

# RAWVISION

O U T S I D E R A R T B R U T

RV 94 SUMMER 2017 \$14.00 £8.00 €15.00



MICHEL NEDJAR • KOHLER • ARTIST PORTRAITS • VALERIE ROUSSEAU • ART CARS





Untitled figure studies, pencil on toilet paper, found paper, AFAM, New York



Untitled, mid twentieth century, Robert A. Roth Collection

## BETWIXT AND BETWEEN: HENRY DARGER'S VIVIAN GIRLS

Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art  
Chicago, Illinois

April 12 – September 4, 2017

Founded in 1991, Intuit is a museum whose programming focuses on the work of *art brut*, outsider and self-taught artists. This exhibition is one of the highlights of its 2017 schedule, whose offerings commemorate the 125th anniversary of the birth of Henry Darger (1892–1973), the local, reclusive, legendary outsider artist whose remarkable oeuvre long ago earned a central place in outsider art's canon.

Organised by guest curator Leisa Rundquist, an associate professor in the art and art history department of the University of North Carolina at Asheville, *Betwixt and Between: Henry Darger's Vivian Girls* examines, to use a contemporary buzzword, the "gender-fluid" character of the Victorian-era little girls who are the protagonists of Darger's epic tale of good versus evil, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. Darger's grand narrative filled more than 15,000 typewritten manuscript pages, for which he created some 300 watercolour-and-collage illustrations.

The exhibition addresses a puzzling aspect of Darger's pictures, which can strike some viewers as curiously puerile or provocatively perverse. That is the fact that, in them, his Vivian Girls often appear naked or nearly naked, with male genitals.

Did Darger, who grew up in orphanages run by the Catholic Church and was a lifelong, devout Catholic, know little or nothing about sex or female anatomy? Or were his portrayals of such intersex children purposeful?

In the exhibition's catalogue, Rundquist describes a Vivian Girl's body as "a rich and effusive fictional representation". She notes, "Darger's art appears to embrace a non-binary vision of gender even though he gleaned his imagery from conventional, gender/sex-conforming resources", such as advertisements for girls' fashions or children's colouring books, which reinforced "mainstream society's representations of girlhood".

The exhibition includes several of Darger's large, double-sided pictures, depicting multitudes of little girls, or the Vivian sisters in idyllic or perilous settings; his portraits of the individual Vivian Girls; and sketches of girls with male genitals. (A wall label suggests that Darger might have equipped them as males in preparation for the dangerous episodes of *In the Realms of the Unreal* in which bravery and defensive skills were especially required.) Also on view are photos of girls from newspapers and magazines that Darger clipped and used for reference in creating his pictures.

While inviting visitors to embrace Darger's peculiar visual representation of his heroines' bodies and the ambiguous view of sex and gender it implies, this exhibition celebrates his art's mysteries. Its inclusion of Darger's source materials enriches the curatorial theme it explores and helps deepen understanding of the richness of his great artistic accomplishment.

**Edward M. Gómez**