

# RAWVISION



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# MOSHE

**In Denver, the life's work of the artist known as "Moshe" is discovered – and rescued – just in the nick of time**

EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



*Self-portrait, graphite and pastel on paper, 8.5 x 11 ins. / 11 x 28 cm, Webb Gallery, Texas*

Call Justin. That's what a municipal-government official in Denver, Colorado, instinctively did earlier this year when he learned that the representative of a local rescue organisation that aids people in crisis situations had come across some unusual pieces of "rubbish" that just might have had some value – as works of art.

Justin Massingale is an antiques dealer based near Denver, the capital of Colorado. Regarded as one of the best "pickers" in his area of seekers and discoverers of market-worthy cast-offs and collectibles, Massingale explores attics, old barns and estate sales in search of notable finds. When we met in Denver a few months ago, he recalled, "That city official knew that I'm always interested in seeing what people are throwing away, just in case there might be something of value. He knew I had experience with folk art and fine art."

It turned out, Massingale explained, that the occupant of a small flat in Denver, an elderly man with debilitating illnesses, could not pay his rent and needed both housing and medical care. He had agreed to give his belongings to the rescue organisation in exchange for its assistance in moving him into a nursing home. Massingale said, "When I arrived at the apartment, he already had moved out, but I found a woman from the rescue organisation throwing his belongings out the window into a trash dumpster. She had come across some flat items, wrapped in tissue paper, that appeared to have had some value to the old man – otherwise, why would he have wrapped them so carefully? She also found some paintings."

The rescue organisation was interested in any appliances or furniture that could be re-used. It was those items that the flat's former occupant had agreed





*Untitled*, graphite and pastel on paper, 55 x 30 ins. / 114 x 72 cm, Webb Gallery, Texas

to give the group in exchange for its assistance. Rummaging around in the apartment, Massingale found piles of drawings of varying sizes; to his experienced eye, they appeared to have been made by the same person, along with various mixed-media objects he took to be sculptures. He also recognised that the paintings on canvas, some of which bore the modern artist George Tooker's (1920–2011) signature, could have had both art-historical and market value.

"I didn't know who had made the drawings, which were full of intense, colourful images," Massingale told me. "I just knew that I had to rescue all of the art from the rescue organisation, and my time was limited!" Soon, he met the creator of the unusual drawings and sculptural objects, an ailing man in his seventies. Born James Brown in North Carolina, he had legally changed his name to "Moshe Zephaniah Ezekiel Isaiah Mordecai Baronestrevenakowske", or "Moshe" for short.

Massingale contacted his friends Bruce Lee Webb and Julie Webb, co-directors of the Webb Gallery in Waxahachie, Texas, south of Dallas, with whom he had worked on art-research projects in the past. Together, the artist, Massingale and the Webbs began organising Moshe's artworks, documenting them photographically and creating a research-worthy, conservation-quality archive. Earlier this year, the

Webbs included a small selection of Moshe's drawings in an exhibition at their gallery.

Made with pencil, ink, pastel and other media on assorted papers, Moshe's pictures bring to mind psychologically charged, classic, European *art brut*. Many of his images seem to have emerged from an emotionally intense dream world; in fact, he said, some are portraits or interpretive depictions of people or other subjects he has known. They feature female figures, cats, agglomerations of eyeballs and stylised sex organs in dense compositions, some marked by bold palettes or inventive, illusionistic uses of pictorial space.

Throughout his life, Moshe has been a very private and reserved person, always making his art, he explained, "because I have to." Moshe showed his work in Denver, but mostly he continued living modestly, alone with his cat and his art, which he consistently made, he said, "because you have to work at it every day to develop your own voice, your own vocabulary, your own way to communicate." Now, rescued from the rubbish bin, it has begun to find its audience.

Edward M. Gómez is *Raw Vision's* New York-based senior editor.

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