

# The Outsiders

Their work can't be found in museums or art galleries. Instead, "outside artists" fill their front yards with sculptures and found objects.

**D**ogs of all sizes litter the crushed red granite in Gary Parsel's front yard. A gray Scottie points from atop a scalloped, concrete birdbath. A tan-and-white Bassett sniffs from a spray of concrete palm fronds. They share the yard with Tony the Pony and a guy named Stan who never, ever, wears anything but shorts, sunglasses and a tie printed with railroad cars.

The neighbors don't seem to mind. The dogs never get loose or dig up the daisies or bite the mail carrier. Constructed of rebar and rapid-set mortar, they'll likely hold their poses until the end of time.

continues to carry the torch.

Coined by art critic Roger Cardinal in 1972, the term outsider art originally referred to work by artists with no formal training who use unconventional techniques and practice outside mainstream institutions. Watts Towers in Los Angeles is one of the best-known examples. Built by an Italian immigrant in the 1950s, the 100-foot spiral of mortared bottles, pottery and shells became a National Historic Landmark.

Phoenix boasts several sites, although none as famous. One of the most beloved is Louis Lee's rock garden. Born in Canton, Lee

immigrated to the U.S. as a young man and came to Phoenix after serving in World War II. In the late 1950s, he built a house and began to decorate his yard according to his vision of an Oriental rock garden. Over the years, it grew into an intricate maze of concrete garden edgers encrusted

with rocks and lights making a latticework of outdoor rooms and narrow pathways with low arches.

Into his structures, Lee cemented dishes from the Chinese restaurant he owned, along with cups, saucers and entire civilizations of porcelain Buddhas. He turned refrigerator doors into tables, and cemented vases with silk flowers onto their tops. Neighbors left offerings: bowling trophies, a whale vertebrae. All found places in the garden, along with every single liquor bottle Lee ever emptied.

Lee turns 94 in October, which has fans worried about what will happen to his garden. Stabilizing outsider art sites can be

spendy, with art conservators charging as much as \$1,000 a day. Then the issue becomes maintenance. With no endowment, it is difficult for properties to become self-sustaining because they don't attract enough visitors.

But losing sites like Lee's would be a triumph of homogenization over texture and character, says Betsy Freeman, a folk art expert who used to run Phoenix's public arts program. "It would be a tragedy if Mr. Lee's garden disappeared," she says. "I worry about it all the time. It's not only a piece of city history. It commemorates a life."

Few people have tried harder to preserve a site than Marion Blake, who bought Grover Cleveland Thompson's rock garden after the artist died in 1978. In the front yard of his Sunnyslope home, Thompson, a retired heavy-equipment operator, constructed a fantasy world from crushed Fiesta Ware, including windmills, fountains and a nine-foot replica of Seattle's Space Needle. He populated his world with concrete figures and faces cast from 1950s Halloween masks.

For a while, Blake opened the garden one Sunday a month. But now she is approaching 65, and wants to turn it over to someone who would preserve it. So far, she hasn't had any luck.

A few years ago, she gave the property to the Kohler Foundation, which has preserved a number of sites. Kohler planned to conserve the sculptures and relocate them to ASU West. But Blake pulled the plug when the Foundation asked for an extension after the agreement with ASU West didn't materialize. She also failed to interest the city, and admits she is tempted to put the property on e-Bay.

"I've been doing all this stuff to no avail, and it's never brought me anything except disappointment," she says. "If no one cares about it, why shouldn't I just cash out?"

If she does, at least the Valley will have Parsel, who has no plans to quit.

"It's always something I had to do," he says of his art. "Some people have to play golf. I have to do this."

— Kathy Montgomery

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A housepainter and son of a plasterer, it makes sense that Parsel approaches sculpture like a construction project. But stucco wasn't the artist's first medium. He crafted the giant Celanese head from *papier mâché* and carved the colossal Indian head from Styrofoam. Each had their problems. *Papier mâché* got heavy and damaged easily. Styrofoam is light, but impermanent, and turns in the wind.

Parsel also experimented with found objects. He's astonished by the things he finds on the street. Amazing things. Free pliers. Free pruners. He likes how they're changed by the weather or traffic pouring over them like the tide. "Walker," who resembles C-3PO of *Star Wars*, sprung from a golf flag and broiler pan. His body incorporates lengths of electrical wire, a bicycle pump, a toothbrush, old belts and a couple of knives.

Some call Parsel an "outsider artist" for his unconventional materials and techniques, and heir to a tradition whose best local examples could soon be lost. Aging artists or caretakers own the Valley's other outsider art sites, making their futures uncertain. At 54, Parsel is relatively young, still working, and

## Outsider Art Sites

- **Gary Parsel's Studio**, 535 E. Willetta Street, Phoenix. This site resumes as a stop on the First Friday tour in October.
- **Louis Lee's Rock Garden**, 4015 E. McDonald Street, Phoenix. The yard is not open to the public, but it's visible from the street.
- **Marion Blake's Sunnyslope Rock Garden**, 10023 N. 13th Place, Phoenix. This site is closed to the public, but sculptures are visible from the street.