

CURRENTS

Reverend Howard Finster

August 7-September 22, 1982

The New Museum



Finster's Apocalypse



The Devils Vice, 1977; enamel on wood, 21 x 23".
Collection Michael and Jane Stern, Wilton, Connecticut.

The visionary work of Reverend Howard Finster centers on a singular and powerful subject—the Apocalypse—and bears a message about last things: the paradox of our possible salvation or ultimate destruction by technology, and the coming millenium in the atomic age. Each object represents what the artist has seen in a vision. What makes the work so compelling is that it both accommodates and moves beyond a personal vision to be concerned with the disposition of humanity facing the world—our efforts to come to know it and to come to grips with it.

Apocalypse is another word for revelation. Finster's art seeks to reveal the true dimensions of our existence and to convey a clear image of the world and the reality we live in. The classic images of apocalypse portray portentous events in both social and natural orders: plagues, wars,

famines, great stars falling from heaven—all presaging the transformation of the world into a new heaven and earth. One of the most characteristic examples of the view of apocalypse in Finster's art is *The Devils Vice* (1977). A woman caught in the grip of a huge vise cries out, "Too late now." The vise is covered with messages about the evils of modern culture and the tragedy of commonplace events: drugs, hijacking, warfare, as well as natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and forest fires. Finster states that the vise is a symbol of social, economic, and political pressures.

Born on December 2, 1916 in Valley Head, Alabama, Finster was one of thirteen children of a sawmill lumberjack and had his first vision at the age of three, after the death of his sister Abbie. One afternoon, unaware that their dog

had rabies, Finster and his sister had been sitting on the porch. The dog licked him but bit his sister, who died a few days afterward despite medical treatment. Some time later, Finster was looking for his mother one afternoon on their forty-three acre farm and couldn't find her. He began to cry, and his sister Abbie appeared to him standing on the middle of seven steps, twenty-five feet high in the air. She turned away and looked back at him over her shoulder and said, "You are going to be a man of visions." Finster feels that because of this experience, he became a prophet, an apocalyptic visionary, and, in his words, "one of the world's last red lights."

Finster has been the reverend of eight churches and has held numerous tent revivals. He published his first sermon at the age of sixteen, and a year later he completed his first book of drawings. Finster's working life has consisted of many other occupations including woodcraft and cabinet making, plumbing, remodeling houses, and working in a glove factory. In 1961 he began his ongoing monument *Paradise Garden*, a two-and-a-half acre environment in the Pennsville community of Sumerville, Georgia. Formerly a lake, the site took eleven years to fill, clear, and create streams throughout. The garden enlisted all of his working trades.

Finster's aspiration and relentless search to find a way to bring all his talents together did not end until the winter of 1976. When it became too cold to work outside, Finster moved indoors and adapted his fugitive procedures to a more intimate scale. He began to paint. But painting for him was more than an artistic act: it was something more inspired—a calling.

One day I dipped my finger into white paint and there appeared a human face on the end of my finger. A feeling came into me that I should paint sacred art pictures and I am now trying.

Afterwards he began to incorporate paintings and sculptures of Biblical figures, famous inventors, and American heroes, as well as Biblical verses and his own words of wisdom, hand-painted on large slabs of plywood that were

scattered throughout the cluttered yard. Interspersed among these creations are oddly shaped cement structures and winding walkways embellished with literally thousands of found objects: mirror fragments, glass-encased photographs, silverware, broken watches, old machine parts, hubcaps, bicycle wheels, flashing lights, dozens of old television tubes salvaged from the repair shop operated by his son, and even a small boy's tonsils preserved in a jar. Narrow streams, algae-covered pools, and numerous cultivated plants add a natural element to the unusual array of found and homemade items. A large sign lettered in red and hung from a fence tells the world:

I took the pieces you threw away and put them together by night and day. Washed by rain, dried by sun, a million pieces all in one.

Just as Finster's garden is a world, so his art can be said to be a world—a universe of images of remarkable diversity and kind. He has created over two thousand objects, presenting a vision of the world which in its cosmology is quite complex. On the one hand, the imagery or world view is apocalyptic in a medieval sense, finding its archetype in the concept of the "Great Chain of Being," with the hierarchical orders ascending from the mineral, vegetable, animal, and human world to the order of angels and ultimately God. On the other hand, Finster's cosmology is principally a matter of speculation and invention. Finster employs concepts and features of technology—space travel, sound and wave theory, relativity, etc.—to make this world accessible to us. The so-called "Hell Paintings," such as *Vision of a Great Gulf on Planet Hell* (1980), merge medieval cosmology with modern science. In another work, *The Great Einstein in His Time* (1979), the scientist gazes into other worlds peopled with flying saucers which replace the medieval angels as God's messengers become extraterrestrials.

There are two grand narratives in Finster's art: one is the history of the world, the other, the personal history of the artist. As an apocalyptic visionary, Finster projects himself throughout history. For example, he moves through

time and place and amuses us with pictures of Shakespeare, a version of a portrait by Pollaiuolo, new interpretations of the Mona Lisa (including one hilarious picture of this famous lady making her social debut), and images of contemporary realities — Elvis Presley and Coca-Cola bottles. Finster's autobiographical paintings include an image of the artist as a baby on the "foam stone of life" and a group of wooden cut-outs of the artist as a young minister complete with Bible. Important from the standpoint of iconography and narrative is the painting *You Look Like This and You Look Like That* (1978), a landscape of heads of the artist at different stages and psychic states in his development. The painting takes as its premise a passage from Joel cited in the work:

Antonio Pollaiuolo, 1480; enamel on wood, 23½ x 22".
Collection Jane and Jeffrey Camp, Tappahanock, Virginia.



I have spoken by the prophets and I have multiplied visions and used similitudes by ministry of the prophets.

Prophecy in the Bible is a comprehensive view of the human situation, surveying it from creation to final deliverance; moreover, it is a view which marks the extent of what in another context we could call the creative imagination. The prophetic dimension of this kind of imagination allows Finster to take us into his view of the world. His vision of the cosmos demands a passing from microcosm to macrocosm, between inner and outer worlds. Thus, Finster's visions are presented in literal depictions of states of affairs in reality and figurative depictions of states of affairs in his mind.

An object by Finster marries two arts—painting and poetry. In this regard, his work brings to mind another visionary—William Blake. Finster's abundant and creative use of the imagination, which to Blake was the true faculty of knowing, allows him to create objects of great diversity. In order to bear out his message, anything will do: melted down TV parts and a terrarium become a reliquary in *Garding Angels of the Persus Stone* (1979); *Round T.V. Screen* (1978) becomes an apocalyptic landscape; the shelf of a display of Fruit-of-the-Loom men's clothing becomes a vision of human error and nightmare in *Mankind Has Fought Against Gods Will* (1982); a piece of pure glass serves as the surface for conjuring an image of the soul and serenity in *The Angel of the Waters* (1979).

What makes the art of Reverend Howard Finster an important addition to the art of our time is its spiritual dimension. Finster uses art to penetrate the apocalyptic dimensions of the world in order to achieve a larger consciousness of a greater reality.

Jesse Murry
Guest Curator

Reverend Howard Finster

Born in Valley Head, Alabama, 1916. Lives in Sumerville, Georgia.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1977 Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York
1978 Janet Fleisher Gallery, Philadelphia
1979 Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, N.C.
1980 *Man of Vision: Hidden Man of the Heart*, Botanical Gardens, University of Georgia, Athens
1981 Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco
1982 Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1976-78 *Missing Pieces: Georgia Folk Art*, Atlanta Historical Society, Atlanta (cat.; traveled)
1978 *First in the Hearts of his Countrymen: Folk Art Images of George Washington*, Fraunces Tavern Museum, New York (brochure)
The Heart in American Folk Art, Museum of American Folk Art, New York
Naive Visions, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond
1979 *America Now* (organized by United States International Communications Agency, Washington, D.C.; traveled in Eastern Europe)
Contemporary American Folk Art, University of Richmond, Richmond
Outsiders, Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester, Rochester
1980 *Folk Art U.S.A. Since 1900 from the Collection of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr.*, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Williamsburg (cat. intro. by Beatrix T. Rumford)
Masterpieces of Folk Art, Otis/Parsons Gallery, Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design, Los Angeles
1981 *Icon/Logos: The Word As Image*, Alternative Museum, New York
Religion Into Art, Pratt Manhattan Center, New York
Transmitters: The Isolate Artist in America, Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia (cat.)
1981-82 *American Folk Art Since 1900 from the Collection of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr.*, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee (cat.; traveled)
1982 *More Than Land or Sky: Art from Appalachia*, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C. (cat.)
What I Do for Art, Just Above Midtown/Downtown, New York

Selected Bibliography

- Carlson, Brigitta. "A Preacher's Vision of Gardening," *Winston-Salem Journal*, March 9, 1980, p. C7.
Larson, Kay, "Now, Voyeur," *Village Voice*, June 9, 1980, p. 72.
Murry, Jesse. "Reverend Howard Finster: Man of Visions," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 55, October 1980, pp. 161-64.
Patterson, Tom. "The Reverend Howard Finster," *Guide to Georgia* [College Park], vol. 9, December 1981, pp. 49-52.
Phillips, Deborah C. *Arts Magazine*, vol. 55, October 1980, p. 124.

The New Museum

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Works in the Exhibition

The New Museum wishes to thank the lenders to the exhibition, who are credited in the following checklist by the use of their initials following the entry:

Jane and Jeffrey Camp, Tappahanock, Virginia (JJC)
Carol Celantano, New York (CC)
Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr., New York (HWH)
Joe and Margaret Knopfelmacher, New York (JMK)
Tom Rubnitz, New York (TR)
Michael and Jane Stern, Wilton, Connecticut (MJS)
Phillis Kind Gallery, Chicago and New York (PKG)

Titles maintain the spellings and punctuation used by the artist. Unless otherwise noted, dimensions are stated in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

One Day I Dipped, 1976; enamel on wood, 6¼ × 18¾ (MJS)

The Devils Vice, 1977; enamel on wood, 21 × 23 (JMK)

Elvis and Guitar, 1977; enamel on wood, 20 × 16¼ (PKG)

Coca-Cola Pays Its Own Bills, 1978; enamel on wood, 41½ × 16¼ (JJC)

My Vision of My Baby Picture on the Foam Stone, 1978; enamel on plate glass, 20 × 23⅞ (JJC)

Round T.V. Screen, 1978; enamel on television screen, diameter: 23¾ (JJC)

The Whole World Is Out There, 1978; enamel on wood, 16⅝ × 38½ (JJC)

U.F.O. Factory (Vision of Strange Equipment Corner Peep into U.F.O. Factory), 1978; enamel on wood, 19 × 24⅞ (JJC)

U.S. Map, 1978; enamel on wood, 42 × 50 (MJS)

Vision of Modle Dwelling Beyond the Light of the Sun, 1978; enamel and plaster on wood, 19¾ × 34½ (HWH)

Visions Planets Beyond the Light of the Sun, 1978; enamel on wood, 49½ × 17 × 17¾ (HWH)

You Look Like This You Look Like That, 1978; enamel on wood, 14¾ × 20⅝ (JJC)

The Angel of the Waters, 1979; enamel on glass, 18 × 32 (JJC)

Can You See Yourself Behind the Brocken Pieces of Your Own World, 1979; enamel on glass, 18 × 32 (JJC)

Empty Cross Trying to Tell the World Something, 1979; oil on mirror, 18 × ¾ × 26¾ (JJC)

Garding Angels of the Persus Stone, 1979; mixed media, glass, and melted television parts, 11½ × 12¾ × 6½ (PKG)

"Gloves," 1979; enamel on concrete (JJC):

Ladies Glove (If a Beautiful Heart), 2¼ × 14¾ × 6

Man's Working Glove (Your Arm Slings Me Around), 2¼ × 9⅝ × 7½

Real Form (Howard's Hand), 1½ × 7¾ × 5½

Winter Glove, 2 × 9½ × 5⅞

The Great Einstein in His Time, 1979; enamel and mirror on wood, 21⅞ × 15⅞ (JJC)

Hand of Art, ca. 1979; enamel on wood, 26¼ × 48 (MJS)

Heaven (In My Father's House There Are Many Mansions), 1979; mixed-media construction, 82½ × 23½ × 23½ (JJC)

Home Coming in Heaven, 1979; enamel on wood, 37 × 19⅝ × 9⅝ (JJC)

I Am Howard. I Love Mansions. I Have Visions . . ., 1979; mixed media construction, 75¾ × 16¾ × 16¾ (JJC)

Just a Vision Chant, 1979; enamel on wood, 16⅞ × 49⅞ (JJC)

Postcard Portraits, ca. 1979; enamel on wood, 15 × 30 (PKG)

The Trellice of the Super Brain, 1979; oil on mirror, 18¾ × 26¾ (JJC)

T.V. Tower—Atomic T.V., 1979; television parts, 19½ × 7½ × 8 (PKG)

Vision of Cabin on Planet Hernala, 1979; mixed-media construction, 12¼ × 18 × 14¾ (JJC)

A Woman Shall Compass Man, 1979; enamel on wood, 22⅝ × 37⅝ (JJC)

Antonio Pollaiuolo, 1980; enamel on wood 23⅞ × 22 (JJC)

Clipping of Queen Isabella, 1980; mixed media, 19¾ × 7⅝ (JJC)

Four Oil Paintings, 1980; oil on paper mounted on wood, 19¼ × 7¼ (JJC)

I Am Satans Angel, 1980; enamel on wood, 23⅞ × 21⅞ (JJC)

Peeping Around Through, 1980; mixed media, 19⅞ × 8¼ (JJC)

Pot Mettle Art, 1980; melted television parts and enamel on particle board, 15½ × 11 (JJC)

Vision of the Great Gulf on Planet Hell, 1980; enamel on wood, 14¾ × 21½ (JJC)

Vision of Sound Waves and Word Patterns, 1980; mixed media on wood, 19¾ × 7⅞ (JJC)

World's Great Riddle: T.V. Set with Jar of Answers, 1980; mixed-media construction, 11½ × 15¼ × 9 (JJC)

The Luder Fullo Show, 1980–81; enamel on wood, 20 × 16¼ (JJC)

Elvis and the Arpitaun World, 1981; enamel on wood, 23⅞ × 21¼ (PKG)

Mona Lisa, 1981; enamel on wood, 18¼ × 19 (CC)

Raining Books of Knowledge, 1981; enamel on wood, 42½ × 33 (PKG)

The Witch of Hell and Her Gang, 1981; enamel on wood, 19½ × 20½ (PKG)

The Wolf Pack, 1981; enamel on wood, 30½ × 17¾ (TR)

Audience and the Inertainers (The Mona Lisa), 1982; enamel on wood, 15 × 20½ (PKG)

Mankind Has Fought Against Gods Will, 1982; enamel on wood, 59 × 18¼ × 2¼ (PKG)

Cover: *The Angel of the Waters*, 1979; enamel on glass; 18 × 32".
Collection Jane and Jeffrey Camp, Tappahanock, Virginia.