those willing to seek it out. These places call to the traveler to visit a monument to life. Even Elizabeth Layton’s work asks the viewer not to forget about those who are passed by within our society. The roadside attraction, whether that road is literal or figurative, has become a form of art within itself.

Kansas is not an anomaly within a new world of the internet and interstate systems; it is just as much a part of the world as any other state in the United States. It is true that it is less densely populated than other states, but it is a community, a region. Diane Quantic states that a region might easily be interpreted by looking at “[f]our intricately related words--*land, society, myth, [and] reality*” (xvi). Historically, Kansas has been defined as a region of strong political ideals and hard working people. Regions, and the people that make them up, however, will always be stereotyped. The

stereotypes of Kansans as set forth by Robert Smith Bader are “Rube, Traditional, Drab, Irrelevant, and Puritanical” (115). These stereotypes are made by people both within and outside the state, and these stereotypes will be reinforced by some and shattered by others; such is the nature of a stereotype. However, the historical make-up of a people is that which happens to and is caused by the people of that region. For Kansans, it is hard to escape the acts of Carrie Nation in the name of prohibition or the medical claims of John Brinkley who said that he could graft goat organs onto humans<sup>1</sup>. These extremists and cranks will forever be seen as representative of Kansas and its inhabitants. The artists Dinsmoor, Liggett, and Layton are also seen as extremists and cranks by some. Therefore, by being representative of Kansas, they also fall into the stereotypes of the region. Frederick Jackson Turner writes that the region is important to the growth of the whole of the nation:

In part this [the integration of sections which causes the increase of national intensity] is due to the factor of great spaces which make sectional rather than national organization the line of least resistance; but, in part, it is also the expression of the separate economic, political, and social interests and the separate spiritual life of the various geographic provinces or sections. (Turner 127)

Turner describes a splintering effect, the reliance on sections of the nation to strengthen the nation as a whole by combining to form a union of disparate parts. To place Turner’s ideas within a metaphor, they are like the cells of any large piece of furniture. Without the cells and the microscopic fundamentals, the whole would not exist. Diane Quantic writes of Great Plains fiction and its regional focus:

In the late eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth century,

proponents of geographical determinism asserted that the land determines the nature of society, the quality of life, and even the form and theme of literature. In some ways, these theorists were right: Life on the plains is determined by the land. Farmers can raise only those crops that weather and soil will tolerate. (xvii)

While geographical determinism has been questioned within the latest century by geographers, sociologists, and other scholars of the human sciences, place, as Quantic states, can be a determining factor of a people. Regionalism is updated throughout the ages; its movements reflect all four of the words “*land, society, myth, [and] reality*” (Quantic xvi) and the ideas that lie behind them. Philip Heldrich writes that regionalism now tends critically to encompass points of imaginary space that

opens possibilities for the mapping regions of gender, regions of ethnicity, regions of nationality, religious regions, geographical regions, cultural regions, even regions of memory. . . . Such writing expresses the particular concerns of a community and its history as it creates a recognizable center of meaning, an outpost on the margins of the homogeneous. . . . For [William] Bevis, concerned with regionalism and the West, regionalism is anti-capitalist with respect to the “no place center created by “capitalist modernity.” Regionalism even espouses community over a destructive Enlightenment mythos of individuality, as it does in many Native American texts. (6)

Heldrich’s and Quantic’s observations are about the fictions of specific spaces, but they are easily transferred to the visual arts of a place. Within the art and lives of Dinsmoor, Liggett, and Layton, we see the history and land in which they live, their impressions of

the outer world and society, the mythology of Kansas as well as their own personal mythologies, and the realities of living within their respective times, spaces, and lands.

A friend of mine and I were talking about Kansas recently. He said, "I love the land, the prairie and its flat, open qualities, but I can't stand the politics of the place." I thought that this was an apt realization for both my friend and for those of us that live within the state and the region. What must be kept in mind, however, is that Kansas was and is a political state, both physically and in relation to its history; from Populism and Socialism to the conservatism of the Republicans, politics is inherent to the region of Kansas. In some ways everyone who lives is a political being, even in apathy. This is the message that the artists have brought forth. Each adds his or her own ideology to the tapestry of their region in Kansas, the United States, and to the art world. Diane Quantic writes that, "the garden in Great Plains fiction is not a treat that prepares one to return to civilization as it is in classical pastoral literature: time and space intervene, so that settlers have no place and no people to return to. Instead, civilization must be established in the wilderness" (97). Within these artists' lives, the people that they return to are the ones of their audience; the people that they return to comprise their community. Elizabeth Layton's sentiment that "the personal is the universal" can be seen as a sort of mission statement for all of the artists, as well as those who live within a given society.

The land within Kansas' borders is often seen as boring, unmonumental, ugly, and even, by some people, as flat and dull as the people within it. But this is the view of the outsider, the visitor, as Yi-Fu Tuan says. Such outside observations are made in "some formal canon of beauty," that which has already been deemed beautiful by the rest of the outside world (64). For these people, the lack of landmarks (i.e. mountains, lakes, forests) creates a void that they would rather pass through at night (Heat-Moon 205).

But the land persists. As the settlers of this state realized, they could not tame it, only try to live with it and come to terms with its subtle beauty, injustice, and life. John Hachmeister spoke of the outsider artists of Kansas in terms of the land, remarking on what it means to be able to see a storm, horseman, or, today, a car from miles away. "When you live in an environment where sky takes up most of your visual field, you don't feel particularly significant, you feel like a very small person. There is this need to make something; some people build big houses, but the more creative [people] are building sculptures" (*Rare Visions and Roadside Attractions*, videocassette). The sculptures of Dinsmoor and Liggett, and to a lesser extent the drawings of Layton, are monuments to themselves, to prove that someone was here.

The political leanings of the state also can be said to come from the land as well. Being seen as the middle ground for the United States, the politics are always used in terminology that combines both extremes of the political spectrum. The land brought about the popularity among farmers in the area of the Populist movement. The stronghold that the Republican party has had within the last part of the twentieth century reflects this notion of Kansas as the "heartland," where people believe in the values of family, work, and happiness. These views of the land and its politics and political leanings, especially what seemingly is an insistence on a split, almost schizophrenic personality--which could be called a progressive Puritanism, or maybe even the progressive/conservative complex--are apparent throughout Kansas history. Milton S. Eisenhower refers to the "hybrid vigor" of the citizens of the state of Kansas (106). He speaks of the combination of the Puritans from the East and the abolitionists of the South, causing the stern yet compassionate, conservative yet progressive dichotomous spirit.

Kansas and outsider artists Dinsmoor, Liggett, and Layton have come to exemplify a world of the “great common people,” a term that is tossed about a lot in essays on the state. This commonness comes through in the artist’s insistence on the ideals of a “common” person: the worker, the family, the other, the native. Commonality can be viewed, of course, just as regionalism can be, by inclusion rather than exclusion. The question is always begged when you mention “common” or “normal:” what does that mean? I think that “common” is exactly that which is the norm for a people in a given community. However, in Kansas, the people have a “chronic expectation of the unexpected,” as Kenneth S. Davis describes, that causes them to be able to adapt to what comes, and be able to stand their ground and report what has occurred and what should occur, at least within its art, to make the community a better place (162). The artists’ creations are made from materials that are common: concrete, metal, road signs, crayons, and poster board. The vehicle of the artists’ work that they use to explore society is based largely in the mythology of the Western world: Greek, Roman, Christian, and, most important, Kansan.

Many people wonder what drives people to create art, even more so outsider art. Is it boredom? Possibly so. Many outsider artists create after they have retired from a life of work. The creation of environments is a way to alleviate the days of doing nothing. It is also a way, as John Hachmeister claims, to prove that the artist was once a human being on earth. Liggett told the New York Times “my political ideas will be here 150 years from now--they’re made out of quarter-inch iron. That’s why I done it this way” (Pierce 19). These people want others to know how they feel about aspects of society. Dinsmoor, Liggett, and Layton, by raising their commentary to an aesthetic realm, catch the attention of others more easily than by purely verbal means. Because the region of

Kansas is a political entity, these artists create political commentary on society. By commenting on the region of Kansas, and the nation as a whole, they have insured a place within the history and mythology of Kansas, within the history of art in the United States, and within the intricate web of the human race.

## Notes

### Chapter One: Introduction

<sup>1</sup> I will use the terms sociopolitical and political interchangeably throughout. For me, the idea of politics is not a partisan ideal, but, instead, an encompassing ideal of political thought and action as well as the politics of personal interaction on a sociological level.

<sup>2</sup>The Garden of Eden was described the last time I was there by a man talking to his video camera as the house of an “old, crazy guy who built a bunch of crazy stuff.”

### Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup> The Cabin Home was finished in 1907 with wiring already inside. The electricity was generated by a gas powered motor that he purchased at the local hardware store.

### Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup> I never found, in all of my research on the Branch Davidians attack in Waco, Texas, a person named Higgins who was involved. I found someone named Higginbotham, a member of the FBI Rescue team at Waco. Higgins may be someone that was for the bombing that lives in or around Mullinville or it may just be a mistake. These mistakes happen occasionally in Liggett’s work. For Ted Kennedy, Liggett has a Cappaquidick totem with a “sinkin’ Lincoln” when in fact the car was a Cadillac. For Liggett, details matter less than having a point to get across.

<sup>2</sup> The interesting thing about this story is that I called the library and the newspaper in Bucklin, and nobody at either place seemed to think that there was a controversy of any sort with the mayor. Cyndi Christopher, the Bucklin librarian, said, “There probably wasn’t anything going on. I know that mayor real well and the man she was supposed to be friendly with was a good thirty years younger than she was.” The response from the Bucklin Banner, the local newspaper, was much the same. The people that I talked to both figured that Liggett was just wanting to “stir up some trouble.”

<sup>3</sup> The article’s title, “The Gospel According to the Grouch,” is interesting because not only is it an accurate description of Liggett, but could just as easily describe S. P. Dinsmoor.

### Chapter Four

<sup>1</sup> A funny anecdote about the painting reveals that Glenn was posing nude for Elizabeth in the bathtub when some friends came over for Sunday dinner. Glenn had to hurriedly dry, dress, and regain his composure in a matter of minutes while Elizabeth left to entertain her guests.

<sup>2</sup> Layton had an exhibit at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, in Washington D. C., in the late 80s.

<sup>3</sup> Layton refused to sell her drawings, instead opting to give them away:

I’m afraid if I put a price on them, the miracle might disappear. And there are too many people who’ve helped me. What should I do, divide up the

money and give everyone a penny? The only worth I can see in these pictures is measured in empathy, not dollars. All I hope is that a few people will see them and ask themselves the same questions I did: How do I feel? What do I believe? Who am I? (Fadiman 3).

This seems to be a trait of some outsider artists. They do not create for the acquisition of money for the most part. Dinsmoor gave tours of his home to make money to finish it, but he didn't sell any of his pieces. Liggett began selling after he realized people wanted to buy them and was tired of giving them away.

#### Chapter Five: Conclusions

<sup>1</sup> Carrie Nation and the Prohibition movement's crusades are still visible in the strict liquor laws of Kansas. Brinkley, who was known for the goat incident and other medical quackery, also established a radio station across the border between Mexico and the U. S. in 1931. This station, broadcast from Mexico with 150, 000 watts of power, could be heard far into the U. S. and carried prominent hillbilly acts like The Carter Family, as well as his own brand of religion and medical advice.

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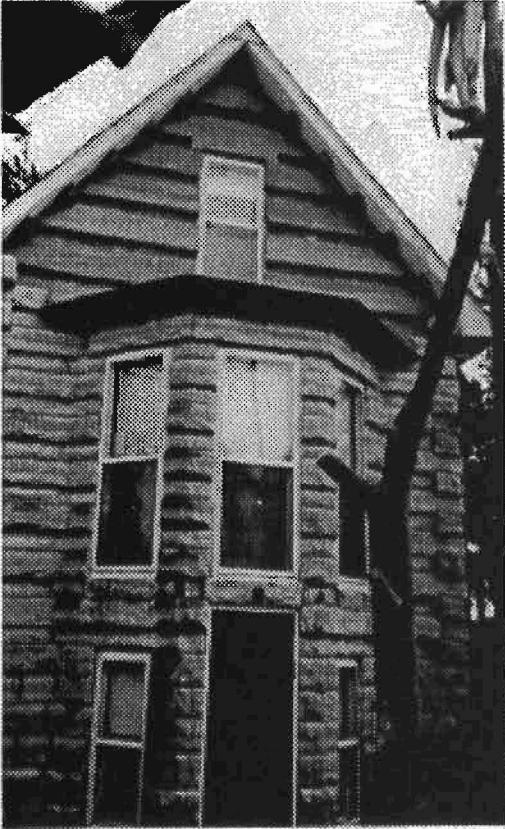
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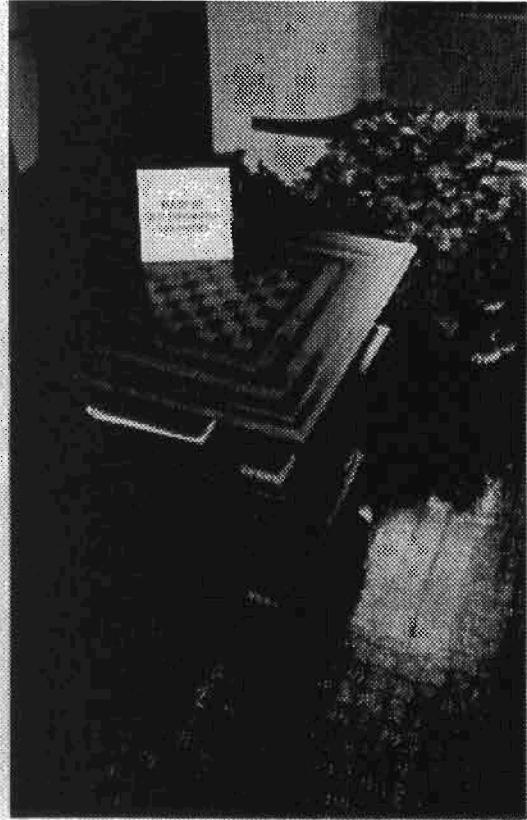
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## Appendix

The following are photographs of the art that correspond to the chapters. Each piece is numbered and corresponds to the number given in the chapter. The photographs from chapters two and three are from the author's archives. The drawings of Elizabeth Layton are from Don Lambert's book *The Life and Art of Elizabeth "Grandma" Layton*, published by WRS Publishing in 1995.



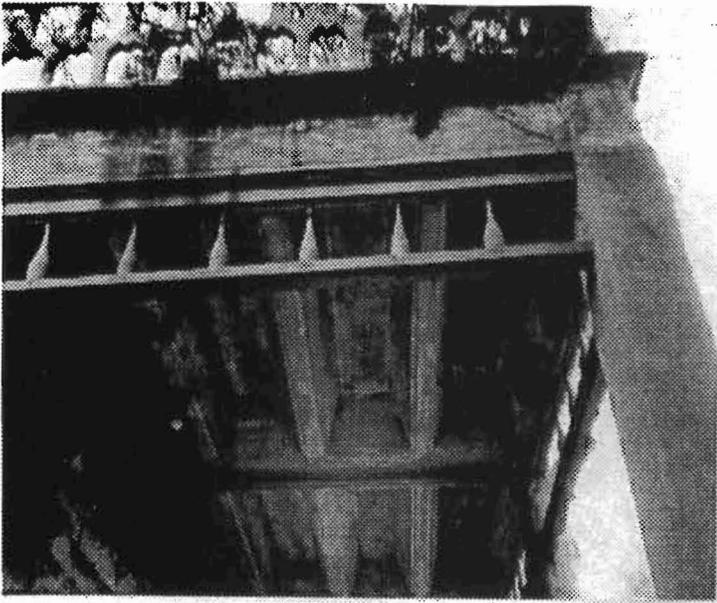
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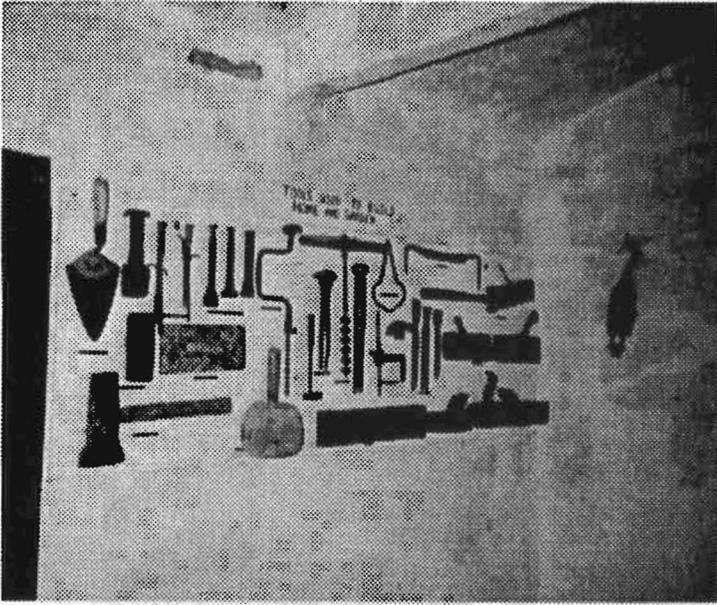
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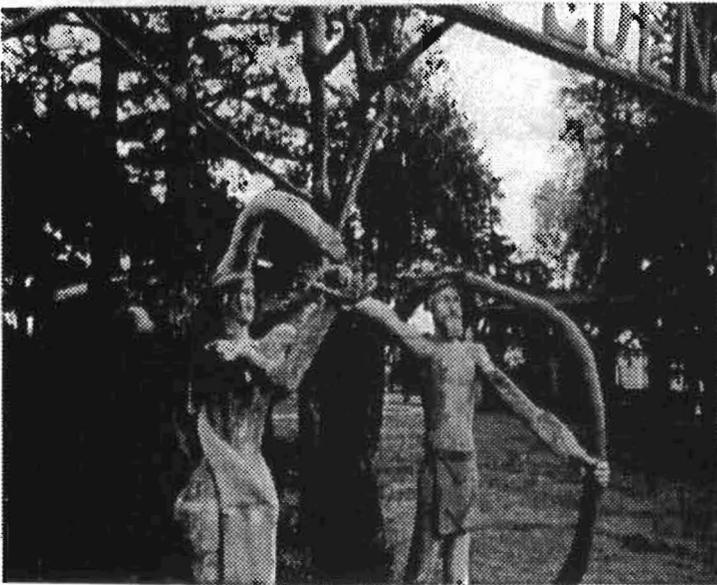
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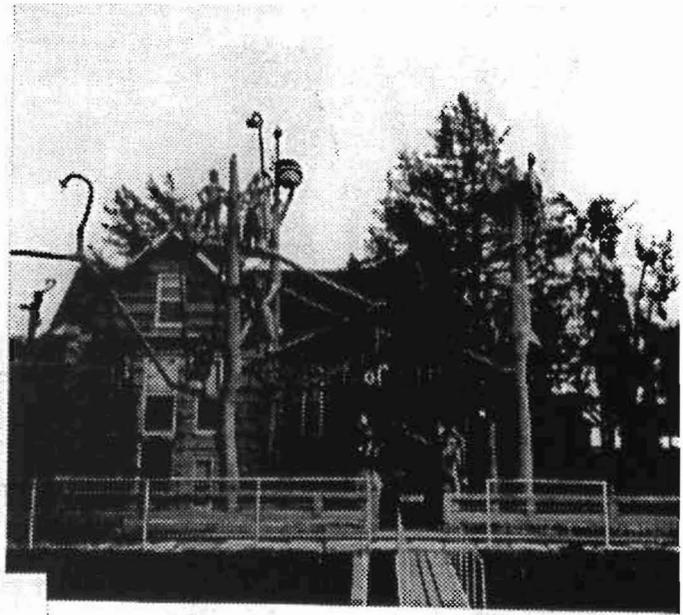


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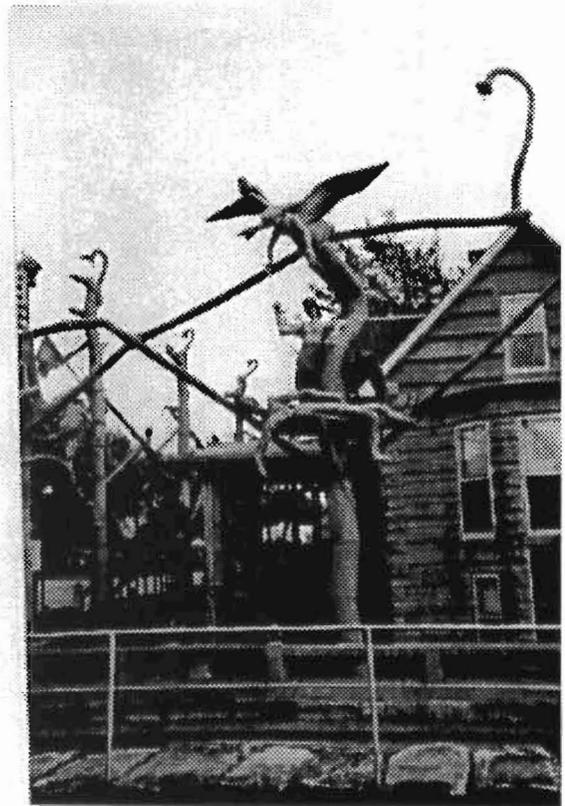
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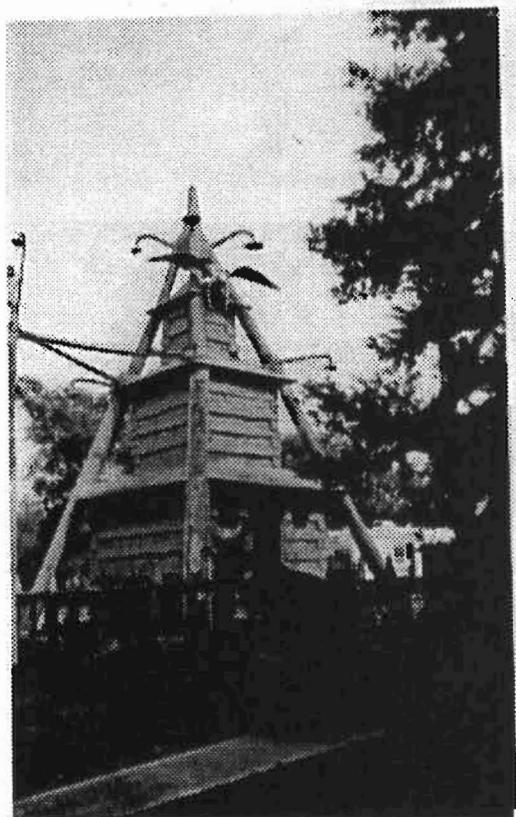




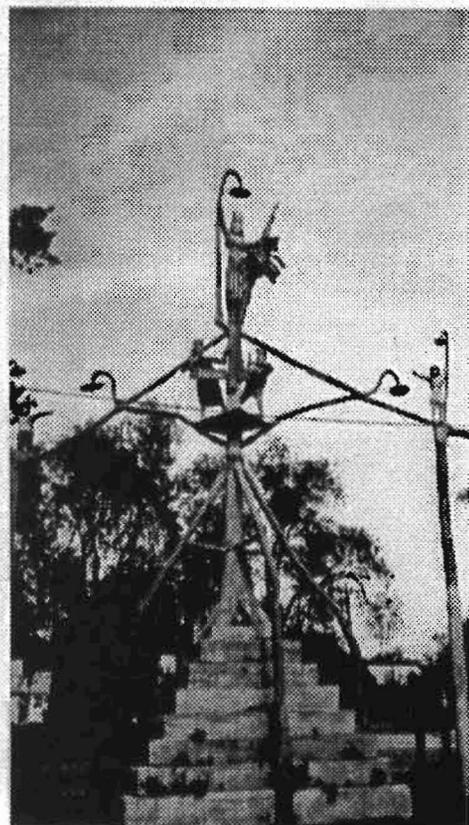
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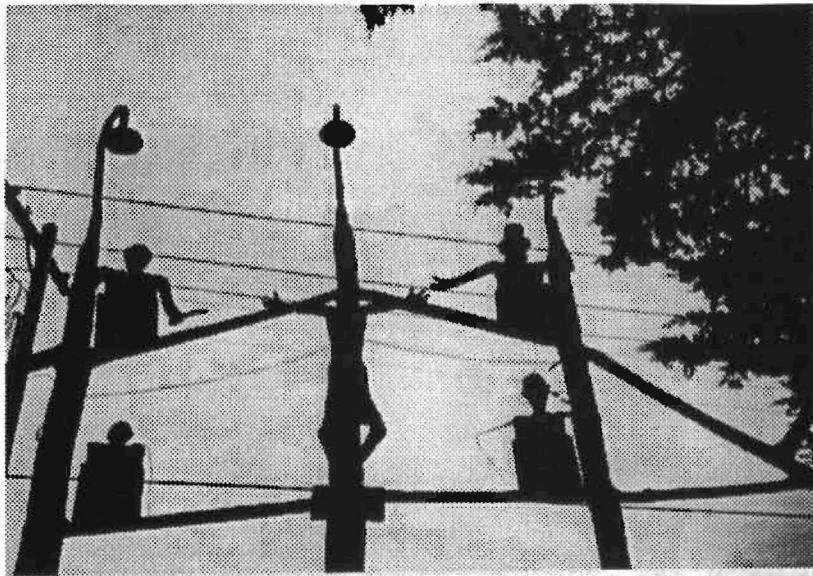
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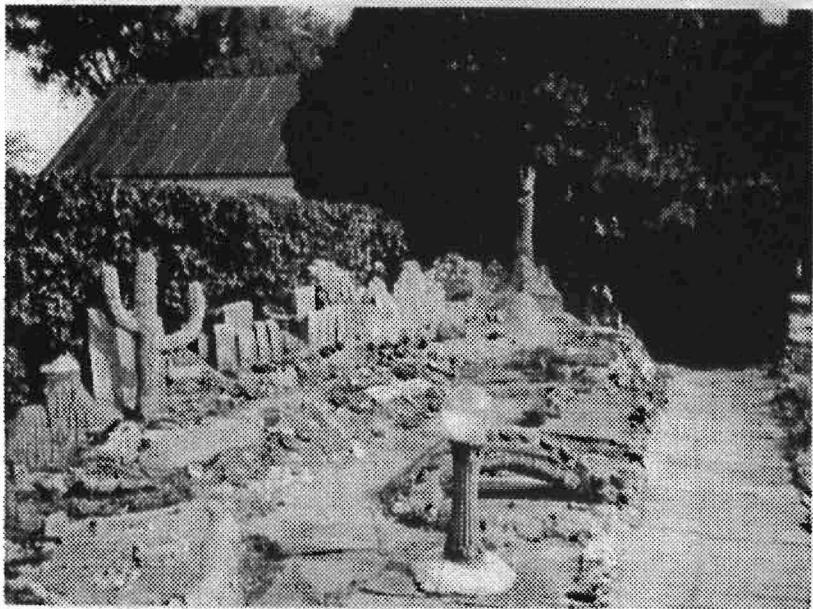
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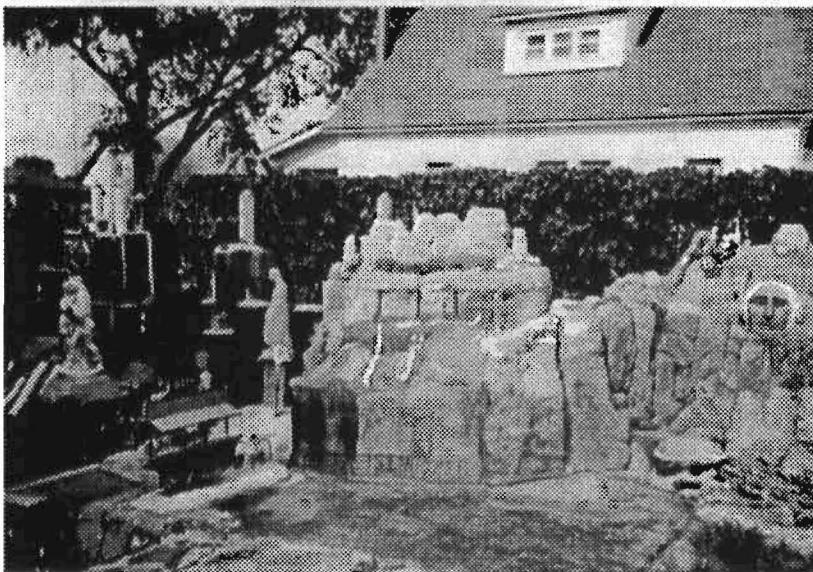
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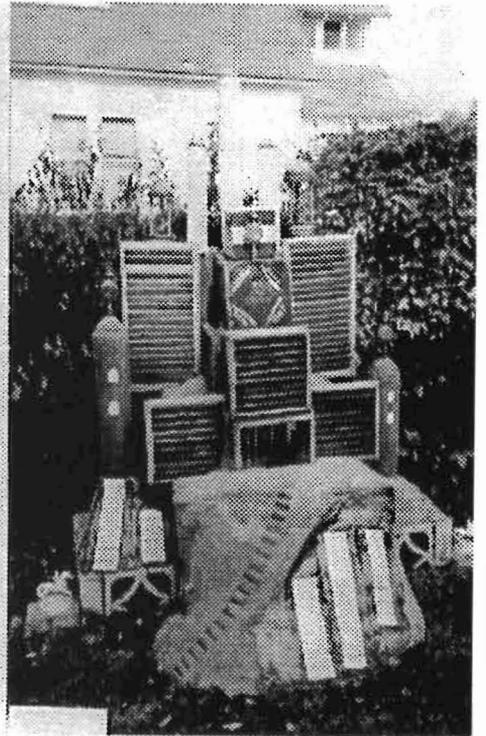
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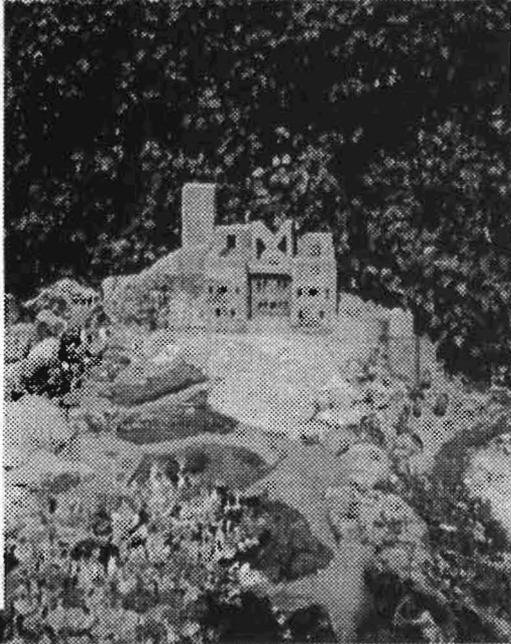
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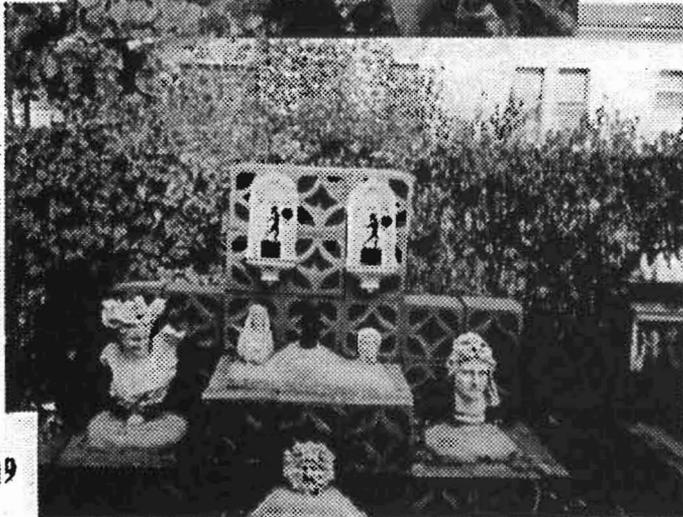
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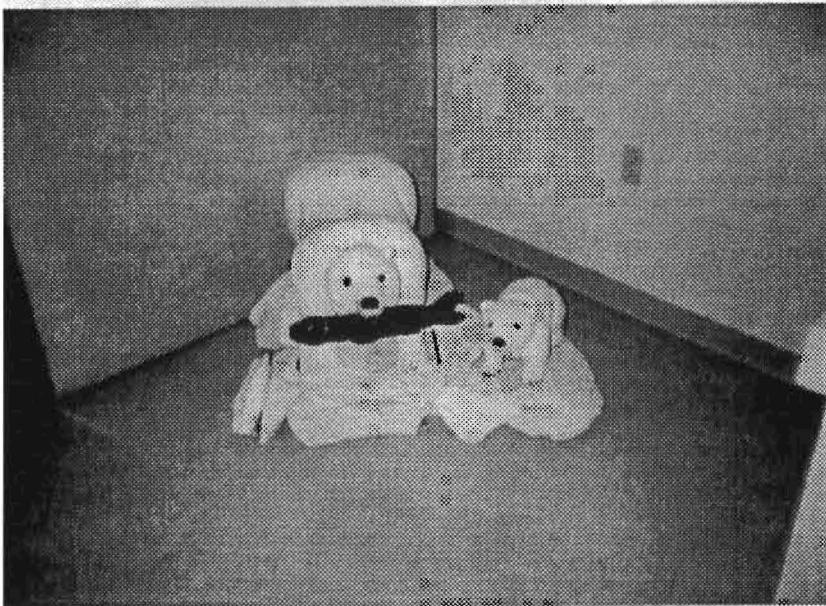
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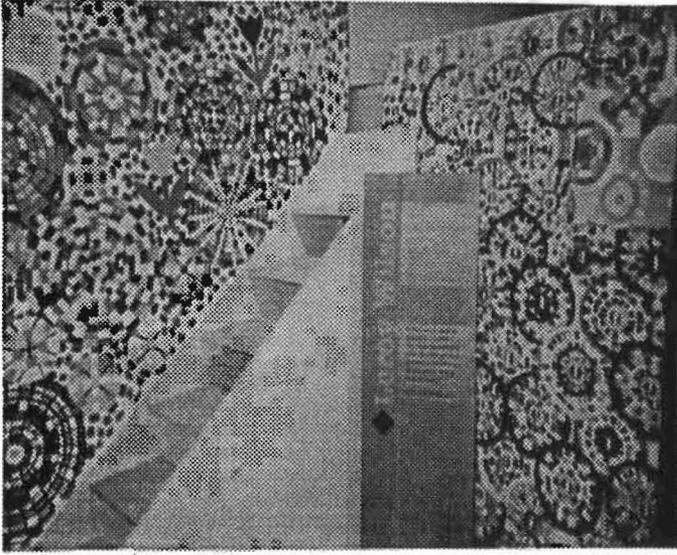
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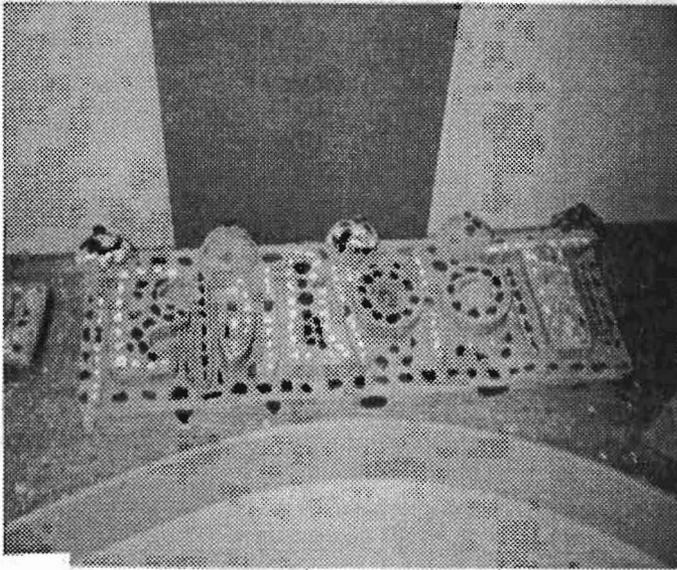
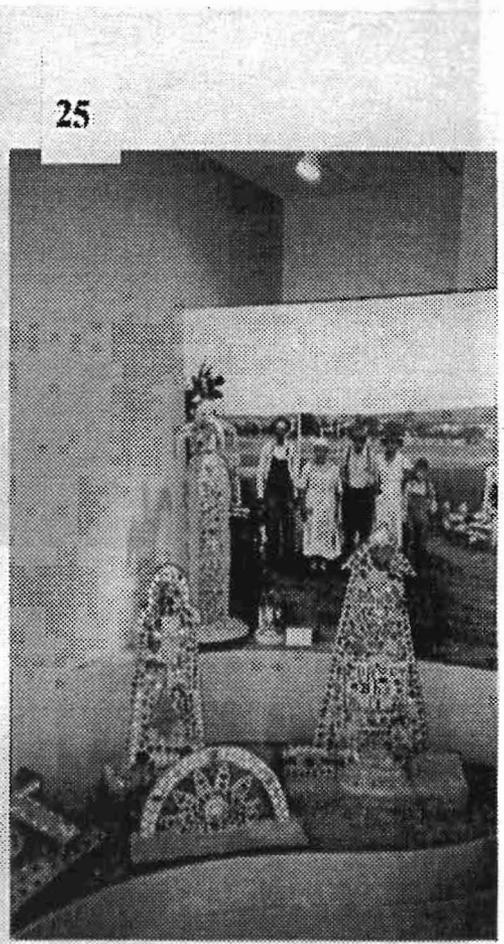
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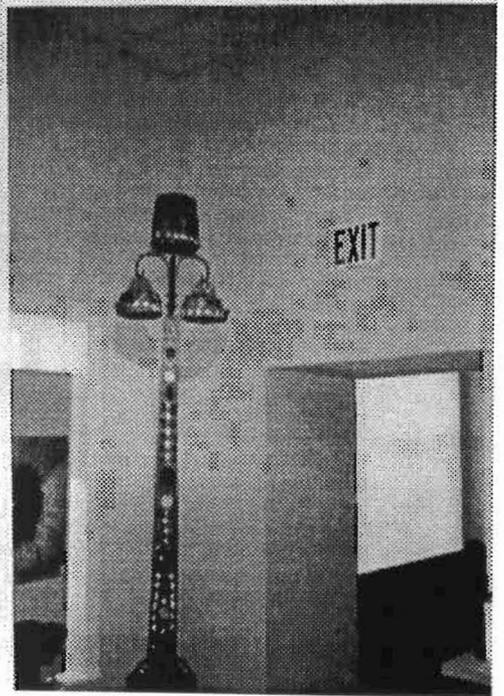
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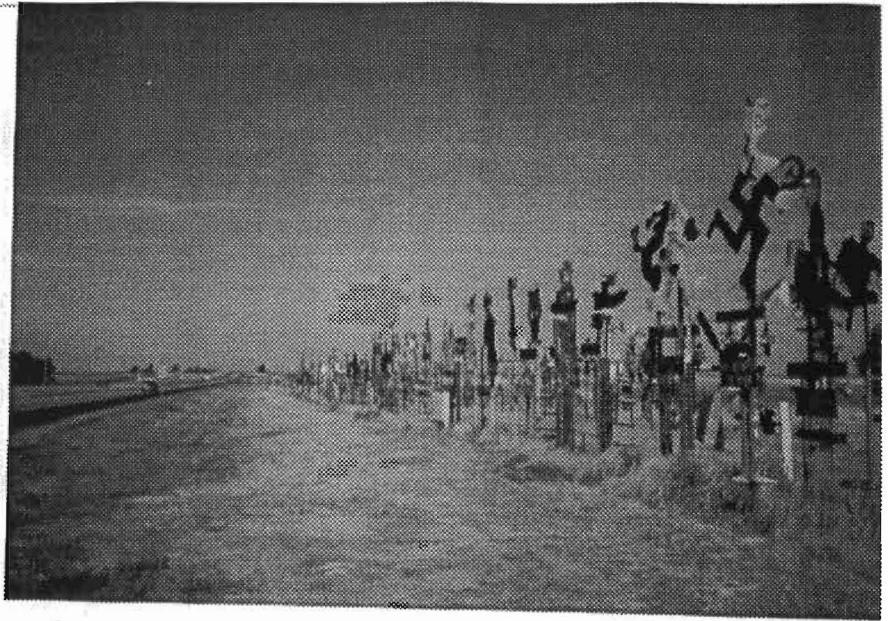
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Chapter Three

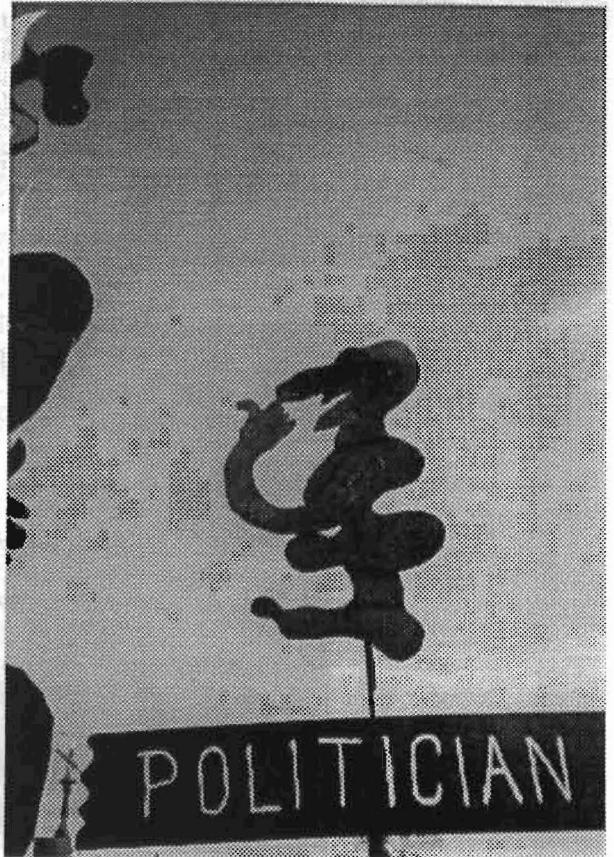


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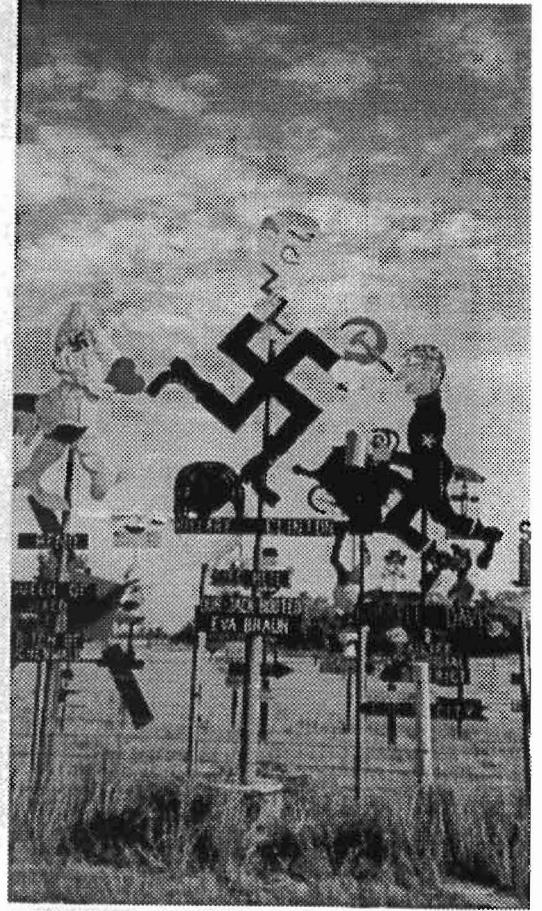
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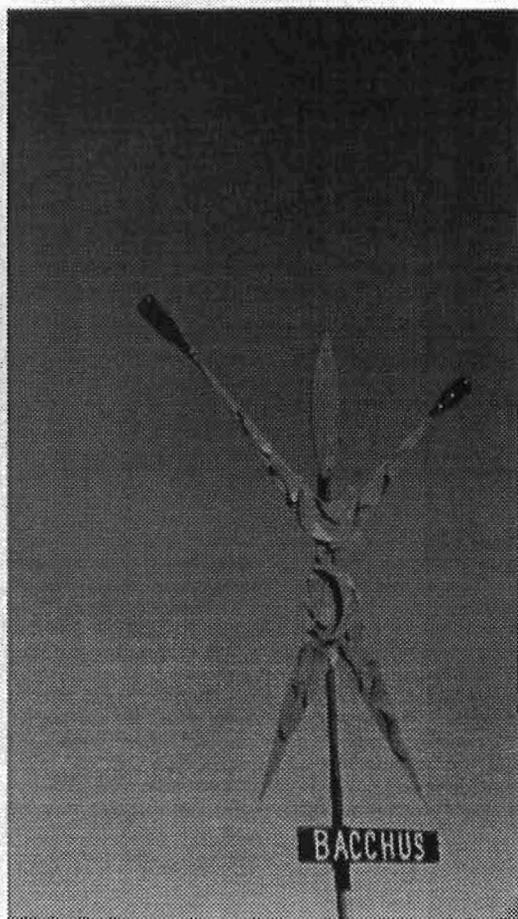


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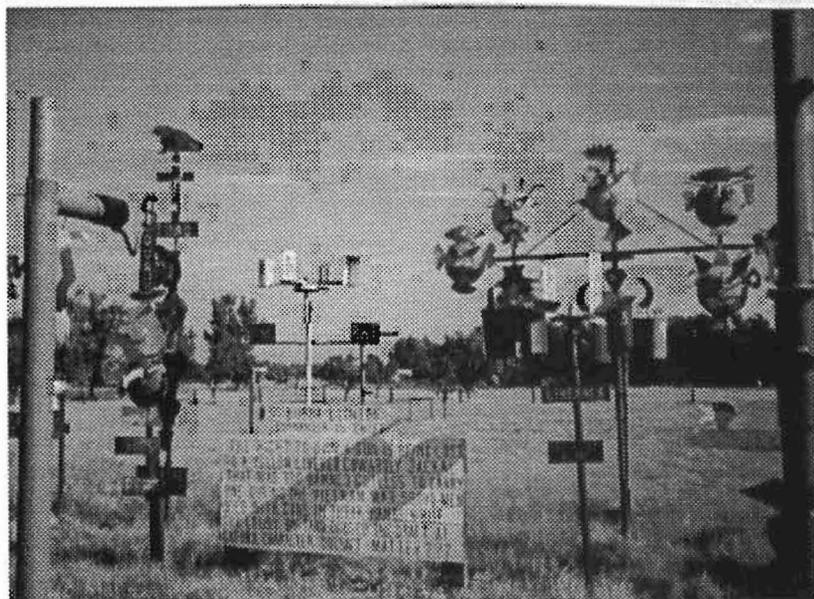


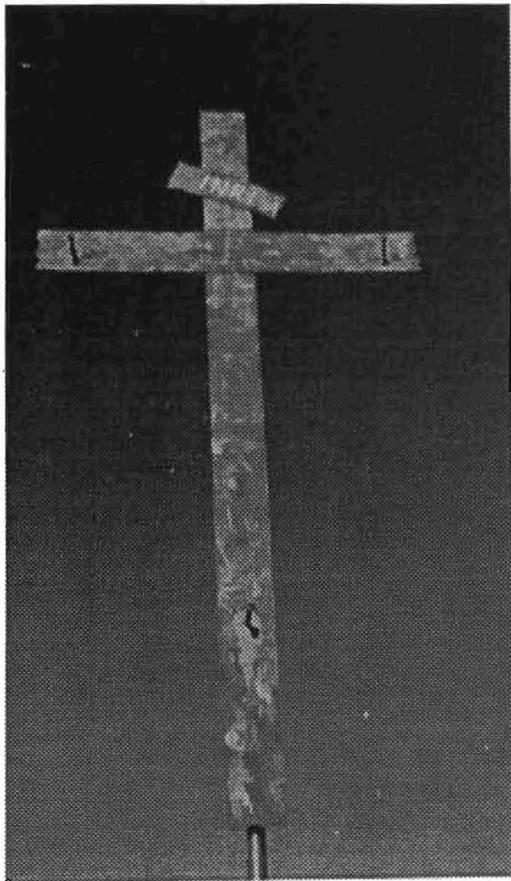
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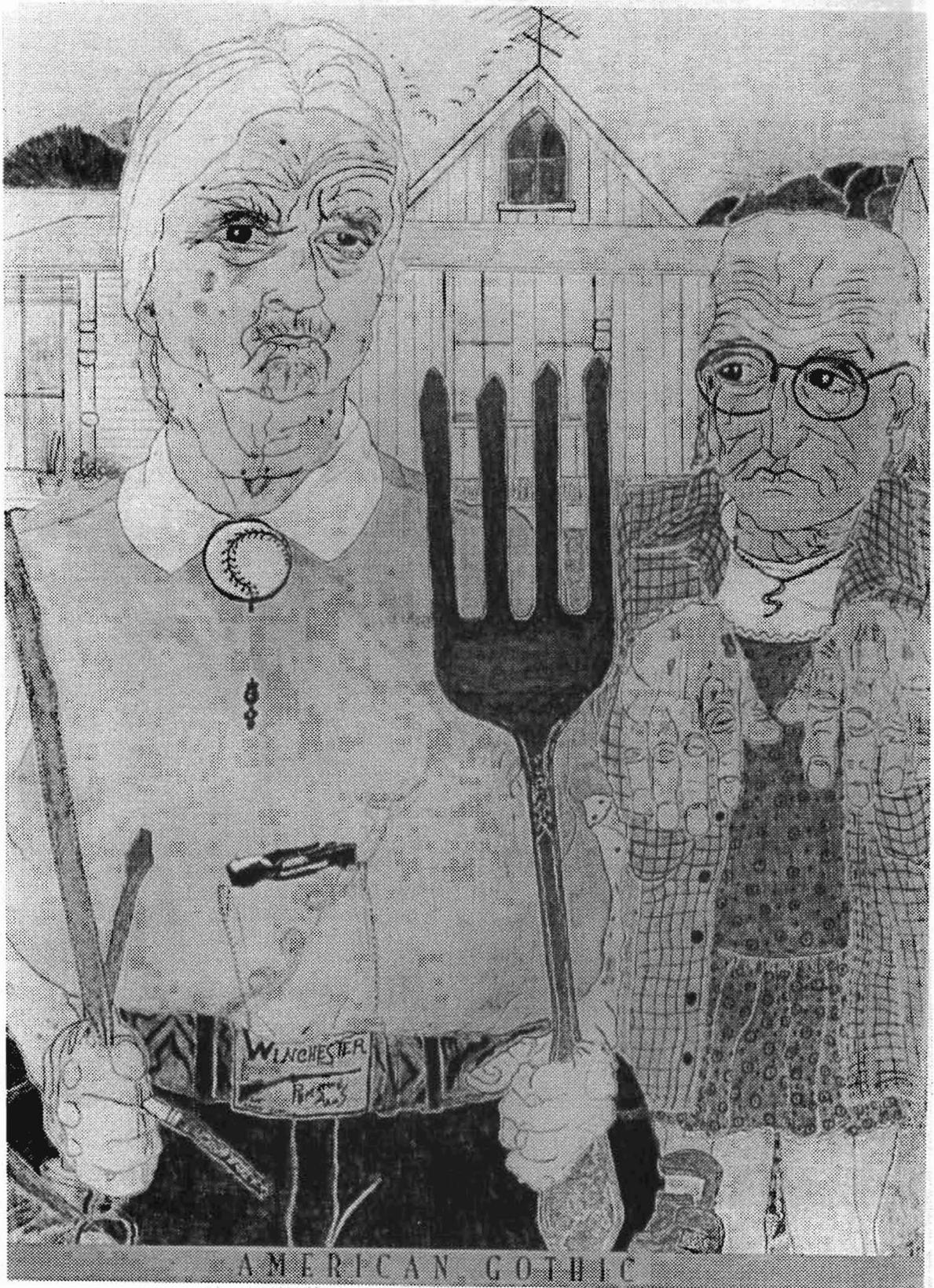
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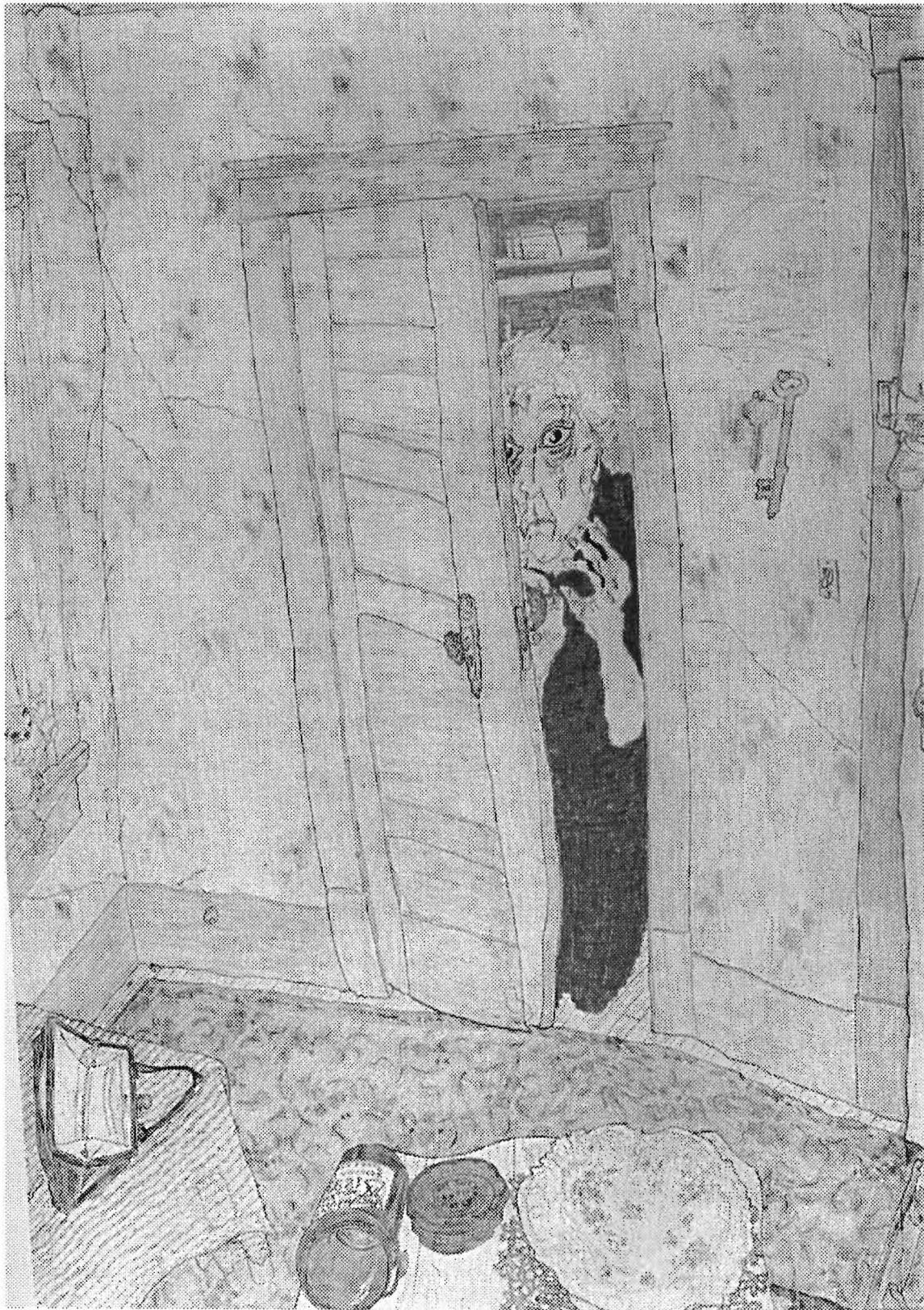






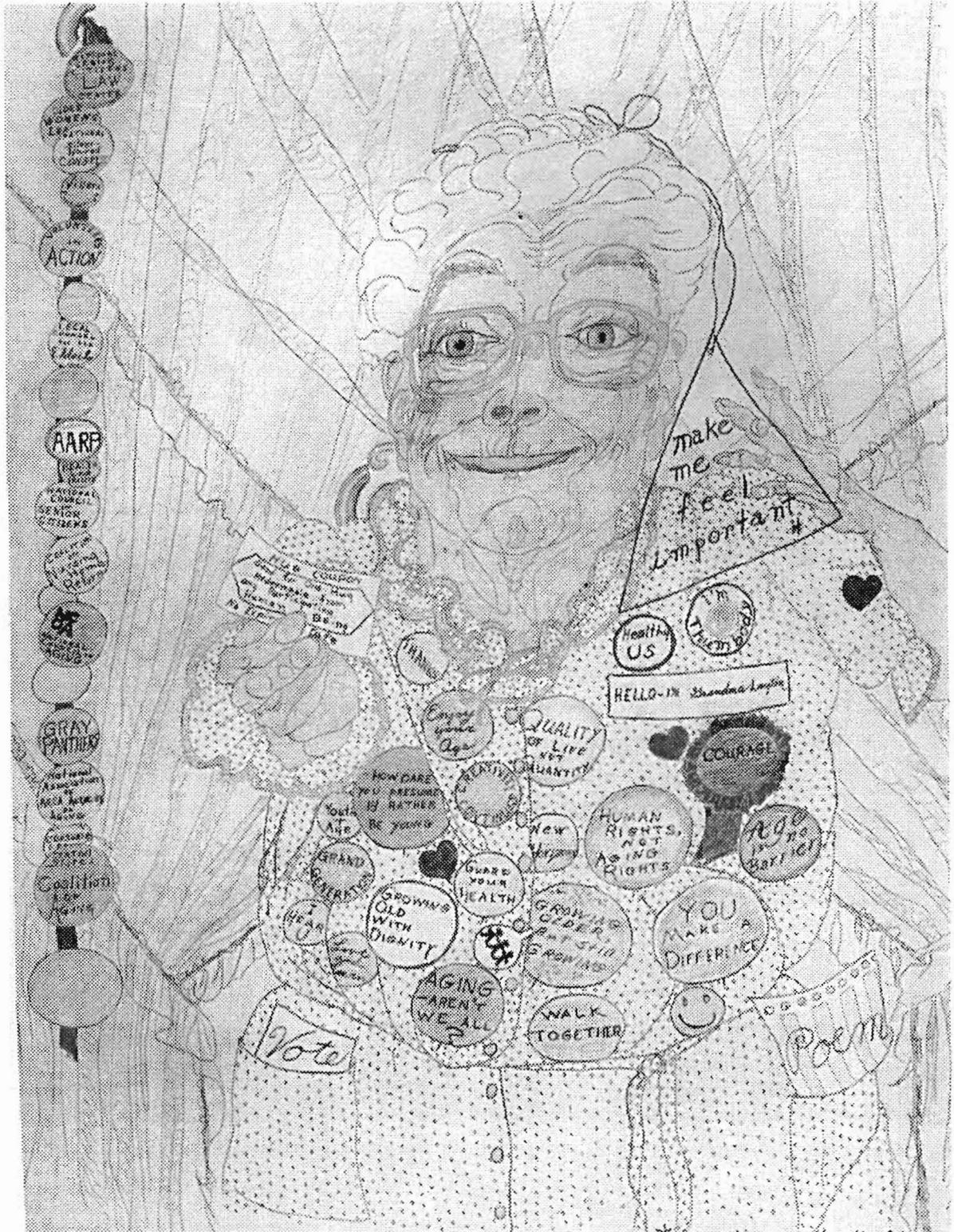
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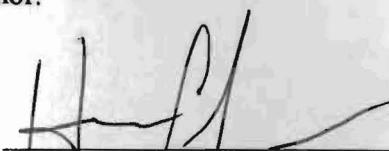




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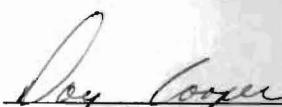
*Don Lambert brought us these caps to spread our message. Art does so much for me I want everybody to try it. If you get tired of my ranting, do like Glenn does — duck. My sister Carolyn kept coaxing me to try Art, like her husband Henry Francis Misselwitz, had persuaded her to paint out in Burlingame, California. Daughter Kay even brought me the Art assignments to do — a child's movie screen in a shoebox, nursery rhymes to illustrate. Big sisters and Little daughters sometimes know best. So, timidly, I ventured out to the World of Art and enrolled in Basic Drawing and discovered CONTOUR! ❄️❄️*

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