

# “Ride It More Realistic”



Indiana Folk Art  
by

Lois Doane  
Donnie Bell

Rae Smith  
Larry Whorrall

## Lois Doane



Lois Doane (1895–1990?) spent all her life in Springs Valley, outside the resort towns of West Baden and French Lick. Growing up during its heyday as the “Monte Carlo of America,” Doane described the area as “a melting pot of all people—different colors and different races, and from different places.” She became interested in painting early in life, but the needs of her family kept her from seeking school training. Instead she worked in local hotels and in her parent’s boarding house. Her father painted and made photographs as a hobby, capturing images of the life that she knew. Doane described his paintings as “primitive” and different than hers: “He would draw

in squares,” she says, “and then fill in. It made it look stiff, you know, more formal. I just draw free hand. As I said, I trace it and draw it. Sometimes I see a spot, any way to get an idea, maybe I see something outside.”\*

Along with her father’s earlier paintings, the artist also held onto and perhaps learned from the memory retained in her father’s scrapbooks of photographs that he took. Doane herself met a range of characters that passed through the bustling town, from those working at the hotels to circus folk and musicians. Memories of them all seem to have made their way into her work, as she described her paintings as “pictures of 1900, from then on, memories.”

She liked to paint “colorful people,” like the Amish whom she described as “colorful in their plain ways.” In Doane’s painting of the Amish, red and green outfits frame delicately clasped hands and quiet, serene faces that look out upon the verdant hills of southern Indiana. The artist’s family had been among the original Quaker settlers of Orange County, a heritage which she spoke of fondly and by which she lived. The commandment of “thou shall not lie” was among the important rules to live by for Quakers and seems central to how she lived her life. To a certain extent, her memory paintings do just that. They provide honest accounts of early twentieth-century life, mixing them with creations derived from her own imagination.

Her “dream pictures” are closely related to the illustrated stories and poems she wrote, the latter of which have been described as “inverted fairytales” that

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\* All information on Lois Doane comes from *Water from Another Time* [videorecording] Kane-Lewis Productions. Produced & directed by Richard Kane; written & directed by Dillon Bustin. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 1982.

express an inner life of toil. In her “The Maid of the Ashes,” Doane writes the “true” story of Cinderella, a tale in which she writes, “this may disillusion you but I am the real Cinderella. You have always pictured her as a girl a fairy godmother helped from rags to riches and happiness. That is not true. All the sweet stuff you read is hogwash.” But the feeling of melancholy evoked in these tales, in which nothing can “come to pass in a fairy story” and in which Cinderella must “remain in true life,” also seems balanced by Doane’s bright and freely composed paintings of nature and her dignified self-portraits.



Doane painted to remember and to give her life meaning. As one of her poems reads, “keep away from statistics/ride it more realistic/...make it interesting, make it shine/don’t forget the grime/write my story while I’m here to relate/because someday it may be too late.” Reflecting a long, full life, her paintings, stories, and poems all made her opinions known and offered guidance to others, handing down wisdom from experience.

## Larry Whorrall



The trade of objects in flea markets is a fluid system within many of the communities of southern Indiana. For many, like Larry Whorrall who has a booth at a flea market in Loogootee, the buying and selling of objects functions as a way to link to the community. “I’m there everyday, sometimes two or three times a day,” he says; “I just make a day of it, looking around for stuff. But I get a kick out of talking to people. You meet people from all over, in the flea market; they’re a lot freer about talking than they are on the outside. There’s a kind of camaraderie there between people.”\*

\* All information on Larry Whorrall is from an interview with the artist on April 14, 2007



Ten years ago, Whorrall had open-heart surgery and, afterwards, a friend told him that collecting would be beneficial for his recovery. He says, “The guy that got me into this, he had heart trouble too and he said ‘you need to find a good hobby to get your mind off your health problems.’” Ever since, he has collected continuously, complementing it with a steady stream of drawing and scrapbooking. Another compulsive hobby, his drawings come out of a tendency he observed in his own family. “My dad was kind of a doodler too,” he explains, “and my brother is a real good artist. And I kind of got a little bit from him. I just doodle for fun, I enjoy drawing.” These sides to the artist’s daily activity – his doodling, collecting, and scrapbooking – make up a busy life with roots in his community, family, and his own health.

Whorrall’s “miscellaneous jars” are pieced together in a system of collecting, organizing, and ordering. At the flea market, he is able to observe the community aesthetic. “This flea market business is a strange thing,” he reflects. “I’ve told people, you can put something up there that’s really nice, really nice, and they won’t buy it. You put something over here that’s just a useless piece of junk I found in the garbage, boy, they’ll buy it just like that.” Over the past ten years, Whorrall has collected these useless pieces of junk. He orders them in jars by category and then puts one of each in a line of jars to create an assemblage of miscellany. Because they are resold, the artist looks for objects that attract the eye: unused crayons, fossils, old keys, bottlecaps, dice, gamepieces, and marbles. When looked at long enough, one can perceive the underlying pattern within each jar. The new and the old become



balanced, using the thrown away object, the fossil, and rock, found at the flea market, in the trash or in nature.

At night, Whorrall occupies his time drawing cartoon forms in marker and making scrapbooks. The drawings are taken

from comics, many of which he remembers seeing when he was young. He combines elements of several different sources to create creatures, animals, and people. Likewise, the artist's scrapbooks are comprised of "all the stuff that I can remember seeing, or doing or being," including advertisements or photographs of "Speedy Alka-Seltzer," Neil Sadaka, and Groucho Marx.

Larry Whorrall has developed an expertise for selecting things, sorting them, and then composing a regularized miscellany, creating a network of objects, images, and memory from the community, his family, and himself. Rescuing these items from loss, giving them new meaning through creative combination and re-presentation, he is able to give meaning to his own brush with mortality: "I think I [came] so close to death that I collect things to try to hold on to life, trying to grasp everything I can get, I guess, before it gets away. Not everybody gets a second chance."

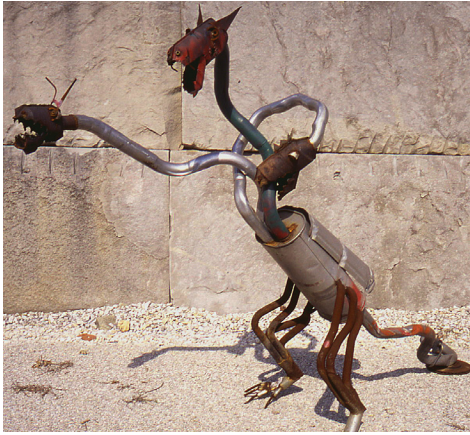
## *Donnie Bell*



"I started here when I was twelve years old," says Donnie Bell, standing in front of Bell's Exhaust in Oolitic. At 27, the artist has been sculpting animals from car parts for fifteen years, using the same skills his father Dan Bell taught him to fix mufflers. Welding and bending metal is central to this trade and Bell freely uses his expertise with metal to create sculptures of animals from the scraps that accumulate from doing car repairs six days a week. To date, he has made between twenty and thirty sculptures in various forms and sizes, including small dogs and turtles, reindeer, people, and fantastic creatures, such as his three-headed dragon.

From years of experience, Bell cuts up different car and truck parts and removes them from vehicles in a methodical way. As he works, Bell collects discarded parts that he thinks could be manipulated to create a particular form. Based on his previous knowledge of past works, he can discern which muffler and other exhaust parts are perfect for forming heads, torsos, legs, arms, ears and other body parts. He wants pieces that are not too rusty or too weak to hold the form of the entire sculpture, applying the same attention to detail to a sculpture as he would to a customer's vehicle.

Often working in tandem with his dad, Donnie says that once enough parts have been accumulated for a whole sculpture, he starts when things are slow around the shop. With the example of the current three-headed dragon, he will begin with the feet and torso. When the heads get added to the top, the artist counterweights them with another scrap welded to the tail to stabilize the



whole form. Once finished, larger sculptures like this one stand in front of the shop. Donnie admits people in the community like them: sometimes commissioning others, sometimes just taking them from the shop, returning them months or even years after. Bell has also made many smaller works for the home and his commissions can be seen in neighborhood yards.

Donnie Bell's large works indicate a specific continuity with the exhaust systems from

which they arise. Employing tailpipes and mufflers that originally began as one long system, works like the large dragon retain the same type of extension and ferocious attitude that make up exhaust systems. And, with the three heads that bite each other and show their fangs, Bell's work embodies the power of engines and the solidity of metal.\*

## *Rae Smith (Mona Lisa)*



According to those who met her during her brief residency in the East Village area of Indianapolis, Rae Smith, also known as "Mona Lisa," drew portraits, decorated the walls of wherever she lived around town, and would readily recite her poems. Indicating a deep connection with the most well-known portrait in the world, her nickname demonstrates both her love for portraiture and the dignity she grants her sitters, as well as the respect she had for others. Her creative expression evidently played an important role in her life and in her connection with others in

the community. Little else is known of her since her recent return to Alabama, where she was born in the 1950s. The portraits shown in this exhibit depict members of her community as well as her immediate family, all of whom served as the focus of her creative expression.

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\* All information on Donnie Bell is from personal communications with the artist on April 10 and April 14, 2007.





A petite woman, Rae Smith was an eccentric dresser known for composing striking outfits from thrift store finds. Elements of her eccentric choices of clothing make their way into her work too. Her portraits feature people with flamboyant attire and each are given sophisticated poses. For example, she accessorizes two of her female sitters with pearls and sunglasses, while her male sitters, included in works like *Uncle Leroy* and *Blues*, wear bowties. These visual motifs recur frequently in her work, unified against other round forms, like curly hair, earrings, eyes and lips. Rae Smith also enhances her sitters with striped pants and dresses, checkered jackets and hats, juxtaposed

with equally distinctive backgrounds.

According to neighborhood friend Greg Brown, her portraits also evoke a love for French style with which she was greatly enamored.\* One of her poems reads, “Stale tobacco/Musty sweat/The moth in a nylon dress/French lace and the/Painters brush/soured water & sensuous breath/two distant stars and dark/jazzy fire/Eterpe† the muse and his poetical/song/cat fight and the stung/silent night & the brake of dawn.” It is uncertain whether Rae Smith imagined a connection between her drawings and her prose; yet, the strong imagery of a dark, sexy, and musical environment resonates within many of her portraits.

The bohemian environment illustrated in Smith’s poems links the distinctive outfits and accessories of her portraits to a coolness of sophistication that she perceived in those she knew. Portraits are creations. Traditionally functioning to add status to the individual it portrays, they additionally incorporate costumes to construct identity. Perhaps reflecting the same identity she presented to others with her thrift store finds, Smith’s portraits signified how she wanted to present her community to the world.



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\* All information on Rae Smith from personal communication with Greg Brown of Utrillo’s Art, Indianapolis, IN. January 20, February 3 and April 15, 2007

† Euterpe in Greek mythology is the muse of lyric poetry.

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