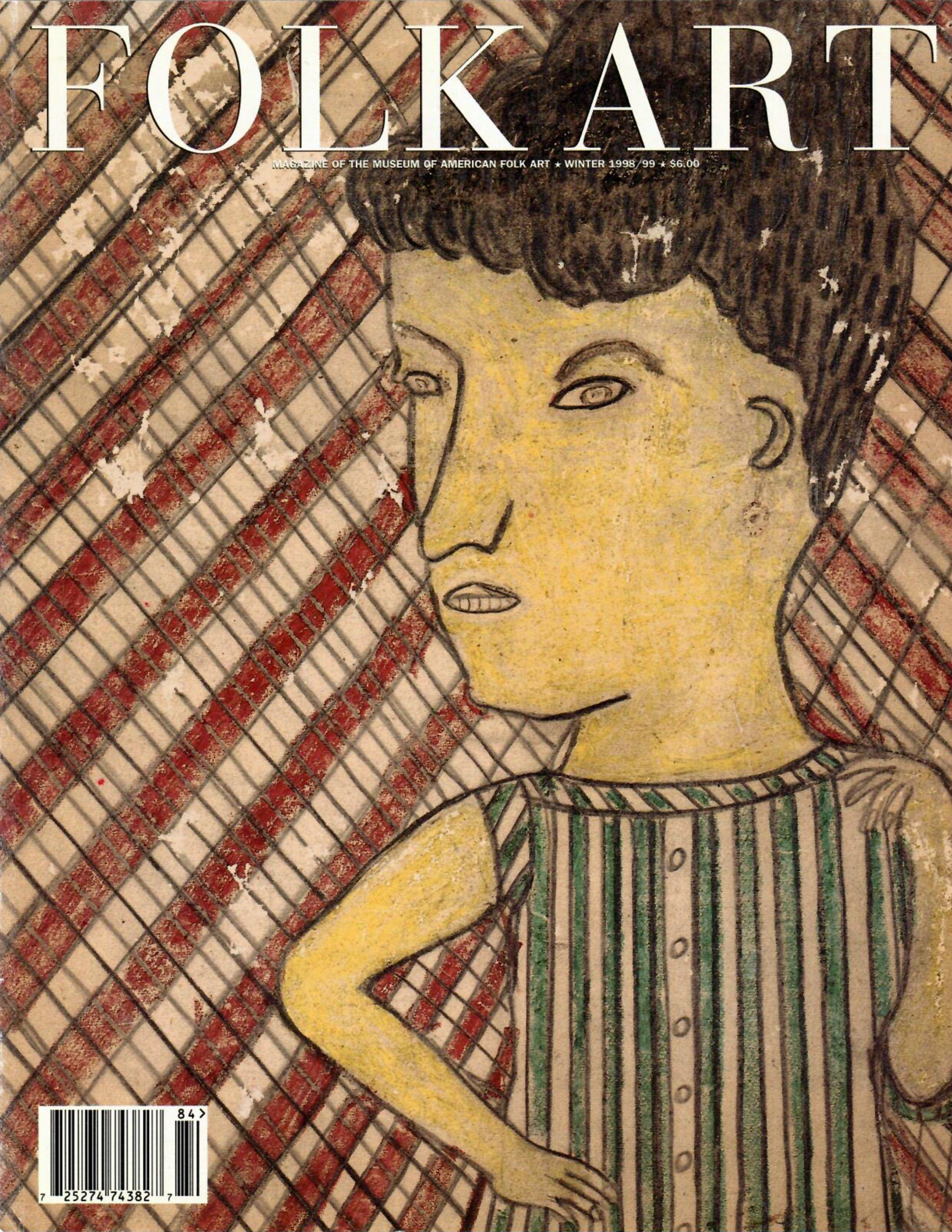


FOLK ART

MAGAZINE OF THE MUSEUM OF AMERICAN FOLK ART • WINTER 1998/99 • \$6.00



ROSEMARY GABRIEL

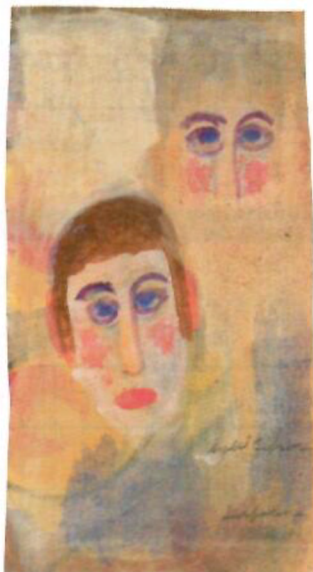
On the eve of the Museum's upcoming exhibition "The Art of Nellie Mae Rowe: Ninety-Nine and a Half Won't Do," Lee Kogan, director of the Museum's Folk Art Institute and curator of the exhibition, brings us a glimpse of some of the many drawings by Nellie Mae Rowe in the Museum's collection. The drawings range from simple studies to fully realized works such as our cover image, *Untitled (Woman and Plaid Background)*. Kogan suggests that this drawing may have been a self-portrait, for although Rowe was a deeply religious and tender person, she was quite passionate and had a strong independent temperament—she was, like the lady in this drawing, a woman with attitude. "Nellie Mae Rowe" begins on page 40; see details for the exhibition dates and tour.

Although artist Sybil Gibson was also a woman with a strong independent nature, John Hood tells us that her independence led her to paint compulsively and to disappear from society periodically. When she started making art at age fifty-five, she was consumed by it, sometimes creating 100 or more pieces in a day, which left her almost no time to attend to her barest needs. "More Than a Pretty Face: The Art of Sybil Gibson" is an essay on a life differently lived, with implications that are as haunting as many of Gibson's portraits. The essay, starting on page 47, is illustrated with some of her finest works.

The passions of young women raised in nineteenth-century middle-class America, however, were generally repressed, and "attitude" was rigorously discouraged. As Shelley Langdale points out in her essay, "The Enchantment of *The Magic Lake: The Origin and Iconography of a Nineteenth-Century Sandpaper Drawing*," romantic stories and images published in the 1840s and 1850s were very popular and inspired many artistic efforts. In recounting the story of *The Magic Lake*, Langdale says, "One can imagine the appeal of this racy romance about a young girl who casts her responsibilities aside to seek her true love." In fact, the illustration in this story, when it was published, very much appealed to and inspired at least five women to copy it almost exactly in their carefully rendered, monochromatic marble dust drawings. Do read Langdale's intriguing, beautifully illustrated essay. It begins on page 52.

I sincerely hope you enjoy your winter issue of *Folk Art* and will stop in during the holiday season to see the remarkable exhibition "Masterpieces in Wood: American Folk Marquetry from The Hirschhorn Foundation" and the Museum's glittering holiday trees. This year's trees were decorated with ornaments made by the Hudson Valley chapter of the Historical Society of Early American Decoration (HSEAD). On behalf of the whole Museum staff and all HSEAD members, I wish you very happy holidays and a healthy new year.

Rosemary Gabriel



SURFACING
Sybil Gibson
Probably Alabama
c. 1980
Tempera on kraft paper
30 x 16"
Collection of Cynthia Ford

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More Than a Pretty Face



T.A. Buchanan, Inc.

The Art of **Sybil Gibson**

By John Hood

Let me describe an artist. She is a white woman from the Deep South born into an affluent family. She attends private schools, gains a college degree, and teaches elementary school. She marries and has a daughter. ▶ Yet her personal life is chaotic. Divorced from her first husband, she leaves their daughter to be raised by the child's grandparents in Alabama. She moves to Florida and marries again. Her husband dies, leaving her a small pension. ▶ At the age of fifty-five, she begins to paint compulsively and prolifically, creating thousands of ethereal images with tempera on grocery bags, newspaper, and cardboard. Some days she does one-hundred pieces or more. ▶ She wastes all her assets through lack of attention. Her art receives recognition in Miami. By the time a third one-woman show is mounted, she has returned to Alabama and never sees the show. Reappearing in a skid-row flat in Birmingham, she continues to paint. Estranged

UNTITLED PORTRAIT

Dunedin, Florida

c. 1994

Acrylic on construction paper

18 x 12"

Collection of Fred and Theresa
Buchanan

from her family, she drifts from relative to acquaintance, and ends up in a retirement home in Jasper. She is kicked out for disruptive behavior. Practically blind, she is brought by her daughter to a nursing home in Florida. She has a cataract operation and resumes painting reams a day until she dies four years later.

This was Sybil Gibson's life. It would not have been more noteworthy than thousands of other sad and unfortunate lives except that Sybil Gibson had talent. The paintings she left behind demand that we take a much closer look.

raised by her parents and attended a number of Alabama colleges. Upon receiving a degree from Jacksonville State Teachers College in Alabama, Gibson returned to Walker County to teach grade school.

Because of a troubling sinus condition, she moved to Fort Myers, Florida, in 1945 or 1946. She again left Theresa, then in her mid-teens, behind with her family, and continued teaching grade school. After moving to Miami, she married David DeYarmon in 1950 or 1951.¹ He later moved to Ohio without her and died there in 1958.

This wet-on-wet technique, with thin layers of paint, served to produce a consistently soft, delicate quality in her work. She sometimes painted several pieces at once. She approached many subjects with a highly stylized, lyrical touch, including still lifes, landscapes, flowers, birds, cats, children, groups of figures, and the recurring image of a single, haunted, female face.

I am called a primitive painter because my work is free of all learning about drawing and color mixing. I just stuck my

DUCKS
Alabama
1980
Tempera on kraft paper
grocery bag
17½ × 37½"
Collection of Robert Cargo
Folk Art Gallery, Tuscaloosa,
Alabama



Born to Monroe Aaron and Lenora Reid Aaron on February 18, 1908, in Dora, Walker County, Alabama, some twenty miles northwest of Birmingham, she was the second of six children. Her father was a banker, merchant, and coal mine operator. The Aarons were of old Alabama stock with money.

In 1929, Sybil married Hugh Gibson and settled in nearby Jasper. Their daughter, Theresa, was born on September 9, 1932. The Gibsons were soon separated, and they divorced in 1935. At the urging of her father, Sybil Gibson left her daughter to be

Though she had briefly attended an art class at the University of Alabama, her career as an artist really started spontaneously in 1963. After coming across some striking gift-wrapping paper in a Miami department store, she said, "It's so beautiful, so charming, and yet so simple I could do it myself."² From that point on, Gibson was an artist with a vengeance. She feverishly produced a series of paintings with tempera paint on damp grocery bags, which were first soaked in water in order to flatten, and unglue them, and found this medium suitable to her needs.

brush into the paint and began painting. One will find no evidence of presketching in my work, for I do not waste any time with such preliminaries or guidelines, which I have coined and labeled the "color book concept" that most people never escape from . . . I can't sit and copy something. That would be too much work. It must be completely my own creation. The amount of one's self which he can put into a work is the difference between he and the thousands of others

who paint. I'll let you in on my secret of success—I never bend over backwards to be good, for who really knows what good is? It is a changeable essence—what is easy and natural for one to do.³

Gibson claims that she didn't plan or presketch her work; rather, when she started on a page she didn't know what would come out. She let the paint tell her what to do. Yet what she painted wasn't simply random color and line. The faces or the pretty

pal subject in her later years—depict an expression clouded with sadness and mystery, with a somber palette of browns and grays highlighted by a touch of white and red. The impenetrable eyes—simply a black dot or gray over white—are an important feature. Juxtaposed against the softness of the figures, they create an ominous and subtly threatening gaze, an intense stare that holds the viewer.

In 1993, a reviewer for *Journal North*, a newspaper in Santa Fe, New Mexico, noted the tension present in the cheery images: “[T]he thing that

tion—with all respect to the teachers. Art must come from within.”⁷

Gibson's primary use of grocery bags was dictated by her state of poverty and the sheer volume of her artistic output. She did not like to use expensive art paper: “Good art paper turns me off, while something out of a trash pile turns me on.”⁸ She loved the notion of using found material and couldn't resist picking up junk.

Gibson showed her paintings around Miami and they were well received. Elwin Porter, an instructor at the Art Institute of Miami who knew



Courtesy Robert Cargo Folk Art Gallery

UNTITLED
Alabama
c. 1980
Tempera on cardboard
18½ × 13¾"
Private collection



Courtesy Robert Cargo Folk Art Gallery

UNTITLED
Alabama
c. 1980
Tempera on kraft paper grocery bag
16 × 11½"
Collection of Sandra McPherson



Jack Black

UNTITLED
Probably Alabama
1975
Tempera on kraft paper grocery bag
25 × 20"
Collection of Claire Wilson

little girls seated in flowers were a conscious presence in her mind when she worked: “I was painting my childhood memories. That's still the best way to start painting, because you're not copying. Your childhood memories are so different from anything else.”⁴ She described reliving childhood feelings of fear: “It is such intense feeling that permits projections of it into our paintings, thereby permitting others to share our feeling. Paintings without feelings are not very effective.”⁵

While her series of flowers and children were often done in muted primary colors, Gibson's faces—a princi-

really comes off the wall at you is Gibson's pain . . . they're haunted, as if something horrible were happening just off to one side.”⁶

She said that she let the brush and paint lead her, but she appears to have had a sure hand. Her brush strokes and color arrangements are not tentative or slapstick. She had a discriminating and determined brush. While certainly influenced by the children she worked with, her one experience with an art class in college had no impact on her work: “It is my contention that art cannot be taught. I consider any art lessons which I was exposed to as just so much frustra-

the artist, described her home as filled with works “stacked in teetering piles on top of the refrigerator, under the stove, under the bed, on tables and chairs—everywhere.”⁹ In 1971, the Miami Museum of Modern Art gave Gibson a one-woman show. Bernard Davis, president of the museum, wrote that he had been watching Gibson for six years and found her an “important, natural painter who, with lack of detail, could accomplish pictures of such tenderness, beauty, and simplicity that they were really unique.”¹⁰

A critic for *The Miami Herald* compared Gibson's work to that of Milton Avery and called her naive in

the European sense: "This formula is one of complete lyric freedom. Children have it for a short time . . . I have seldom seen more beautiful passages of painting than some of those to be found in the dream gardens and dream children that Sybil Gibson has put down on commonplace grocery sacks."¹¹ Her work has also been compared to that of Odilon Redon.¹²

Gibson never saw the exhibition in Miami. She had disappeared two years earlier, in 1969, after a period in which she lost her money and property because of her own improvidence and irresponsibility. When she resurfaced in Birmingham in 1971, bereft and living in a seedy hotel, she said she had been studying weeds. Gibson was prone to periods of self-absorption and lost track of her daily affairs and personal relationships in the intense pursuit of her curiosities, like the stock market or religion.

That year, her work was also being shown at the Town Hall Gallery at the Birmingham University School. A reviewer wrote, "[D]escribing the subtle charm of her paintings has baffled almost every writer who has tackled the chore. The paintings are not overpowering, they are truly fragile in the best sense. The colors are very delicate, and while Sybil Gibson's work is figurative, her realism is tempered with a certain dreamlike quality."¹³

In 1972, Gibson had two one-woman shows in Alabama, one at the Fayette Art Museum and the other at the Tuskegee Institute's Carver Museum. Jack Black, director of the Fayette Art Museum, who knew Gibson personally for many years, said of her early paintings, "Having been an elementary school teacher may have had something to do with her turning out so many fetching paintings of picturesque little girls."¹⁴ He records her as saying, "[L]et the brush do what it seems to want to do. The paint itself will help you. As it blends with other colors it will suggest cues for you to follow. You can't go wrong if you follow your paint."¹⁵

We next pick up her life in a report from *The Independent Florida Alligator*, Gainesville, in the winter of 1979, when she was seventy-one. She was sharing a trailer with her cousin Bill Aaron and encouraging senior citizens to paint.¹⁶ By 1984 she was living

in Delaware House, a facility for the elderly in Jasper, where she had been for three years. Her sight was not good.

She was forced to leave Delaware House suddenly in 1986 for apparently disruptive behavior. She stopped painting because of her deteriorating eyesight in 1988. In 1991, Gibson's daughter, Theresa Buchanan, took charge of her mother's life. Gibson was legally blind and under protective custody. Buchanan moved her to the Dunedin Care Center in Dunedin, Florida, and arranged for a cataract operation. With her eyesight restored, Gibson was soon back at work, covering her bed and floor with stacks of new paintings. This commitment to her work continued until her death four years later on January 2, 1995, at the age of eighty-six. Through her daughter's intervention, her life was finally organized and her work preserved.

Sybil Gibson's work is included in the permanent collections of the Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama; the Fayette Art Museum, Fayette, Alabama; the Marietta/Cobb Museum of Art, Marietta, Georgia; the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama; the Museum of American Folk Art, New York; the New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, Louisiana; and the New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, New York. Her work is also on view in a permanent installation at The Birmingham Airport.

It is impossible to tally the number of paintings Gibson created. She undoubtedly completed many thousands over three decades, but most were thrown away or destroyed: "I lost more priceless art to the dump than any other artist ever did."¹⁷ Her work is detached from the workaday world of ordinary people. It does not reflect an awareness of or connection with the social upheaval in the South during her lifetime. It is a world of enchanting flowers and pretty little girls, yet there is more.

Sybil Gibson was more than an eccentric nomad who compulsively painted on grocery bags. The idiosyncratic and mysterious quality of her paintings has a compelling appeal. Painting was her life and gave it meaning. Recognition and attention

came from her work. She was not just another difficult old lady. She was an artist. ★

John Hood is an advertising sales representative for Folk Art magazine. He received a certificate in folk art studies from the Museum's Folk Art Institute in 1994. He and his wife, Laima, have traveled extensively through the American South, visiting folk artists and collecting their work.

NOTES

- 1 While Sybil DeYarmon was her legal name, the artist signed all of her works "Sybil Gibson."
- 2 Kathy Kemp and Keith Boyer, *Revelations: Alabama's Visionary Artists* (Birmingham, Ala.: Crane Hill Publishers, 1994), p. 66.
- 3 Betsy Lavanna, "Sybil Gibson—An Artist Burning with Ideas," *Daily Mountain Eagle* (Jasper, Ala.), 1 September 1972.
- 4 Kemp and Boyer, op. cit.
- 5 Linda Baker, "Sybil Gibson: She Likes Making Something Out of Nothing," *Daily Mountain Eagle* (Jasper, Ala.), 24 February 1984.
- 6 Mark Van deWalle, "Naive Art at Muth: Mixture of Innocence, Experience," *Journal North* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.), 1 July 1993.
- 7 Sybil Gibson, "Autobiography," in *Sybil Gibson* (Miami, Fla.: Miami Museum of Modern Art, 1971).
- 8 Chuck Rosenak and Jan Rosenak, *Museum of American Folk Art Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century American Folk Art and Artists* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), p. 137.
- 9 Griffin Smith, "Sybil Gibson, Artist, Where Are You?," *The Miami Herald*, 30 May 1971.
- 10 Bernard Davis, "A Neglected Artist," in *Sybil Gibson* (Miami, Fla.: Miami Museum of Modern Art, 1971).
- 11 Smith, op. cit.
- 12 D. Eric Bookhardt, review in *Art Papers*, November/December 1992, n.p.
- 13 Howell Raines, "Here She Is, *Miami Herald*," in Birmingham, *The Birmingham News*, 20 June 1971. Raines is now the editorial page editor at *The New York Times*.
- 14 Jack Black, interview with the author, September 1998.
- 15 Jack Black, "Art Museum Opens Third Season Sunday with Show by Sybil Gibson," *Fayette County Broadcaster* (Fayette, Ala.), 21 September 1972.
- 16 "A Second Childhood," *The Independent Florida Alligator* (Gainesville, Fla.), 15 February 1979.
- 17 Rosenak and Rosenak, op. cit.

**ABSTRACT WITH THREE
FACES**
Dunedin, Florida
1993
Tempera on newspaper
27 × 21"
Museum of American Folk Art,
gift of Theresa Buchanan,
Mother's Day gift from Sybil
Gibson to her daughter,
Theresa, 1993
1993.8.1



1993
Gavin Ashworth