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*The Road Less Traveled* 50th anniversary program was conceived by Amy Horst, deputy director for programming. The exhibitions series was organized and curated by Arts Center Curator Karen Patterson. Special thanks to Emily Schlemowitz, assistant curator, and Amy Chaloupka, guest curator.

Front Image Cutline:  
Fred Scruton, *Work of MT Liggett, Mullinville, KS*, 2016; chromogenic print; 30 x 24 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.



JOHN MICHAEL **KOHLER ARTS CENTER**

# AMERICAN SITES: ART ENVIRONMENT PHOTOGRAPHY

+ Fred Scruton

April 16–September 3, 2017

Artist-built environments are an enduring and ever-evolving art form; people in communities throughout the U.S. and worldwide continue to be inspired to add to, alter, and transform their homes and familiar spaces into creations that reflect their experiences. Fred Scruton, a photographer based in Pennsylvania, travels extensively to photograph artists and their art environments, bringing attention to these often under-documented sites.

AMERICAN SITES is one of fifteen exhibitions on view throughout 2017 as part of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center's 50th-anniversary series, THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED. Twenty thought leaders were invited to lend their expertise and provide new insight into the Arts Center's collection of works created by art-environment builders.

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Fred Scruton, *House of Prophet Isaiah Robertson, Niagara Falls, NY*, 2015; chromogenic print; 24 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Fred Scruton began his career as a freelance photographer of art and architecture in New York City in the 1980s. Returning to his home in Brooklyn at night, he often drove by a brick four-story building covered in religious signs. As years passed, the owner, Louis DiBraggio, increased the decoration on the home, embellishing the façade and sidewalk with additional religious sentiments and assemblages of found objects, signs, and photographs. Scruton repeatedly photographed DiBraggio's installations; it was this first encounter with an artist-built environment that made a lasting impression on him. He recalls, "The whole area of 'Outsider' art was mostly new to me, but as my interest grew, Louis's corner would come to mark a turning point in my life."



Fred Scruton, Leonard Knight, *Salvation Mountain*, Niland, CA, 2009; chromogenic print; 30 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist.

In 2003, Scruton moved to Erie, PA, to take a position as a professor of photography at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. He

commenced photographing art environments in the area and beyond. Scruton frequently befriends the artists whose work he photographs, making return visits to those who live near his home and yearly road trips to record the evolution of more distant sites. "I have to remind myself that I start off as a guy that knocks on the door...but I routinely go back. I spend an enormous amount of time, and this puts me in their eyes on a whole other level and allows me to collaborate with them," he says.

AMERICAN SITES focuses on Scruton's photographs of seven artists. Scruton often receives calls or suggestions from around the country of sites he should visit; this exhibition also features photographs of those people—maybe even a neighbor—who have creatively embellished their property, adding that sense of wonder to the everyday experience. The seven artists include Dominic "Cano" Espinoza, Leonard Knight, M.T. Liggett, Joe Minter, Prophet Isaiah Robertson, Vollis Simpson, and Billy Tripp. Scruton says he does not necessarily see connections among these artists beyond their pursuit of art. "Art is often the only thing they have in common. Their work comes out of their life, and photographing them is a great avenue for getting to know and understand a range of people that I would not have otherwise."

Dominic "Cano" Espinoza's "Cano's Castle" in Antonito, CO, is a network of rooms named after chess pieces and capped by two impressive glass and aluminum-encrusted towers he calls the "King" and the "Queen." Although Espinoza rarely speaks of his time as a soldier in Vietnam, he credits his building of the castle with "being fascinated" by the Buddhist temples he saw during the war and his determination to "build something for our religion." Scruton has visited Espinoza yearly since 2008. Each year they collaborate on a new photograph of a shrine Espinoza has erected in his living room.



Fred Scruton, Dominic "Cano" Espinoza's *Cano's Castle*, Antonito, CO, 2011; chromogenic print; 24 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Fred Scruton, Joe Minter, *African Village in America*, Birmingham, AL, 2013; chromogenic print; 30 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Scruton met Leonard Knight only once prior to Knight's death in 2014, but his experience of Knight's "Salvation Mountain" in Niland, CA, stayed with Scruton. For nearly three decades, Knight constructed a sloping, terraced mound, about three stories tall and one hundred feet long, made out of adobe that he exuberantly painted with religious messages. Scruton describes seeing the kaleidoscopic mountain set in the Imperial Valley desert as like "arriving in Oz; if ever you felt like Dorothy, this was it."

In Mullinsville, KS, M.T. Liggett has lined more than a quarter-mile of his property with over four hundred sculptures. The metal and brightly painted sculptures depict local personalities, political dignitaries such as Bill Clinton, and Liggett's former romantic partners. As Scruton points out, the site is a mixture of personal and public imagery.

Joe Minter's "African Village in America" in Birmingham, AL, serves as a museum of African American history. Minter's museum is made of found materials that he transforms into African masks, signs with Biblical passages, disaster memorials, references to the treatment of slaves and African Americans in history, and scenes depicting current events and political causes such as the death penalty and the Sandy Hook shooting. Scruton says of Minter's creation, "It is kind of his way of him making peace with the world. It really comes out of the heart."

Scruton estimates that he has visited Prophet Isaiah Robertson in Niagara Falls, NY, sixty or seventy times since 2010. Robertson is a parishioner at the Mount Erie Baptist Church, located just a few blocks from the falls, where he received his first "prophecy" in 2006 and a second "prophecy" a year later. Robertson's second prophecy foretold that the Rapture (the second coming of Christ and the ascension of the saved) would take place in 2014. In response, he dedicated a room in his home for prayer, placed candles and beads throughout the house, erected a twenty-five-foot wooden cross at the head of his driveway, and began covering his home with wooden cutouts as well as signs, numbers, and symbols. Robertson attributes a specific meaning to each of his intricate, brightly colored designs.

Vollis Simpson made metal scraps into magnificent sculptures called whirligigs that twirled and jangled when placed on his land in Wilson, NC. After retiring at age sixty-five, he began experimenting with his collection of odd parts and started constructing enormous windmills in his yard. Simpson's whirligigs depict farm animals and people; references to Simpson's experiences, such as the many World War II-era airplanes; lumberjacks sawing wood; and a guitar player based on his son. Scruton recalls "painting the sculptures with light using a high intensity floodlight" to capture the power of the creations at night.

Billy Tripp's "The Mindfield Cemetery" in Brownsville, TN, is a diary of sorts. "It's a story of his life...you walk through it with him, and he's got a little tribute to Simon Rodia, tributes to his favorite authors; it's essentially a monumentally-scaled personal scrapbook," says Scruton. Looking from afar, Tripp's sculpture of repurposed steel from bridges and scrap metal resembles an intricate web. Begun over twenty-five years ago, Tripp continues to add to the structure, making it more complex every year. Scruton has visited Tripp biannually since 2008; he particularly enjoys watching Tripp ascend the beams and walk the grid of metal trusses.

The sixty-five photographs on view in AMERICAN SITES reveal the breadth and depth of Scruton's engagement with his subject matter, as well as the wellspring of ingenuity, creativity, and curiosity that flourishes in communities across the country.