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The Uncertain Legacy of Rudy Rotter

by Pegi Taylor

What is it, exactly? And what parts of it, if any will be preserved?

<Editor's note: In mid-2017 stewardship of the collection transitioned to Rotter's eldest son, Randy, with the goal of saving the artwork and moving it out of the warehouse and into public view. See <http://rudyroterart.com>>

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"It's nobody's responsibility except the people who really have a gut feeling and burning passion for his work," says Alderwoman Maureen "Dolly" Stokes, sitting in the director's office at the Rahr-West Art Museum in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. She has served on the museum's board for several years. The "work" and "responsibility" she refers to is the art of Rudy Rotter and what to do with it.

Rotter was Wisconsin's and perhaps the nation's most prolific artist. A one-block, 21,000-square-foot warehouse in downtown Manitowoc contains around 16,000 pieces of his art, including carvings, assemblages, and drawings. Rotter started creating this huge body of work in 1955, at the age of 43, and continued until his death in November 2001 at the age of 88.

The density of objects in the space he called the "Manitowoc Museum of Sculpture" may qualify it as an art environment. Pieces are stacked on the tables and line the shelves and walls of his dusty, drafty, and dark museum. Beth Bergin, director of travel programs for the American Folk Art Museum, included Rotter's space on a September tour. She's been with AFAM for 16 years and says, "I've never seen quite as many pieces."

Widow Karen Rotter now owns all the art and must decide what to do with it. At age 60, she does not have the energy to take on the sole responsibility of maintaining the space, nor does she have the funds to do so. What will happen to Rotter's legacy? The answer partially depends on how Rotter is evaluated.

The art world seems to agree that he qualifies as a self-taught artist. Tony Rajer, author of *Rudy Rotter's Spirit-Driven Work: The Odyssey and Evolution of an Artistic Vision* (self-published through Fine Arts Conservation Services in 1998), describes Rotter's self-taught attributes as "obsessive-compulsive production, serial proliferation, and artistic production outside of the academic realm."

His status as a vernacular artist isn't as clear-cut. Rajer notes that Rotter "does not fit the stereotype of impoverished visionary or social misfit," because he ran a successful dental practice in Manitowoc. "Rudy was not an outsider, except that he created and exhibited his own work outside of the professional art structure," says Milwaukee art historian Debra Brehmer, who curated a 1996 retrospective solo show of Rotter's work for the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan.

The uneven character of Rotter's work complicates the question of how much attention his work merits. Many people consider his carved work his best, sculpted between 1955 and the mid-80s, before arthritis forced him to set his chisels aside. Baltimore's American Visionary Art Museum accepted one donated wood piece for its collection in the late 90s. This past fall, Madison gallery owner Wendy Cooper showed wood sculptures of Rotter's as part of a show of local artists. New York gallery owner Andrew Edlin will include about six pieces in a spring show, "Remembrance and Ritual: Jewish Folk Artists of Our Time." He hopes this will pave the way for a solo exhibit. "There is massive strength in the wood carvings," he says. "They have a visceral quality." He compares Rotter to Albert Hoffman, whose work is in the American Folk Art Museum.

By the time Rotter retired from his dental practice in 1987, his arthritis was bothering him so much that he would sleep sitting in a chair at night. He had additional pain due to angina. After angioplasty surgery, he started taking walks every day and picking up items he found on the street. Karen, his second wife, claims this is how he altered his approach to making art with seemingly no interruption. He became entranced with the possibilities of cast-off materials from businesses all over the city. He would spend about six hours in his studio almost every day shaping assemblages.

David K. Smith, an art historian who shared studio space with Rotter for about a year in the mid-90s, believes the shiny delights he concocted from parts he got from the Wisconsin Aluminum Foundry or Dave's Trophy Company expanded Rudy's creative vision. He became a better artist." The way Rotter worked with materials at hand and in different modes in the period after the onset of arthritis reminds Brehmer of Howard Finster. Assistant professor of art, Berel Lutsky from the University of Wisconsin-Manitowoc, is particularly attracted to Rotter's collage drawings made of magazine images and Day-Glo paper.

Yet, for every astute, complex composition, Rotter also spent many hours churning out dozens of extremely simple forms. Smith talks about Rotter's "three-inch-high pieces of twisted aluminum nailed to a chunk of two-by-four." Nancy Moulton, who had extensive contact with Rotter in her role as preservation coordinator at Kohler Foundation Inc., captures the essence of his process orientation: "His favorite piece was the one he was working on at the moment.

Of the aesthetic value of Rotter's work, Brehmer says, "Some is traditionally 'good art' (the wood carvings with entwined figures) and some is junk (the piece of plywood with six squares of shiny aluminum nailed on)." New York gallery owner Phyllis Kind toured Rotter's museum and decided not to represent him because of its mixed quality. "There has to be a certain consistency for me to represent an artist properly," she says.

But there's another factor: what Smith calls the "eye-popper, 'Oh my God'" experience of the space itself. It seems necessary to ask the cliched question, Is the whole greater than the sum of the parts?

One solution to Karen Rotter's dilemma would be to sort out and sell the best of her husband's carvings and assemblages and dump the rest. To the family and Rotter enthusiasts, this would be a tragic error. They want to preserve the majority of his art as an environment in its current Buffalo Street warehouse or, if this isn't feasible, at least a core sampling of it someplace else.

The American Folk Art Museum's Bergin is one of the people who believes the best-case scenario would be to preserve the art where it is. So is Brehmer, who says what she finds worthy about the space is how it holds the uncritical energy of Rotter's "joyous valuing of life. His message [was] that you don't need

much to transform a moment or a day into something that touches on the miraculous." She contrasts Rotter's love of creating with the angst-filled tribulations of many artists, and argues that artists may learn more from visiting Rotter's space than from touring a traditional art museum. Professor Lutsky brings students to the museum "so they can begin to appreciate what it means to make art one's life work."

On the other hand, asks University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee art historian Jeffrey Hayes, "Is this really an art environment? What exactly are the criteria for preserving such places?" People close to Rotter concur that he focused all his attention on creating art, not displaying it. Rudy didn't give a hoot about a piece once it was made," claims Smith. "He rarely ventured beyond his studio." His widow says that when Rotter's art stood in piles in his small studio toward the front of the warehouse, he'd ask Smith or even art students to come in and organize it. Says Leslie Umberger, senior curator of exhibitions and collections at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, "He differs from other artists who embellish and transform their environments in that his interest lay more in making and interacting than in presentation and self-fulfillment."

Tony Rajer maintains that Rotter wanted his work preserved. But if this was his intent, he certainly didn't do anything during his lifetime to prepare for such an eventuality. Although he maintained a middle-class livelihood for his family, he never accumulated the assets to start a foundation himself. Rotter was a professional, but he didn't cater to wealthy clients. He didn't make investments either, perhaps because as the youngest of six children from a Russian-Jewish immigrant family he witnessed his parents' financial woes after some failed business deals. He never even bought the warehouse. He never even bought the warehouse. Karen Rotter calculates that rent and related expenses add up to about \$10,000 a year.

After Rotter's death, a group called Friends of Rudy Rotter (FoRR) formed with the goal "to document, preserve, and make accessible" Rotter's art. Karen is the group's president, and key members include Rotter's four children, Rajer, designer Christine Style, and the Manitowoc photography team of John Shimon and Julie Lindemann. Rajer, Shimon and Lindemann have consistently worked to promote Rotter's art. Yet after hosting a fund-raising memorial in May 2002, nothing substantial has happened. Lindemann believes Karen "doesn't realize how much energy it takes to maintain visibility and interest." She says the non-family members of the group have not wanted to lobby or impose their values as Karen decides what to do.

Karen admits her personality simply isn't suited to marshal volunteers and money. "I'm not shy or retiring, but I hate asking people for things." She also has no experience with the business side of the art world. It must be hard for her to sort through what she hears from various sources. "Everybody has an opinion," she says, "and they'll tell me to talk to so-and-so." Gallery owner Wendy Cooper says Karen declined to let her bring some of Rotter's work to the 2003 Outsider Art Fair in New York because "Karen didn't want him pegged as only that." Karen responds that she held off to hear what Andrew Edlin thought of Rotter's work, and she heard through the boyfriend of a relative that the fair might not result in sales.

The Kohler Foundation, which is dedicated to preserving self-taught sites and has taken on any number of ambitious projects, bought 101 pieces of Rotter's work after the 1996 show at the Kohler Arts Center and gifted them to the center in 1999. The JMKAC had a second solo show of Rotter's work in 2001 and regularly rotates Rotter pieces into the Collections Gallery. So Rajer thought the foundation might be

logical place to turn for help, and wrote them early last year to solicit further involvement. He has not received a response.

Leslie Umberger suggests one of the elements that makes the Kohler hesitate to get involved with the Rotter space is lack of stewardship: no party has come forward to take over maintaining and running the site. Moulton adds another issue: "How do you create an exhibit of a stack of things? How would you protect it from finger prints and dirty hands?" Rotter's environment also presents two other problems. The very thing that makes it so powerful, the sheer volume of the work, is the exact thing that makes it nearly impossible to preserve. Moulton explains, "It would be difficult for a non-profit entity to take on the responsibility for the entire collection, because documentation and preservation efforts would be daunting."

The second problem is that due to Rotter's uncritical judgment of his work, he asked for prohibitive amounts when he sold it. Karen remembers her husband asking \$40,000 for a single piece. "Rotter's relatively high prices ultimately limited the scope of the acquisition," says Umberger, "though the collection we acquired represents some of his best work as well as stages of his artistic career."

Rotter did not fully understand the way the self-taught art world seems to operate. In this world, foundations, museums, and galleries divert the majority of their funds to preserve, archive, and market work. The money to procure work is secondary. But "Rudy was an educated man and small business person," says Julie Lindemann, "and this informed how he approached the issue of selling his work." In focusing on the potential monetary value of specific parts, Rotter certainly influenced future Kohler Foundation involvement to preserve the whole.

"There is this notion that if nobody else does something, then government should," says affable longtime Manitowoc mayor Kevin Crawford. This city of 35,000 people 85 miles north of Milwaukee has a strong tradition of volunteer efforts, including founding the Wisconsin Maritime Museum and transforming a movie theater into a civic center. The logical local institution to potentially coordinate an effort to save Rotter's environment would be the Rahr-West Art Museum. Could it provide a space to honor Rotter's life and work? Brehmer believes, "Even if it's in the basement, there should be an installation and photo documentation."

However, the Rahr-West Art Museum (RRAM) has a history of ignoring Rotter. Richard Quick, director of the museum from 1981 until 1998, had almost no contact with Rotter. According to his widow, Rotter first wrote Quick in 1987 inviting him to visit. She contends it was a decade later that he finally came to see the environment, even though it's only four blocks away from the RWAM. Quick declined to be interviewed for this story.

The museum's mission statement defines itself as "a community art museum with the primary purpose to preserve, collect, exhibit, educate about and interpret the visual arts. It preserves ... a collection of 19th, 20th, and 21st century art with a primary focus on American Art." Nevertheless, says current director Jan Mirenda Smith, "Rudy's work is not our niche."

I asked Smith what would happen if Karen Rotter donated work to transform the second-floor research room into a space with a few highlighted pieces, an area meant to give a feel of the studio, and a chronological display of photographs. Smith replied, "As a collecting policy, we try to accept things without restrictions. I will not take on a collection that I can't maintain or house with integrity."

Her resistance is understandable. The museum, owned and primarily financed by the city, has had a flat budget for the past few years, with no relief in sight. Smith acts as both director and curator. The board's current goal is accreditation, and it's taking time and money to conserve and frame works the museum already owns.

When I press Alderwoman Stokes and Smith on whether either of them has that "gut feeling and burning passion" that Stokes says it would take to preserve Rotter's work, neither one replies directly. Yet Smith volunteered in 2002 to sit in on FoRR meetings and Stokes offers, "We could do a nice show of Rudy's work as a kick-off for something."

If the broader art community, family, and city don't have the capacity to save Rotter's environment, is it possible the Jewish community might? Rotter attended temple regularly until his health declined, and his early carvings have biblical themes. Gallery owner Edlin considers him a Jewish artist through and through. "Even with carvings that aren't overtly biblical," he says, "they are spiritual and totemic in that Old Testament sort of way. They have an archetypal power.

Unfortunately, the Jewish community of Manitowoc has shrunk considerably. Treasurer of the local synagogue, Herman Balaban, says membership now hovers at about 50, from a height of 200 in the mid-1900s. Though the synagogue proudly exhibits one of the sculptures Rotter donated, it is in no position to raise the funds needed for a major preservation effort.

With no miracle rescue operation in sight, Karen may eventually end up calling the local junkyard. In a final ironic twist, this could possibly be the same junkyard that provided Rotter some of his prized recycled materials. Ashes to ashes; junkyard to junkyard.

To see more examples of Rotter's work, go to www.rudyrotterart.com.

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