HENRY DARGER: IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL

JOHN M MacGREGOR

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The explosion of mainstream interest in the work of Henry Darger (1892–1973) in his own country was sparked by an exhibition at PS 1 in Queens, New York in the winter of 2000–1. In the short time since, three serious books on

Henry Derger, *At McCall's Run. Hands of Fire*, date unknown. Collage drawing. Collection of Kiyoko Lerner. © 1998 Kiyoko Lerner. Cover image of *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal* by John MacGrgeor.

Darger have appeared here, most recently the monumental, controversial *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal* by John M MacGregor (Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002). A psychiatrist as well as an art historian, the author is a specialist in outsider art whose *Discovery of the Art of the Insane* (Princeton University Press, 1989) is among the most important books yet published on the subject. MacGregor spent 12 years researching Darger and his work and, at over 700 pages, including extensive notes, appendices and bibliography, this volume is the most comprehensive and scholarly to date. Implicit in the scope of such a project is the evaluation, which MacGregor has stated elsewhere, that far from being an autodidactic oddity (or in addition to being one) Darger may eventually be seen as a key figure in the history of art. Whether or not the reader is convinced, one of the book's most enjoyable traits is the intimate voice of MacGregor's writing, as if he is sharing with us his enthusiasm for a recent discovery in all its disturbing, glorious strangeness.

A janitor and dishwasher with an elementary-school-level education, suffering from what was probably a form of autism, Darger occupied the same room in a house in Chicago for 30 years until shortly before his death. He worked obsessively in near-complete isolation and amassed a staggering amount of material. His work was preserved by his landlord (artist and educator Nathan Lerner) after Darger was moved to a nursing home; much of it is now housed at the American Folk Art Museum in New York City.

Certainly these are, at their best, works of enormous emotional and formal power. The PS1 show was called 'Disasters of War', and indeed a great many of Darger's finished compositions are battlefield scenes. They were done in watercolour and pencil on paper to illustrate and otherwise augment his major work, titled *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in what is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*, a 15,000-page epic work of imaginative prose which Darger worked on, in secret, apparently for decades. MacGregor calls Darger's technique 'collage-drawing'. Pictures of little girls, soldiers, trees, clouds and other elements in amazing variety were lifted from sources such as magazine pictorials, comics and advertising graphics. The images are traced, sometimes resized, and finally spliced together into vigorous, sprawling landscape compositions or interior scenes, with colour evidently added last. The Coppertone girl, for example (minus puppy and panties) makes occasional appearances, as does a colouring-book rendition of Little Miss Muffet. In many cases the images bear captions linking them, if fluidly, to events described somewhere or other in the great ocean of prose.

MacGregor devotes a section of his book to the fantastic race of creatures Darger named the Blengiglomenean serpents, a completely benign race of dragon-like hybrid creatures who appear, deus ex machina, to assist the Vivian Girls in their times of direst need. This occasions the only examination feasible of Darger's pictorial 'sources' in art history, which MacGregor attributes to Darger's familiarity with culturally held common notions – mythologies, in the most general sense – to which any but the most verbally isolated individuals would have access. In a small subsection headed 'Tradition and the outsider', MacGregor deftly acknowledges that any discussion of Darger's work in relation to earlier or contemporaneous artists is moot, since there is no evidence whatever that he sought out or looked at this kind of material. This seems to be what distinguishes 'outsider' art. On some level, deep or not, an artist who possesses an awareness of the history of art embodies his response to that history in his work. This ensures the evolution of painting as a language, and makes it a completely different kind of activity from that of someone, however gifted or driven, who is engaged in 'constructing an elaborate, private alternate world', as the author puts it.

Following the early sections of the book, concerned with matters of biography and compositional technique, and with *The Realms of the Unreal* as writing (influenced greatly by Darger's reading about the American Civil War), MacGregor takes on the daunting task of identifying and analysing major themes in *The Realms*. This was Darger's magnum opus and the one for which the associated paintings were executed. (The term 'illustration' is inadequate because, especially later on, many of the collage-drawings had a less-than-direct connection to specific episodes in the narrative, and seem to coexist alongside it as supplementary material.) The author is as careful an observer of the paintings as he is a reader of the prose, and refers to both in equal measure, as when he discusses the significance for Darger of extremes of weather and of other forms of chaos in nature. He also draws from the details of Darger's biography to suggest root experiential sources for these themes. The author walks a fine line in places, as when he declares that

> the chief need prompting the creation of Blengins was unquestionably Darger's adolescent experience of helplessness in the face of adult injustice.

This is an exceptional instance; MacGregor is acutely aware that a psychiatric diagnosis does absolutely nothing to illuminate the work. He has been taken to task by some heavy guns for imposing a psychoanalytic orientation on the material at hand, and though an ever-present danger in an analysis of this kind is to over-explain or trivialise the material, the overall effect of the author's approach is quite the opposite. Our awe of the endlessly inventive, fertile imagination

that so vividly transmutes childhood trauma and humiliation is deepened. The point is that MacGregor, unquestionably, greatly respects the unexplainable in the part of the brain responsible for the creative process. After all, the primary source material for biographical information is Darger's own *The History of My Life*. Written when Darger was in advanced years, it veers after page 206 into a retelling of the ravages of a humanoid tornado named Sweetie Pie, an account that goes on for another *five thousand pages*.

To be sure, an artist who routinely adds male genitalia to his drawings of little girls is one about whose psychological background we cannot help but wonder. Backed by the history of clinical research into the 'fantasy phallus', MacGregor speculates at length on this characteristic of Darger's work, which is more enigmatic than shocking. The shock is reserved for a later section of the book exploring the extremes of sadism the adult male Glandelinian army visit upon the Vivian Girls and other members of the pre-adolescent female population of *The Realms*. That such horrific violence, so graphically depicted and described, comes from the brush of an artist obsessed with the bodies of little girls suggests an inner conflict that is indeed chilling to contemplate.

Other sections of the book deal with the Darger's deep if troubled Catholic faith; the loss of his sister when she was put up for adoption as a newborn, following the death of their mother; the appearances, in various guises, that Darger himself makes in the written *Realms* (but not the painted *Realms*); and the special lifelong place in his imagination of a little girl who was kidnapped and killed in Chicago when Darger was still a young man. Throughout, MacGregor's attentiveness to the pictorial and literary in Darger's work is detailed without being pedantic. He's a terrific writer.

The book itself is intelligently designed, with many of the excellent reproductions floating on black spreads, rather than the expected white, when the individual piece is flattered by such a treatment. The horizontal format helps to remind the reader that these pieces are often quite large – eight feet long is not uncommon and some are as long as 12 feet. Another nice touch is the use of a contrasting font in the body type for the many extensive quotations from Darger's writings. This simple expedient is much less visually disruptive than endless quotation marks or indented columns might have been.

But then, another beautifully put together book from this smart, focused publisher should come as no surprise.

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SECRET KNOWLEDGE: REDISCOVERING THE LOST TECHNIQUES OF THE OLD MASTERS

DAVID HOCKNEY

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There is no doubt in my mind that a well-trained artist tends to look at art differently than the rest of us. While most people look at the subject of a picture and wonder what it means and why it was produced, artists cut straight to the how. I saw the same Ingres exhibition as David Hockney at the National Gallery in London and I was amazed at the facility shown by Ingres in the early portraits made in Rome, but it certainly didn't occur to me to speculate, as Hockney has, on the use by artists of optical devices from as early as the fifteenth century. These speculations have culminated in this beautifully produced book.

Hockney has come in for a lot of criticism for this book, from two quite separate angles. As far as many art historians are concerned, the documentary evidence for the use of optics this early and by the artists concerned does not exist. The other criticism is that Hockney's thesis lays artists open to the accusation of 'cheating' by using optical devices.

Hockney's rather disingenuous response to the first criticism is that he does not understand what is meant by documentary evidence, and then he quotes the art historian Roberto Longhi's statement that pictures *are* primary documents. To the latter criticism he says that '... optics do not make marks, only the artist's hand can do that, and it requires great skill ...'.

I can understand both these critical angles and I think Hockney deals with them pretty well, most of the time, arguing from very much a practising artist's perspective. Nonetheless, this valuable perspective of his is seriously compro-