

Meet Duke Cahill

by Steve Vanoni

The first time I noticed Duke Cahill's place was in 1978 while driving down a South Sacramento road. Over the next 10 years I would pull into his driveway numerous times to admire the artworks and try to figure out how I could possibly meet the creator of this amazing Folk Environmental Sculpture Park. Signs like "TRESPASSERS MAY BE SHOT" and "GO AWAY YOU'RE NOT WELCOME," along with the doberman stationed near the gate, made me feel somewhat uneasy about even standing in his driveway. I always wondered how someone could seduce you with such an array of beauty and at the same time chase you away by posting such threatening signage.

It took me about 10 years to finally meet Duke Cahill, a man whose persona exudes an aura more like John Wayne than anyone else I've met. My artist friend Robert and I took a trip down to his place to try to interview him for a local rag. So we pulled up into his driveway, got out of the car and as usual stood there in awe looking around at all the wonderful "stuff." After a couple of minutes the doberman got up and started heading our way. "Here comes the dog Robert!" I said, as we quickly scuffled for the car. A car pulled behind us, then moved over along my side. Duke cracked his window a little and I rolled mine down. "What do you want?" he asked me. "We want to talk to the person who made these wonderful sculptures. We've been admiring them for years; I really love this stuff," I told him. "Follow me," he said.

Following Duke into his place gave me an ominous feeling-like what are we getting into? Is he going to shoot us or what? So we drove into his 2-acre city block-sized work yard and parked behind him under a large covered area. We introduced ourselves; then Duke asked us, "So you boys old enough to drink?" "Sure" we said; we followed him over to a wall totally covered with signs. He reached down and pulled up a garage door revealing the inside of a bar and workshop area.

Inside the bar a 65 year old green parrot named Rosita lives in a large metal cage positioned near a wood burning stove. There's a couple of large wooden thrones and a low ceiling where literally thousands of "things, objects" hang down suspended over your head. The interior and exterior walls of the entire complex are covered with photos, posters, curios and bar and restaurant related product signs. Duke has owned several bars and restaurants over the

years. There's street and traffic signs from all over California, plants, cacti and maze-like passage ways winding throughout the complex. There's a lot of 30s and 40s era fight photos and posters displayed around the place from the times when Duke was a heavy weight boxer and merchant marine challenging the champion of every South Pacific port he docked in, as well as boxing his way across America. He had a professional record of 72 wins and 2 t.k.o.'s.

A large salvage yard is located a couple miles away, allowing Duke to accumulate found objects to use for his metal sculptures. This has made it easier for him to continue adding on and filling the walls and ceilings of his 40 rooms and workyard with objects and images for more than 35 years. The more you look the more you see and like the Louvre, it would take more than one day to see it all. You can take a spiral staircase up to the top of a tower and gaze into a periscope to look at the neighboring site of a modern suburbia encroaching its way up to Duke's once solitary and remote walls.

The artwork is divided into three categories. Most noticeable at first, because of their large size, are the fiberglass and plaster sculptures. A row of creatures faces West consisting of a 15 foot pink alien man, a 12 foot cat, a 10 foot dog, a large prehistoric looking bird with an egg and a huge plaster jug whose sides are embellished with metal tools pushed into its outer gray surface. Another 20 foot alien woman stands off to the side along with a huge whale who rests on top of a barn like structure that was once the home for a couple of goats and ducks. A trio of sphere-headed aliens stand on top of a boat peering down on you, monitoring your actions near the entry gate.

And then there are the metal wall assemblages; there are around 50 pieces hanging around the work yard and they are made of rusted and painted metal tools welded together. An 8' by 8' metal wall piece composed of various sized rusted wrenches welded together creates a natural mechanical rhythm by utilizing the repetition of images and tools; it is somewhat Arman-esque. The enormous brightly painted metal gates are particularly beautiful. Some pieces have a minimal amount of color painted on the objects, while most remain entirely covered with a natural rich rust patina.

These first two types of artwork evolved out of a need for Duke to keep his crew of working men busy when the weather conditions were not optimum for one of his businesses, producing fiberglass swimming pools. Duke told me that he could use fiberglass only if there was no wind or rain. The art is the result of collaborating with his crew of working men using metal shapes and working tools for materials-tools and materials that they came into contact with daily in the construction field-and also using the all too familiar fiberglass they

have worked with for years to build, construct and to create and form a truly "working man's" aesthetic that combines the idea of Art and Work. The result is one working man's oeuvre spread out over the entire work yard. This "Industrial Age Working Man's" aesthetic of art has a purity similar to the cave wall artists reflecting the Earth's animals that inhabited the Earth at that time, on the sides of the Earth's walls, using pigments derived from the Earth, or of a stack of Warhol's Brillo boxes stacked from floor to ceiling in the modern American consumer culture that numbs us daily. Like any culture, being an American can be a somewhat ambivalent experience but the "heroic voices" that have emerged from our culture are amongst the greatest on our planet.

The last and most personal form of art, (atleast to the people their directed at), is Duke's signs. Duke uses these as vehicle to communicate humorous sayings he either invents or borrows, and to rib his friends and workers. These signs espouse the truth according to Cahill. They're small wooden signs, around 100 of them, with spray painted stenciled lettering often accompanied by a photo of the person who has become the brunt of his joke or judgment.

The artwork incorporated along with everything else creates an overall organic ambiance of walking through a large fifth dimensional abstract expressionist field painting of a Pollock, or a Schwitters collage. Duke's world is inundated with the multitudes of auto-socio-primitive information and wonder. It's epic scale and proportions combined with images and ideas create an "otherworldly" feel similar to that of Gaudi's Cathedral, Rodia's Watt's Towers, Nek Chand's Sculpture Park, Cheval's Palais Ideal, the Buddha Parks of Thailand, but captures a pop-rustic-surreal sensibility indigenous only to our American West.

Photographs of Duke's environment are included in Seymour Rosen's classic 70's book on California Environments: "IN CELEBRATION OF OURSELVES." A couple of his metal pieces were featured in the now infamous "A CAT ON A BALL WITH A WATERFALL" Exhibition of Self-taught and environmental folk artists hosted by the Oakland Museum. Duke lent me several pieces in the Spring of '96 for his first gallery showing at the Martin Ramirez Gallery I ran in downtown Sacramento. In november of the same year photos of Duke's sculpture garden were included in a show entitled "MEMORIES and VISIONS," Self-taught and Outsider Artists West of the Rockies; held at the Sheppard Art Gallery at the University of Nevada in Reno. Within this year Duke's environment was listed amongst a Global Tour of 120 sites in a new book published by Aperture entitled "SELF-MADE WORLDS," Visionary Folk Art Environments. I am currently working on a video of Duke's place which will be included in the archives at the American Folk Art Museum in New York City.

Once I brought my video camera out to his place; he asked me why I brought it and I told him I wanted to video some of the artwork. "So that's what they call it?" he said. "Yeah, that's what they call it," I said. "You know Duke you make some of the greatest art I've ever seen," I told him. "Have another drink kid," he said.

Seymour here's
the newly revised
story, much similar
to the old one...

Any questions or
comments you can
reach me at my
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hm you gots that

Sorry I
hope this isn't
too early!!

Steve