

***When the Spirit Speaks: Self-Taught Art of the South.* Margaret Day Allen. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2014. 144 pp.\***

Reviewed by Trista Reis Porter

*When the Spirit Speaks: Self-Taught Art of the South* provides a generous and vibrant glimpse into the lives and work of 32 artists from the southeastern United States for an intended audience of collectors and self-taught art aficionados. Margaret Day Allen, an avid collector of self-taught art and a former journalist and photographer, shares her appreciation and respect for the artists in this collection of biographies. She gives equal attention to all of the artists' stories, regardless of their currency in self-taught art collecting crowds. This book is neither a comprehensive nor scholarly look at all of the self-taught artists in the South; rather, it is a representation of the author's preferences for specific artists, along with recommendations given to her by collectors, museum professionals, and other artists. It was important to Allen to visit the artists where they live and work and this book is the culmination of five years of traveling, interviewing, and writing. She describes it as a collaborative endeavor with the artists, and this perspective certainly surfaces in their biographies. Their voices are made clear through direct quotes and in the way the author celebrates their lives and work.

The book begins with a two-page introduction to self-taught art, how it is defined, and how this genre is oriented within larger definitions of "folk art," "*art brut*," and "outsider art"—categories that she acknowledges are often misleading and misused. For the purposes of this book, Allen defines "self-taught art" as "art made by persons who do not hold an art degree," though she acknowledges that others might be more inclusive or restrictive in their definitions (10). These distinctions, along with the brief historical origins she mentions for each of these terms, are clarifying and necessary for introducing the work of these artists in the remainder of the book. The author also situates them within their contemporary context, acknowledging the variety of influences on their work—including those from television and the Internet—and the contemporary range of means for marketing their work through Facebook, eBay, blogs, YouTube, and more.

Allen includes an overview of the most common reasons self-taught artists make the work they do. She believes that the typical association between self-taught art, "true" folk art, isolation, and "traditional" artistic influences is a myth, expanding instead on the influences initially mentioned in the introduction. She discusses the prevalence of strong personal experiences that triggered much of the artists' work as well as the prominence of spirituality and religious experiences within these life histories. The book's title is in keeping with this theme, and Allen is correct in acknowledging the influences that echo throughout many of the artists' biographies.

Each chapter includes background information on the artists' lives and families and descriptions of the art they make. The author describes their processes, how they first got started, and where they live and work today. The strongest biographies in this volume begin with and maintain a strong focus on the art without letting the artist's background and history overshadow the work

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itself. The essay on J. J. Cromer, for example, began with a strong discussion of his art before getting into his life and entry into the art world. Allen discussed his influences, the titles of the work, and the symbolic vocabulary Cromer references throughout much of his art. More of this type of focus throughout the remainder of the book would have been valuable; many of the essays begin with a page or more of background and biographical information before any indication of the type of work the artists make is mentioned. Unfortunately, many of these biographies also used trauma as their hook (for examples, see the biographies of Bruce Davenport, Jr., Edna Hackett, or O. L. Samuels). While these large life events or experiences often set the artist apart and motivated them to make art, placing traumatic events at the forefront in this way continues to situate them in a marginalized place—defined more by the events in their lives than the art they make. It is important to acknowledge these events and the effects they had on their art-making practices, but the biographies would benefit from beginning with the art and using it as the framework for understanding their lives and work.

Collectors and fans of self-taught art will likely enjoy this book. It fits in with the large quantity of books directed toward art collectors that Schiffer Publishing puts out each year. The author's writing style is approachable and non-academic and the biographies are well balanced by an abundance of high-quality photographs. This is a strong but limited survey of self-taught and outsider art in the American South. The book captures the passion the artists have for what they do and the shared struggles they have endured. While the biographies are not analytical, each introduces the lives of these artists and how they came to create art, making this a useful starting place for those interested in learning more about artists working in the southeastern region of the United States.

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