

## THE EARL SHOW

a retrospective of the work of Earl King Swanigan (1/14/1964 – 1/5/2019)

Separating art from the artist is a complicated and timely issue. This exhibit of Earl's work is controversial and, while acknowledging the charges against him, we look forward to engaging in productive conversations about race, class, gender, and sexual abuse against those who so often have no voice or power – issues that have become amplified by the rapid acceleration of gentrification in Hudson and the surrounding region.

I first came across the work of Earl Swanigan while visiting Nancy Shaver's store, HENRY, on the 300 block of Warren Street. Nancy is an artist who has run her shop for a long time. She has a love of found objects and showcases them in a way that highlights their presence while she considers whether or not to recycle and reuse them.

In a way, this made Nancy a natural ally of Earl who would often find a space at HENRY to show and sell his work to chance visitors. At that time, I was one of the chance visitors and it didn't take long before Claudia and I became part of Earl's ever-increasing number of collectors.

During the economic free fall of 2008, Nancy commissioned Earl to paint a portrait of Obama as the first African-American to be elected President. The portrait cost her \$100 and, subsequently, provided Earl the opportunity to paint many Obamas, which he did, enabling him to pursue painting and to live in Hudson. Nancy once said that Earl was very proud that he could be an artist and provide for his family. She also said that he was a cash and carry kind of artist – not at all sentimental or pretentious – but definitely concerned about the money he could make to survive.

Earl was a self-taught, outsider artist who did not attend art school. He was a forceful businessman, endlessly peddling his art and promoting his wares on the streets of Hudson. He was a wheeler dealer and salesman who insisted that store owners carry his art. He was not shy and, regularly, knocked on the doors of repeat buyers or those he sensed were likely to buy. Nancy put it this way: "If you had one EARL you most likely have 10 or more."

The City of Hudson provided fertile ground for Earl to expand his audience. Travelers who passed through the city and purchased his work helped promote his art and, often, images of Earl's work could be seen in designer and architectural magazines from around the world.

Earl was a familiar character who knew everybody. He was a complex character, famous and also infamous. His run for Mayor, in 2017, was cut short by an arrest for trespass and forcible touching, which, ultimately, resulted in his incarceration.

According to Reggie Madison, a friend and early supporter, Earl had known for some time that he had cancer and refused to seek treatment. In 2019, Earl died in West Virginia at the age of 55 and was later buried in his hometown of Columbus Mississippi.

This retrospective is a look at one of Hudson's original art makers who lived on the edge, crossed boundaries, and painted on anything and everything – cars, barns, furniture, cardboard, recycled plywood, Luan, Masonite, tee-shirts, and whatever else came his way. He never removed staples or tried to cover the holes of former screws. He was in a hurry to make art, to sell art, and to get his work out into the world in order to make a living.

Earl joins the long list of other outsider artists such as Mose Tolliver, Horace Pippin, Joe Minter, Bill Taylor, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, James Castle, and Henry Darger whose work expanded the way outsider art is made and understood.

In 2020, a year of a global pandemic and a year after Earl's death, TSL's gallery is filled with his work which represents a small portion of his prodigious output.

I want to thank Kevin Gilligan, my collaborator, for help collecting and installing Earl's work. Some of the pieces are on loan and some are for sale.

Linda Mussmann, September 2020