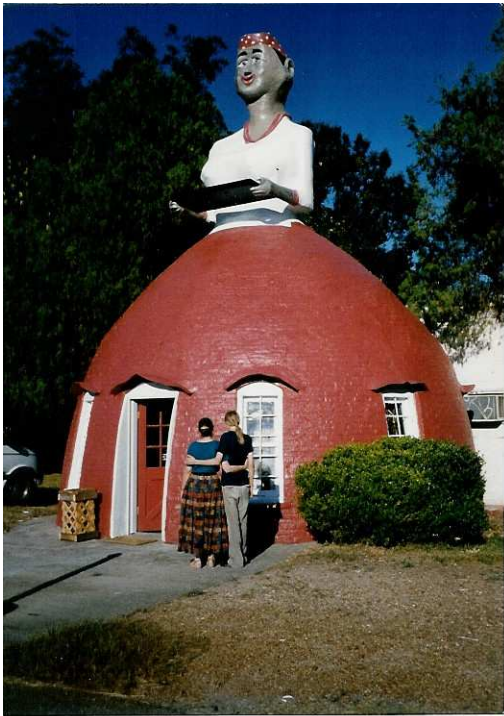


Noah Saterstrom

## Amateur Art

### I. Mammy's

"It's a long, long preparation for a few moments of innocence."  
—Philip Guston



My sister and I decide to drop out of college and start a farm on the outskirts of Natchez, Mississippi, our hometown. While searching for land, we see a building for rent on the side of Highway 61. We rent the building, fix it up, and open a folk art shop. The building is shaped like a thirty foot black woman holding a tray. Since the 1920's when she was built as a hotel (later converted to a gambling house, then a diner) everyone in Natchez has called her "Mammy." Our shop will be inside her dress. To enter our shop you walk through a door in the front of her dress.

To diffuse the racial charge of the building's design we call our shop *River Road Folk Art*. But everyone, including us, still calls it Mammy's. We put an ad in the newspaper: "Do you make Art? Folk Art Shop opening soon. Bring submissions Saturday to Mammy's, Hwy 61 South."

My sister and I are not sure what Folk Art is. We use the terms Art, Folk Art, and Craft interchangeably.

We don't know what kind of art will show up, but I think I know what Folk Art looks like. In the South, Folk Art is painting on plywood, preachers with large heads and hands with bottlecap halos. In New England it is George and Martha Washington with red circles on their cheeks within decorated borders, and portraits of doll-like children next to horses where the horses are little and the children big. Folk Art, the way I imagine it, is quirky and charming and gives the feeling that life has magic. I think of a figure made of welded gears and carburetors. The artists come with their work and we accept almost all submissions.

A man named Lucas makes drawings with colored pencils on typing paper. He draws only from memory. One drawing shows Lucas and his friends standing outside of a bar on Pine Street. Another is of himself at the kitchen table eating breakfast.

Ray is the Deputy Sheriff of Adams County. He makes portraits, his version of a traditional African technique, using colored sand and glue. The portraits are life-like, not stylized. Sometimes instead of sand he uses salt. One time, when the shop floods, his salt *Black Jesus* partly melts from the chin down.

Laverne is a soft-spoken middle-school teacher from the nearby town of Fayette. When he isn't teaching he is in his backyard carving large figures from chunks of black walnut. He brings us a life-size sculpture of a woman singing, deep cavernous mouth, life-size. A preacher pounding a lectern with one hand, holding the gospel with the other. A mother and child. One day, an out-of-towner pulls up to Laverne's house with a truckload of wood

and trades him the wood for some sculptures. Later we hear that some of Laverne's sculptures have sold at Christie's Auction House in New York. We have several of Laverne's large sculptures, but what sells to tourists are small carvings in the shape of pumpkins.

Fancy Crawfish are not very expensive and therefore our best seller. They are real crawfish, their insides weightless dehydrated webs clinging to the interior of the still-intact shells. Red acrylic paint gives them a just-been-boiled-but-still-a-jaunty-crawfish look. One has a banjo hot-glued to its thorax while the others have top hats and canes. A farmer from the Palestine Road area, north of town, makes the Fancy Crawfish. He is calming to meet, although distant and not very talkative.

An old white man comes in with a box of Black Mammy dolls made of black painted spools and fabric scraps. We tell him that we will not be able to take them because we are concerned that some of our black and foreign customers may "misunderstand" them as racist. We have a staring contest until he throws his dolls back in the box shouting "Who was here first, *us* or the *foreigners*?" and he tells us we shouldn't let the niggers push us around.

We hire Ray, the salt-painting Deputy Sheriff, to renovate Mammy. He straddles her giant waist with a plaster bucket and trowel in the dead heat of summer. As he scrapes away layers of dead face to get at the good plaster underneath, he finds she has been repainted many times over the years. She started out coal black, then she was made a mid-tone brown, then a mulatto, before returning to dark brown, the color she has been during my lifetime. Ray comes down to ask what color we want her to be. We say, "Whatever you think."

Ray buys some medium brown paint and climbs Mammy's massive form to work on her face and arms. He comes down again to ask if we want him to reconnect the wires in the back of her head. There is an old circuit box in the back of Mammy's head and if Ray reconnects these wires her eyes will light up.

During an especially bad rodent infestation we open the shop one morning to find only piles of red crumbs and a plastic banjo where the Fancy Crawfish used to be.

## II. The State Fair

A painted picture: This is me in the kitchen. I remember my Grandfather. I love my home. Dogs are cute. Flowers make me happy and this is a picture of my daughter holding some. It is hard to get the nose right. The ears, one is too low, but those look just like her eyes. Make the flowers in the painting look like the flowers on the table.

I am the judge for the South Carolina State Fair Art Competition. A cavernous warehouse holds over a thousand entries from amateur artists. The space is vast and absorbs sound. The warehouse floor is carpeted like a green pasture. The art hangs on white lattice partitions that form zigzagging corridors.

The work is separated into eight categories of medium: painting on canvas, painting on paper, prints, photography, sculpture, ceramic, mixed media, and open media. I notice eight categories of subject matter: family members and children, religious/patriotic, still-life, landscape, pets and wildlife, imaginary scenes, social statement, and abstract. For each of the eight categories of medium I am to assign first, second, and third place prizes. I must also select works to receive thirty-five merit awards and a "Best in Show."

The organizer asks that I begin with an "elimination phase." This is when pieces that are deemed unsuitable as Art are disqualified and stored in the snack room, leaving conspicuous gaps in the otherwise packed display. An average snapshot of a toddler making a funny face, for instance, of which there are many, might be eliminated.

Someone paints the American flag to show patriotism, the family dog to show loyalty, the country store from a magazine picture of a country store which means the olden days.

A father paints his daughter posing on the sofa. Every few years he paints another picture, of a pet, or the back yard, and he enjoys it every time.

A young woman gets out a paint set and makes a picture of her brother wearing a NASCAR hat playing his guitar. It never looks right so she puts it in her closet unfinished.

For his fourteenth birthday a child gets a drawing set from his mother who has always called him "artistic." He goes to the art supply store and buys a book. Hundreds of poses: nude women with putty-colored patches over their nipples and genitalia.

A middle-aged woman decides to make a watercolor of the ocean, or flowers from the garden, or a historic landmark in downtown Columbia. She makes her paintings to fit the frames she got at a garage sale.

An elderly woman uses the nice paper and color pens she was given by her son and makes a drawing of a crucifixion with an inspirational quote in calligraphy.

A forty-year-old plumber paints a picture of a lion, or a car, or a wizard. He does not show his paintings to anyone, but when one of his friends comes by unannounced while he is painting he is not made fun of. His friend says it is cool and the next year he enters a painting in the State Fair Art Competition. It is an acrylic painting of an orange cheetah on a black background.

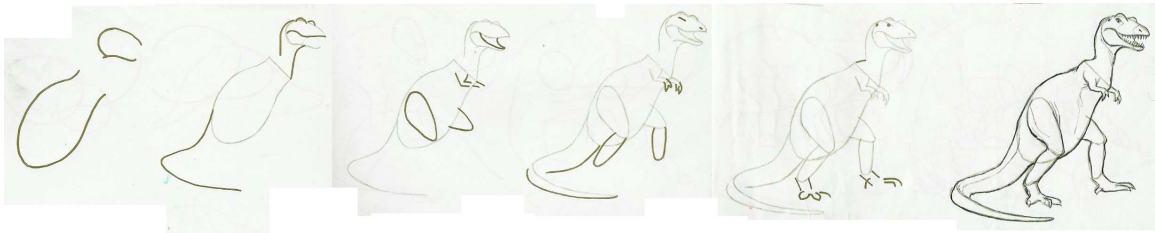
Someone paints a picture of two children, one white and one black, holding hands and running toward the sea. The white child also holds a shovel, the black child, a bucket. They are running, but they have the bodies of newborns. The white child is a flat vanilla color and the black child is dark and shiny, like a river stone. The red sun is setting into a gray ocean.

If a thousand amateur artists enter this annual competition in South Carolina, a state of four million people, this suggests the possibility that in the United States there are over 74,000 amateur artists likely to enter a similar contest.

The work at the State Fair is "amateur" art. Not "folk" art. Although my early (pre-Mammy's) idea of Folk Art was generic and misguided, even then I understood, on some level, the difference. Folk Art can be a *style*. It can, for example, appear as a "look" in home decorating catalogs, or gift shops. I once knew an MFA graduate who made "Folk Art" paintings. When invoked as a style, folk art is reproducible and can be made profitable. Amateur Art is not like that.

Whether all the art at Mammy's was "folk art" is debatable, but it was all singular, at times almost visionary. No artist was attempting what another was attempting, or seemed to be aware that others were making art at all. I feel that the art at the State Fair has an idea of what "real" art should look like and is striving to be like that. It is as if all the artists are attempting to speak the same words, and each artist is mispronouncing the words in a different way. The mistakes and accidents make all the artists unique despite their best attempts to be the same.

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In the back of every kid's magazine you can learn how to draw-a-cowboy-in-ten-easy-steps. In the 1950s, with a postwar tone of renewal, *Paint by Numbers* delivered paints and brushes to the people with the message that everyone, everywhere can be an artist.

In the 1960s, how-to art books flooded the market, instructing the novice in appropriate and efficient methods to achieve certain artistic effects. The budding impulse in the amateur artist is molded by instruction, the goal of which is capability, enjoyment, and perhaps even perfection.

Some of the 113 books available in the 1960s from the Foster Art Service, Inc, 430 West Sixth Street, Tustin, California 92680:

1. How to Draw
2. How to Draw Trees
3. Oil Painting
4. How to Draw and Paint Hoofed Animals
5. How to Draw Flowers

6. An Easy Way to do Chinese Painting
7. How to Draw Landscapes
8. How to Draw Seascapes
9. How to Draw Dogs
10. Portraits and How to Do Them
11. Understanding and Painting Abstract Art
12. 101 Heads
13. Heads from Life
14. How to draw Children
15. Designs to Trace and Draw
16. How to Draw Birds
17. How to Paint Exotic Butterflies and Moths
18. How to Draw Bears
19. How to Paint Textures of Animals
20. Moods in Oils and Felt Pens
21. The Nude by Fritz Willis
22. How to Paint Boats
23. Animals Expressions
24. Painting Sunsets
25. Faces and Features
26. Painting Red Barns, Boats, Land and Seascapes
27. Still Life is Exciting

Those who already have a form  
Crystallize themselves through painting.

Those who do not yet have a form  
are born through painting.

—Chou King-Yuan

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The judging is over and the organizer of the competition and her husband take me out for dinner. While we wait for the food, the husband talks about how he began painting. He was stationed on a submarine during the sixties and made watercolor paintings to pass long hours under the sea. I happen to know another painter who began painting while stationed on a submarine so I ask the husband if he thinks there is something about being on a submarine, besides the lack of other diversions, that made him want to paint. He says he doesn't know.

Later he says that he had brought a copy of a painting magazine with him to sea and one day noticed an advertisement for a long-distance painting club for "Incarcerated Artists." He reckoned that "incarcerated" referred to people in prison, people in mental institutions, and people on submarines, so he joined. "People that are incarcerated think about two things," he says, "staying alive and getting out." I ask if he thinks that art is about the same things. But the food comes and the conversation turns to church functions.

### III. The High Schoolers

"It is, of course, a luxury to create art and on top of this, to insist on expressing one's own artistic opinion. Nothing is more luxurious than this."

— Max Beckmann

I am one of a hundred artists and art educators gathering in New Jersey to grade the artwork of the national Advanced Placement Studio Art students. There are over 28,000 portfolios to grade in one week. We are called "Readers." Every portfolio will be given a grade between one and six, with students given a four or higher earning the right to forego introductory college art courses.

Envelopes of slides are packed in hundreds of boxes which are categorized, labeled with codes, and stacked along every wall. Actual artworks arrive in cardboard portfolios, are bound together in large numbers, and moved around by forklift.

The "rubric" tells us how to grade the artwork. Training to learn the rubric is rigorous and lasts for days. Before Readers begin grading the portfolios we must be sure that our judgments will be as consistent as possible. The leaders tell us that

our opinions are not wrong, and that natural differences in opinion among a hundred people is healthy, but that in order to grade effectively we must "calibrate our thinking," align ourselves with the intelligence of the rubric.

The Readers are told to "internalize the rubric," to take it in, like food, until we see with the eyes of the rubric. I notice that I give low grades to drawings of Dungeons & Dragons-style warriors regardless of the quality. I learn not to do this.

After several days of intense training we are ready to grade. Towers of slide packets are stacked next to rows of light tables and magnifying glasses. The system is as efficient as a nineteenth-century garment factory. We are able to grade a portfolio in a matter of seconds. Each Reader grades hundreds a day, with very few discrepancies.

A girl makes an acrylic painting of her friend, smiling sweetly, holding a stuffed bear. A boy makes a self-portrait wearing a long black coat, arm extended holding a crystal ball. Skulls and roses are in the background. A boy makes ten charcoal drawings of the gears of his bike. A girl makes a drawing of her feet. She thinks this is her idea, but around the country, hundreds of other girls are drawing their feet too.

There are pastel drawings of ponies that, once the prejudice has been overridden, reveal a genius. There is a drawing of Bob Marley smoking a joint.

A boy draws his own eye, up close. So do many others. A girl makes a drawing of a Korean grandmother with a tear in her eye. A boy draws himself screaming and shooting himself in the temple.

Underneath he writes "FAGGOT." A boy makes pencil drawings on loose-leaf paper of his favorite football quarterbacks.

There is an oil pastel drawing of a girl cutting herself with razors, blood pooling at her bare feet. There is a painting of a woman in a long flowing dress dancing in the moonlight, or by the sea, or by a waterfall. There are many pictures of mermaids.

There is one kid—actually, I learn from other Readers, quite a few—who makes a series of self-portraits that he says represents the "full range of human emotions." Each expression is a variation of the adolescent scream.

None of this is Amateur Art. "Amateur" is a term reserved for adults. A teenager cannot be a professional or an amateur anything. Then what kind of art are they making? When I look at these pictures I feel I am watching an organism under a microscope dividing and multiplying and struggling toward form. Sometimes the pictures try to please, follow all the rules, and come up with right answers, while at other times they seem flippant, indifferent, despondent. Sometimes the pictures want to rebel, violently, against everything and everyone. Teenage artwork shows what teenagers think is profound.

Like the relationship between black and white—i.e., that one exists only in so much as it is lighter or darker than the other—the term Amateur Art is only possible because there is a Professional Art to compare it to. At first glance, an amateur is an undeveloped professional, and the professional *used to be* an amateur. But maybe amateurs make their art without the desire to be professional. You don't become a Professional Artist by accident, you must have aspirations, which the

Amateur Artist may not have. Perhaps these are two different kinds of people who happen to share a love.

Of the 28,000 students we are grading, only a small number will pursue a degree in Studio Art in college. According to statistics, 98% of college graduates holding Art degrees never use the degree. Once you have formal training, can you still be an Amateur Artist? If not, then what happens when someone has a degree in Art but does not use the degree to become a Professional Artist? What are they?

Or is it a matter of self-awareness? Or a knowledge of current trends in Art? The professional boundaries of Art are unclear. In Law or Anesthesiology, either you are a professional or you're not. But you may make art your whole life and never think of yourself as an Artist. Or you may become a Professional Artist simply by introducing yourself as one to others.

Is there a certain amount of money that needs to be made before an artist can be called professional? Or is it recognition by others that changes things? By selling art at Mammy's, were we taking away the "amateur" status of the artists in exchange for pay? Or by giving prizes at the South Carolina State Fair, was I unknowingly turning regular people who like to paint into "professional artists"? Perhaps the very word amateur—with its origins in *to love* or *to be a lover of*—suggests a logic so simple as to make definitions tangled and comparisons irrelevant.

A fellow Reader leans over and says, "I've only seen three Johnny Depps so far. Down from last year. But way more Bob Marleys."

A kid draws a picture of a banana killing other kinds of fruit. He also draws a picture of himself with a pencil in his nose.

A kid makes a series of portraits of important people from history.

There is a drawing of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. In the background is a penguin and what looks like an elevator.

A fellow Reader shows me a drawing of dozens of tiny stick figures killing each other with stick swords and guns. In the middle of the drawing is an open space and the words "war is sad." Reluctantly, the Reader gives the portfolio a low score.