

Street Stories

# Portrait of Robert Eugene Smith

by Crystal Payton

Photos by Leland Payton

*Memories still remind me when as a teenager during World War II, 1941-1945, there was a burning desire for me to be at far off places, living and seeing action, a terrifying experience, regardless of the environment, just like some war correspondent was doing and taking some picture to prove my story. —Robert E. Smith, 1987.*

"Well, what is the term outsider art anyway?" Robert Eugene Smith asked as we talked in his sparsely furnished room last February. "I'm not exactly an outsider," he said. "I been there before. I'm more broken in—I'm not no outsider. I'm a folk artist. If you're not known, [you're an outsider], aren't you?" Bob looked quizzical and authentically puzzled, vexed somewhat at yet another new classification.

Sharing Smith's intuitive uneasiness with a taxonomic fence strung with the barbed wire of art babble were New York City fine arts dealer Edward Thorp of Edward Thorp Gallery and folk art dealer Aarne Anton of American Primitive Gallery. Both participated in Sanford Smith's Outsider Art Fair on January 30-31.

"Basically, 'outsider' seems to be defined right now as anything that isn't topical or mainstream," Thorp said. "Obviously, that encompasses a hell of a lot. There's crossover. There's a breaking down right now of categories, and that's what's exciting. There's nothing that's overtly topical right now, and that's why there's all this searching, this sense of movement is taking place...I was reluctant going in [to the Outsider Art Fair], and I was very, very pleased at the outcome because of the audience participation."

Aarne Anton prefers 'self-taught' to 'outsider'. He recalled the broader perspective and continuum seen by a handful of farsighted dealers, such as Bert Hemphill and Bob Bishop, who greatly expanded interest in non-traditional art and artists. Like Mr. Thorp, he reported a very successful show, with as much business coming after the show as during it. He also noted the presence of European customers, which he attributed to the long history of European interest in non-traditional art, starting with Jean Dubuffet and his contemporaries. He said the attendees were "not responding to

name, to hype. They were responding to what they saw."

Folk art, children's art, and tribal art admittedly can have a superficial resemblance to each other, but their origins are very different. The authentic folk artist is

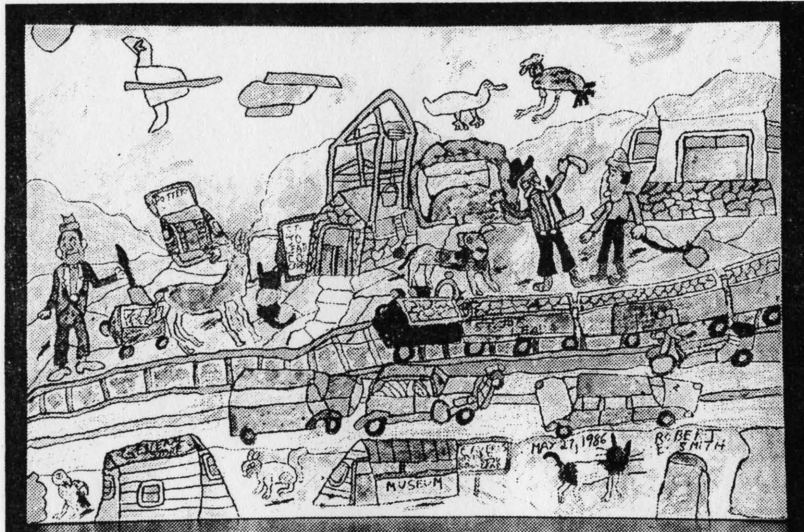
less individualistic or innovative and more bound to tradition than their often strikingly "modern" works would have us believe. The drawings of children closely chart the development of the human mind and, while often delightful, are rarely

aesthetically motivated. Tribal art, according to anthropologists, is more concerned with appeasing the gods than appeasing critics or collectors.

Outsider art, yet another form that can resemble the works of children, folks, and tribal peoples, was originally associated with the obsessed drawings of mental patients, most often schizophrenics. Enter Robert Eugene Smith. His vision, expressed in acrylics on poster board, has been variously described as innocent, childlike, primitive, and folk.

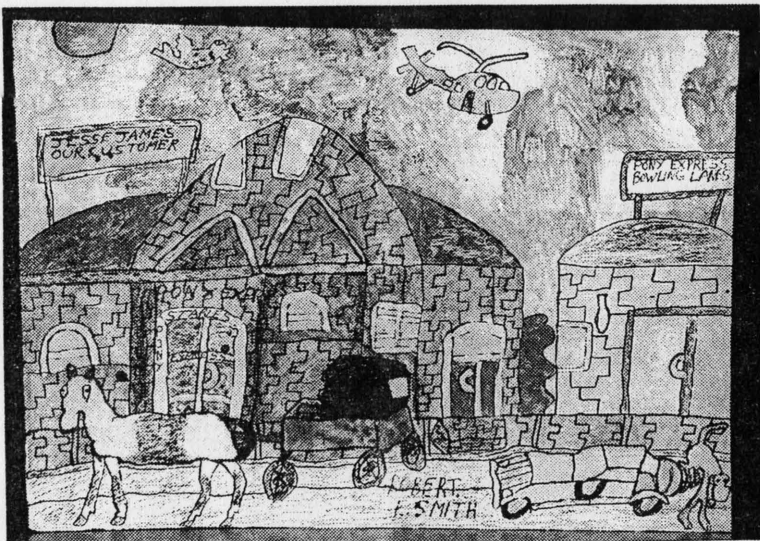
We first met Bob Smith in September 1977, after seeing a painting of his at the Missouri State Fair. It stuck out like a searchlight in that sea of earnest art student still lifes, tasteful earth-toned landscapes, and every-little-cat-hair pictures of wildlife. There in an orange-, yellow-, and red-tiled room stood a naked Joseph Stalin taking a shower. He and "his famous mustache" shared the shower room with a monkey, a camel, a lamb, a naked Indian chief with headdress, and a peacock. We tracked Bob down to a listing, ramshackle boarding house.

Last February we looked him up again, now ensconced in a one-room apartment in a six-story high-rise building. He seems not to have changed in the 15 years we've known him. At age 65 he has the same



*Bonne Terre Missouri and St. Joe Lead Company, 20" x 30".*

Smith loves to take charter bus tours to tourist attractions and records his trips with loving details, rarely failing to add a sky full of spaceships and birds and a cast of quizzical animals.



*Pony Express Stables, 18" x 24 1/4". "...The horse hopes to get some service. An old sports car is parked behind the buggy and a dog is doing acrobatic tricks in back of this old style 1930 car..."*



*Innauguration Practise, 20" x 24". "...The scene was at Mr. Reagan's Santa Barbara California Ranch but what a scene. The mountains of Santa Barbara were beautiful but the sidewalk in front of Mr. Reagan's ranch house, oh my goodness. A rooster, duck, deer and rabbit seemed to enjoy the sidewalk, and Baby Charley was getting big but he crawled along the sidewalk. Baby Charley belonged to one of the ranch hands, but the ranch hands were away working..."*

All public events excite Mr. Smith, especially baseball, war, and political theater. Borrowing Oral Roberts's "preacher's box," Ronald Reagan was practicing his oath amid Smith's fantasies of earth and sky.



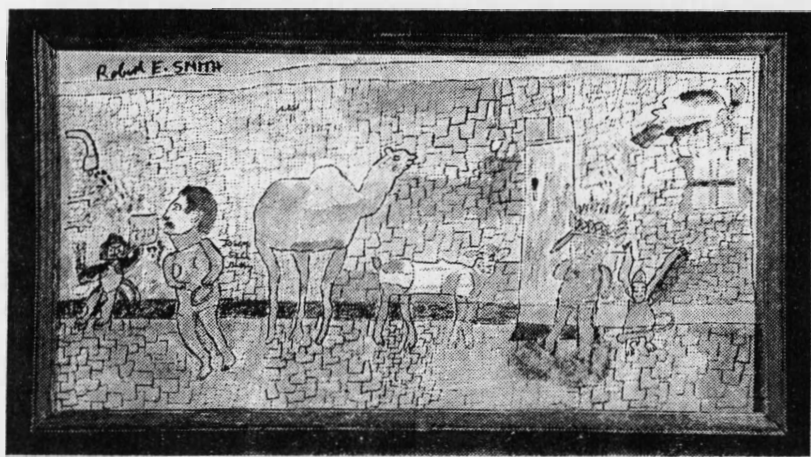
*Abraham Smitty Boob, The Artist, 20" x 30". "...Mr. Smitty Boob had no problems with check cashing or identifications because SMITTY BOOB is not a common name like SMITH or Jones...Wilbur the big young brown bear walked and growled some and was holding an orange bowl of Quaker yellow cornmeal mush. Abraham knew Wilbur the bear and wasn't scared of him. Wilbur was hungry."*

The artist sent us a snapshot of himself in the red suit worn by Abraham Smitty Boob in the painting. A landscape with characters, symbols, and situations that populate the inner life of Robert Eugene Smith, it is, to say the least, an interactive world of astonishment and wonder, with danger mostly held in check.



*Detail of Abraham Smitty Boob. "... Abraham planned on sketching the children..."*





Untitled (Stalin in the Shower Room), 1977.

This is the first painting of Smith's we ever saw. It stuck out like a beacon in the Fine Arts Pavilion of the Missouri State Fair, calling to us across a not too crowded room.



The Outside View of Crystal and Leland Payton's House, 19 1/2" x 28".

bump-and-go drive (apparently running on rechargeable batteries) that he had when we first met him. Always animated, he produces a stream of stories, a world in motion. In '77 he played his harmonica then for us, and last February he played and sang again. He described his paintings and the sources of some of his images, a mix of specific reality (the Black Kettle restaurant) and an often fearsome fantasy (oversized birds, multicolored animals, dinosaurs, and spaceships in the skies).

Like virtually every so-called outsider we've ever known, he is extremely fond of his own work. He shows up at art museums, demanding shows and sometimes getting them. He describes works past, present, and in the planning stages with equal enthusiasm. He is an almost irresistible force.

*The war ended and in 1957 twelve years after the war ended, I began to realize that I didn't have money to go to those distant environments, to encounter some new event that would motivate me to write something. I would have to find my excuse for writing something at home in my own back yard.* —Robert E. Smith, 1987.

He paints the world he lives in—the world of the streets, the mean streets of late 20th-century America. These busy, slightly manic ink and acrylic paintings on board are peopled with cartoon-like caricatures drawn from his tough life, a life lived in institutions and public housing with its cast of marginals, the infirm, the handicapped, the shell-shocked Vietnam vet with a pint in a brown bag who glares at passing Buicks to be sure they don't harbor "Charlie." Intermixed with these street scenes are a phantasmagoria of animals wild, animals domestic, and characters from television, advertising, and world events both present and past. Occasionally, Smith's world is visited by spacecraft and dinosaurs.

Bob doesn't deal in nostalgia. He doesn't wander around in a mythic, trouble-free past. He paints what he sees on the streets and in his mind. His is a world of rented rooms, nocturnal bus stations, the homeless, druggies, outlaws, bikers, lots of bureaucrats, cops, pay phones, and politicians. It runs on cash—no credit, no civility. Through all of

this, Robert E. Smith has no bad habits. He doesn't smoke, or drink, has never broken the law, and is religious. Out of all this chaos he creates, he persists. A great rarity, he's able to sell virtually everything he paints.

It's energy and the need to overcome the loneliness, neglect, and danger of his life, not just aesthetics, that drive him to art. His stuff is not made to fit in with someone's decorating scheme. It won't color-coordinate with the drapes or blend in with the wallpaper.

His palette is primary. He's not much for mixing colors. Bob uses it as it comes out of the tube and then outlines everything in black. The intense colors produce a kind of



At present Mr. Smith's performance arts are known only to his friends and some handicapped and senior citizens groups he volunteers to entertain. We are planning a video to remedy this. Mr. Smith loves to sing and has a rather good voice. Standing next to his bicycle, he sings us a rollicking comic song. He wears a purple clown wig pulled from his bag of performance supplies.



Detail of Untitled (Stalin in the Shower Room).

medieval (not Tiffany) stained-glass effect. But there is not much medieval about the iconography. The windows of Chartres don't contain bears, Burger King, or Popeye. Still, there is a parallel in the intensity, simplicity, and sincerity of his imagery.

A self-described "vagabond artist and writer," he has roamed the country. Greyhound buses are his chariot of choice. We have received collect calls from him from bus stations east and west, including Albuquerque, Los Angeles, D.C., and Hannibal, Missouri, and each trip ignited his artistic fires. "The trips I make on certain occasions motivate me to write or draw expressing my feeling on a new experience," he explained.

The Pony Express stables in St. Joseph, Missouri, the riverfront at Hannibal, fairs, interstate highways, people working, public buildings, and political rallies (in January, despite freezing temperatures, he went by bus with a local group to the inauguration of Missouri's new governor, and in February he was at work on some inauguration pictures). There are few interior scenes. It is mostly life in the streets, with skies filled with mysterious birds, blimps, and few clouds. He depicts a world seen from a bicycle or a bus. It is a journey of small adventures.

Some things have changed for Bob. The rundown boarding house has been replaced by a small room on the top floor of a subsidized apartment building

with elevator and brightly lit lobby. He shares his small apartment with a couple of goldfish and Kenny and Billy John, two cockatoos. "His name is Billy John, not Billy Jack. You ever hear of Billy Jack? The other one, I named him Kenny 'cause sometimes his warbling reminds me of Kenny Rogers."

Prices of his paintings have gone from \$15 to \$20 apiece to the low hundreds. He's had dinner with Robert Bishop ("He was a nice fellow. I did a little serenading to his dog when I was visiting over there. He got a kick out of that, you know... We all rode around once and went out to have a dinner out there at Rockefeller Center. It was something.") and has added the train to his modes of travel, though bus and bicycle remain primary.

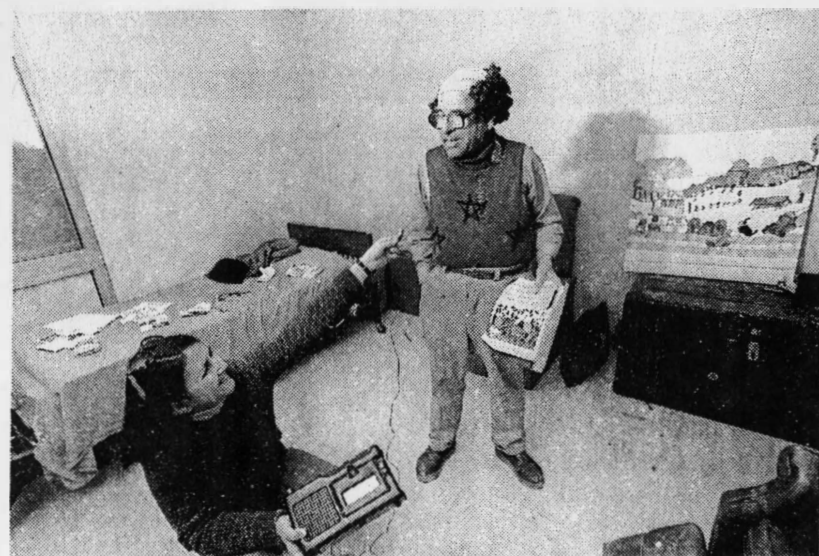
"I done some paintings of my trip out to California too in 1990... I stayed at the Hollywood YMCA the day before I went down to try to get in to see 'The Price is Right'... You look over there and see those mountains in Hollywood and see 'Hollywood' on them, you know. It is, it's beautiful... I had a picture of me just to prove I was in Hollywood... I was standing by the Greyhound Bus Depot in Hollywood... I could tell some people I'd been to Hollywood, but I just didn't make the grade."

For a number of years we bought everything he sent us and supplied him with paints. He didn't like oil paints, preferring acrylics, which dried faster. But even they didn't dry fast enough for Bob; some of his paintings stuck to the wrapping paper. The guys at the post office would let me know when one of his pictures arrived—string tied around a flat package of patchwork brown and colored wrapping paper. He didn't care for canvas either. To this day he still works on poster board and paper with acrylics and watercolors. He has, however, abandoned the ballpoint pen that he used occasionally in his early work, and he now uses fewer crayons.

I remember asking him why he didn't write down the stories he told about his paintings. From then on he would write the stories, often in the body of a letter, which also told of his troubles with the V.A., or how many *Grit* magazines he'd sold that week, or his current health problems, or his late disability check causing him rent problems. He seemed to have never-ending battles with various social service bureaucracies, and we would occasionally have to go to bat for him.

*For almost thirty years or up until 1985 I must confess that childish idea of having more money than I have haunted me in being a success as an artist or writer.* —Robert E. Smith, 1987.

In 1979 we helped Smith apply to the National Endowment for the Arts for an Artist's Fellowship (Office of Special Constituencies). We had turned our friend, the late Larry Whiteley, Los Angeles folk art dealer extraordinaire, on to Smith's work,

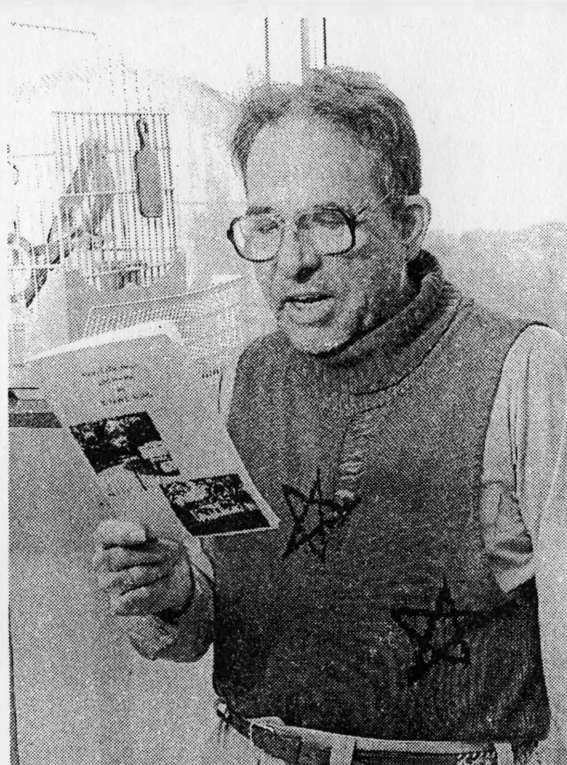


The book he holds is Chuck and Jan Rosenak's *Museum of American Folk Art Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century American Folk Art and Artists* (Abbeville Press, 1990). The Rosenaks say "[Smith] is emerging as an important new talent. He has a colorful and lyrical storytelling style that is gaining more and more attention from museums." Our tapes of him go back to our first meeting in 1977. He is little changed in spite of some difficult times and still optimistic and cheerful.

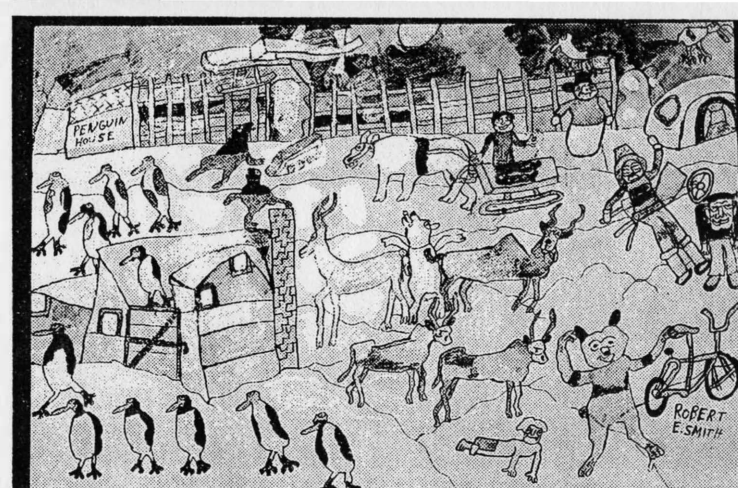




Robert Eugene Smith and Kenny, the cockatoo.



Smith reads his poem, "Kenny, Dear," from his most recently published book of poetry. In spite of many attempts to interest major publishers in his art, poetry, and writings, Smith has yet to find a sympathetic acquiring editor. This necessitates periodic self-publishing at Kinko's. The photocopied, stapled tomes are often enhanced by wax crayons and acrylic touches by Smith's own hand.



*The Penguin Farm*, 20" x 30". "...It was a typical Penguin Farm in the Southpole."

On Smith's "typical penguin farm," the 11 penguins share their farm with Baby Danny, Cornelius Rumpeldump (dressed in an Eskimo suit), Herman Boxdorfer, a brown/gray moose, a yellowish deer, Oscar the Brown Bear (who had a problem, since he couldn't ride the bicycle in the snow), and two caribou that had come in from the North Pole. Though this "Peaceable Antarctic Kingdom" is not on Greyhound's route, it's a stop on Bob's dream tours.

and by '79 he had a closet-full of his own. In a letter of support for Bob, Larry wrote, "In my opinion Robert E. Smith's paintings are exceptional in that they are present day primitives. He is documenting in his own untrained and personal style his present day life in Missouri. His naivete is unadulterated, his style original and consistent. The prose he has written to describe the paintings is powerful poetry...and serves as insight into the diary-like episodes evolving in each painting."

Robert E. Smith was the only contemporary American artist Larry Whiteley, still known for his innovative vision and real sense of adventure, represented at the time. Despite Larry's eloquence and our efforts, Bob didn't get the grant. Outsiders weren't "in" then.

Smith doesn't suffer from boredom and solitude. He is energetic, gregarious, opinionated. He writes poetry and publishes it himself (at Kinko's) and is forever entering poetry contests. Vanity publishers know his name. A small man with a Chaplinesque busyness and bravery, Bob is also a performance artist; he sings and plays several musical instruments. The little man performs for senior-citizens groups or birthday parties, using costumes, kazoos, wigs, and disguises. He takes courses at colleges, but has no degree. Robert E. Smith is a kind of Renaissance outsider.

*It can never be advertised enough, that in writing or in art work, if something develops in you that makes you feel you*

*have something to contribute to a few in society, then you do have something to contribute. Get busy. Don't put it off. — Robert E. Smith, 1987.*

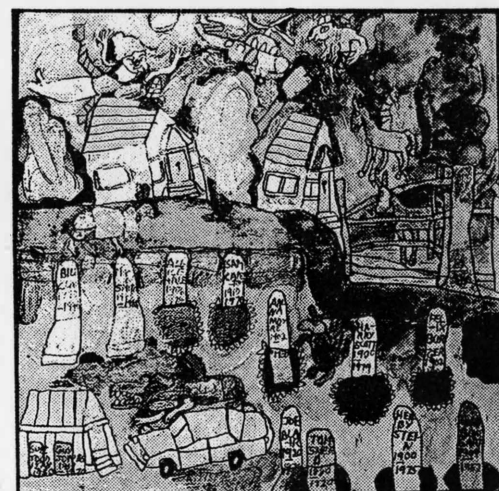
Often his paintings and poems are autobiographical. He can show up as a bear or as his alter ego, Abraham Smitty Boob, the Moody Artist. In 1987 he published *A Moment's Insight*, a book of poems and pictures. In one poem, "The Moody Artist," he describes himself:

*The moody artist begins to paint;  
He has had a rough time  
and feels a little faint —  
Painting to the artist is  
Relaxing, problems don't matter.  
One would think this man has  
A hidden silver platter,  
Thoughts and duties are —  
Temporarily tossed aside.  
The artist works briskly —  
Hiding his sad feelings.  
Just to watch the painter;  
Pace in a hurry.  
One guesses the artist  
is in another world.  
The next plan and movement;  
Motivates the artist who —  
doesn't worry.  
The artist has thought  
Of something else he —  
is in a typical mood.  
There is a smile on his face;  
While drawing another object —*

*He has forgotten noonday food.  
For a man unhappy and —  
a tale of woe;  
The color and humor in the —  
painting have an abundant flow.  
Painting is this little —  
man's life;  
New painting projects are  
always on his mind —  
Not even thinking of a wife!  
The time has come to say farewell;  
To the artist oh so moody!  
Inquire from this chap about a  
Painting and say howdy doody!*

Some people say Bob paints for himself alone (the romantic image of the inspired visionary artist), but he sells his paintings as fast as he can, maintaining no inventory. These sales show acceptance of his personality, his travails, his view of reality. They are a bridge (granted it's a toll bridge) from the island of his isolation and loneliness to the mainland of society. They are an avenue to social acceptance and some much needed cash to augment his miserly social security checks.

It is easier to learn to live cheaply than to live without connection to the world. The art of "outsiders" gives them status, notoriety, and attention—things most of us seek. I've never known such an artist who wouldn't relish coming to a show of his/her own work. Dealers who express a rather precious concern for preserving the "purity" of "their" outsider by sequestering him far from the bright lights and big-city



*Untitled (A Graveyard Scene).*

Smith is anxious (with good reason) about his health, and motifs of death are not unknown in his paintings. Not all collectors care for these funereal pictures. My impression is that with more acceptance of his work, Smith paints fewer pictures like this.

openings, open themselves to questions of exploitation. Other issues arise as public awareness and appreciation of these beyond-the-mainstream works expands, such as commodification, commercialization, intervention into human behavior, and inspiration. But these same issues are not unknown in mainstream "finé" art circles.

Still, things could be worse for outsider artists. They could be ignored. The interaction between people such as Bob and their market—their audience—is itself a source of inspiration and energy.

Robert Eugene Smith paints and performs for both love and money. What's wrong with that?