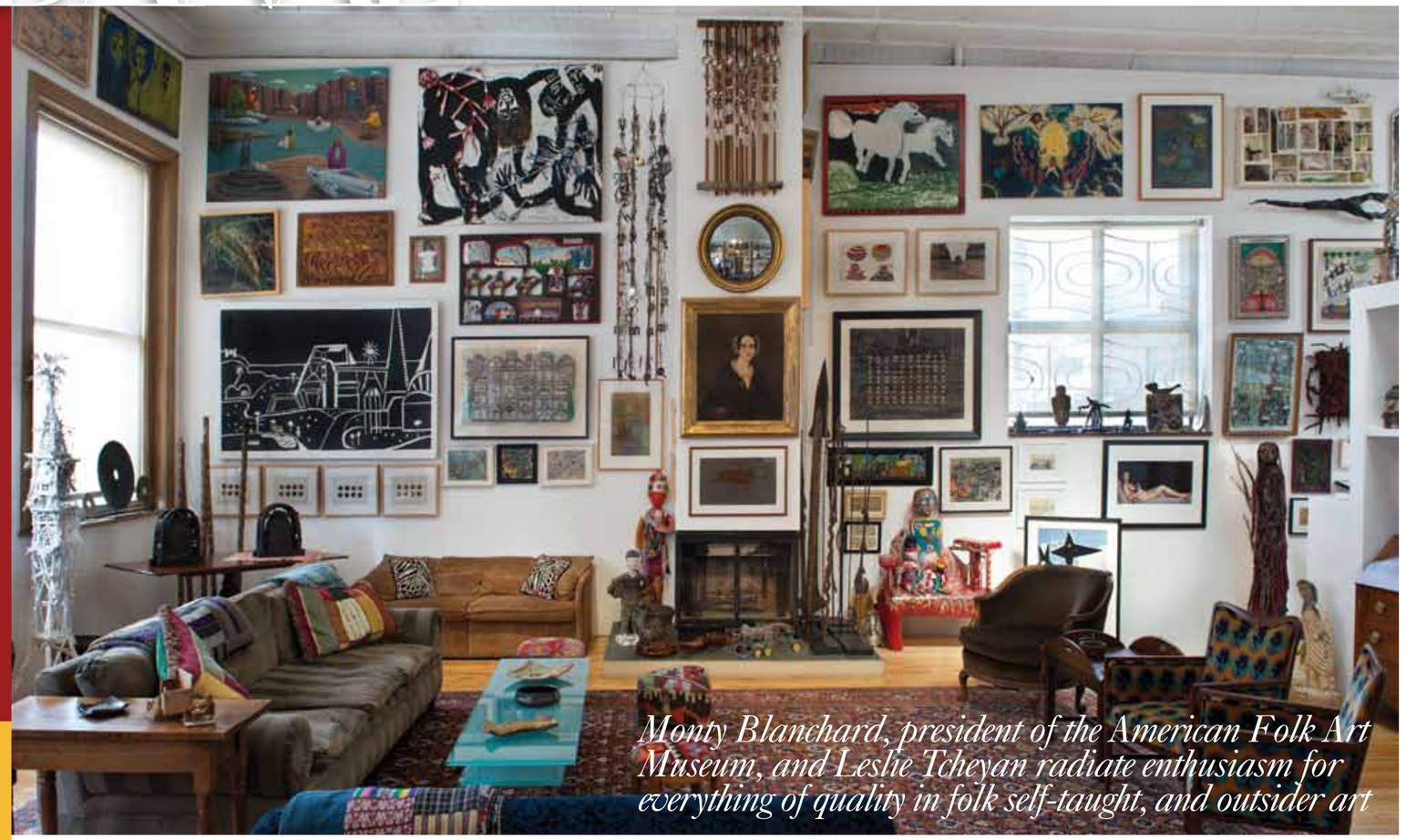
PAS BANAL

By Laura Beach PHOTOGRAPHY by Gavin Ashworth



Monty Blanchard, president of the American Folk Art Museum, and Leslie Tcheyan radiate enthusiasm for everything of quality in folk self-taught, and outsider art

Fig. 1. Called Monty and Che by their friends, collectors Edward V. Blanchard Jr. and Leslie Tcheyan among a few favorite things. The mixed-media red chair is by Willie Leroy Elliott Jr. (1943–), 1989. At the left is *Melancholy Che, La Habana, Cuba,* a 1964 gelatin silver print by Rodrigo Moya (1934–).

They met again on a Manhattan bus years after they first knew each other from the Chapin School, where their children were friends. Between them they have five daughters, the youngest then still in college. By 2010 Edward Vermont Blanchard Jr., a financier who serves as president of the American Folk Art Museum board, and Leslie Tcheyan, a free-spirited jeweler and owner of the Madison Avenue atelier L'Artigiano, had merged households, exchanging apartments in the East 90s for a loft in Tribeca. Their requirements were few but precise: plenty of light, not direct. And walls, preferably tall and bare. "We walked into this big, empty space and it was pretty fantastic," Tcheyan says, remembering how sunshine spilled from large west- and north-facing windows onto the expanse of wooden floor.

Fig. 2. Natural light floods the living room area. The c. 1841 portrait of Lucretia Bruce Blamire above the fireplace is a family heirloom. Below it is *Running Rabbit,* c. 1940, by Bill Traylor (c. 1854–1949). To the right of the portrait is *50 Years (Reversed)* by George Widener (1962–), a 2008 pen-and-ink drawing on paper napkins. Near the ceiling is a 1984 enamel on Masonite painting of horses by William L. Hawkins (1895–1990). Among the works to the left of the fireplace are two mixed-media mobiles by Emery Blagdon (1907–1986), both c. 1956–1984; the skeletal *Discrimination and Electricity* by Thornton Dial Sr. (1928–), 1992 (near the ceiling); and an untitled black and white cityscape by Ken Grimes (1947–), c. 2004. A recent acquisition, at far left, beside the window, is a 2011 mixed-media *White Tower* by Sylvain Corentin (1962–).

Fig. 3. The couple designed the L-shaped display unit that divides the great room. Two c. 1990 painted concrete busts by North Carolina artist Vernon Burwell (1916–1990) include, on the slant-front desk, a self-portrait, and, on the shelf above, right, the abolitionist Sojourner Truth. On the same shelf is an unfired clay and mixed-media bust of Abraham Lincoln, 1988, envisioned as an African-American by James "Son" Thomas (1926–1993). On the floor at the left is *Untitled [Woman Leaning]* in cement and stone by Nek Chand (1924–), 1984. Above the side table to the right hangs the colorful crayon, pen, and pencil on paper *Summer Time* by Nellie Mae Rowe (1900–1982), c. 1979. The painted and shell-encrusted concrete reptile by Q. J. Stephenson (1920–1997) on the floor below was purchased by Monty and his first wife, Anne, from the artist in early 1990s. An untitled drawing by Martín Ramírez (1895–1963), c. 1950, hangs to the right above an undated drawing by Lonnie Holley (1950–) and four watercolor pictographs by Ben Hotchkiss (1945–), c. 1970–1980.

Three years into their domestic project, Monty and Che, as friends know them, occupy the space well. They are unassuming and direct, their unvarnished candor startling in two who have known life at its glossiest. Having attained much they require less, their newly streamlined lives breezily in sync with lower Manhattan's youthful, caffeinated vibe. "Ce n'est pas banal," Tcheyan's French mother exclaimed the first time she saw their new place. The name stuck. Down to the couple's stationery, it's been Pas Banal ever since.

Other second-nesters might have occupied themselves by selecting furniture or remodeling the kitchen. For Blanchard and Tcheyan, the challenge was to arrange their collection of outsider and self-taught art, which Blanchard began assembling in 1984, as a syncopated summary of their own voyage of discovery. The installation offers fresh evidence that collecting itself is a creative exercise.

From floor to ceiling, the salon-style hanging fills every inch, imparting the feeling of an old-time cabinet of curiosities or even, perhaps, a fecund environment of the sort created by self-taught artists such as Howard Finster, who devised his Paradise Garden on four acres in rural Georgia. "It's not a mechanical process. We spend a lot of time arranging. It's very satisfying when it works," says Blanchard, who elicits an orchestrated performance from his unruly chorus. He pauses to inspect a collaged street scene, urban and gritty, by C. T. McClusky, a self-taught California artist who is said to have worked as a circus clown. Two more McCluskys call out from across the room.

First-time visitors to the Blanchard-Tcheyan ménage are struck by the eclecticism of what they see. Dozens of artists jostle for attention in large and small works of every description and all mediums. Sculpture gathers atop partitions and collects in shelves, compelling closer inspection.

"Monty has an adventurous eye," says Frank Maresca of Ricco-Maresca Gallery, who met Blanchard and his late wife, Anne Hill Blanchard, thirty years ago. The New York dealer especially admires *Dust Bowl Collage* by William L. Hawkins, an elegiac tour de force in black and gray that is among roughly eighty works that the Blanchards gave the American Folk Art Museum in 1998 (Fig. 10). The broadly diverse selection of twentieth-century self-taught art includes important examples by, among others, Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930), Bill Traylor, James Castle (1899–1977), Bessie Harvey (1929–1994), and Morton Bartlett (1909–1993), a New England isolate whose eroticized sculptures of children fracture Norman Rockwell's saccharine homilies.

Thoughtful and precise, Blanchard has a way of penetrating a piece, diving beneath its superficial attributes to gauge its emotional essence. Of Bartlett, he says, "He is challenging but also true and deep. We recognized his work as unique, an individual expression that is, in fact, artistic."

"Outsider art has an immediacy that appeals to me. It's unfiltered, unmodulated," Blanchard explains. Among the collectors he most admires are Philadelphia modernist Dr. Albert C. Barnes, for his progressive taste and intuitive approach to display; and Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr., an American Folk Art Museum founder who stimulated interest in self-taught art with his vanguard 1970 exhibition *Twentieth Century Folk Art* and 1974 book *20th-Century American Folk Art and Artists,* co-written with Julia Weissman. The Smithsonian American Art Museum acquired the lion's share of Hemphill's collection between 1986 and 1998. Since then, once

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Fig. 4. *Seal Space Dwelling* (number "1000 and 381") by Howard Finster (1916–2001), before 1984. Paint on glass, mirrors, and found materials; height 24 ½, width 8, depth 8 ½ inches.

Fig. 5. As portraiture has long been a staple of the traditional dining room, Monty and Che thought it would be fun to hang *Sumner Family,* a 1960 group portrait by Jon Serl (1894–1993) that is something of a twisted take on the subject, in the dining area. To the immediate right of that painting is *Untitled (Three Buses)* by Martín Ramírez, c. 1950 (partially visible); and below, *Rt. 66 out of Arizona into California,* an undated colored pencil and ink on paper drawing by Joseph E. Yoakum (1890–1972). At the upper left are a 1980s mixed-media scarecrow construction by Hawkins Bolden (1914–2005) and, to its right, near the ceiling, a mixed-media assemblage by Keith Goodhart (1956–). The architectural view above the corner cupboard is *Franklin County Hall Justice* by William Hawkins. The large painted cardboard and wood collage to its right is *What Peoples be Doin'* by Purvis Young (1943–2010), 1990.

Fig. 6. One of the collectors' favorites is *Eve* by Herbert Singleton (1945–2007), carved and painted cedar, 20 by 30 inches.

outré outsider art has steadily moved mainstream.

As southerners, Blanchard and his late wife felt an affinity for self-taught art, much of which is visionary or even overtly religious and not a little of which was made by African Americans, too often marginalized by poverty and lack of formal education, recurring themes in the outsider narrative. From a small town in rural eastern North Carolina, Blanchard met Anne, an Alabama native, in Boston.

The couple combined trips home with visits to local folk artists. In North Carolina they claimed a fearsome cement reptile by Garysburg craftsman Q. J. Stephenson (see Fig. 3) and a bust of Martin Luther King by Ahoskie woodcarver Arliss Watford (b. 1924). When a concrete bust by Vernon Burwell of Rocky Mount surfaced in the Sotheby's 1996 sale of the collection of choreographers and dancers Geoffrey Holder and Carmen de Lavallade, the Blanchards, having met the artist, recognized the work as a self-portrait (see Fig. 3).

The Blanchards moved to Manhattan in 1979. "The big names in the Soho art scene at the time—Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Robert Longo—were distant, cool, and intellectual. "What was going on in the East Village was more representational and direct, and more to our taste. We fell in love with a painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) but had to pass. At several thousand dollars, it was over our budget," Blanchard says.

The couple began buying what Blanchard calls outsider art in 1984, after he was introduced to it by a colleague, Philadelphia attorney Sheldon M. Bonovitz, whose collection, formed with his wife, Jill, is a promised gift to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

"I walked into his office and there were works by the masters, artists such as Bill Traylor, Joseph Yoakum, Simon Sparrow, and William Hawkins. Seeing my interest, Sheldon referred me to John Ollman at what is now the Fleisher Ollman Gallery in Philadelphia. I went immediately and placed

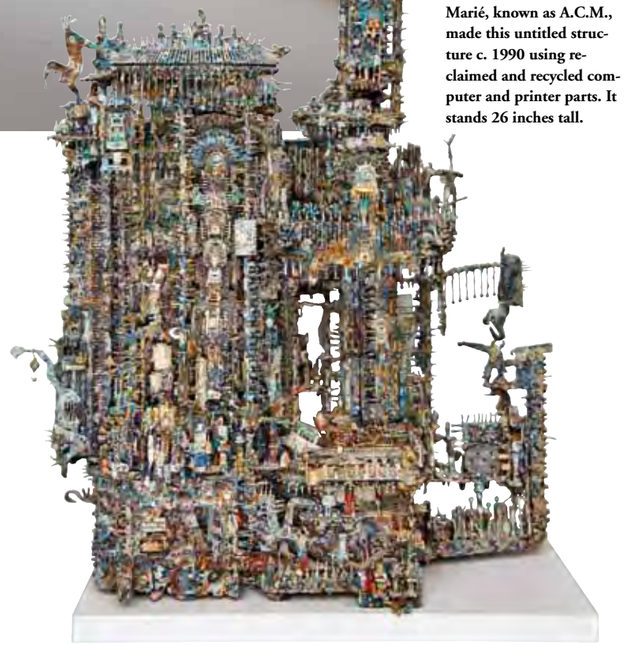
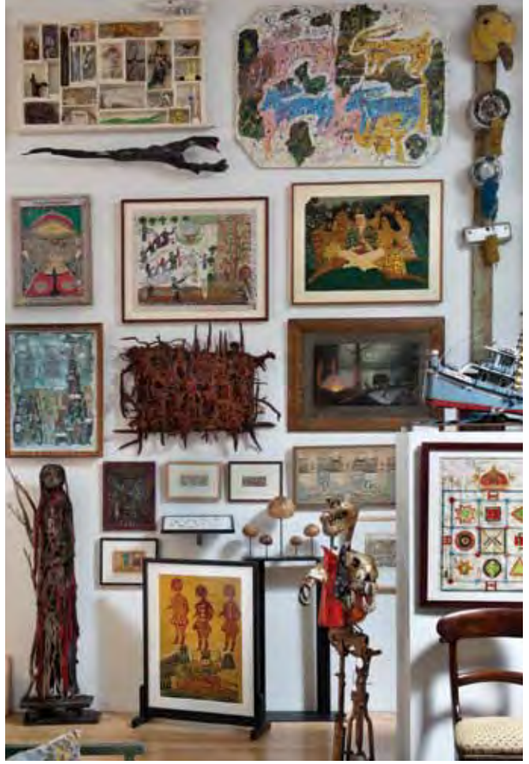


Fig. 7. The French self-taught artists Alfred (1951–) and Corinne Marié, known as A.C.M., made this untitled structure c. 1990 using reclaimed and recycled computer and printer parts. It stands 26 inches tall.



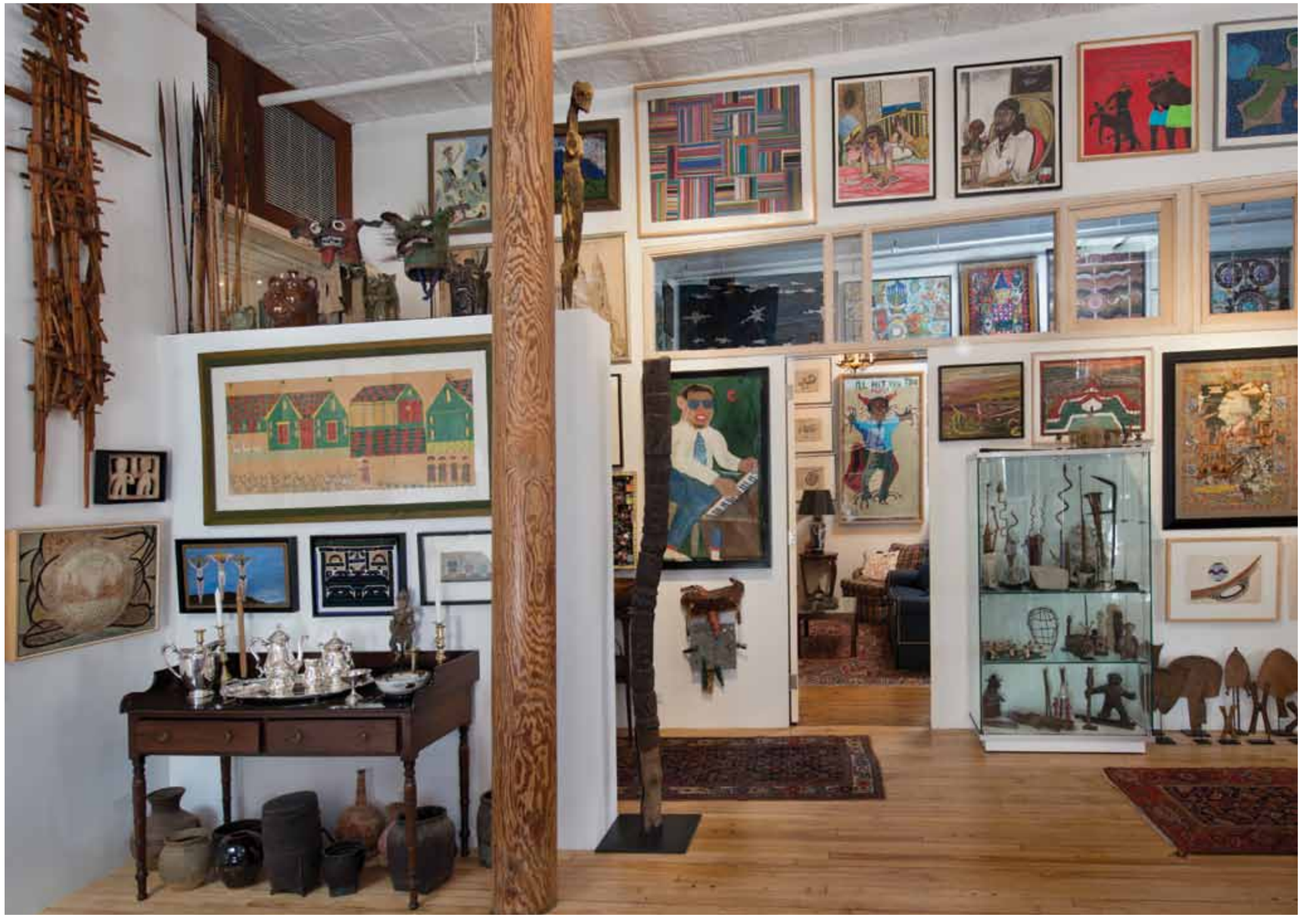


Fig. 8. Beyond the dining enclosure on the north wall are two recent mixed-media sculptures by the self-taught French artists Sylvain (1968–) and Ghyslaine Staëlens (1960–): *La Sentinelle* on the left, and, above it, to the right, *La Ville.* In the right foreground is *Politician,* a 1988 mixed-media sculpture by Willie Leroy Elliott Jr. To its left is an untitled 1963 gouache by Carlo Zinelli (1916–1974). Among the other works are, near the ceiling on the right, *Looking for a Dear Friend* by Thornton Dial Sr. (1928–), 1980s; and below it, an oil on cardboard of a ukulele-playing man surrounded by exotic beauties by Ellis Ruley (1882–1959), c. 1950s.

Fig. 9. Two works by Sam Doyle (1906–1985) are seen in this view looking through the great room into the study: a 1978 oil on tin portrait of Ray Charles and a 1982 depiction of a devil spirit inscribed "I'll Hit You Too Man!," painted in enamel on a window shade. Hanging on the wall at the far left is *Christ,* a 1997 wood, nail, and wire sculpture by Keith Goodhart. To its right is a c. 1920 watercolor farm scene by J. C. Huntington and, below it to the left, *Crucifiction* by Minnie Evans (1892–1987), c. 1945–1955. Above the clerestory windows are a c. 1990 self-portrait by Roy Ferdinand (1959–2004) and, to its right, *Proverbs 26:17* by John Harvey (1951–), late 1980s. On the wall below, on the far right is a mixed-media diptych depicting Washington and Lincoln by Felipe Jesus Consalvos (1891–c. 1960?).

a number of things on hold. Through John we soon met the New York dealers Shari Cavin and Randall Morris, with whom we spent much time."

Blanchard bought one piece from Ollman on the spot, a two-foot-high painted and mirrored glass tower (Fig. 7), meant to represent heaven, by Howard Finster, a southern minister who spread the gospel through garrulous paintings on board and other unconventional materials. There is genius in Finster's adroit representation of the afterlife's vaporous heights, along with shrewd comedy in his depiction of the crowded confines behind the pearly gates. With characteristic élan, the artist signed the piece: "Howard Finster, Man of Vision."

Another treasure is *Running Rabbit* by Traylor, who was born a slave on an Alabama plantation and developed a knack for conveying movement—and, implicitly, narrative—with a minimum of piquant gesture. "It's probably the Traylor I would grab in a fire," Blanchard says of the colored-pencil drawing of the startled creature with upright ears and outstretched legs that hangs above the fireplace.

Blanchard recalls that he traded one of Martín Ramírez's signature caballero drawings of Mexican cowboys for four drawings by William O. Golding (1874–1943), a landscape on paper by Yoakum (see Fig. 5), and a painting by Sam Doyle, who explored the African American experience in the Gullah South. Two works by the Mexican American immigrant Ramírez, a brilliant draftsman and institutionalized schizophrenic, remain in the collection, confirming the artist's graphic originality and Escher-like fascination with perspective.

In one of their few modifications to the loft, Blanchard and Tcheyan erected the partitions that partially enclose a dining area and provide additional space for displaying light-sensitive vernacular photography. Above the dining table, in a sly poke at convention, they hung a hollow-eyed family group by Jon Serl. Visible beyond the dining area are two large, colorful paintings by Doyle—one of a devil spirit, the other of Ray Charles (see Fig. 9).

A group of works on the theme of Adam and Eve includes a carved and painted panel by Herbert Singleton (Fig. 6), who recasts lapsarian legend as racial struggle. Singleton's conspicuously white serpent seduces a submissive black Eve. In the bath, an emancipated Eve casts a lusty eye on the forbidden fruit in an anonymous oil painting of about

1940. Above a doorway, pinup photographs of his dishy wife, Marie, by Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910–1983), are playful and intimate.

As president of the American Folk Art Museum, Blanchard saw the institution through perilous times, earning a reputation as an effective, collaborative manager. He is quick to credit the contributions of others, noting that it is especially through the leadership of chairperson Laura Parsons and the generosity of Joyce B. Cowin, a trustee, that the museum is now on solid footing.

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Sometimes lost in the coverage of the institution's near-death experience and the fate of its former home—the Williams and Tsien-designed bijou that MoMA acquired and may demolish—is the American Folk Art Museum's outsized role in moving critical conversation on outsider and self-taught art forward and center. The museum began in 1965 with an exhibition of the embraceable stone sculptures of William Edmondson (1874–1951) and continues this summer with twin displays and a symposium, set for September 16, devoted to Bill Traylor, whose elegantly quirky works on paper transcend their genre in their wide appeal.

"There are people looking at this material who never thought about folk art. They are fascinated by its excitement and energy. It resonates as something new, fresh and meaningful," says Tim Hill, a Birmingham, Michigan, gallerist for whom the fine-folk distinction has never held much meaning.

Fig. 10. ***Dust Bowl Collage*** **by William Hawkins, 1989. House paint and collage on masonite, 39 ¼ by 48 inches.** ***American Folk Art Museum, Blanchard-Hill Collection, gift of M. Anne Hill and Edward V. Blanchard Jr.***

The museum lent *Il Enciclopedico Palazzo del Mondo (The Encyclopedic Palace of the World)*, an eleven-foot tall architectural model by the Italian-American immigrant Marino Auriti (1891–1980), to this year's Venice Biennale, where it is the centerpiece of the International Art Exhibition. In what is becoming accepted practice, curator Massimiliano Gioni is pairing outsiders like Morton Bartlett with consummate art world insiders such as Cindy Sherman, both known for their conceptual photography. In keeping with these worldly times, the American Folk Art Museum's new curator of twentieth-century and contemporary art, Canadian-born art historian Valérie Rousseau, brings an international perspective to her work.

Blanchard and Tcheyan, too, have moved beyond the typecast confines of American art, adding floral abstractions by the Czech artist Anna Zemánková (1908–1986), cobwebbed towers by Frenchman Sylvain Corentin (see Fig. 2), and the twiggy assemblages of Sylvain and Ghyslaine Staëlens, whose desiccated, fiber-wrapped figures dare one to look away. Known as A.C.M., the French couple Alfred and Corinne Marié weld tiny bits of salvaged electronics into intricate tabletop architecture (Fig. 7). The collectors see elegance and coherence in these eccentric, single-minded visions.

Blanchard shares the outsider's impulse to fill the page. At Tcheyan's insistence, a spot was left blank on their bedroom wall. "I would never want to feel that we had finished," she says.

Wangle a visit—or two—to Pas Banal. The place has an improvisational flair. New pieces arrive. Others depart, rarely permanently. Generous with the trove, the couple lent works by Ramírez to Madrid's Reina Sofia Museum and is currently loaning an ink by Achilles G. Rizzoli (1896–1982) to London's Hayward Gallery, and a Serl to San Jose State University's Thompson Gallery.

Blanchard and Tcheyan started their new life in Tribeca by moving eight pieces into the empty space. Among them were a nineteenth-century portrait, a family heirloom; *High Wire Lines*, a resolutely forward-looking crayon drawing of about 1965 by Eddie Arning (1898–1993); and two favorite pieces of African currency, a spiral and a bell, one suggesting life's meandering beauty, the other to ring in the future.

"Art is not about accepting or rejecting, it's about understanding. Monty and Leslie are on a journey," Tim Hill observes. Blanchard says simply, "We were lucky enough to see things early and willing to go where others weren't."

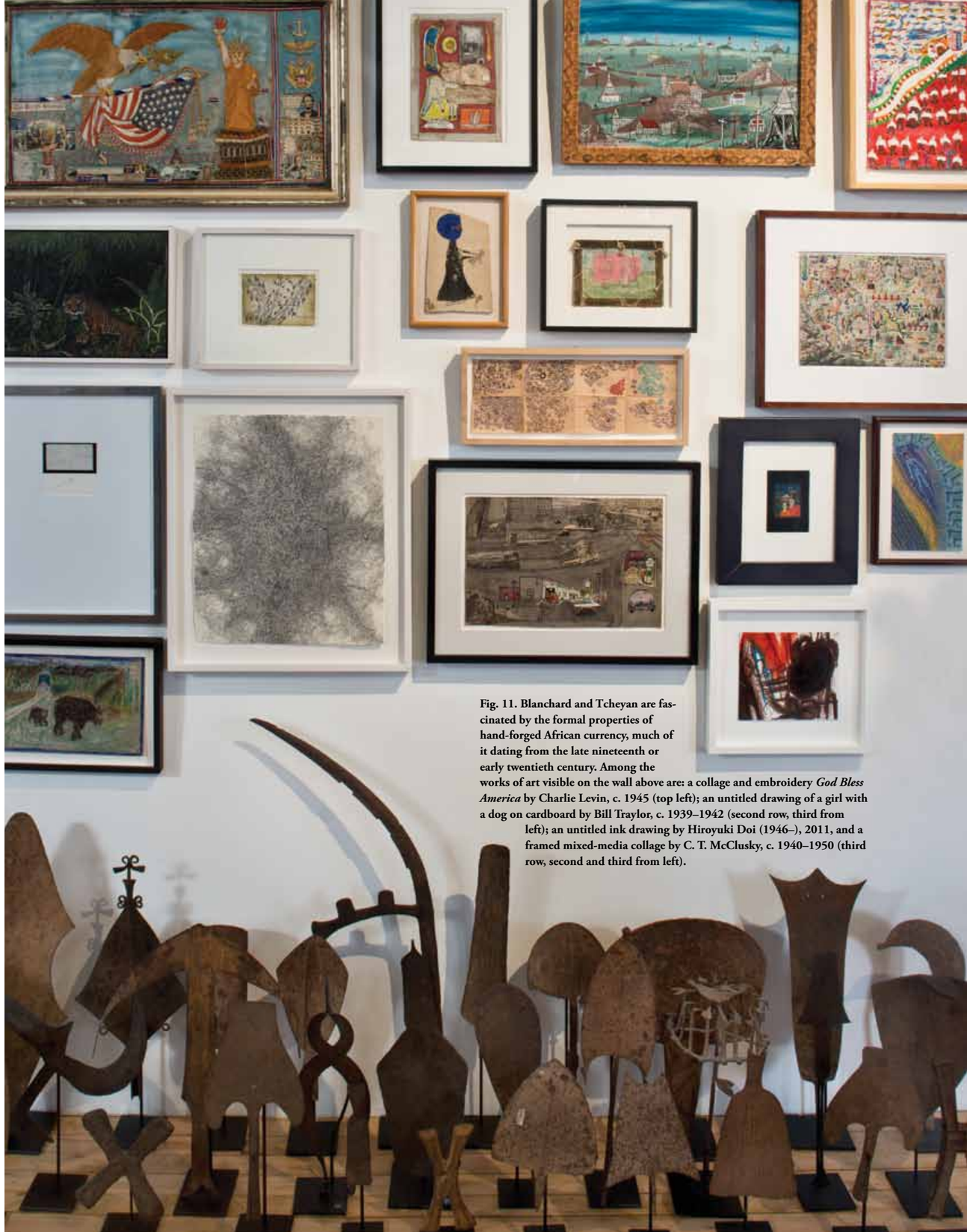

Fig. 11. Blanchard and Tcheyan are fascinated by the formal properties of hand-forged African currency, much of it dating from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Among the works of art visible on the wall above are: a collage and embroidery ***God Bless America*** **by Charlie Levin, c. 1945 (top left); an untitled drawing of a girl with a dog on cardboard by Bill Traylor, c. 1939–1942 (second row, third from left); an untitled ink drawing by Hiroyuki Doi (1946–), 2011, and a framed mixed-media collage by C. T. McClusky, c. 1940–1950 (third row, second and third from left).**