

# Variations of a Dream

Repurposed art enlivens local artist

From a distance, the colorful figures presiding over a yard full of wild mint on Alder Street look like overgrown toys. A closer inspection reveals ingenious assemblages made from scraps — carved wooden figures have Hobart kitchen mixer paddles for heads, the loin cloth worn by a crucified figure is a folded strap of rusting bullets, another figure sports pipes for limbs.

Recently abandoned by their maker, they look forlorn, especially two figures whose eyes weep tears of rust. Failing health forced artist George Ernst von der Linden into a nursing home, where he lives in a small room crowded with his creations, many of which are fabricated from cast-offs.

“I love junk,” von der Linden said during a recent interview. “I always hunted junk since I was a little kid. I’d find junk all over the place and sold it to the junk man. I love to make things out of junk.”

Dressed in his uniform of denim overalls and a hand-painted T-shirt with the petals of a sunflower radiating from behind the bib, a ball cap pulled snug over his head of white hair, he sat enthroned in a wheelchair that he uses more for convenience than out of necessity.

Born in 1937 in Pittsburg, Pa., the eldest of five, von der Linden endured regular beatings by his working-class parents. As a teenager, he was institutionalized for a year because the state determined him “incorrigible.” During his tumultuous childhood, junk was his salvation. Collecting industrial scraps he found strewn about town provided him solace and instilled his passion for making things out of broken items, something for which he had an affinity, feeling broken himself and in need of finding ways to stay whole.

After leaving home, von der Linden served in the army before a brief stint in Kansas, where he studied geology and art at a junior college. He then lived an itinerant life, moving between Texas, Oklahoma and Colorado, supporting himself as a bartender, cab driver, millwright and a derrick hand in the oil fields.

Even though von der Linden said, “I’ve been an artist all my life,” it wasn’t until he moved to southern California and set about “studying marijuana and LSD” that he “launched a career in art.” He worked as an engineer for Mattel toys in Los Angeles, where he was given free rein to do whatever he wanted to do because he knew “how to do things.”

A telephone pole washed in by the tide earned him enough attention to set his artistic career in motion. He fastened the pole to a staircase that was coming unattached from a villa. Passersby noticed his solution. “People went by and marveled at it,” von der Linden recalled. “Then people hired me to do showy gardens.”

Since then, von der Linden estimates that he’s carved more than a hundred statues, some of which are on display on the Oregon coast.

He worked in Oakridge as a millwright for a few years before moving to Eugene in 1970 to study art at LCC. Essentially self-taught, college offered von der Linden use of a shop he otherwise would not have had access to. Because he actually sold art while he was a student, he said that his teachers and fellow students saw him as a “supernatural being, a borderline deity.”

Frank about the difficult life he’s experienced, von der Linden acknowledged that he suffers from “lots of issues” and a disabling bipolar disorder. Numerous people offered him support through the years, and he now feels as if it’s his turn to give back.

“I’ve given guys in their thirties tools and shown them things and I know it has helped,” he said. After a pause, he continued: “I have a way with animals, old people and children. I’m the father to myself that I never had. I want to parlay that on the kids. I have seven or eight foster kids I help out. I want to make unfortunate children happy.”

Von der Linden handed over a stack of wooden panels, all about the size of a clipboard. They are painted on both sides, one side usually a simple rendering of a flower, and on the other a landscape in thick paint, often a solitary dwelling set in a mountainous landscape. “They’re all of a rural dwelling you can live in, I call them ‘Variations of a Dream.’ I paint them because I’ve never had a house of my own.”

With some effort, von der Linden lifted a sculpture onto a table. This one he called “a bookmobile,” a clever wooden cart he built that holds five unique books. Far from traditional books, these consist of wooden frames that face each other with a hinge in between to make them open like a book. Inside the book are diptychs he painted with motifs he often uses — whale, house, mountains, river, forests, lighthouse and his signature rhythmic skies that he acknowledged were inspired by and in homage to Vincent Van Gogh.

Another carved figure, Cleopatra, has faces on two sides of her head, a common characteristic of many of his sculptures. Von der Linden said these faces represent the “split personalities we all have.”

When asked about the significance of the frequent use of crucifixes in his work, he dismissed any symbolic implications and stated matter-of-factly that the geometry appeals to him. “I have a theory about these shapes I utilize — they instill a thought in the minds of people who look at them that cause them to think. Of course there’s significance, but this way it grants the viewer the opportunity to decipher the meaning, to provide the context.”

Accustomed to using whatever he had at hand long before it became fashionable to turn trash into art, von der Linden didn’t set out to make an anticonsumption statement. Over time, he grew more philosophical about his approach to art making, realizing that his repurposing materials headed for the dump was a sound choice, maybe even one to model.

“I have a philosophy of no buying,” von der Linden explained. “Maybe this art will teach people to recycle one way or the other. Lots of salvaging defeats the purpose of buying. I don’t buy paint — they throw it away!” **EW**



The potentially true story of the last best band

**Color Me Obsessed**  
A film about The Replacements

{showing at the bijou}  
thursday, october 20 - saturday, october 22

**meet the director**  
{thursday, october 20}  
director Gorman Bechard will hold a live Q&A following the 9pm showing  
{sponsored by}  
**Weekly** **RED LION HOTELS**  
cinema pacific filmmaker dialogues series

**ACTORS CABARET OF EUGENE**

**TICKETS NOW ON SALE! OPENS OCT. 21st**

LIMITED ENGAGEMENT!  
Seven Shows ONLY!

**SPRING AWAKENING**

Recommended for 15 years and over ONLY

Book and lyrics by **Steven Sater**  
Music by **Duncan Sheik**  
Directed by **Joe Zingo**

Order Online at Tickets  
www.actorscabaret.org

Call **541-683-4368**