

Learning from Bruce West, Photographic Artist
AFS Professional Development Program Report by Georgia Wier

In 1994, Bruce West, who on his website describes himself as a “photographic artist and educator,” began what became for him a 17-year journey of photographing three Mississippi folk artists who lived within the environments that they creatively transformed. One of these artists was the late L.V. Hull of Kosciusko, whose work I documented during a time period that overlapped with West’s work with her. The other two artists were the Reverend H.D. Dennis and Margaret Dennis of Vicksburg.

I had seen some of West’s portraits of Mrs. Hull and been impressed with the way he had captured her and her home environment. When I learned that West was to exhibit his photographs of Mrs. Hull and the Dennises at the Lauren Rogers Museum of Art in Laurel, Mississippi, early in 2011, I became interested in making a trip to see it. When I learned that the museum would not only host the show but would produce a related “Folk Art Symposium” during which Bruce West would speak, and that West would also lead a fieldtrip to the “Margaret’s Grocery,” the Dennises’ creation in Vicksburg, I made plans to go.

I have documented the work of several folk artists who created whole environments with their houses and/or yards. In each case, I have worked hard to adequately represent the whole environment created and at the same time to demonstrate the work the artists put into the details. I have struggled particularly with how to photograph the artists within their home environments. By viewing the large exhibit of West’s work with folk artists in their environments and by learning about his motivations and methods, I sought to gain new perspectives that would lead me in useful directions with my own documentary photography. West generously agreed to my recording an interview with him so that I would be able to ask him more detailed questions than would have been possible during the Folk Art Symposium or the field trip. I was fascinated and inspired as I learned about West’s goals and approaches during my short but intense contact with this photographer.

West approaches his work systematically while allowing himself to veer off into new directions that present themselves. When West headed south during a sabbatical from his teaching position at the Missouri State University, he planned to use color photography rather than sticking with his typical large format black and white photography; he also planned to photograph people along with the landscapes on which he had previously focused. West was not at that time seeking folk art sites; he started his 17-year venture when he passed by the Dennises’ fantastically decorated home and store and made the decision to pull off the road.

Some of West's approaches and experiences sounded familiar to me as a folklorist. West's accounts of his routines and his evolving and developing relationships with the Mississippi folk artists made me realize the commonality of experiences of "people working with people" (using a phrase from the title of the 1980 book on fieldwork by Robert A. Georges and Michael O. Jones)—at least for those whose work has positive outcomes. West's yearly summer visits with the Mississippi artists included many hours of conversation followed by concentrated photography sessions. West also established a routine for each visit of giving the artists prints of the photographs he had taken on the previous visit.

Just as I hope to take photographs that the artists I document will appreciate, I learned that West worked to create images that would please Mrs. Hull. The folk artist did indeed seem to "like what she saw" when presented with the photographs he had taken of her. It did not surprise me that the Mrs. Hull had liked West's photographs, which showed her as contemplative, often with obvious intensity, while letting her intentional eccentricity shine through.

I discovered that some of West's goals and procedures deviated widely from my typical "take it as it comes" approach to documentation and contributed at least in part to his superior results. West sought to create true portraits of Mrs. Hull. He almost always used a tripod and primarily took outdoor shots, selecting times of day when the "light was beautiful." For his long outdoor shots, West coached Mrs. Hull to compose herself and remain very still. This period of intentional composure certainly would have contributed to the sense of calm and peace that Mrs. Hull evidenced in West's portraits of her even as she stood in the midst of her wildly creative house or yard.

Along with seeking to create flattering and beautiful portraits of Mrs. Hull, West worked to create photographs that showed how the artist fit into the environment that she had created. West composed his portraits so that the artist stood or sat in different parts of her house or yard. The photographs each showed her in a peaceful coexistence with the items she had transformed with paint or simply by placement in juxtaposition with other items. To help create visual variety, West purposefully photographed Mrs. Hull with different lighting conditions as well as in different locations. In one photograph she sat in indirect sun on the walkway that led up to her front porch--flanked on both sides by well-tended plants and a mixture of shoes and other items. In another portrait Mrs. Hull sat on a shaded bench across the street from her house. Adding even more variety and a different sort of connection, West sometimes created portraits that did not feature Hull's face but instead one of her arms or her legs—always in connection with some facet of her creation.

West frequently did not include many objects in each portrait of Mrs. Hull, saying that photographing her with just a few items would give the impression that "even

though the photograph stopped, the space or the objects didn't." For his environmental shots that did not include the artist herself, West generally also focused on particular segments rather than attempting to show the contents of whole rooms or the entire layout of the yard. After studying the entire portion of the exhibit featuring Mrs. Hull, I concluded that West had really captured the flavor of the folk artist's whole home environment. I asked West whether he had intended to document the entirety of her work. West explained that his intention had not been to create a documentary record; however, that because I had viewed all the photographs together, I had probably gotten the impression of having seen the whole.

West sees his photographs as being not just about the places but also about his vision of who the artists are. He wanted to show the environments as "kind of mythic places and very special"—and "sometimes kind of bizarre." West recognizes surrealistic overtones in some of his photographs, and he sees these as reflecting the folk artists' imagination and creativity. West viewed all three folk artists as extraordinary, courageous, even noble individuals. He wanted those who viewed the photographs to see them this way as well, and consequently he did not photograph the artists when he was with them at a fast food restaurant or in other everyday situations.

West spoke of seeing the three folk artists as having something in common with the saints and Madonnas of Renaissance paintings. I felt that West had succeeded in elevating the artists, and I did not find his method of romanticizing them offensive. Instead, I felt that West had used his tools as a photographic artist to show the world (as well as the folk artists themselves) his view of them as creative, extraordinary, courageous individuals. Having known Mrs. Hull myself, I was happy to think of her as having known West and having seen in his portraits the way he saw her.

I left my experience at the exhibit, symposium, field trip, and interview with West with greater appreciation for the variety of ways available to portray people and their creative work with photography. I felt inspired to approach folk art environments, sometimes so overwhelming in their enormity or density, with a renewed eye to using different methods for showing the connection between the creators and their creations. I also left with an intention to learn to slow down and contemplate the conditions that will allow the artists' wisdom and imagination to shine through the documentary photographs that I take of them.