

NUESTRO PUEBLO
(OUR TOWN/OUR PEOPLE)
by
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Challenge 21 - Due 22/02 at 10am GMT

It is not easy to define "visionary art." Like love, you know it when you're in it. Visionary art has been called by a lot of other names - outsider, isolate, or raw art to name just a few. Although there is a kinship with folk art, in that both tend to be made by everyday "folk" or people, we define folk art as art-making traditions that are learned at the knee, or by familiarisation with an art tradition of a specific ethnic or geographic group. We like the terms "visionary" because everybody dreams, but our dreamers don't go to school to learn how to express their visions. Visionary artists are self-taught, intuitive people who find their own way into the making of art in an intensely personal way. Visionary art dances on the edge.

Visionary artists:

- * Usually without formal art training/often self-taught.
- * Never were taught what not to do in the making of their art (or they never listened!)
- * Often see their art as fulfillment of a spiritual mission or personal vision. The most common theme of visionary artists the world over is the backyard paradise- their personal recreation of the Garden of Eden.
- * May spend decades of intense devotion working to create just one work. It may be very small or absolutely gigantic in scale, or it may repeat itself over and over thousands of times until it looks like an ocean of images.
- * May not even think of what they do as "art." They often grab everyday objects to make their art- discarded flip tops off tin cans, matchsticks and toothpicks, old buttons and newspapers, stuff that usually just gets thrown away. They "take nothing and make something" -and as such be magnificent recyclers.
- * Like the ancient Greeks, the ancient Egyptians, the Hopi Indians, and the New Guinea tribes- cultures which all produced amazing art despite having no word whatsoever in the respective languages for "art." Visionaries practice what these great cultures practiced- they try and concentrate on making things and doing things they feel are "well-made." This concept of art then pertains to the way of living each day and to doing all things as best and as imaginatively as one possibly can.
- * Suit themselves. They might delight if you like it too, but for most it is the joy and need to make their art to please themselves. This might be why so many visionaries don't start making their art until the last decade of their lives, when they have lived so much they have learned not to care so much about what other people think!
- * Are at their best untamed and a bit wild.

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SCENE 1 - 1921-54

ORDINARY DAYTIME SOUNDS, WITH
HAMMERING

PASSER-BY 1: Building something big there, Sam?

PASSER-BY 2 Sure is coming along. Nice shells. Broken pots.

PASSER-BY Shhh, at least he's come back from it with something productive. He was an alcoholic. Maybe he still is. That's why he's building.

NEIGHBOUR All this? It's vast.

PASSER-BY Why is it so big? That tower must be a hundred feet.

NEIGHBOUR 1 He's been building it for thirty years. He starts his monument by slapping up the walls first, using bedsprings as structure. How can it stand up? He calls his work Nuestro Pueblo which means Our Town. Then, beginning within the narrower, east end of the wedge, he constructs the "Ship of Marco Polo", a replica boat with a 28-foot spire. It goes on and grows for thirty years. It's an eyesore.

NEIGHBOUR 2 It's great! For me it's Beauty, freedom of initiative, to conceive of things important for humanity.

NEIGHBOUR 1 To do more with less.

PASSER-BY What is it supposed to be? What's it for?

RODIA Some of the people, they say "What is he doin'?" Some of the people, they thinkin' I was crazy. And some people they say "He's gonna do something."

NEIGHBOUR You're crazy all right, Rodia!

PASSERBY What if he does do something?

NEIGHBOUR It'll never stand up. Look at the materials he's using. He's using old girders. Gathers the material here and there. Make that place famous. Didn't know anything about it for a long time. I didnt know nothing about it and I lived two blocks away until 1940. Tokyo Rose was born here. The whole neighbourhood goes along, and he just keeps building. Is it ugly or beautiful, amazing or crazy? Maybe all of these things.

RODIA: Good, good, good, and bad, bad, bad. You be half good and half no good, well, that's no good.

NEIGHBOUR He calls it Nuestro Pueblo. It means Our Town or Our People. We call it Watts Towers.

RODIA: I build the tower myself. I'm a gonna do something. im a gonna do something. I'm a gonna do something. You got to

do something they never got 'em in the world.

NEIGHBOUR Weird sight in a poor black neighbourhood, these crazy towers rising out of a triangular plot while cars go past. I don't know how he built it by himself.

RODIA: I build it singlehandedly.

PASSERBY But why? Why?

NEIGHBOUR 2 He doesn't know.

NEIGHBOUR 1 Noone knows!

RODIA: Why I build it? I can't tell you. Why a man make the pants?
Why a man make the shoes?

PASSER-BY: I asked him. He listened patiently to everything that was said and then just continued with his work.

PASSERBY 1 To express his appreciation for his adopted country, isn't it?

PASSERBY 2 Or a love letter to his old country.

RODIA: Galileo Galilei. He proved the way the earth move. The pope was boss then. He built a tower in Italy, tower lean over, Tower of Pisa. "My God," I say, "I'm a gonna make a tower different from Galileo!"

machine parts, corncobs and the like.

NEIGHBOUR 2

The interconnected mass is dominated by three breath-takingly tall towers. Rodia worked on his project, which he called Nuestro Pueblo (Our Town, or Our People) for thirty-three years

RODIA:

I have the respect for Galileo, Michaelangelo, Marco polo - martyrs, explorers, men of stature. My hope my work related to tradition. I don't watch TV. I don't want to see disasters of the era. Radio, TV electronics. No. I go on bending steel into girders. With the simplest of tools. Began in the man. Stranger new country. Untrained unskilled. Urgent need for expression. Dedication. Scattered objects emerged as design. I did it all by myself I couldn't hire no help I didn't have no money. Not a thing. A million times I don't know what to do with myself. I was awake, up all night. Of course, this was all my own idea.. The tall bell towers of Italy recalled from childhood. Minarets and old distant places of worship. Gilded domes dozing in hot jungles. High cold aspiring gothic cathedrals. An old man's flow, tormented... ensuring steps to some light undefined.

NEIGHBOUR:

He signed the work with the imprint of tools and initials and his eyes lit with the quiet pride of craftsman.

RODIA:

I had in my mind to do something big, and I did.

NEIGHBOUR

He's getting tired. Now he has to spend as much time repairing as building. How he can climb those towers without

scaffolding, the man's seventy years old!

RODIA I'm done. Nineteen twenty one to nineteen fifty-four. I'm making over the deeds to my neighbour and getting out of here.

NEIGHBOUR Where will you go Sam?

NEIGHBOUR Why are you going?

NEIGHBOUR Will you ever return to the city to see your work?

RODIA Don't you understand? It's the end; there's nothing there. 30yrs alone, a bed, a chair, a table. Music and faded symbols of time when I was young. Something else in the house, a dream. Of vast structures. For 30yrs every day every moment outside my work for a living, in the light and darkness. I laboured to express a dream. Seashells, broken bottles, pebbles, shattered tiles, discarded, useless. Debris of a machine ridden civilization I avoid. Colour vitality texture to towers. Steel girders. Wire mesh. Concrete. Bucket chisel hammer. two hands. Built inch by inch. That look down on the plain. I call it Nuestro Pueblo. It means Our Town or Our People.

SCENE 2 - 1965

ORDINARY DAYTIME SOUNDS. NO
HAMMERING.

ONE: Why are the Watts Towers crumbling?

TWO: Why is the neighbourhood crumbling?

ONE: What happened to them? What was his name, Rodia, why did he leave?

TWO: That was eleven years ago. Nineteen fifty-four. He just abandoned it to go off and live with his family. He was seventy-five. Donated the property to a neighbour, who wanted to build a taco stand but couldn't get a permit so sold it on to someone else. It ended up getting donated to the City, so the City was responsible for maintenance and care. Then it got handed to the state. It was complex. The towers had preservation problems from the beginning.

ONE: But it's stood up. The 1933 earthquake scared him. He made the towers wider. More columns, more reinforced. The main problem's the environment. We don't have freeze-thaw problems like in Europe and East Coast but up there in a good sun you'd have heat and 60/70 degrees C and higher

on some elements. Heat makes materials expand. Different at different rates. Creates stress in monument, leads to cracking. As do strong winds. October, November until March there's very strong winds, the Santa Anna winds. Forces comparable to other natural problem earthquakes, wind with as much force as moderate earthquakes. Seen a few of those.

ONE: People from university come just to study the sea shells. To compare today with here: 1921-54. It interests ceramic people, there are metallurgy problems to study. Artistic and materials culture. It's an important monument. In the late-50s, the city was eager to pull down the towers for safety reasons, but a subsequent stress test was passed with flying colors. It has that strength of the individual genius. But it's withering, like the neighbourhood.

ONE: The cement cover's cracking. Decorative elements falling down. Getting lost. Major restoration campaigns over years. Some by state or city etc. Most repairs don't last. Most already cracked in less than two years. Some hold up. Those most intrusive did most damage visually to the monument.

WITNESS 1: Have you heard? A riot's breaking out in the neighbourhood.

NEIGHBOUR: What happened?

WITNESS 2: A brother, a black motorist got his ass arrested for drunk driving. They started arguing, it turned into a fight.

WITNESS 1: Then the community got wind of it. There's real outrage happening.

WITNESS 2: Looting, arson. Breaking up the white businesses.

WITNESS 1: They're sending in the National Guard, thousands of them.

WITNESS 2: I haven't seen unrest like this.

WITNESS: What did you expect? With all this unemployment.

WITNESS: It's the police racism, that's why.

WITNESS: It's this fascist white system. Here we are down in Watts

WITNESS: Lotta projects in Watts. Hacienda Village. Imperial Courts. PJ Watts.

WITNESS: It's all the Latinos in the neighbourhood. They throw us all down here together, disrupt the purity of neighbourhoods, the community, just to keep the white areas white.

WITNESS: It's illegal but 95% of LA housing is off limits to African Americans and Asians. Minorities who had served in World War II or worked in L.A.'s defense industries come home to face increasing patterns of discrimination in housing, excluded from the suburbs, restricted to housing in East or South Los Angeles: the Watts neighborhood and Compton. There's no education, no economy.

WITNESS: The black and Latinos are excluded from the high-paying jobs, affordable housing, and politics available to white residents.

WITNESS: It's bubbling up. Recently I was down in the projects. I saw this police officer go up to this tiny young black girl, all of ten. He says to her "How are you doin' kid?" and this kid says to him "Fuck you, pig."

WITNESS: Whoa! What he say?

WITNESS: He say "We have lost it round here." And he's right. How can he be surprised?

WITNESS: It was here that they invented the term "Thin Blue Line."

WITNESS: I feel like this riot, the whole point of the outbreak in Watts is that it marks the first major rebellion of Negroes against their own masochism. It's carried on with the express purpose of asserting that they would no longer quietly submit to the deprivation of slum life. Building the tower was the same impulse. Not to submit, to do something. To do something. He called it Nuestro Pueblo. It means Our Town or Our People.

WITNESS: Come on! The rioters have come up. We have to move.

WITNESS: The whole of Watts is exploding. Get up now. Let's go!

END