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DANIEL MARTIN DIAZ • FRANK BRUNO • CUBA • BALKANS

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, *Whence This Flame / See?*, 1954, oil on fibreboard



MYTHOLOGIES: EUGENE VON BRUENCHENHEIN

John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 608 New York Ave, Sheboygan, WI 53081. June 25, 2017 – January 14, 2018

After the American self-taught artist Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910–1983) died, and his vast body of work came to the attention of museum officials in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in whose suburbs he had long resided, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in nearby Sheboygan acquired the bulk of his remarkable oeuvre. After conserving and cataloguing it, JMKAC presented a first Von Bruenchenhein exhibition in 1984.

Since then, examples of the artist's diverse creations – abstract and semi-abstract paintings; stylised, often semi-nude girlie photos of his wife, Marie; handmade, coloured ceramics; and sculptures made with painted chicken bones – have turned up frequently in group shows and at art fairs, and in occasional, solo gallery presentations. Now, as part of a series of exhibitions celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of its founding, JMKAC has organised the most comprehensive Von Bruenchenhein survey ever. Featuring definitive examples of all aspects of the artist's production, it allows viewers to clearly comprehend the ideas and life circumstances that informed his general worldview and, more specifically, his aesthetic vision.

A revelation is a section of the exhibition featuring Von

Bruenchenhein's paintings in oil on fibreboard of hydrogen-bomb mushroom clouds, some incorporating demonic faces, and audio recordings of his own readings of his statements about war and humanity's follies in the Cold War era. Also noteworthy: his paintings of high-rise "towers" on cardboard or Masonite from the 1970s and 1980s, his photo albums and poetic writings, and the diversity of his delicate ceramic crowns and vessels. Von Bruenchenhein's sense of himself as an artist, his interest in vegetal and architectonic forms, and Marie's role as his muse and queen of their shared fantasy world emerge powerfully in this big show.

Von Bruenchenhein worked in a commercial bakery until the late 1950s; for decades, though, he and Marie lived in poverty. Still, through art they created in their home a realm of imagined royalty and larger-than-life self-expression. Isolated, unrecognised, and eccentric, Von Bruenchenhein identified himself as a "Freelance Artist", a "Poet and Sculptor", and an "Arrow maker and Plant man", among other roles. In one of his introspective, handwritten texts, the originals of which are on display, he wrote, "I work on my art as a jeweler works, painfully and gust [sic]. Precise to an end result, close as I can get to perfection." Elsewhere he once noted, "I am from another world. I always felt so."

Edward M. Gómez