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Visionary Art, Visionary Message: Howard Finster and the Art of Preaching

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Abstract

This paper will work to analyze the style, visual content, and biblical text present in the art of Evangelical Reverend Howard Finster (1916-2001) in relationship to the theological constructs he worked within. Howard Finster's folk art constructions communicate the Evangelical understanding of salvation as being accessible through communion with the Holy Spirit. Through his use of pop culture icons and found materials, Finster engrained this worldview into the very material construction of his work with the intention of making his message accessible to the masses. The accessibility of his simplistic folk style played a crucial role in the success of Finster's work, as much of the content was concerned with violent apocalyptic messages and out of this world visions in which Finster traveled through space and interacted with alien planets. While a majority of the academic work concerning Finster has been focused on his means of production and connection to traditional values, this research explores the contribution of folk style to the content of his visual sermons and the way in which these art works have contributed to the expansion of Evangelical Protestant theology. This paper also analyzes the ways in which his overlapping identities as artist, Reverend, and self-proclaimed prophet have worked to strengthened the reception of his artwork. Through presenting a first person experience of Paradise Garden, Finster's visionary environment in Summerville, Georgia, and a critical analysis of academic work concerning Finster's life and art, this paper is a fresh look at the significance of Finster's work and what its content reflects about the experience of being an Evangelical Protestant in the American south today.

1. Introduction

From 1961 until his death in 2001, the Reverend Howard Finster obsessively constructed a visionary art environment known as Paradise Garden in Summerville, Georgia, a small city near the Alabama border. This environment, along with thousands of paintings that he produced during the latter portion of his life, has become internationally recognized as a visual testament to the distinct and colorful religious culture of the American south. Historically, religious life in the south has been predominantly Protestant, with Fundamentalist movements providing an emphasis on the authority of the Bible as the literal world of God;[1] and it is within this atmosphere that Finster grew into his roles as preacher, artist, and self-proclaimed messenger of God. While the identities of the artist and preacher have generally been understood as separate, the life and work of Finster provide us with an instance in which these identities have fused, resulting in the creation of what I will refer to as the *Reverend-artist*. With this self-constructed authority, working within an established folk art tradition, Howard Finster was able to visually represent the expansion of the theological boundaries of Evangelical Protestantism that was beginning to occur during his lifetime.

Despite working within a Protestant tradition that has historically rejected the use of visual art in acts of worship, Finster's work utilized traditional Protestant theologies and narratives to communicate and inspire legitimate religious experience. While there was folk art produced in the south teaching Protestant moral lessons and narratives

prior to Finster, the content of his work is distinct in its communication of both authentic religious experience and new Evangelical theological interpretations. Finster's art is the reflection of an emerging acceptance of the use of visual art in Protestant worship and the content of the work is an expression of the expansion of southern Evangelical Protestant theologies. Placing this work within a southern context, Finster might be understood as the pioneer of a new form of artistic expression in the south; one which, through equal parts artistic and religious expression, broke through the barriers of historical restrictions on the use of visual art in religious worship. Through the utilization of distinct religious and cultural icons, Biblical quotes, and his own personal commentary in both his paintings and sculptures in Paradise Garden, Finster's visual sermons reflect one of the ways in which southern Evangelical Protestantism has adapted to change in order to maintain societal relevance in an increasingly modern and globalized world.

2. The Life of Howard Finster

Howard Finster was born on December 2, 1915 to a relatively poor rural family with thirteen children in Alabama.[2] A loquacious self-promoter who claimed to be from another world, Finster's vibrant public persona was born from his work as an Evangelist. From a young age, Finster was instilled with a sense of individualism and independence; his father owned a small lumber mill and the family grew their own food and made most of the objects they used. While his family was not overtly religious, Finster's own religious inclinations began early in his life. Finster claimed to have his first vision at the age of three, when he saw his recently deceased sister hovering over a tomato patch. Since his parents had not told him about her death, this vision of her triggered concern over their son's mental state.[3] Finster was saved[4] at the age of thirteen while attending a revival at his school and soon after, he quit his formal education. At the age of sixteen, he felt called to preach and began speaking at revivals across the south.

Finster continued to preach throughout his life, initially at revivals and later as a permanent pastor of several Churches in both Alabama and Georgia. He was married at the age of eighteen and, with his wife, had five children. Along with preaching, Finster worked a series of odd jobs to support his family. Throughout his life, he was a mechanic, factory worker, plumber, carpenter, and bicycle repair man; all occupations that promoted hands-on interaction and construction.[5] In his sermons, Finster adhered to the Evangelical style common to his area, promoting a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit as the only way to heaven. He often cited his own visions as a way of maintaining religious authority, and began referring to himself as the "second Noah" and "God's Last Red Light," sent here to warn humanity of its impending doom.[6]

In his home, Finster began to decorate the walls and furniture, seeing decorative arts as a direct extension of spirituality.[7] In the late 1940s, he began to construct his first art environment in the back yard of his home in Trion, Alabama. He referred to this first space as a "museum" and developed a collection of miniature churches, religious icons, and a small pond. It was at this time that he developed his first cohesive collection of objects created from found materials that he referred to as the "inventions of mankind" exhibit.[8] He saw this work, as well as a column he submitted to several local papers, as a form of evangelizing; showing the world what he knew to be true through his visions.[9]

In 1961, Finster purchased a plot of land near Summerville, Georgia, where he began work on what would eventually become Paradise Garden, his own version of the Garden of Eden. The space was initially a swampy mess, but Finster dug out a basement in the bottom of his house and used this dirt to fill in some of the swampy areas.[10] He soon began constructing walkways, concrete sculptures, and buildings that all promoted the words of the Bible along with large signs with verses painted across them that demanded immediate repenting and adherence to the Word of the Lord by all of humanity (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Howard Finster, Walkway from Paradise Garden, High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

In the early years of Paradise Garden, many of Finster's neighbors were wary of the man who collected junk in his yard and painted Bible verses on everything. They considered his property an eyesore, and his claims of having visions made him the target of ridicule. In December of 1975, his local community's opinion of the Garden began to shift as Finster received his first dose of national recognition when he was included in an article on self-taught environmental artists in *Esquire* magazine titled "Backyards: The Garden of Paradise." At this time, Finster also worked out of a bicycle repair shop adjacent to the Garden, and it was in this shop that he would experience a life-altering vision in which a large figure instructed him to "paint sacred art."[11] Soon after this initial premonition to begin painting, Finster's artwork began to sought out by both contemporary and folk art collectors, and he began receiving commissions for individual and group exhibitions across the country. While Paradise Garden was always a major focus of his energy, painting began to consume much of his time and, in order to meet the high demands for his art, he began employing family members as studio assistants.

3. Evangelical Fundamentalism

Before jumping into an analysis of the content and cultural relevance of Finster's work, one must first understand the roots of the theological constructs he was working within and responding to as well as the changes in religious practice that his work reflects. The revivals in which Finster was saved and later preached at were immersed in the Evangelical Protestant tradition. Protestantism, historically the majority denomination of American religious affiliations, was established during the period now referred to as the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant Reformation was characterized by a rejection of Catholic dogma, hierarchy, and ritual that created excessive gaps between the laity and clergy in the sixteenth century in Europe. In America, Protestantism took on a new life and, without legal restrictions or a Catholic majority to respond against, different branches and denominations began to develop exponentially and the ritual life of these groups began to reflect the range of cultural diversity in the developing country.[12]

Evangelism is an approach to Protestant worship and preaching that is defined by its focus on combating the threat of eternal damnation with a connection to the Word and the experience of being consumed by the Holy Spirit. In practice, this translates to a very vocal tradition in which members and preachers both value the act of spreading the Word of God to the sinful masses in an effort to save souls. One may note the influence of this vocal, missionary zeal in interviews with Finster as well as in the content of his work. Evangelical Protestantism in the south was established as a dominant social institution following a series of revivals known as the Second Great Awakening.

In the eighteenth century, The First Great Awakening was triggered by a series of visits from Anglican preacher George Whitefield.[13] During his visits, Whitefield united several smaller revivals that were happening in the

American colonies and developed an emphasis on conversion, piety, and a suspicion of wealth and worldliness. The Second Great Awakening began through a series of frontier revivals spearheaded by Baptists and Methodists who sent representatives into newly settled areas to establish and strengthen the Protestant foothold in America.[14] Camp meetings, continued in southern culture today in the form of revivals, were organized and promoted and settlers traveled from far distances to hear sermons, establish community, and have conversion experiences in which ecstatic religious behavior was accepted as a byproduct of coming into contact with the Holy Spirit. These camp meetings and traveling preachers, such as Finster, who speak at them have their roots in the tradition of missionary work that is a trademark of all denominations within the Christian tradition. Following the Second Great Awakening, Evangelism found a new life in America, and those who traveled to the camp meetings took their experiences home and established new religious communities that were meant to continue the experience.

Although Evangelism is not an exclusively southern tradition, it took on a distinct form in reaction to more "liberal" forms in the north that considered the Bible to be a work of man and not a direct extension of God.[15] This difference between northern and southern variations of Evangelism may also be understood as a byproduct of the social divisions caused by the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation.[16] With the Bible considered an interpretation of divinity as witnessed and experienced by man and *not* the literal message of God, northern Evangelicals could rationalize dismantling the institution of slavery and extend the message of God's love to all ethnicities. Inversely, in interpreting the Bible literally, southern Evangelicals could support the institution, as slavery was an accepted practice in Biblical times. Economic factors may also be cited as a source for the emergence of this theological division.

With industry in the north promising growth, renewal, and the possibility of an improved America, biblical millennialism was established as an attitude proclaiming that human society could be perfected through social work and Jesus would peacefully return to Earth once an ideal Christian society was created. Following an influx of non-Protestant immigrants and increased poverty rates in the agrarian South, dispensational premillennialism evolved, insisting that Jesus could return at any moment to claim those who had been saved, violently punishing all who were not.[17] This focus on the immanence of the rapture established in dispensational premillennialism continues in southern Evangelical traditions today, where pockets of poverty still prevail.

4. Protestantism and Art

While Finster's religious visions were recognized by many in his immediate religious community as authentic religious experience, art depicting these experiences that were intended to be used in devotional settings was not. Since the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the use of icons in Christian worship has, for the most part, been restricted to Eastern Orthodox Catholicism. While many people cite Martin Luther, the initiator of the Reformation, as the person responsible for this wave of Protestant iconoclasm, it was actually reformers Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin who institutionalized the ban on images in practice and decor.[18] Quite the opposite of banning religious imagery in worship, Luther often spoke on what he saw as the *proper* use of images in the Church:

> "Of this I am certain, that God desires to have his works heard and read, especially the passion of our Lord. But it is impossible for me to hear and bear it in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as the reflection of my face naturally appears on the water when I look into it. If it is not a sin, but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes?"[19]

With this record of Martin Luther's own acceptance of the minimal use of images and icons in worship, the reintegration of this practice into American Protestantism has been theologically justified. Beginning in the early nineties, shortly after Finster's meteoric rise to popularity, the taboo surrounding art in chapels and houses of worship began to lift. Perhaps the most obvious and wide-spread example of this shift is the use of large screens with videos acting out Biblical narratives, recorded sermons being projected onto screens, and Power Points and text placed behind speakers at the pulpit.[20] Thirty or even forty years ago, this practice would have been considered blasphemous, a distraction to the audience that was expected to be giving its full attention to the divinely-inspired preacher.

Southern Evangelical Protestant services were historically defined by a central focus on the speaker. This speaker, who could be an official or visiting pastor or even one of the laity, would proclaim some exegetical insight they had

concerning the true meaning of a verse or story in the Bible, or loudly and energetically call for sinners to repent. Church was a place of discipline, and the act of worship was centered on the individual's reception and internalization of the sermon. Art was considered to be a distraction from the important spiritual connection one was supposed to be cultivating, allowing the mind to focus on the material and earthly instead of the spiritual and heavenly. Following this aesthetic of simplicity, music in the Protestant Church was traditionally drawn from hymns that were also based on the Word of the Bible.

Beginning in the mid twentieth century, the use of up-beat, folk-influenced music began to emerge in Protestant worship, particularly in African-American Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations in the rural south. A change in the style of music used in worship might be understood as one of the first major changes in Protestant practice that laid the foundation for the reintroduction of the visual arts in ritual life. Folk music, with roots in African-American musical traditions, is characterized by banjos and narrative lyrics and often times reflected communal experiences. Howard Finster was known for his self-taught banjo playing as well as for his performance of songs both in the Church and within his Garden. For Finster, music and the visual arts were just another way of surrounding oneself with the power of the Word and not, as it had been previously understood, a distraction from it.

With television, radio, and advertising constantly bombarding American consumers with immediate sensory satisfaction, it is not surprising to find that Americans soon became accustomed to, and even expected, a constantly high level of stimulation. As a way of keeping congregations engaged and dedicated, Churches have been forced to maintain this level of visual and musical stimulation and some have even started producing advertisements both for themselves and their doctrines. One way that we can see this growing tolerance for the visual arts is in the creation of roadside signs proclaiming religious messages or a call to repent. From Church billboards to handmade wooden signs, southern Protestants have adapted to America's need for the visual and are beginning to use signage to promote Churches and religious messages.[21]

Traditionally, Protestant Churches have been defined by an intentionally simple interior. Decorative arts and wares were minimized and sanctuaries were sacred in their purity and separation from the influence of the icon, which was associated with Catholic extravagance. Consider this separation in relation to Finster's Paradise Garden; a space that was created with the intention of inspiring religious experience. While the decision to incorporate large TV screens into sanctuaries has been a relatively large leap for Protestant interiors, Finster was years ahead of other Evangelical Protestants in his deliberate decision to use art to create a sanctuary. Finster's environment and the works within it replace the role of the preacher (although Finster was known to spontaneously evangelize) with visual sermons that use art, Biblical text and commentary to teach moral and spiritual lessons on damnation, salvation, and history. In this sense, Paradise Garden is to be understood as a sacred space in itself; a model of the Garden of Eden working to facilitate religious experience and growth.

> "At the Church I pastored, over at Chelsea, they'd forget my messages from one service to another. And lotta people didn't even know what was in them Bibles at their houses. So I had this feelin' to put them Bible verses up in the garden-- a feelin' from God-- and I went ahead anyhow and done it. 'Cause in the Garden of Eden God was talkin'. He was talkin' to the only people that was in there. And I felt like my garden ought to be talkin' to people, so I put up them Bible verses."[22]

While many sacred spaces work to remove the influence of the outside or secular world, Paradise Garden is distinct in its inclusion of and reference to popular culture, historical figures, and current events as a way of guiding the perspective of the visitor to see God's presence in all things. This distinction exposes the first of many ways in which Finster's theology is distinct within the larger Protestant framework. To Finster, all life, materials, and creations were born from God He reasoned that if man was made in the image of God, why would man or anything he creates be considered outside the realm of sacred? The very materials utilized in the construction of sculptures and buildings in the Garden are found objects, products cast away as junk after society has finished with them. In his work, Finster reclaimed these objects, citing their identification by others as "junk" as an extension of his larger Evangelical, apocalyptic message. "I built this park of broken pieces to try to mend a broken world of people who are traveling their last road. I took the pieces you threw away and put them together by night and day."[23] Through his intentional manipulation of material, content, and form, Finster communicated a distinct religious aesthetic new to southern Evangelical Protestantism.

5. Artist, Reverend, Prophet: Maintaining Authority

With the utilization of the visual arts being slowly reintegrated into Protestant liturgy, it is now important to consider how Finster was capable of establishing and maintaining his authority as Reverend, artist, and Prophet. Historically, each of these identities have each been held in high esteem, although they were done so separately. While art and religion are both considered to communicate the ineffable, and the artist and preacher both function as mediators between how the world is and how it could be, they are many times categorized as distinctly separate occupations. The word artist is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "a person skilled in a craft or fine art," or "a person who practises [sic] any creative art in which accomplished execution is informed by imagination." Culturally, the role of the artist is not only to be skilled in reproducing what they see, but also what they experience and know to be true.

Taking this understanding of the role of the artist into consideration, the role of the preacher, pastor, or Reverend is not very far removed. Consulting the Oxford English Dictionary yet again, one finds that the word pastor is defined as a person who "has the spiritual care of a body of Christians" or "a minister in charge of a large church or congregation." But of course, these words simply scratch the surface of what a pastor (this is a synonym for the more formal title of Reverend, which was the preferred title of Howard Finster) does for the congregation they are responsible for. The Reverend or pastor works to communicate divinely inspired messages to the public; mediating between conceptual frameworks of spirituality and public accessibility. This understanding places the roles of the Reverend and artist on the same level of cultural significance, with both working to communicate an ineffable reality that they experience separate from the general public.

Even today, many art critics, historians, and curators assert the separation of the religious identity from an identity as a modern artist. Carol Crown, a noted scholar on "outsider" and folk art has proposed that "religion and art, as Lynda Sexson has said, come together in special ways in the secularized culture of the modern world. Thus art 'comes to be not an aesthetic expression of religious consciousness but a conflation of the two...Religion and art are not precisely equivalent terms but relational perspectives on the importance of imaginary world building." While it is certainly a valid statement that both religion and art are perspectives on imaginary world building (the act of mentally constructing worlds that could, but do not, exist) and that art works to express the religious consciousness, I reject the assertion that the two terms are not equivalent. Certainly, there are situations in which art serves as an expression of sentiment, narrative, or reality; but, as evidenced by interviews with Finster on the intentions behind his work, creating art can also be an act of religious devotion and a form of evangelizing.

An expanding and globalized contemporary world means that individuals are expected to balance multiple cultural, professional, and social identities. Howard Finster's conglomeration of identities is evidence of this, as is the woman who is simultaneously mother, wife, small business owner, and citizen. While this fusion of identities may present a challenge to the maintenance of authority in each role, success with one identity has the potential to simultaneously reinforce another adopted identity in establishing credibility. I would argue that religion and art are more than relational perspectives, but that, under certain circumstances, the two can not only coexist but fuse to create the Reverend-artist; one who experiences, explores, and expresses their own religious inclinations in the process of producing artwork. In an increasingly diversified world, it is important to recognize and promote the Reverend-artist as a testament to the power of legitimate religious inspiration and authority to expand and foster creativity.

5.1 "Outsider" Influence *(In progress)*

In discussing and defining the role of the artist, it would be negligent not to mention the various qualities that separate Finster's work from artistic genres considered to be normative. The genre of "outsider" art is one that Finster is frequently associated with. This genre finds its roots in the French art term Art Brut, or "raw art," that was used to described works created by a range of individuals who fell outside of normative cultural categorizations. In Art Brut, the interpretation of a work's content was affected by the cultural and social identification of the artist who created it. Untrained artists, children, and the mentally handicapped were among those who fell into this group, with the style and content of the work read as simplistic and honest; a refreshing change from the overwhelmingly intellectual European art community of the time.

Art Brut has been reinterpreted in contemporary Art as "outsider" art, a genre that includes those artists marginalized as a result of their position on the fringe of normative cultural experience or training. Regarding religious expression, these artists have a special ability to produce art that speaks to the reality of religious life and

experience as it affects the individual and may even work to expand the parameters of religious life into unchartered territories. In describing the relationship between the "outsider" artist and religion, Carol Crown has noted that "Some of the [outsider] artists show us how the visionary expansion and artistic expression of evangelical themes can transform and enlarge the horizons off Evangelicalism itself."

5.2 Folk Influence

While Finster's background may place his work in conversation with that of "outsider" artists, and many critics and scholars have discussed him as one, he is also associated with the more traditional genre of Folk Art. Folk artists are understood to be everyday people who "are generally unaware of and most certainly unaffected but the mainstream of professional art--its trained artists, trends, intentions, theories, and developments."[24] Folk art gives vision to the private world of its maker, who, as an untrained and relatively "normal" person is considered to be a representation of the masses. The style of folk art is generally defined by crude shapes, hyper-defined lines, a single plane of perspective, and flat coloration. This style was shaped by the American folk craft tradition that has largely informed and shaped the art movement that bares the same name.[25]

The roots of American folk art lie in early craft traditions brought over by colonists. Being skilled at craft work (wood working, metal working, weaving, etc.) enabled these early artists to access materials that could be used for both creative and commercial production. This experience in craft shaped not only the materials of these artists work but also their style, which was passed down and refined through generations. The Industrial Revolution destroyed the demand for hand-crafted objects and, simultaneously, the use of early folk style declined with it. While folk art fell out of the eye of mainstream consumers, it persisted in impoverished and rural areas where hand-crafted objects remained essential and where the ability to manually produce something was still valued.[26] While Howard Finster's training as a handy man and utilization of folk style do place him within this realm of Folk art, he was largely unaware of those folk traditions that came before him and his utilization of modern pop culture references and the infusion of his work

6. Can Modern Art Be Religious? (*In progress)*

Some critics assert that religious artwork cannot be significant in contemporary discussions because "Modernism was predicated on a series of rejections and refusals, among them the 19th-century (sic) sense that art-- that is, academic art, and mainly painting-- is an appropriate vehicle for religious stories." To limit discussions of modern and contemporary to only that work which rejects nineteenth century values and practices is to ignore the iconic and intellectual progress achieved in the last century of art.

Instead of this exclusive perspective of what constitutes art, I subscribe to the alternative notion that suggests "art is inescapably religious...because it expresses such things as the hope of transcendence or the possibilities of the human spirit." Although this perspective is a minority one, it encompasses the argument that the act of creating art can simultaneously be an act of religious devotion, thus widening the framework of what can be discussed as art. Considering this perspective in relation to "outsider" art, it stands to reason that the identification of a work of art as both relevant and contemporary lies in its communication of a transcendental concept. While not all "Outsider" or Folk artists work on this level of commentary, some (such as Howard Finster) soar beyond this qualifier and construct entire universes of possibility. Consequently, some "outsider" artists may also be interpreted as contemporary ones, but not all contemporary artists have the distinction of working from outside of societal and academic norms.

Despite supporting a more inclusive artistic vocabulary, I do not mean to establish that all religious artwork is automatically contemporary art, or that it is even in conversation with all "outsider" art. In order for an artist to be considered in conversation with the world of contemporary art, they must address relevant themes, make connections between experiences and groups, and transmit a new understanding of identity or place. While the larger narrative of art history would greatly benefit from the relaxation of boundaries that have been drawn in contemporary art to delineate relevance this is not to say that an appreciation of aesthetics should relax as well. Despite the relative simplicity of his folk forms, Howard Finster is among the most influential and innovative artists of the last thirty years.

7. Analyzing the Work *(In progress)*

Finster has been referred to as an "outsider" artist for a variety of reasons. Following suit with other artists in this genre, he was formally untrained and, as a result, he worked with crude materials and developed compositions based on his own understanding of framing and scale. Finster's style, largely associated with folk art is another way in which he has been pushed out of normative categorizations and pulled into the "outsider" art genre. His work is characterized by flat coloration, minimalistic perspective, naive and disproportionate figures and landscapes, and the "declarative didacticism" of the text he superimposes onto his paintings and buildings. This folk style brings the viewer back to Finster's religious identity as a southern Evangelical Protestant, a tradition in which simple theological interpretation and accessibility are important to devotees.

Furthermore, his occupation as a religious leader and claim to be a Prophet speaking for God place the content of his work outside of normative frameworks. While it is not uncommon for a Baptist minister to claim that they speak to or are spoken to by God, it is generally considered blasphemous for one to claim to be a prophet or messenger on the same level of significance as Biblical characters. Finster not only claimed to be a messenger sent directly from God to earth, but referred to himself as a "second Noah," sent here to warn humanity of its last chance to repent. In asserting this identity, Finster promoted both his life and his work as a final warning from God, and this is reflected in his paintings. In supporting his claim to be God's messenger, Finster compared his visions to those of Biblical prophets, citing similarities in the nature of his visions as well as the messages he received during them. Many of Finster's paintings, as well as the design for the World's Folk Art Church (Fig. 2), are products of these visionary experiences. These artworks, then, become the product of Finster's overlapping identities as prophet, Reverend, and artist.

Figure 2: Howard Finster, The World's Folk Art Church, 1981, Paradise Garden in Summerville, Georgia, photo taken by Kimber Lawson (October, 2012).

His lack of formal theological training might also contribute to his classification as an "outsider artist." Instead of painting scenes from Protestant theologies considered "normative," the content of his visual sermons were his own

fantastical visions. While Finster's visions were generally based in Biblical narratives, they often expanded the horizons of Christian cosmology. In his visionary paintings, Finster presented an understanding of the universe in which God created countless planets that host life, many of which are related to our experience on Earth. The concept of Hell, a place of eternal damnation that some believe lies beneath the earth's crust, was reappropriated by Finster in the painting VISIONS OF A GREAT GULF ON PLANET HELL (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Howard Finster, VISION OF A GREAT GULF ON PLANET HELL, 1980, enamel on plywood, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

In this painting, Finster presented a vision he had in which he traveled to the planet of Hell, where humans are forced to exist in a physical place of pain with no possibility of escape. The scene shows a variety of monsters and gruesome scenes of physical torment, all placed on a blood red backdrop that reinforces the pain associated with damnation. Scrawled across the pictorial plane are verses from the Bible warning of the horrors of the afterlife that await those who do not repent. On the back of the painting, Finster inscribed his work with a warning that reads "To leave out [the] teaching of hell from the Bible is like taking down red lights in a congested street in your city. The more you hide hell from the world the more [may] go there." While this warning of damnation echoed throughout Finster's work coincides with mainstream of Evangelical Protestant theology, the assertion that Hell is a place removed from this earth is a major deviation.

In painting his visions of traveling to other planets, Finster challenged the Christian notion that earth is special to God because it is the only planet in the entire universe that hosts life. Finster contextualized his deviation in an inscription on another painting, This Board Shows a Speck of God's Endlass Space, writing:

> "If man of earths planet was made in Gods own image and in Gods likeness and man don't stop on 500 thousand cars. Don't stop on 200 thousand ships or 40 thousand planes of 29 million houses then why do you thank [sic] god would stop on one little 6-day job on earth planet can't you see gods planet work is beyond number[?]"

While this concept might be difficult for the more traditional Evangelical Protestant to swallow, to the outsider it appears to be a way in which Finster is working to contextualize religious understanding within modern scientific knowledge of the universe. These works seem to compromise an understanding of the Christian God as the ultimate creator with the widely accepted notion that there is life on other planets.

In looking to a triptych created by Finster in 1980, one may further examine Finster's place within and relationship to the framework of Evangelical Protestant theology. The left panel, THE LORD WILL DELIVER HIS PEOPLE ACROSS JORDAN (Fig. 4), shows Jesus navigating a river representing salvation.

Figure 4: Howard Finster, THE LORD WILL DELIVER HIS PEOPLE ACROSS JORDAN, 1976, Enamel on fiberboard, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

On one side of the river, the unsaved are shown next to lists of sins scrawled on every surface of the allotted area. "Long tongue liars," "Dope atics [sic]," "seekers of man pleasures," and "funeral robery [sic]" are among those sins, along with images of the "rich" who are shown in the act of elevating prices on goods to take more money from the impoverished. This distrust for wealth ties back to the very origins of Evangelical Protestant traditions in the south and reflects the continuation of this distrust into modern times. Parallel to the images of sin, the upper portion of the painting shows the side of the river that is reserved for those who have been saved. Roads labeled "kindness," "love," "peace," and "eturnal life" lead to tiered palaces that are reminiscent of the World's Folk Art Church (Fig. 2), suggesting that true wealth lies not in material goods but in the afterlife. Again, this is a connection to the historical establishment of Evangelical Protestantism as the dominant religion in the south. Rural southerners were, and many times continue to be, significantly more impoverished than the rest of the country. This impoverishment played a key role in the life of Finster, and it may account for his dedication to a theological framework that contextualizes that suffering and translates it into heavenly wealth.

The center panel of the triptych, AND THE MOON BECAME AS BLOOD (Fig. 5), is a blood-soaked visualization of the apocalypse.

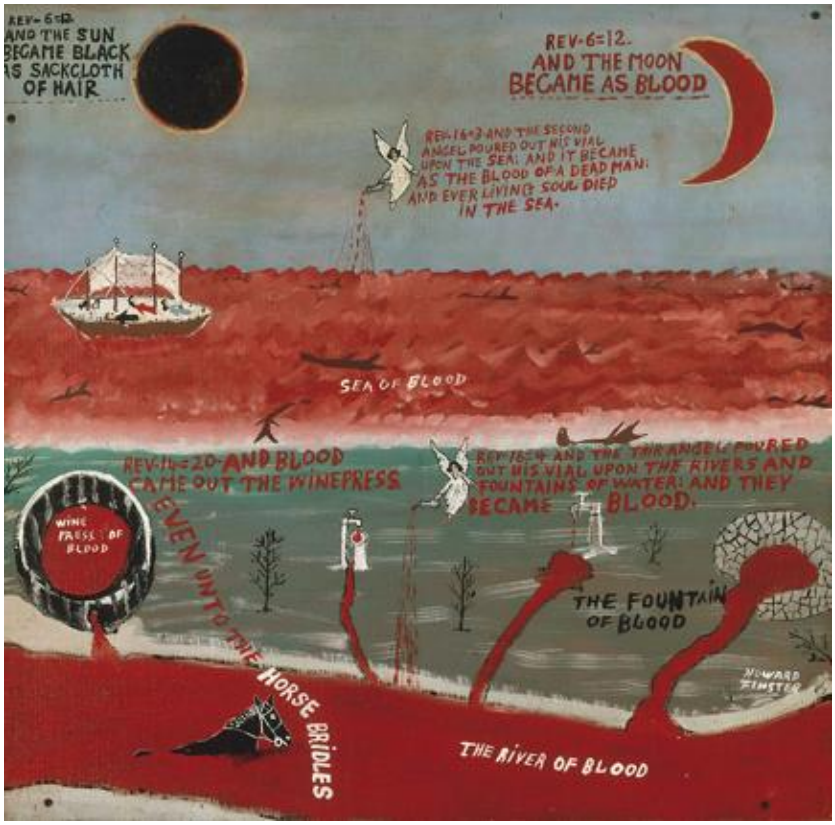

Figure 5: Howard Finster, AND THE MOON BECAME AS BLOOD, 1976, enamel on fiberboard, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

Unlike VISIONS OF A GREAT GULF ON PLANET HELL (Fig. 3), that shows what happens in the afterlife to those who remain unsaved, this image presents the earth's demise as Jesus comes to reclaim the earth and punish the sinful who remain. Five verses from Revelations are written in different places on the image. Unlike the use of text in his other work, in which words were scrawled, smushed, and overlapped to convey a sense of chaos, the words on this painting are intentionally legible and distinct, giving the message Finster intended to convey even more power against a blacked out sun and sea of blood. Unlike other paintings in which Finster's visions give traditional narratives or concepts a new spin, this painting very directly aligns with previous Protestant understandings of the apocalypse. Icons such as the horse, the blacked out sun, and the river of blood leave little room for interpretation, and Finster's use of Biblical text supports the presence of these images.

In the final panel, THERE SHALL BE EARTH qUAKES (Fig. 6), the final treatment of the earth following the apocalypse is visualized. Jesus stands on the only visibly stable piece of earth, with buildings, mountains, cars, and people toppling below him.

Figure 6: Howard Finster, THERE SHALL BE EARTH qUAKES, 1976, enamel on Fiberboard, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

Again, Biblical text from the book of Isaiah is inserted into the image to contextualize the experience of those suffering. Water washes away figures grasping to the sides of rocks, obviously struggling for a last chance at life beneath the feet of Jesus, who stands over them with his arms open. In several verses shown directly parallel to Jesus, it is suggested that the earth was plagued with the existence of evil men, and so the scene becomes understood as one reflecting the final act of earth purging itself of the last of the sinners. Considering Finster's connection to nature, evidenced in the creation and cultivation of Paradise Garden, it is not surprising that he would ascribe a sense of consciousness and intention to the earth's activity. While the work does not express an environmentalist stance, it does seem to suggest Finster's respect of the earth as a divine creation that is also capable of rejecting evil.

7.1 Personal Observations of Paradise Garden

These paintings, along with roughly 46,000 others that Finster creating during his lifetime, were originally housed in the created visionary environment known as Paradise Garden. As it was suggested earlier, Finster intended this space to be a sacred one in which visitors could come without any expectations to receive his visual sermons, and commune with God's presence in the natural world without having to commit to a Church or attend a service. In the course of this research, I personally visited the space to examine how Finster had constructed it as well as how the Garden is being conserved by the non-profit organization charged recently with its management. While I had previously respected Finster's work and knew that the Garden was undoubtedly beautiful, the emotions that I experienced while wandering through the mosaic pathways was-- dare I say-- religious?

Every inch of Paradise Garden shows evidence of Finster's touch. Upon entering, the mailbox is inscribed with Finster's artistic mantra, "I took the pieces you threw away, put them together by night and day, washed by rain and dried by sun, a million pieces all in one," (Fig. 7) and the work in the garden immediately becomes accessible.

Figure 7: Howard Finster, Mailbox at the entrance of Paradise Garden, photo taken by Kimber Lawson (October, 2012).

Abandoned wheels are scribbled with bible verses, rusted bicycles are melded together to create abstract sculptures, and dozens of shoes missing their soles are installed in a miniature house with reference to the woman who made them and Bible verses discussing the transitory nature of physical existence. Houses made of mirrors sit on stilts and glow in the reflection of the sun, while inside, their ceilings are plastered with images of pop culture icons and illustrations of Jesus and the Holy Family that have been pulled from vintage magazines.

As if walkways with mosaic inscriptions of Bible verses and sculptures that place Jesus' head next to an image of a bodhisattva didn't already establish a distinctly eclectic and inclusive religious aesthetic, I turned a corner and was confronted with the World's Folk Art Church (Fig. 2); a building reminiscent of the wedding cake mansions shown in Finster's paintings of heaven. Bringing to life Finster's dream of creating a religious community through shared experience of art and music, the World's Folk Art Church is the pinnacle of his work in the Garden, and possibly of his entire artistic career. In 1981, following his appearance in an article in Life Magazine on folk art, Finster was endowed with a $5,000 sculpture grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and he used those funds to purchase a building at the back of his property that would become the World's Folk Art Church. After the building's completion (Finster ripped the roof off of the original structure and added several tiered levels), Finster invited artists from all over the world to come install work alongside his own paintings, wanting the space to belong to all. Finster's own reflection on his intentions behind creating the World's Folk Art Church work to contextualize his larger body of work as well as the purpose of Paradise Garden:

> "The reason I named my chapel 'World's Folk Art Church' as 'cause I was fillin' it with my art and other people'a art and ever'thing, and that's how I preach now-- through my art. I never intended for it to be a kinda church where you have Sunday service and prayer meetin' and all. It's a church for ever'day, 'cause people comes here ever'day, nearly 'bout, and they go through the garden and look at my art, read the messages on it, and ever'thing. And o'course, I'm lible to start in preachin' here any time, any day o' the week, to whoever's here."

8. Conclusion

The Reverend Howard Finster, stranger from another world, passed away on October 22, 2001, leaving behind a distinct artistic legacy that included 46,000 pieces of artwork. Through an exploration of Finster's life, work, and religious motivations, it is clear that this man was perhaps one of the most relevant contemporary artists to come out of the American south. All criticisms aside, one cannot deny that

contemporary art is generally distinguished by an awareness of identity. Regardless of the painting's subject, work that may be placed in conversation with the larger contemporary art world must, at its core, reflect an awareness of the intentional ways in which we construct identity both collectively and individually. Howard Finster provides us with an raw example of this awareness, and his commentary is accessible and pertinent to the masses, making his work even more relevant. Along with his relevance as a contemporary artist, an appreciation of Finster as a product of southern culture is crucial to a legitimate conversation of his value.

Through intentionally branding himself as a larger-than-life artistic personality and pioneering the use of visionary style in Protestant art, Finster worked to expand the perception of southern religious culture to its very fringes. Not only was Finster an "outsider" to the art community, but his visionary beliefs made him a minority in his own religious community as well. His work, therefore, may be understood as a reflection of the interaction between the larger modern world and the culturally isolated American south. Finster's work bridges the secular and sacred in southern culture, giving modern cultural and scientific phenomena meaning within a religious framework. In his introduction to Finster's autobiography, editor Tom Patterson perfectly places Finster's relevance: "He [Finster] provides a rare example among contemporary artists, inside or outside the mainstream, in that rather than judging, mirroring, or ignoring a sick and fragmented world, he boldly uses his world to heal it, to redirect its inhabitants toward a coherent and comprehensive (if highly idiosyncratic) notion of wholeness." This brings us back, yet again, to Finster's mantra, reiterated in both his paintings and scrawled on countless surfaces of Paradise Garden, "I took the pieces you threw away, put them together by night and day, washed by rain and dried by sun, a million pieces all in one."

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10. Endnotes

1 Sam S. Hill and Charles H. Lippy, *Religion in the South,* 2nd ed. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005), s.v. "Fundamentalism."

2 Finster, *Howard Finster Stranger From Another World,* 212.

3 Ibid., 32.

4 Defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "Delivered from damnation." In Protestant Evangelicalism, it relates to the experience of receiving the Holy Spirit, often times in the setting of a revival.

5 Charles Russell, *Groundwaters: A Century of Art by Self-Taught and Outsider Artists* (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2011),168.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Finster, *Howard Finster*, 213.

9 Ibid., 14.

10 Ibid., 104.

11 Ibid., 123.

12 Hill and Lippy, *Religion in the South*, "Evangelical Protestantism."

13 Randall Balmer and Lauren F. Winner, *Protestantism in America* (NY: Columbia University Press), 15.

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