

FIELD SURVEY FORM - FOLK ART ENVIRONMENTS

This form has been prepared by SPACES as part of a national survey of American folk art environments. It is intended to serve as a basic information sheet on an individual site. Any additional information can be added to this sheet or attached to it. Please send SPACES a copy of this form, along with xeroxes of any photographs or printed materials. Direct any questions to SPACES at the address and phone number listed above.

ARTIST: Name, address and phone Is artist still working on site Yes No

Calvin "Cal" Black and Ruby Black

ENVIRONMENT: Name of site: Possum Trot

Years of construction: 1953-1981

Birdcage Theater completed by Cal in 1969

Location: outside Yermo, California (destroyed), alongside Highway 15
Calico Ghost Town Road
San Bernadino County

present location of the dolls--most are dispersed and held in private hands

Description of site: The original site (now destroyed) was located in the desert, in an area surrounded by ghost towns. It consisted of small structures, trains, artificial scenery, benches, merry-go-rounds, stage coaches, covered wagons, Ferris wheel, totems, signs and paintings, all made by Calvin. On top of almost every object were dolls (approx. 60 - 100 dolls, in total), also made by Calvin. The heads and bodies of the dolls were carved from redwood fenceposts scavenged from the highway; the legs, arms and noses were carved from sugar pine. The earliest dolls had carved hair, the later ones wore wigs, as well as jewelry, hats, shoes and handbags found at the dump. The dolls are characterized by stark expressions. Calvin carved them, and Ruby dressed them. Each doll was named, and most were created to do some activity, such as posing on bicycles, on stage, dancing, skating, riding the merry-go-round. Some moved outside on wind-driven carousels. The Birdcage Theater (built in 1969) housed a doll show, with the speaking and singing being provided by Cal, his voice recorded on tape. Admission to the Birdcage Theater was 50¢. Ruby sold polished rocks and postcards to tourists. The signs carved by Cal carried such messages as: "We don't know where Ma is but we got Pop on ice." "Don't feed the camels." "A doll show for people who likes art."

Biographical Information: Calvin and Ruby were both born in the rural South, Cal in Tennessee. He panned gold in California, and then in 1953, he and Ruby moved from Redding, California to Yermo. They thought the desert climate would help Cal's diabetes. They bought the land, "sight unseen," from a magazine advertisement. Before seeing the land, they named it Possum Trot, a rural Southern term meaning a shortcut between two settlements--a straight line through the woods. As a child, Calvin carved 200 dolls from corncobs, all of which he burned. (He wanted Ruby to burn the Possum Trot dolls when he died.) Cal spent 10 years in the circus.

Quotes: Calvin: "So, I just decided I'd do by own singing myself, in a lady's voice and a man's voice and in a kid's voice and a child's voice and all them voices. If I had to do it, so I had to do it."

Present Owner, Custodian:

Local person or group involved with site:

Local attitudes toward the site (how big a sample?)

CONDITION: Present Condition (Check appropriate lines and explain)

- Excellent (structurally sound, well-maintained)
- Good (structurally sound, needs routine maintenance)
- Fair (in need of repairs other than routine maintenance)
- Deteriorating (in need of major repairs)
- Ruins

Destroyed (Date): 1981. The site is destroyed, with some dolls privately owned and others owned by Whiteley / Love Gallery in Los Angeles, California. When Ruby died, there were attempts locally to save the site, but these failed and ads were put in newspapers to sell the dolls. The dolls were sold by the estate executor for a total of \$10,000.

Threats to Survival (Check appropriate line and explain)

- Weather
- Vandalism
- Deterioration of site or materials
- Inappropriate alteration
- Long range plans for area (e.g. redevelopment)
- Are local attitudes toward the site a threat to its survival?
- Other

SITE PLAN: Sketch map of site with directional arrow showing north. Give overall dimensions of site. Mention any streets that bound site. Give scale used (1/4"=1')

PHOTOGRAPH: We encourage the photodocumentation of the site: a long shot to establish the context of the site and any important details. The photograph should be labeled with the name of the environment and the direction from which it was photographed, i.e. from the south, etc. Also include the photographers name and date of shooting.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: e.g. any awards, newspaper articles, etc.

ABOUT THIS FORM: Prepared by: Name, organization, address and phone

Susan Alderson Hoffmann, SPACES

Date: June 4, 1984