

Art's Mouth



May 16-June 29, 1991 • ARTISTS SPACE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Mark Rothko Foundation series of exhibitions was initiated in 1983 as a means of presenting the work of artists who have been working for at least twenty years and who have not received adequate recognition for their work. In 1988 the Mark Rothko Foundation awarded a grant to Artists Space which will enable us to continue this series annually, through 1999. We are deeply grateful for their support in presenting the work of the seven artists in the Art's Mouth exhibition.

Several years ago Artists Space board member Gregory Amenoff began to share his infectious enthusiasm for the work of self taught artists whose production exists primarily outside the "mainstream" artworld. Gregory has travelled around the country meeting these artists, looking at their work and educating himself and others about an approach to art making that is both inspiring and refreshingly outside but parallel to the often narrow confines of our aesthetic experiences. We thank him for his guidance and support.

Many people generously shared their knowledge. Without their assistance the exhibition would not have been possible. For their willingness to share information we thank Tom Finkelperl, Bolek Greczynski, Gaylord Torrence, Don Sunseri, John Ollman, Jeff Way, and David Wooley. We are grateful to Todd Alden, Todd Bockley of the Bockley Gallery, Ellin and Baron Gordon, Bert Hemphill, Randall Morris and Shari Cavin-Morris of Cavin-Morris Gallery and Amir Shaker, for generous loans to the exhibition. We also thank Kerry Schuss for his invaluable assistance and inspiring commitment to these artists.

Finally, we would like to thank Chelo Amezcua, Prophet Blackmon, Freddie Brice, Ray Hamilton, Bessie Harvey, Asterios Matakos and Phillip Travers whose work is filled with integrity and passion that cuts across the boundaries often imposed by culture, education and economics. We are indebted to them for sharing their work.

Susan Wyatt
Executive Director

Connie Butler
Curator

Art's Mouth

CHELO AMEZCUA
PROPHET WILLIAM J. BLACKMON
FREDDIE BRICE
RAY HAMILTON
BESSIE HARVEY
ASTERIOS MATAKOS
PHILLIP TRAVERS

Organized by Connie Butler

INTRODUCTION

As an alternative space, Artists Space has for seventeen years been committed to dissolving the many boundaries historically present in the art world—boundaries established to exclude certain art and artists from the "mainstream" culture. By consistently exhibiting the work of people of color, unknown emerging artists and work with difficult scale and uncommodifiable concepts, Artists Space has insisted that the "mainstream" concept of contemporary art and art history is a bankrupt one. It is my hope that the whole notion of the mainstream be dissolved and that we begin to look at the range of human "art" production with fresh eyes—not to ghettoize what we see with elitist categories like folk, outsider, primitive, ethnographic etc. By exhibiting the work of untrained, non-art educated artists that "mainstream" concept is further dissolved. This show is one of many before and many to follow which forces us to look and not to name. I am convinced that through looking we can recognize a vision of power and quality.

Gregory Amenoff
Artists Space Board Member

ARTISTS WITHOUT SLIDES

The world of self taught artists moves at a different pace. Think of all the trappings encoded in our elaborate mainstream artworld charade and loosen them. The studio visit, the slides, the opening, the resume, the pristine, white box of the commercial gallery and the very notion of creating a body of work which ascends according to some culturally ingrained drive to achieve quality—these are not part of the process or intentionality of the self taught artist. Ironically, it is precisely this distance, this alternative intentionality and often isolated production which, much like its nineteenth century artist-in-the-garret ancestor, has bred the romanticized even condescending stereotypes about so called folk artists, which are clung to often at the expense of an accurate representation of the art making of these artists.

As Lucy Lippard so vehemently states in her book *Mixed Blessings* much marginalization and misrepresentation begins with how categories are rationalized and insinuated on work—in short, how we name a thing, an artist or an aesthetic object, has everything to do with how we come to understand it. By way of example Lippard reports a melting of the hierarchy and tracks the uses and misuses of the term “primitivism”:

The most pervasive and arguably most insidious term artists of color must challenge is “primitivism.” It has been used historically to separate the supposedly sophisticated civilized “high” art of the West from the equally sophisticated civilized art it has pillaged from other cultures...The term “primitive” is also used to separate by class, as in “minor,” “low,” “folk,” or “amateur,” art—distinguished from the “fine,” “high,” or “professional” art that may in fact be imitating it.... (Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings*, New York: Pantheon, 1990, p. 25.)

Later Lippard elaborates with specific reference to self taught artists and marginalization of a different kind:

The struggle over representation is taking place among untrained artists as well as in the artworld. The term “Outsider Art,”...is determinedly exclusive (classist, divisive, discriminatory), used loosely to span art by all untrained artists, usually of the working class, and more tightly to describe art by visionaries inspired by religion or by mental illness... (Lippard, p. 173.)

The process undergone in the past decade by women, who have progressed from being mailmen and waiters to mail- and wait- persons, and minorities such as African Americans and Latinos who have loosened the stronghold of previously racist linguistic stereotypes, is a parallel struggle to that in which the self taught community has been involved. As is the case for women and minorities, self naming versus culturally imposed categorization is of great importance in structuring the relationship of artists to the mainstream power structure.

Far from feeling denigrated by a lack of formal training these artists are often proud of their non-academic status and are more concerned with what it means to be an

artist at all. Others have written about how the currently out-of-favor names, Folk, Naive, Visionary, Art of the Insane and the most recently debunked Outsider, are problematic not only because they are not alone inclusive enough to umbrella all the various situations of these artists, but because they are condescending and lead to further ghettoization. Hence, damaging criteria arise: is a particular sculpture Folk enough or is a painting Insane enough? The current term of choice is Self Taught which is not ethnically or economically based, neutrally describes a basic commonality of background and, at least until now, carries no concomitant qualitative judgement or stylistically based description of the art in question.

One of the most fascinating and telling moments in many of the works in this exhibition is the signature or title, which are often one and the same. There is an undeniable obsession with stamping the object or naming it almost as if without the signature the thing will not exist or be validated as art. This need to claim or proclaim a thing preceeds any intellectualized, post-modernist dialogue about the hand of production. For these artists drawing, painting, sculpture or environment is their unmediated response to the world around them and often their only connection to it. When Freddie Brice begins to paint, after painting his shoes and baseball cap, the first thing he does is initial the blank white surface that will be his painting. Or, as the image starts to take shape, he titles it and links the title with his name: *Brice Bear*. The blocky scrawled signature is incorporated into consistently flat space of the painting.

Originality is a primary concern to these artists. It seems to grow out of a personal assertion of individuality in terms of the art object itself. This aspect of naming—a kind of affirmation through making—is a bit trickier to fully understand and worthy of further study in terms of its psychiatric roots and its relationship to other expressions such as Graffiti Art. From its early roots in street gangs and urban territorial marking, to its co-opted version in the art of Keith Haring or even Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Graffiti, collaborative mural making and street art, are accessible and democratic art forms that subvert questions of authorship while demanding a de facto respect for the intention of the author. An example are the early murals in East Los Angeles many of which were made by one artist with a group of children in order to commemorate a particular site or incident.

In addition to the signature there often appears the word “original” somewhere near the name or within whatever text may be present. The presence of this assertion, in much self-taught art, seems to express the degree of cognition of the outside world and an understanding of the art object as commodifiable. Brice states: “People like these things because they are the real McCoy.” He believes that others must relate to his paintings as he does—in order to gain better understanding. Chelo Amezcua for example, proclaims herself as the creator of “Filigree Art, The New Texas Culture.” Asterios Matakos signs/titles an assemblage *Picassomatakos*. Ray Hamilton declares

his own vital statistics in blocky letters on each drawing: "Ray Hamilton, Single, Citizen of the USA, original." Art as the unmitigated extension of the self.

Yet the originality has nothing to do with preciousness. This is perhaps one of the single most important breaks with our own cult of the sanctified object. When Philip Travers states that the drawings in his Tut Project are "Original by Philip Travers" with the date and an extensive Roman numeral identification number, (which is so high in sequence it is usually indecipherable to the average viewer) he is declaring the authenticity of the drawing rather than its singularity. He will, in fact, make dozens of versions of the same drawing. The use of both sides of the picture is another common symptom of this lack of reverence. Often when Brice or Hamilton run out of materials they begin to use the opposite side of the canvas or paper without privileging one or the other finished picture. The fact that this may create a dilemma for an eventual collector or curator is of no concern.

Most important perhaps is this issue of intentionality. As Sam Farber rightly points out in his introductory essay "Portraits from the Outside," in the exhibition catalogue of the same name, there are sometimes market-guided rules which apply in the self taught world as well: "Once an artist has had some degree of success, they are maligned if they become savvy." There is an over emphasis on The Creative Act and often an obsession with scrutinizing that moment, apprehending its origin or understanding its otherness. This is, in part, based on the European mythology of Art Brut established by French artist Jean Dubuffet which dictated: the more insane the better.

The false purity bred by this kind of imposition of the need of some collectors, dealers or scholars to consistently exoticize and commodify the artists and therefore keep them at a safe distance, mystifies the process and dilutes a true appreciation of the impulse to create work in the absence of any formal training. As someone approaching this work from a mainstream position, I would argue that the reason that self taught work has had such an impact on many contemporary mainstream artists and that they have championed the cause of many of these artists, is that they recognize the source and understand the instinct to create form. They believe that this work can and should be taken seriously in the mainstream world as any other area of culture enterprise. I hope and have come to believe, during my brief foray into the self taught world, that this is yet another sign of an opening-up, a further incorporation of other visions.

The work of each of the artists in this exhibition deserves the formal attention given their mainstream counterparts. The inspiration is different but the result must be taken seriously in the same realm. How much more compelling it is to examine how these artists might be influenced by their cultural heritage or art historical predecessors—how the "low" might be influenced by the "high". Their work demands a reconfiguration of canonized routes of influence and accepted formal

vocabulary. What is it in Chelo Amezcua's Latin heritage that inspires her obsessive ball point filigree drawings? How can we describe our attraction to the visual text of Prophet Blackmon with its strange mixture of mundane urbanity and evangelistic slogan and what makes it so different from the urban texts of Karen Finley or John Ashbury? Can we separate Freddie Brice's artistic production from the overwhelming fact of his survival as an uneducated African American with no family? Is his relationship to the "rehabilitability" he finds in the process of painting his bold, flat faces, which are as infinite as any Clyfford Still so different from the cathartic rage David Wojnarowicz finds in his explosive body of work?

C o n n i e B u t l e r

CHELO AMEZCUA

King Lirartamo

This King was born in the garden of my imagination, the 21, thirty first of Jan. 1968 at 9 a.m.

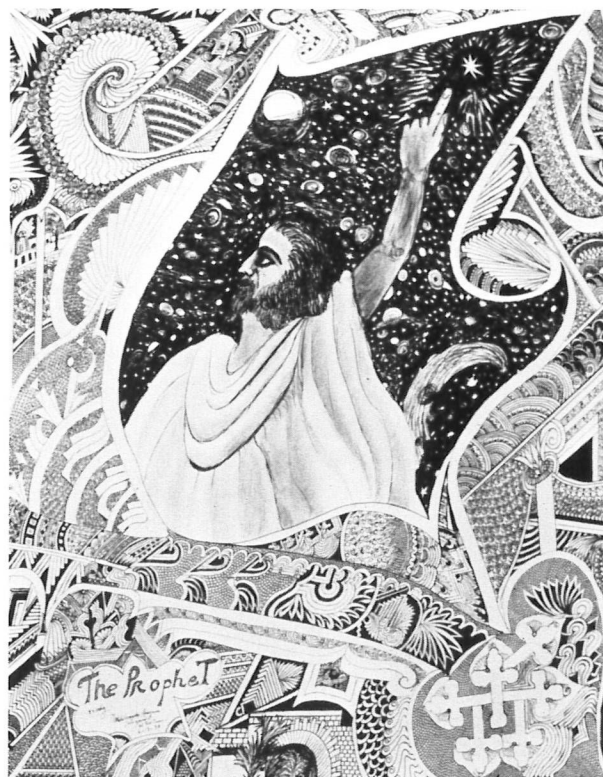
King Lirartamo —will you please tell me what is art?

Art is the gift of ability that gives expression, love and beauty.

Our Lord gave you the benefit of art —that you should develop, cultivate and respect. Nature offers its beauty to the artist. The idea is born and gives expression and life to the thought and intelligence.

The inspiration flourishes and gives beauty to Art.

—excerpted from poem inscribed on reverse of *King Lirartamo*, *King of Arts* 1968.



Consuelo Gonzalez Amezcua was born in 1903 in Piedras Negras, Mexico. She moved to Del Rio, Texas when she was a child and her first artistic expressions were stone carvings before she began to draw. In the thirties Amezcua received a scholarship from the San Carlos Academy in Mexico City but was unable to attend because of her father's death. She was completely self taught and wrote poetry and music on the back of many of her drawings. Amezcua called her ball point pen drawings "Filigree Art, a new Texas culture," after the intricate silver and gold jewelry made in Mexico which she loved to wear. She was not interested in making money from her art but in bringing people happiness through her drawings, poems and songs. Her body of work consists of approximately four hundred drawings. Amezcua died in Del Rio, Texas in 1974.

The Prophet, 1970, ink on paper, 28x22 inches, courtesy Cavin-Morris, Inc.; photo courtesy Cavin-Morris gallery

PROPHET WILLIAM J. BLACKMON



I only have two members in the congregation. I'm a little too strict for most. See, Christianity is different than religion. Christianity is doing exactly what the Bible says, without question....I could probably have made it easy, selling my art...But I said no. These neighborhoods are so terrible. I have to be an example I have to make something out of nothing.

—excerpted from "For Prophet, signs point to a miracle," Thomas Schmidt, *The Milwaukee Journal*, Sunday, January 31, 1988.

Prophet Blackmon is a native of Milwaukee. After many years of "hitchhiking for the Lord" Blackmon began painting to express his strong Christian message through signs and paintings at his "Revival Center and Shoe Repair; Rummage, Laundry, Tailoring; Services Tonight at 8 p.m." Part of his self-appointed ministry is to create jobs for young people in the neighborhood: the young men would "learn about shoe repair and fixing things," while the young women would learn to sew. Blackmon is self-taught and works only when the spirit moves him. He hopes to use the proceeds from his art to purchase a church for his congregation, which currently consists of two people and meets in a small area cleared among the shirts and overcoats in his store.

ORDER-NOW
TICKET-TO
OUR-PLAYS
AND-CONCERTS.
BY-DOING-YOU-HELP-
P-US-TO-MAKE
JOB-FEED-THE
HUNGRY-
CLOTHE-THE
NAKED.

Order Now Tickets To Our Plays And Concerts, 28 x 18 inches, acrylic on wood painting courtesy Bockley gallery; photo courtesy: Bockley gallery



FREDDIE BRICE

It's in my way of drawin'. It's in my conscious of drawin'. It's in my mind. It became to be lovely to me. It became to be likely to me. Why, I like it more than I like anything else. I think it's a hobby.

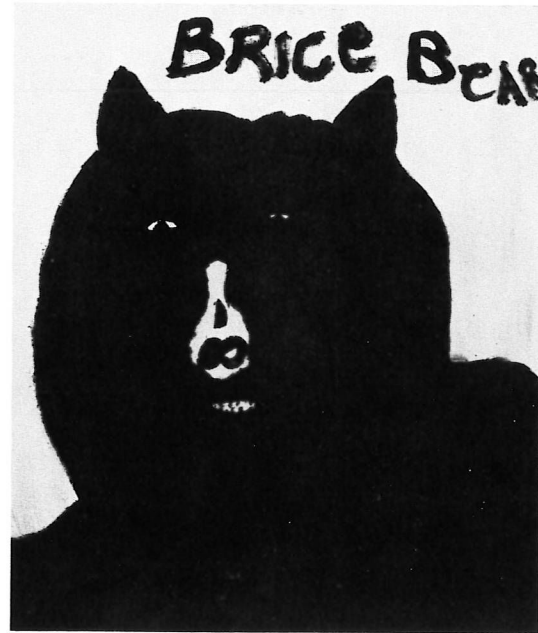
You know, speaking about a hobby. A hobby is a true thing...When you begin to love something; when you begin to do something, a constructive, something that you like and love, it becomes a hobby. It becomes regular. It becomes continuously. It becomes outrageous. It becomes magnificent. It becomes to be something that you like to do for a hobby. And I like to do drawing for a

hobby. I like to do drawing because I get understanding of what I'm doing. It gives me understanding of talking. It gives me understanding of books. It gives me understanding of drawing and hearing what I listen to. It gives me time, it gives me patience and it also gives me ability. Ability is when you gain what your doing, and when you get enough of it you begin to have rehability...rehabileality of what you're doing. It becomes a whole lot to you.

Drawing is a rehabileality to me. I began to do it often and I began to do it much. And it's ability. It's rehabileality of what I love. And it's a hobby.

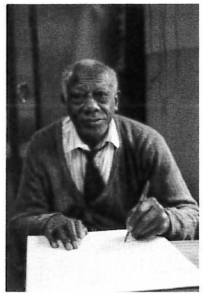
—excerpted from videotaped interview with the artist,
"Freddie paints two paintings," by Les LeVeque & Kerry Schuss, 1990

Freddie Brice was born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1920, and currently lives in New York City where he moved at the age of eight. After the death of his mother he was raised by his aunt and uncle. Brice held several jobs as an elevator operator, in a laundry, a boiler room and in a Brooklyn shipyard where he painted ships. He drew pictures as a child and, after a long history of incarceration and institutionalization, started painting in 1983. He currently participates in art workshops at a seniors' center in Manhattan.



Brice Bear 1990, acrylic on wood, 48 x 40 inches
Collection of Kerry Schuss

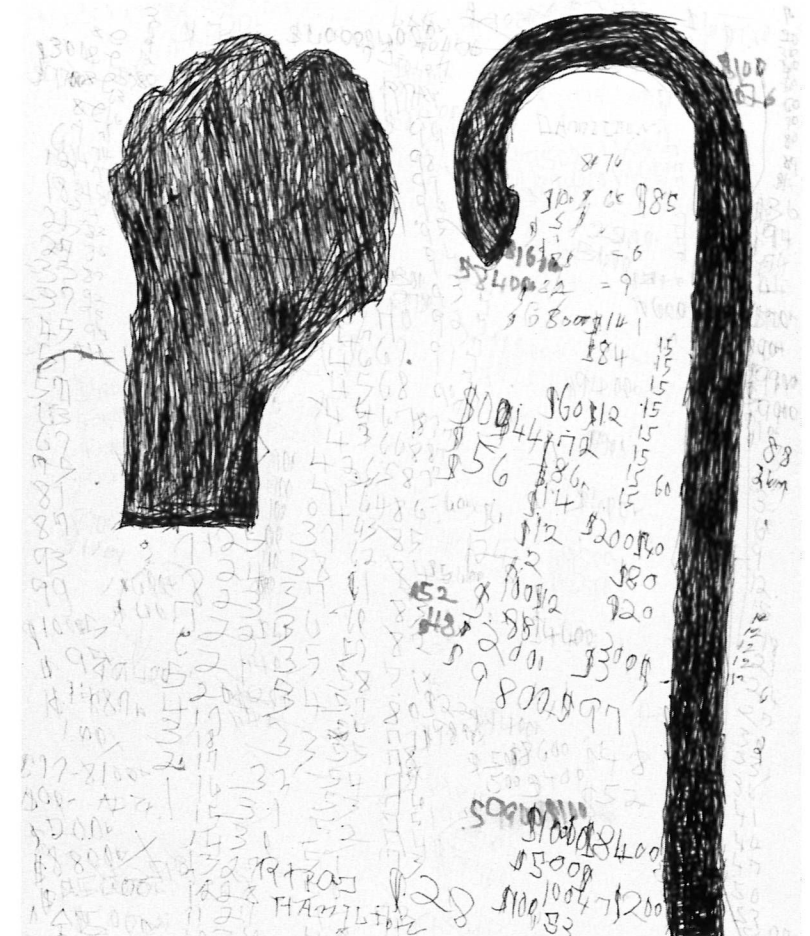
RAY HAMILTON



Single Citizen of the USA—artist's inscription on all drawings

Ray Hamilton began drawing as a child. He attended school through the tenth grade and in his drawings records memories of his childhood on a farm. He was born in 1919 in Williamston, South Carolina and had six brothers and six sisters. In 1941

he entered the navy and traveled with the navy to Alaska. He also worked on the railroad. He currently lives in Brooklyn, New York.



untitled, 1990, ball point pen on paper; courtesy Kerry Schuss



BESSIE HARVEY

...trees is soul people to me, maybe not to other people, but I have watched the trees when they pray and I've watched them shout and sometimes they give thanks slowly and quietly, they praise God in this beautiful light the flowers do too, all these things do, everything but Man...

I really didn't become truly human until my youngest was half-grown. I was a little better than an animal trying to scrape together food and shelter for them. Later, that's when I began to develop my mind and question the spiritual nature of my life...

I can go to bed and pray, close my eyes, and always a little light begins to open up and faces start to pass by. One will stick and I must get up and draw it or do it in wood or I can't get back to sleep I must get him free, get him out of me...It's somethin' like a torment. It's not a torment really, but it's something like a torment.

—quotes and biographical information compiled from Shari Cavin Morris, "Bessie Harvey: The Spirit in the Wood," *The Clarion*, Spring/Summer 1987, vol. 12, no. 2/3, pp. 44-49.



Bessie Harvey was the seventh of thirteen children. She was born in 1928 in Dallas, Georgia and was married by the age of fourteen. She had eleven children which she raised almost entirely by herself. By the time her children were raised she began to make physical many of the faces and visions that had appeared to her throughout her life. Made from tree roots, jewelry, cloth, hair, feathers, wood putty and paint, her "dolls" are an extension of her deep religious beliefs and African American heritage. They represent the souls of "ancient Africans" and she creates her sculptures as part of a mythological "tribe."

Untitled tulip form, 1986, mixed media, 24x22x10 1/2 inches, courtesy Cavin-Morris, Inc.; photo courtesy: Cavin-Morris Gallery

ASTERIOS MATAKOS



I never been to school, never in my life. Anything I do, is my own. My philosophy in life is the philosophy of Diogenes and we don't believe in anything. We respect everything but we

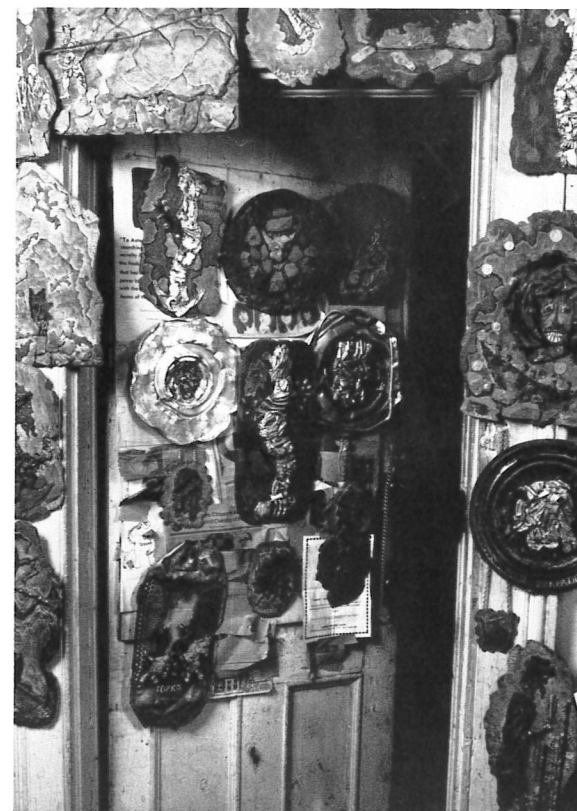
judge things in life by what you do the best...

That's why you may see in my work a confusion of styles because I don't accept anything ready-made. I

may do a few things and some ideas I saw in Picasso...it's an open field for me. I am not tied down to anything. The only thing I have in my life is my conscious. And to

live in this modern life with only your conscious is a very difficult process. I know very few people that can say the way they feel about things.

—excerpted from videotaped interview with the artist April, 1991



Asterios Matakos was born in New York City in 1917.

His father was Macedonian and his mother was Italian. They divorced when he was young and he was raised by his grandparents in Greece. He moved back to New York during the German occupation of Greece in World War II, and he has lived in Chelsea since 1952. For the early years after his return to New York, Matakos worked as a tailor and saved money

to go to Paris to be a musician. He played the accordion but did not make enough money to remain in Paris. He began to make his "slate pieces" when he found part of a slate roof under the George Washington Bridge and made his first assemblage of the image of a fish. He sold it to a woman on the subway for ten dollars, and then realized that he could continue to make art to which people would be receptive.

View of Matakos studio, 1991

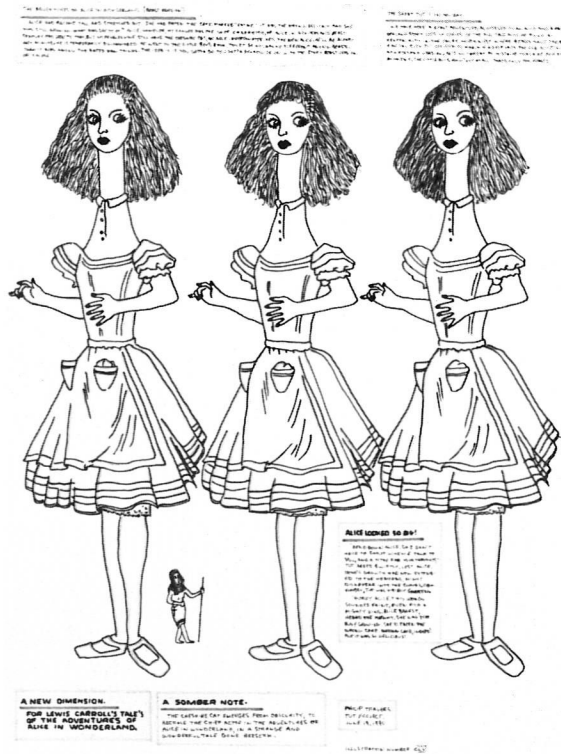


PHILLIP TRAVERS

I decided to make my entire apartment, lock, stock and barrel, part of the Tut Project...I decided there would be a story running serially about Tut...I had myself transported into the past by a certain magician who was able to do these things...(of course this isn't true, it's fantasy)...I got in to see the various Gods. So, I had an interview with Osiris, Anubus, Horace and others. Some of them liked me, some of them thought I was putting them on. I even tried to introduce a goddess,...one called the Statue of Liberty [saying to the Gods,] "she would make an admirable goddess for your particular century." But Tut somehow got wind of the things I was doing with the gods and didn't like it. He felt I was insulting him and the Gods. So, he became a sworn enemy and began chasing me. For some reason I didn't want to use my name and Tut gave me an assumed name Mistaire Travaire, as it is in the French. And he began hunting me through time, through the centuries, in each of the illustrations I made...

—excerpted from phone interview with the artist, April, 1991

Three Alices 1990, pencil on paper
24 x 18 inches, Private Collection



Phillip Travers was born 1914 in New York where he still lives and works. He began drawing as a child and later took some art courses as an adult at the Art Students League. He was asked to leave because he refused to paint watercolors in a class taught by George Grosz. He studied showcard design and sign painting, worked as a male nurse and research chemist, and worked in a photo lab and photo portrait studio. Since 1955 he has read widely on astrology and the occult and has predicted the demise of Humpty Dumpty through his astrological chart. He is an avid reader and amateur Egyptologist. Since 1984 he has been compiling drawings in The Tut Project which is a conflated narrative about the adventures of King Tut, Mistaire Travaire (the artist's French alter ego, so named by Tut), and Alice in Wonderland. Travers has also performed in several dance/theater productions in New York City. He currently participates in art workshops at a seniors' center in Manhattan.

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Artists Space is a member of the National Association of Artists Organizations (NAAO) and Media Alliance.

*"The eye is not
satisfied with
seeing nor the ear
filled with
hearing—Art's
Prodigious Maw
is Omnivorous
and insatiate.
The name of this
picture is: With
his foot in his
mouth and a
feather to his
nose."*

—exhibition title & text from assemblage
by Ohio artist BIRDIE LUSCH, 1903-1988