



Staff Photo by David Rolfe

Howard Finster's work will be on display at Wake Forest through March 24.

Junk Can Be Beautiful, Too

A Preacher's Vision of Gardening

A Preacher's Vision of Gardening

By Brigitta Carlson

Staff Reporter

Howard Finster's garden is made of cement embedded with bits of jewelry, shattered mirrors, broken glass and old bottles. A tangle of tomatoes and vine ochre growing in crevices shelters rabbits, ducks and dogs.

Finster, a Baptist minister, said he felt "impressed" by God to build it. Twenty years ago he began the garden in Summerville, Ga., by filling the lake in his backyard with dirt. Like a whimsical god, he created mountains and diverted small rivers.

He has built a house of mirrors in his garden, a hut of bottles and a tower of bicycle frames covered with hubcaps and topped with a bunch of bush beans. Watches glitter and tick in the sidewalk. Flowers grow in window boxes made out of Coke bottles, and

an aluminum angel guards the stairs.

Explaining the inspiration for his garden, Finster says: "A human being has a major feeling from head to toe. There's a feeling you have for your sister that's different than for your brother, and a divine feeling from the holy God. It's where I get my inspiration."

Finster says he had his first vision at age 3. He saw his dead sister ascend and descend steps in the sky. He published his first sermon at 16. At 60 he retired from preaching to work in his garden. Then he began to paint.

He dipped his finger in white paint one day, he says, and saw a face inscribed on it. He says he was overcome with a warm feeling and heard a command to paint sacred art, to which he replied, "I cannot paint. If I did paint I would want to paint real human beings. The very

thing that I couldn't do I had to prove I could do."

He uses tractor enamel to paint on plywood, airplane canvas, television sets and even a refrigerator. His paintings are peopled with Albert Einstein, Elvis Presley, Jimmy Carter, George Washington, Richard M. Nixon and countless others.

His paintings of hell, he says, form themselves. He just picks out the faces and dots the eyes on the swirls of paint that have dried on a board. He went looking for "God's folk art" once, he says, and came up with a group of roots he turned into creatures with a little paint.

His bright, naive-looking paintings with religious messages like "You can get to hell by not believing in it" have attracted attention among folk-art connoisseurs. Finster's paintings have been shown in the Museum of

American Folk Art and the Phyllis Kind Gallery in New York City. The Library of Congress owns two of them. His garden is open to visitors.

The God that inspires Finster's work never stops creating, Finster says. "I came from God and I'm going back to God. There's a planet being prepared for me right now," Finster said. "He only had six days to make this one. He's making planets now, and he'll be making planets when this one's gone."

A sign in Finster's garden proclaims that "My work proves that junk can be made beautiful . . ." He has not finished the garden. He is still buying and collecting pieces of sculpture, masks and molds, pots and wire to add to the cement terrain, along with cabbages, corn, English peas and raspberries, in accordance with his vision.

Washington Daily News
Wilmington Star
Wilson Daily Times
Winston-Salem Journal
Winston-Salem Sentinel

MAR 9 1980