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The Creative Urge

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Ulysses Davis



THE TREASURE OF ULYSSES DAVIS

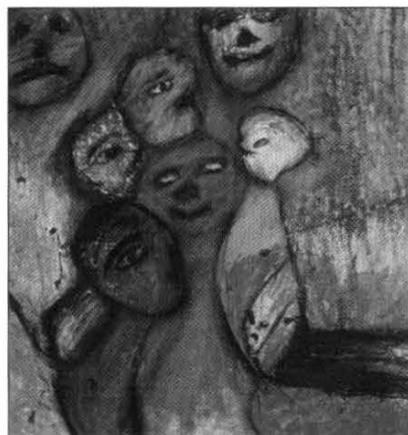
Sculpture from a Savannah Barbershop.
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia,
December 6 2008 – April 5 2009
American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY
April 21 – September 6 2009.

One of the most original and talented African American wood sculptors, Davis has long been artistically underrated, perhaps because little of his work has entered the folk-art market, and exhibitions of it have been relatively rare (despite his inclusion in the Corcoran Gallery of Art's pioneering 1982 exhibition *Black Folk Art in America*). For viewers with little previous exposure to his art, this posthumous retrospective no doubt serves as a wake-up call. It provides a comprehensive overview of the work Davis created in his spare time during an active life as a railroad worker, father of nine children, and proprietor of a single-chair barbershop in the backyard of his family's modest home in Savannah, on the Georgia coast. Davis (1914-1990) was born in the smaller, inland town of Fitzgerald, Georgia, where he taught himself to carve wood as a child. He dropped out of school after the tenth grade, married soon afterward, and in 1942 moved with his family to Savannah, where he would spend the rest of his life. Generally refusing to sell his sculptures, he displayed most of them in his barbershop, where they filled the available shelf and countertop surfaces until after his death. The current exhibition--Davis' largest to date--

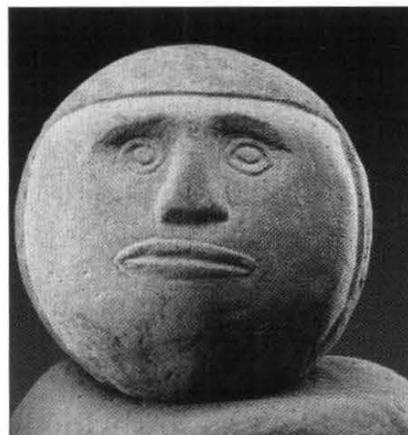
consists of more than 250 pieces selected by Susan Crawley, the High's folk-art curator. Crawley also authored the accompanying colour-illustrated, 120-page catalogue, in which she definitively recounts Davis' life story and astutely assesses his work and his place within the larger contexts of black folk art and contemporary art. The show itself is stunning, highlighting Davis' broad thematic range as well as the intricate detail and textural richness of the individual works. It brings together presumably the best available examples of the several thematic categories he explored, including the biblical narrative and historical commemorative pieces for which he is best known, his celebratory images of traditional Africa, and his wildly imaginative, multi-headed humanoid and other hybrid beings (here identified as 'beasts'). Exhibition highlights include his small portrait busts of 40 U.S. presidents (for some of whom he fashioned miniature eyeglasses); several more elaborate busts portraying African royalty; an idiosyncratic interpretation of the Garden of Eden in the form of a vertically elongated altar-like table; and gold-painted, sphere-centered abstractions whose titles are the only obvious evidence of their biblical inspiration.

Davis was a self-taught sculptural genius, a relentlessly self-challenging artist whose substantial body of work reflects an expansive, visionary mind. This project -- and particularly the exhibition's appearance in New York -- casts a brilliant, long-overdue spotlight on his extraordinary accomplishments.

Tom Patterson



Dr Joe Cole



Humberto Hermosillo

THE CREATIVE URGE

November 5 – December 10, 2008
Department of Art and Art History, Santa Clara
University, California.

The Creative Urge exhibition featured pastel drawings by Dr. Joe Cole and small-scale stone sculpture by Humberto Hermosillo.

Cole, an established San Francisco dentist with no formal training in art, began drawing following his retirement in 1979. His idiosyncratic style ranges from the purely abstract to the representational, yet displays a sureness of hand and consistency of treatment that is marked with lyricism and humour. Despite his colour-blindness, Cole's palette is saturated and compelling, and his figuration reveals an intense and methodical over-working of each image.

Hermosillo, too, began making art after retirement. Immigrating to California from Chihuahua, Mexico as a young man, he apprenticed as a mason, working hard at this and other vocations for decades. Each of Hermosillo's "rocks" evidences its own personality and emotion: he adapts the stone's physical imperfections to his own visual vocabulary, creating work ranging from serene to strong, each revealing both humility and expressive power. This exhibition pairing Cole and Hermosillo introduced potent works boasting indisputable authenticity and vigor.

Jo Farb Hernandez