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*The Road Less Traveled* 50th anniversary program was conceived by Amy Horst, deputy director for programming. The exhibition 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:  
Von Bruenchenhein house (interior detail, plaque above the kitchen door), 1983. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.



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JOHN MICHAEL **KOHLER ARTS CENTER**

## MYTHOLOGIES: EUGENE VON BRUENCHENHEIN

- + Michelle Grabner
- + Brett Littman
- + Lisa Stone
- + Karen Patterson
- + Chris Wiley

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There are very few people who encountered Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's work in situ, very few who experienced firsthand the incredible universe he and his wife generated within that home. Those who did were confounded by the incongruence of the reality of the couple's living conditions and the imagined realm they produced. By all accounts, the Von Bruenchenheins lived in abject poverty, yet many of the artworks reference royalty, innovation, and passion, revealing a larger-than-life sense of self.

Edward Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910–1983) was born in Marinette, Wisconsin. After graduating from high school, Von Bruenchenhein worked as a florist and later found employment at a commercial bakery, where he worked until the late 1950s. In 1943, he married Eveline Kalka, whom he renamed "Marie" in honor of one of his favorite aunts.

Over the next forty years, their home on the west side of Milwaukee evolved into an all-encompassing universe. Working in relative privacy, Von Bruenchenhein produced thousands of artworks including paintings, photographs, and sculpture. Evidence of his elaborate thoughts and theories on the universe—and his place in it—can be found in all that he created, including sketches, poetry, and voice recordings. Each piece—an elaborate tower made of poultry bones; a stunningly composed image of his muse, Marie; a vibrant painting of the cosmos; a small, delicate throne; a golden crown; an intricate invention scribbled in a book—tells the story of a man who believed he was destined for greatness, who existed without any confines or limits.

MYTHOLOGIES

With over two hundred works, site photos, archives, poetry, and audio recordings, MYTHOLOGIES is the largest, most comprehensive exhibition of Von Bruenchenhein works to date. An accompanying two hundred-page publication, *Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Mythologies*, featuring essays by all the contributors will be in stores September 2017.



Von Bruenchenhein house (exterior detail, front façade), 1983. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

# MYTHOLOGIES: EUGENE VON BRUENCHENHEIN

It is now thirty-four years since Eugene Von Bruenchenhein was brought to the attention of the art world. The Arts Center presented the first exhibition of his work, *Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Obsessive Visionary*, in 1984 and currently holds the largest museum collection of his art. The recognition that arose from that exhibition and the accompanying publication came with a bittersweet sense of accomplishment, however, as the level of fame and attention was exactly what the artist had sought—and never attained—in his lifetime.

The intervening years have seen his works achieve considerable acclaim and representation in prominent museum and private collections in addition to inclusion in numerous solo and group exhibitions around the world. And despite being renown, the mystery surrounding the microcosm that Eugene and Marie inhabited remains. The mythology he constructed—the truths and the ideas that motivated him on a daily basis—will never be fully understood, but we look for clues in the work he left for us.

In honor of the Arts Center's 50th anniversary and its first art environment acquisition—a decision that charted the course for the Arts Center's pivotal role in the preservation and presentation of art environments—we reached out to four curators whose paths have crossed with Von Bruenchenhein's work throughout the years and who have, in their own way, contributed to the continued acclaim.

Chris Wiley served as curatorial advisor and head catalog writer for The Encyclopedic Palace at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2015, where several of Von Bruenchenhein's photographic prints were exhibited. Wiley took the iconic sign that hung in the Von Bruenchenhein home, on which the artist describes himself as "Freelance Artist - Poet and Sculptor - Inovator - Arrow maker and Plant man - Bone artifacts constructor - Photographer and Architect - Philosopher" and reveals just how unstoppable and insatiable Von Bruenchenhein was. This exhibition honors those nine facets of the artist's practice and Wiley's writing accompanies each area.



Von Bruenchenhein house (interior site detail, parlor with painted wall), 1983. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.



Von Bruenchenhein house (exterior detail, greenhouse), 1983. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

Brett Littman, executive director at The Drawing Center, curated the most recent major retrospective of Von Bruenchenhein's work, presented in 2010 at the American Folk Art Museum. He delves into the lesser recognized aspects of Von Bruenchenhein's work, his drawings and appreciation of nature. The seemingly self-generating nature of Von Bruenchenhein's artwork and the way his creative processes germinate and grow is reminiscent of plant life, and this imagery runs throughout the artist's entire body of work.

As an artist, writer, and educator based in Von Bruenchenhein's home of Milwaukee, Michelle Grabner has long taught the work of Von Bruenchenhein at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and lectures across the country. She draws upon contemporary theory and engages with new research to demonstrate how Von Bruenchenhein articulated the conditions of his landscape in his paintings in unprecedented ways. In the 1950s and 60s, he witnessed an accelerated mid-twentieth-century world contoured by Cold War ideology, proxy wars, the Space Race, mass consumerism, and the hydrogen bomb. From his small Midwestern home, Von Bruenchenhein's mid-twentieth-century worldview was fantastical and global, yet his aesthetic was idiosyncratic and local, revealing a truth more pronounced than many of the mainstream artists of the same era.



Von Bruenchenhein house (interior detail, sculptures in basement), 1983. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

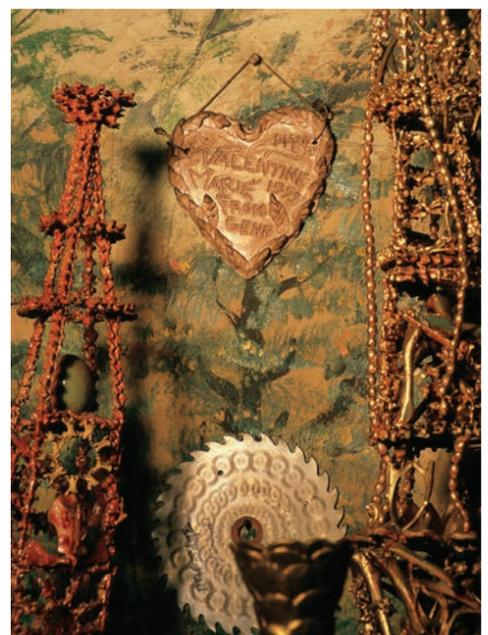


Von Bruenchenhein house (interior detail, bone chairs strung up in the attic), 1983. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

constructing towers with poultry bones, using a technique he had mastered in the crafting of tiny, magisterial bone thrones in the 1960s; the exact time frame for the construction of the bone towers is unknown, but it is presumed that Von Bruenchenhein created them circa 1979...The tower motif proved to be a potent pursuit in which the artist improvised media and techniques capable of expressing his ideas."

In the 1980s Lisa Stone worked at the Carl Hammer Gallery, one of the first commercial galleries to represent Von Bruenchenhein's work, and she is currently the curator at the Roger Brown Study Collection in Chicago. For MYTHOLOGIES, Stone considered Von Bruenchenhein's notions of grandeur and architecture through the examination of his late series of tower paintings. As she wrote, "He cultivated a long-held fascination with towers, ingeniously exploring the possibilities of depicting tall buildings and their symbolic implications off and on for nearly thirty years. His first tower paintings date to the mid-1950s. He returned to the theme, hesitantly, in 1976-77, then full on in 1978, and again in 1981, with a final procession of paintings involving an invented architectural age. Between these last two stages, he tried his hand at

Presenting a large number of photos of Marie Von Bruenchenhein in the exhibition, JMKAC Curator Karen Patterson contemplates Marie's role as muse and queen in the manifestation of Von Bruenchenhein's universe. Not only did he produce the majority of the paintings, sculptures, and drawings in that world, he also was the only voice creating the meaning around them. It is evident that Eugene Von Bruenchenhein held the dominant role in the house, yet there are many ideas to explore about Marie Von Bruenchenhein's place within their creative life together. Although there is still so much more to understand, this exhibition brings her to the forefront of our minds.



Von Bruenchenhein house (interior site detail, parlor wall), 1983. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.