the night is only a dream
You come up after dark, you pause alone
With me on the shore.
I lead you back to this world.

~James Wright (1927-1980)
from To the Muse (1968)

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UPON REFLECTION on my growing up a shy, introverted boy in Baltimore, Maryland, I now see that popular music was what propelled me out of the solitude of my boyhood books and rowhouse basement into a broader world of unknown possibilities. Though certainly not just any music, because in 1964 The Beatles landed in The United States. The energy that burst from the television and my portable phonograph was palpable. I was enthralled by the Fab Four’s exuberance, verve and humor. While this eight-year-old boy could not quite fully grasp the early Beatles’ songs of holding hands, declaring love and mourning heartbreak, I did get the feeling of them. The feeling was so strong that I wanted to be them. Eventually, The Beatles moved on from romantic love songs and carried me along with them. In 1967 their increasingly psychedelic music was a trip that my pre-adolescent mind was ready to take. That year they released the album *Magical Mystery Tour*. After being primed earlier that year by John Lennon’s hallucinogenic “Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds”, his songs on this album, such as “Strawberry Fields Forever” and “I Am The Walrus” were transporting. These were not love songs but maps to a new set of perceptions and experiences. They were sound collages far beyond verse, chorus and melody. With my young mind reeling, the album’s conceptual trip concludes with the song “All You Need Is Love.” Now here was a love song anyone of any age could understand. The Beatles seemed to be saying that after experiencing the preceding aural kaleidoscope, love is all you need for true transcendence.

I have come to understand and enjoy how Bruce New’s visual art resonates with these sensibilities established decades ago in my boyhood musical DNA. New’s work also brings me into a world of altered and heightened perception. His visual collages, full of personal symbolism, numerology and magical references, are mysterious. They draw the viewer into a seemingly supernatural world constructed of the pieces of the artist’s dreams and visions. Bruce New’s art takes us somewhere outside of our own experience, but intimately deep within his own. Ultimately, the experience that he presents us with is love. His recurrent imagery of birds, exalted female figures on pedestals, crystalline shapes, letters and numerals are all visual manifestations of his love for his wife, Robin. Forever following his muse, Bruce New’s art is a paean to the transformative power of love. His collages, like my childhood idols’ songs, take us on a journey of discovery. If we are lucky, it’s a magical and mysterious trip that never ends. And for the price of a ticket, as Bruce New has discovered, all you need is love.

~ Jay Wehnert
April, 2017
HUMANS, AS WE CALL OURSELVES, first appeared upon the African continent some 200,000 years ago, and our ancestral cousins, like Neanderthals and homo erectus, predate our own species existence by eons. As beings, we have become sentient and sometimes rational. We have spread ourselves to every part of the planet. We have built great cities and brought them to ruin. We have bent the land and the seas to our sundry needs and our urgent will. We have tamed or killed every kind of beast in the wilderness. We have contrived and constructed the tools of our own annihilation. And yet, our priests, philosophers, and physicists dispute our origins and the reasons for our continuing existence. Even after all of this time and all of our accomplishment, after countless wars and couplings and songs sung, we struggle still to understand the vast universe, our place in it, and our relationships to one another. Therefore, any of us laid upon the earth beneath a clear night sky will begin to trace figures amongst the stars, wondering at our own fleeting existence and questioning what strange hands brought us to this time and place.

All mythologies take root and grow from searches for individual purpose and meaning. We construct narratives to make sense of our own lives. 35,000 years ago, ancient men and women went into Chauvet Cave in southern France and began by torchlight to paint some of the most wondrous images in the history of the world. Over thousands of years of continued attention, it became a sacred place that told and kept the stories of those people. More than 30,000 years later during the Bronze Age, oral traditions arose in Greece that would eventually take root and grow into the great religious myths of that culture, myths that we still look to today. By the fourth century, the Aztecs had completed the Temple of the Feathered Serpent at Teotihuacan, and blood was spilled upon its altar to appease that god. In the middle of the 19th century in America, Joseph Smith was founding a new religion based upon his own personal narrative. Today, there are fifteen million people across the world who ascribe to the Mormon faith. At their base, all of the world’s powerful mythological narratives begin as someone’s story, told to make sense of a complex world and an infinite universe. If those personal myths are powerful enough or useful enough, others adopt them as their own and carry them forward.

**THE NIGHT IS ONLY A DREAM**

*Myths are public dreams; dreams are private myths.*

~ Joseph Campbell (1904-1987)

*from The Impact of Science on Myth, 1961*
THE WORKS OF BRUCE NEW represent one such powerful personal narrative brought into the realm of the mythological by the work of the artist’s hands. New’s striking collages can stand alone. Certainly the first time that I encountered his work, I realized that I was looking at something entirely original, even if I did not fully grasp the artist’s narrative intent. Now, after a decade of appreciating New’s work, coming to understand its aim, and witnessing its continuing growth and evolution, I appreciate it all the more. Taken together, Bruce New’s collages tell the story of a man’s life, his love for his wife, and the challenges they face together in a way that renders the common act of living as mythically powerful. These works are daring, even radical, in their design and execution, but the ardor, devotion, and exultation that gave rise to them ensures their timeless appeal.

A Bird Charms the Sun into Darkness, 2014, Mixed Media Collage, 24 x 36, Collection of the Artist

The Sun Ceremony, 2015, Mixed Media Collage, 24 x 36, Collection of the Artist
Biography

BRUCE NEW WAS BORN in 1970 and raised in Somerset, Kentucky, about a ninety-minute drive south of Lexington. After many years in Richmond, he recently moved back to his hometown. In an interview from the winter 2013/14 issue of Raw Vision, the artist describes his childhood as "a typical middle class upbringing, with the adults working hard to provide everything we needed and a lot of what we wanted." From an early age, New was interested in art, taking comic books and the work of an artist uncle as his introduction and inspiration. He quit high school during his senior year to take a job working construction. He remained in that field until the age of twenty-seven. Then, while building a motel in Houston, TX, he fell on scaffolding and severely injured his leg. During his recuperation, New decided to pursue his artistic interests with vigor. His wife, Robin, to whom he was married in 1996, is an art teacher in a local school system, and she was highly supportive of his efforts. Bruce New has been working as an artist ever since. Over the past several years, his work has been presented in dozens of exhibitions across the world in locales as varied as New York, Tokyo, Houston, Chicago, Santa Fe, and Morehead, Kentucky.

Robin Standing at the Edge of the World, 2009, Mixed Media Collage, 16 x 14, Private Collection

The Dream Totem, 2015, Mixed Media Collage, 36 x 24, Collection of the Artist
The Paintings

BRUCE NEW BEGAN as a painter. Looking through art books at the local library, he was drawn to the paintings of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Marc Chagall (1887-1985). The works of those great modernists served as the inspiration for New’s early forays into painting. As context for his later works, a grouping of New’s paintings from 2003-2004 are presented as part of this exhibition. The paintings include portraits, landscapes, and a still life. They are good, even though they exhibit a young artist’s tendency to borrow heavily from those who inspired him. The paintings clearly show New’s developing style and vision, and they introduce some motifs that are still present in his current work. The noticeable texture in these paintings was achieved through the artist’s mixing of coffee grounds into his paint.

Invented Landscape #3, 2004, Acrylics with Coffee Grounds, 9 x 12, Collection of the Artist

Invented Landscape #2, 2004, Acrylics with Coffee Grounds, 9 x 12, Collection of the Artist

Still Life with Sculpture, 2003, Acrylics with Coffee Grounds, 20 x 16, Collection of the Artist
Between an Artist and a Bird (dyptich), 2004, Acrylics with Coffee Grounds, 28 x 44, Collection of the Artist
A Period of Transition

BY THE END of the first decade of our current century, Bruce New’s artistic vision was rounding into form. In essence, he was finally figuring out what he wanted his art to look like and what he wanted it to be about. This transition to artistic maturity can be seen in three works from that period included in this exhibition.

In 2009, Bruce New came upon a roll of rice paper. At forty feet in length, he obsessively filled the entire roll with colorful marker drawings. It was in this work that he firmly established his distinctive, angular figures, his symbology, and his recurring motifs. Here, he began to apply the conceits of a developing mythology to his personal story and emotional life. To understand New’s work in full, “the scroll,” as he calls it, is a seminal work. As Bruce New said in an interview in January, 2017, “The scroll is the beginning.”

Two large drawings from the same period, “Waiting for the Moon to Say Goodnight” and “The Dreaming City,” further reinforce where New was going. Notable in both works is New’s treatment of perspective. In essence there is none. In whatever dimension the mythology of Bruce New would inhabit, that world is entirely flat, and the effect is striking.
Waiting for the Moon to Say Goodnight, 2010, Marker on Paper, 36 x 24, Collection of the Artist

The Dreaming City, 2010, Marker on Paper, 36 x 24, Collection of the Artist
First Contact

BRUCE NEW FIRST CAME to the attention of the staff at Kentucky Folk Art Center in 2010. In response to encouragement from representatives of Kentucky’s state government, our museum agreed to present an equine-themed exhibition to commemorate and support the World Equestrian Games which would be held in October of that year at locations around Lexington. The title of the show, borrowed from Edwin Muir’s great poem, was “The Strange Horses” came. And, the show might have been quickly forgotten had we not received an entry form from an artist in Richmond, Kentucky named Bruce New.

New submitted three works to the show and all were selected. Upon initially reviewing the submission photos, I assumed the works were drawings. However, when the artist delivered the pieces to us, I was amazed to find that these were three intricate cut paper collages. We acquired all three works for our permanent collection. The artist had constructed severe figures and other images from black and white paper, meticulously cut them out, placed them upon a base of torn book pages, and drawn final details with a pen. Taken together, it was clear that the three works shared a narrative intent. The impact of the pieces was arresting. As a museum professional who works with living artists, there is perhaps nothing as exciting as discovering a self-taught artist who is doing work that is both profound and singular. I will remember the day that I first saw Bruce New’s collages for the rest of my life.
Riders to the Sea, 2010, Mixed Media Collage, 36 x 24, KFAC Permanent Collection

The Moon Totem, 2010, Mixed Media Collage, 36 x 10, KFAC Permanent Collection
His Muse & Connections to Ancient Art

THE DOMINANT CHARACTER in Bruce New’s work is his wife Robin (He also presents himself as “The Artist.”). In interviews and in the titles to his works, New refers to her as “The Muse.” However, she is more than the inspiration for his art. Her character, often presented as a centaur-like creature, is also the hero of New’s narrative. She is typically depicted in an elevated or central position in the collages. The Muse is often overseeing activities or preparations and functioning as a protector.

Today, we use “muse” to refer to anyone who inspired art, but the term originated with the ancient Greeks. According to Hesiod (c. 600 BC), there were nine muses who were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne. They were the deities who gave knowledge of the arts to man and inspired creativity. It is clear that New has been heavily influenced by both reading ancient mythology and by looking at much art from the ancient world. His use of perspective, his use of art as narration, and his use of space and symbology appear to have been inspired by his viewing of ancient Egyptian and archaic Greek works. He also claims to have an affinity for Mexican and Native American artwork.

New’s borrowing of specific design and thematic concepts from ancient art and blending it with his own contemporary perspective, while nodding toward the modernists, makes his own art seem timeless. This is appropriate since the questions that he asks are those that have troubled man from the beginning. Where do I come from? How do I find meaning in my existence? How do I tell my story? What wonder is this thing called love?

Greek Terracotta Hydria, ca. 520–510 B.C., Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Muse Performs the Thought Transfer, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 18 x 22, Collection of the Artist
The Moon Whispers to the Muse, "Don't Ever Let Go," 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 18 x 22, Collection of the Artist

The Muse Prepares the Sun for Flight, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 16 x 12, Collection of the Artist
Double Portrait: Muse & Madman, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 20 x 16, Collection of the Artist

The Muse Mimics the Flight of the Sun, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 16 x 20, Collection of the Artist
The Collage

BRUCE NEW'S PAINTINGS and drawings can be excellent, but he rightly settled on the paper collage as his chosen medium. The techniques of collage have been used for various purposes down through the centuries since the invention of paper. However, the collage as an art medium did not fully come into fashion until the arrival of modernists artists like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque around the turn of the twentieth century. New has always claimed an affinity for the work of these artists. Picasso comes up repeatedly in any discussion with him about the seeds of his own art. However, while New borrows modernist concepts, he strips from them much of the self-consciousness that so defined the work of that earlier age. Bruce New collages are folk art in the finest sense of the term. They are obsessive, intricate, and seem to emerge organically and insistently. A visit to his studio will find stacks upon stacks of collages ready to make their way into the world.

As mentioned previously, the artist’s earlier collages were primarily black and white pasted upon yellowed pages from vintage books. As time went by, single colors made an appearance, then two. Then he began to use multiple colors sparingly throughout a piece. Now, New’s collages explode with color, much like the scroll that he made in 2009, and his original artistic vision would seem to have become fully realized.

The Ritual of a Bird Shaman, 2014, Mixed Media Collage, 24 x 36, Collection of the Artist
The Muse Prepares the Moon for Flight, 2013, Mixed Media Collage, 36 x 24, KFAC Permanent Collection

A Lesson in Flight, 2011, Mixed Media Collage, 24 x 36, KFAC Permanent Collection
Dream Your Way to the Stars, 2014, Mixed Media Collage, 16 x 20, Collection of the Artist

The Sun Trance, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 18 x 22, Collection of the Artist

The Dream Reflection, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 18 x 22, Collection of the Artist

The Dream Globe, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 16 x 20, Collection of the Artist
NOW THE ARTIST HAS BEGUN a series of works that pushes his established aesthetic into excitingly innovative territory. His photomontage pieces are built almost entirely from images cut from books and magazines assembled upon a stark white background. Occasionally, New incorporates a few colorful symbols of his own making. The figures presented in this series are reminiscent of his other work, and numbers and symbols of significance to the artist also appear. This keeps the pieces firmly rooted in the artist’s ongoing examination of his personal mythology. However, the impact of this series is radically different, though no less powerful for the viewer. Though the photomontages appear more controlled, there is a palpable tension residing within them.

Double Portrait: Bird & Beast, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 16 x 20, Collection of the Artist

Portrait of a Dreamer, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 16 x 12, Collection of the Artist
The 3-D Objects

OVER RECENT YEARS, Bruce New has placed his collages on a variety of three-dimensional objects. His favorite choices appear to be globes and guitars, both of which can be readily found at yard sales and thrift stores. The globes are particularly effective. He covers them with torn pages and expertly places hundreds of figures and symbols over the rotating surface. The globes can be stunning. As a side note, everyone who works at the Kentucky Folk Art Center has at one time uttered the phrase, “Oh my god, I really want a Bruce New globe.”
Modus Operandi

Bruce New maintains his studio in his home. He may work on one piece at a time, but more often he will have multiple works in development simultaneously. Regardless, he is prolific. For instance, this exhibition is composed mostly of new and recent works. Over the years, he has moved back and forth stylistically, but in general his work has always moved forward as his vision and technical skills have advanced. Not all of the figures or symbols included in one of his collages were necessarily made for that particular piece. As he has worked over the years, he has collected “piles” of cut paper objects which he continues to draw from as a resource.

When New begins a collage, he first builds his background, typically from torn paper or book pages. Then he cuts, selects, and arranges pieces until he “finds the right composition.” His works are not planned, rather they arise organically from his subconscious through the process of working. Once a composition is complete, he will finish it off with pen work when necessary. New says that his art comes from his “dream world” and that he finds himself spending increasing time in that psychic realm.
What Folk Art Means Today and What Bruce New Means to Folk Art

FOLK ART FROM KENTUCKY, in fact all of 20th century southern folk art, has often been viewed as a strange cultural by-product of the region’s unique and tortured agrarian past and the mythologies that it birthed. To the outsiders who comprised most of the collecting and scholarly communities that concerned themselves with such things, folk art was something made by odd and ingenious individuals who hailed from forgotten places that seemed to exemplify both exoticism and something archetypally American.

The fascination directed toward east Kentucky artists like Edgar Tolson, Chester Cornett, and Charley Kinney beginning in the 1960s and 1970s led to assumptions and oversimplifications. Their work was often categorized as regional, rural, and other. Thus, it was kept at a safe distance. The line between folk art and fine art was firmly situated and a wall was built out of our basest intellectual tendency to sort and rank. Today, Bruce New has secured his place amongst a new generation of self-taught artists who may well take down that old wall brick by brick. Recently, a visitor to our museum pointed to Bruce New’s work and asked me, “That’s not folk art, is it?” “Yes,” I replied, “Bruce New is a self-taught artist, but he’s also simply a great artist, period.” Bruce New’s work challenges our understanding of what self-taught art is, and it should leave us terribly excited about what it can become.

~ Matt Collinsworth
April, 2017

Run with the Hunted, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 14 x 11, Collection of the Artist

The Moon Riders, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 18 x 22, Collection of the Artist

The Moon Escort, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 18 x 22, Collection of the Artist
ENDNOTES

1 https://rawvision.com/articles/exploring-collage-drawings-bruce-new
6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muse
7 Interview with the artist. April 24, 2017.
8 Interview with the artist. April 26, 2017.

The Bird Lover, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 12 x 9, Collection of the Artist

With a Bird on My Mind, 2016, Mixed Media Collage, 12 x 9, Collection of the Artist
SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2017
Solo Exhibition, Copenhagen Outsider Art Gallery, Copenhagen, DK

Group Show, Hickory Museum of Art, Hickory, NC

2016
Group Show, Hiromart Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

Group Show, ArtsPlace, Lexington, KY

Solo Show, Reibus Gallery, Houston, TX

Contemporary Urban Folk Art From Kentucky: End of the Agrarian Tradition, The Arts Company, Nashville, TN

2015
Outsider Show, The Art Center Highland Park, Chicago, IL

Folk Fest, Marcia Weber Gallery, Atlanta, GA

Wild & Domesticated, ArtPlace Gallery, Lexington, KY

Come We to the Summer, KY Folk Art Center, Morehead, KY

Outsider Art Fair, American Primitive Gallery, New York, NY

Nevencal Expressions, Theatre Art Gallery, High Point, NC

2014
Folk Fest, Marcia Weber Gallery, Atlanta, GA

The Metro, American Primitive Gallery, New York, NY

Outsider Art Fair, American Primitive Gallery, New York, NY

The Metro Show, American Primitive Gallery, New York, NY

2012
Folk Fest, Marcia Weber Gallery, Atlanta, GA

Outsider Art Fair, Marcia Weber Gallery, New York, NY

Outsider Art Fair, Yard Dog Gallery, New York, NY

Solo Show, Yard Dog Gallery, Austin, TX

2 x 20, Kentucky Folk Art Center, Morehead, KY

2011
Outsider Art Fair, Lindsay Gallery, New York, NY

Folk Fest, Gordon Gallery, Atlanta, GA

Intuit Show, Yard Dog Gallery, Santa Fe, NM

Bruce New and Fort Guerin, Yard Dog Gallery, Austin, TX

The Strange Horses Came, KY Folk Art Center, Morehead, KY

Folk Fest, Lindsay Gallery, Atlanta, GA

Intuit Show, Lindsay Gallery, Chicago, IL

Solo Show, Lindsay Gallery, Columbus, OH

CHECKLIST

8. American Madonna with Targets, 2016, 14 x 9, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
10. The Bird Lover, 2016, 12 x 9, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
11. The Channeling, 2016, 10 x 10, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
15. The Dream Alliance, 2016, 22 x 18, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
17. The Dream Reflection, 2016, 18 x 22, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
18. The Dream Tower, 2015, 36 x 24, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
22. Each Star is a Setting Sun, 2010, 22 x 18, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
23. The Enchantment, 2016, 18 x 22, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
26. Invented Landscape #1, 2004, 9 x 12, Acrylics with coffee grounds on canvas, Collection of the Artist.
27. Invented Landscape #2, 2004, 9 x 12, Acrylics with coffee grounds on canvas, Collection of the Artist.
29. Invented Landscape #4, 2004, 9 x 12, Acrylics with coffee grounds on canvas, Collection of the Artist.
30. The Jester, 2016, 14 x 11, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
31. The Jester, 2016, 15 x 12, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
32. The Jester, 2016, 16 x 12, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
33. The Jester, 2016, 16 x 12, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
34. The Jester, 2016, 16 x 12, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
35. The Jester, 2016, 16 x 12, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
36. The Jester, 2016, 16 x 12, Mixed media collage, Collection of the Artist.
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