

by RACHEL LOEPER | PHOTOS BY DONOVAN ROBERTS WITMER



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The opening of *Internal Guidance Systems* at the Outsider Folk Art Gallery this month brings a few locals from surprising backgrounds and self-taught artists from around the world to Reading's own GoggleWorks Center for the Arts.

Curators Anne Grgich, a Seattle artist, and Colin Rhodes, a British art historian, sought to give the show a common thread through the title. *Internal Guidance Systems* refers to one commonality many self-taught artists share.

"They're really not responding to any tradition," says Emily Christensen, assistant director of the gallery. "*Internal Guidance Systems* points to the fact that the source of their art is subjective. They're not drawing on a dialog in the art world. An internal dialog is their source."

"*Internal Guidance Systems* is what you might call a replenishing traveling show," adds Christensen. "Anne has about 32 artist contacts whose

work she has incorporated into the show. It's difficult to talk about them all together because they are representative of a new generation of artists that don't really 'fit' anywhere."

Grgich will also display her own work, that features vivid and abstract portraiture characterized by strong lines, vibrant colors and encaustic - a technique achieved by dripping melted wax onto the canvas, resulting in blurred lines and added depth.

Christensen says, "It is as though, in all of these portraits, there is a living out of the self. As though Anne is living out all the possible people the artist could be, perhaps all the people she was."

### Featured Artists Share Their Internal Guidance Systems...

Artists Jim Bloom and Alice Schwager have been picked up by *Internal Guidance Systems*. The other artists mentioned here are frequent exhibitors at the Outsider Folk Art Gallery; they will be available for viewing independent of the *Internal Guidance Systems* exhibit.

**Jim Bloom**, a Philadelphia artist, mixes comic book and pop culture imagery with devastating

portraits of couples and family life. In his "Auschwitz Was Enough for One Day," a golden-toothed couple holds their heads high as the man points a camera to their smiling faces and a barbed-wire backdrop. The implied observer, perhaps the artist himself, adds a more obvious dark-comic element to this piece than is present in most of his work.

**Loring Cornish**, a Baltimore artist, uses found objects and "garbage" to create thought-provoking montages like "Untitled Assemblage," an 81 1/2" x 13" piece that molds sneakers - complete with old dirt embedded in the seams - into a kaleidoscope of color and forms that calls to mind both the excitement of the game and sadly forgotten youth. He also covered his entire Baltimore



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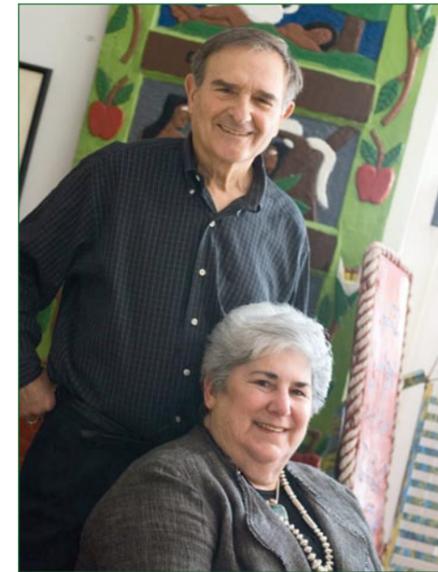
home in a glass mosaic. An interview and scenes from his home can be found on YouTube.

**Sonny King** of Los Angeles is 68 years old, and he didn't start making art until about a year and a half ago. He creates vivid dioramas of his remembered youth, many of which are inspired by the three years he spent with a traveling circus. "Men's Dressing Tent" features a miniature, mid-century figure pulling on his leotard, a clown inspecting the underside of his shoe, and not less than 10 other circus figures recalled from memory, all in action again.

**David "Big Dutch" Nally** is a Reading native whose work has been shown at Albright College as well as at the Northeast Taproom, a popular Reading bar with a taste for outsider art. He creates hectic and intuitive artwork with its own intricate iconography that reverberates well for a modern audience. A long-time employee of Carpenter Technology, "Big Dutch" uses factories, airplanes, amoebas and human figures to attract the attention of his audience. His works pay homage to both the dailiness and the infinity of life.

**Alice Schwager**, born in Romania, wandered into the GoggleWorks last fall, looking for a place to display her artwork. Schwager claims, "I paint; therefore I play," and yet her artwork seems deeply meditative; some have called it "tribal." "Step by Step," like most of her works, transforms as the viewer steps away, highlighting the abstract portrait's turquoise eyes and the bright white dots that suddenly shine out from the form's heavy black outline.

1. "Hand Carved Stone Heads" by Ted Ludwiczak
2. "Poolside" by Jim Bloom
3. "Chief Raven Thunder (of the Osage Tribe)" by Mark May
4. "Untitled" (Sneaker Assemblage) by Loring Cornish



### George and Sue Viener's Journey to the Outsider Folk Art Gallery

George and Sue Viener, long-time Berks County residents, weren't collectors when they went to the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Museum in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1970. In fact, George Viener's primary exposure to art before then was through an art history course in college.

"I was blown over by this thing called Americana," Veiner remembers about that trip. "We went gaga over folk art, and suddenly I was reading every newspaper and magazine article I could get my hands on, just trying to figure out exactly what it was."

In a serendipitous trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico, a few years later, their interests were fueled by a new friendship. They met Chuck and Jan Rosenak, folk art enthusiasts who were in the throes of researching the *Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century American Folk Art and Artists* (Abbeville Press, 1991).

"In the early eighties," Veiner says, "there were probably half a dozen dealers. Finding these artists meant traveling into the backwoods, often in the South. Finding them wasn't always easy, but they were more than friendly when you did."

More than 20 years later, with the help of the Rosenaks' book and the Internet, folk art collecting and dealing has become more common.

"The folk art world does seem to be changing," Christensen says, "but I'm not sure how. There was a whole generation of folk artists that weren't discovered until very late in life." Now, presumably, the artists are being discovered earlier in their lives. There's no way to tell how this is affecting their art.

There is something consistent about self-taught or outsider artists, Viener says. Artists featured in the Outsider Folk Art Gallery and other galleries like it "create because they have a need to create," Viener says. "It has nothing to do with your class or your lot in life. You can create out of anything." Pointing to a piece by Loring Cornish made of glass, beads and other found objects, Viener reflects and says, "There's nothing here that cost him a penny."

Free from the restrictions of traditional art, self-taught artists follow their natural intuition down the path of total creativity. The result is art that reflects their stories and offers viewers a unique reflection on the human experience. The world of self-taught art remains centered on personal relationships and shared networks of knowledge. "These artists have become a huge part of our lives," says Viener. "There's a lot of joy in doing this."

### Outsider Folk Art Gallery

GoggleWorks Center for the Arts  
201 Washington St., 5th Floor, Suite 504  
Reading, PA 19601-4040

### Gallery Hours:

Wed.- Fri., 10am-6pm; Sat. & Sun., 11am-5pm;  
or by appointment, call 610.939.1737  
or visit [www.outsiderfolkart.com](http://www.outsiderfolkart.com).

### Exhibitions

*Internal Guidance Systems*  
July 13-Aug. 24  
opening reception Sun. July 13,  
3-6 pm, artists' talk at 4 pm.

*Philadelphia artist Harriet Wiseman*  
September - October  
opening reception Thurs. Sept. 4, 5:30-8pm

*Philadelphia Dumpster Divers*  
Feb.-March 2009