

JON SERL

Born: Olean, New York 1894

Died: Lake Elsinore, California 1993

The painter Jon Serl was an American maverick. His paintings, iconic and seemingly simple on the surface, have always maintained a mysterious power; a glimpse of darkness even when deceptively lighthearted. It is as if a double narrative is being represented; a social one on the surface and another, not so obvious, running like a shadow beneath the simplicity of his forms. This deeper layer is his own added personal history, a picture of a part of America that is no longer around.

Jon Serl was born Joseph Searles in 1894 in Olean, New York, and spent much of his life intimately familiar with an America in transition between two world wars. His family was a traveling carny-cum-vaudeville family; desperately poor and traveling with his parents and sisters, Serl was never in one place long enough to put down any kind of serious roots. He grew up intimate with cruelty and transience; his parents were cold, self-involved in their desperate need to eke out a survival.

A traveling vaudeville group had a slightly unsavory overtone in those days; part theatre, part burlesque, part traveling bordello, the shows could range from the vulgar to the sublime. Serl was a character player from childhood; he spent half his time on stage in drag or in Native American outfits. He sometimes impersonated females, and his domineering father used to make him vomit to keep a thin girlish figure for these roles. He played Little Eva in Uncle Tom's Cabin. He was painted gold and rolled out of carpets. Serl was no stranger to some of the more bizarre aspects of life. He witnessed a bloody abortion when he was nine years old. He played many roles in his life, from chuck-wagon chef in the Pacific Northwest to voice-over in Hollywood. He picked peaches and cherries. He made gardens. An American apricot somewhere is named after him.

His life as a painter; however, was certainly not a role. He painted from the early '40s till the day he died. Many of his paintings reflect experiences in life where he constantly questioned the ramifications of gender and expression of personal sexuality. He felt he painted for the salt of the earth. He painted in order to document and keep alive his many personal stories. He painted to keep his soul alive.

Before I met Jon Serl, my vision of the field of self-taught artists was romantic and highly idealized. I wanted the fool on the hill, the Buddha, the artist who could hand down pieces of godhead to others with his art, in order to clear a path through the trees in this hard world. I got other things. I got a reality check that enriched my future life with self-taught artists beyond all my own intentions, because it was harsh and real and unromantic. It was heady in its passion and genius, and down to earth in its execution. It was dirt and sweat and piss. I got very close and still I was a million miles away. To me this is very American. It is Greil Marcus' Old Weird America. Sometimes I was so far into Jon's world that I forgot one could ever be comfortable in reality, because of the mad lower depths that screamed around in his presence. Then there would appear a handhold, the maternal smile of early summer before its compulsive heat, a falcon hovering in a shimmering Kerouac autumn sky, and I would come back home, exhausted and in awe of the unpredictable magic of what makes men and women artists.

Selected Solo Exhibitions:

2018: *Jon Serl: The Hawk of Elsinore*, Good Luck Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

2013: *Jon Serl*, Natalie and James Thompson Art Gallery, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA

2005: *Outsider: A Self-Taught Artist*, Art Resource Group, Corona del Mar, CA

1996: *Jon Serl: Oils on Boards*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY

- 1995: *Centennial Plus One*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
- 1994: *Jon Serl: One Man By Himself*, Art Alliance Gallery, Riverside Art Museum, Riverside, CA
- 1993: *Jon Serl, New and Old Paintings*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
Making Decisions: Jon Serl, Jamison/Thomas Gallery, Portland, OR
- 1991: *Jon Serl: One Person Show*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
Jon Serl, Recent Paintings, Jamison/Thomas Gallery, Portland, OR
Jon Serl: Master Painter, Mia Gallery, Seattle, WA
- 1990: *Jon Serl, 40 Year Retrospective*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
- 1981: *Psychological Paintings: The Personal Vision of Jon Serl*, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA

Selected Group Exhibitions:

- 2023: *Death of an Outsider*, Shrine, Los Angeles, CA
- 2022: *Singing in Unison*, Below Grand, New York, NY
- 2020: *Good Luck*, Shrine, New York, NY
- 2016: *Cavin-Morris Summer Spotlight*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
Maverick!, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
Art Bruts and Beasts, Luise Ross Gallery, New York, NY
- 2015: *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities: 30 Years at Cavin-Morris*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
Vodun, Vodou, Conjure: Animistic Arts of the African Diaspora
- 2014: *Enigmas Rapt in Mysteries*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
- 2013: *Great and Mighty Things: Outsider Art from the Sheldon and Jill Bonovitz Collection*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
- 2012: *Accidental Genius: Art From the Anthony Petullo Collection*, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI
American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY
Intuit: The center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago, IL
Valise Gallery, Vashon Island, WA
- 2011: *Twenty-Five Years of Collecting Self-Taught Artists*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
- 2010: American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY
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- 2006: American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY
- 2005: American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY

Art Resource Group, Corona del Mar, CA

- 2004: *Golden Blessings of Old Age*, American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, MD
American Folk Art Museum
- 2003: *Insights: Self-taught Artists for the 21st Century*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
- 2002: *Artists' Artists*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
Between The Nameless and the Named: The Art of Vernacular Homeground, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
- 2001: *Keeping the Faith: Works by Self-Taught Artists*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
- 2000: *Ignoring Borders: New Artists, New Works*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
Man-ifest: Visions of Masculinity by Self-Taught Men, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
- 1999: *e-scapes: Passion of Place*, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, NY
Aliens Among Us, Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, MD
- 1998: Museum of American Folk Art
Traveled through to Philadelphia Museum of Art, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Amon Carter Museum and The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, TX; Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, NY; Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus
- 1996: Birmingham Museum of Art, AL
- 1995: Nathan D. Rosen Museum Gallery, Boca Raton, FL
Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, CA
- 1994: New School for Social Research, NY
Jamison/Thomas Gallery, Portland, OR
Heckscher Museum, Huntington NY
- 1993: Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford CT
- 1991: *Jon Serl, Paintings*, Oneiros Gallery, San Diego, CA
Art in Embassies, U.S. Department of State
Irvine Fine Arts Center, Irvine, CA
- 1990: Art in Embassies, U.S. Department of State
Randall Gallery, St. Louis, MO
- 1989: Art in Embassies, U.S. Department of State
- 1988: Janet Fleisher Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
Rona Gallery, London UK
- 1987: Robeson Center Gallery, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ
Florida State University
- 1986: *Muffled Voices: Folk Artists in Contemporary America*, PaineWebber Art Gallery & Museum of American Folk Art, New York
Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA
Rosa Esman Gallery, NY

- 1985: Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ
Folk Craft Gallery, Portland, OR
- 1984: Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, CA
Traveled to the Henry Gallery of Art, University of Washington, Seattle; Maryhurst College, Portland, OR;
San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA
- 1983: Harbor College Art Gallery, Wilmington, CA

Selected Collections:

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Luce Foundation Center, Washington, D.C.
American Folk Art Museum, New York
New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans
Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach
Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee
Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach
Oakland Museum of California, Oakland
John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI

Selected Bibliography:

Goldner, Liz, "Jon Serl," Contemporary-Art-Dialogue.com, Online Resource, 2013.

Jo Farb Hernandez, Randall Morris, and Cara Zimmerman. Jon Serl: The Mutability of Being (1 ed). San Jose: Natalie and James Thompson Art Gallery, SJSU, 2013.

Stone, Lisa, ed., Accidental Genius: Art From the Anthony Petullo Collection, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, 2012.

Borum, Jennifer P., "Jon Serl," Artforum International, Vol. 32, No. 2, 1996.

Messer, Sam, Denis Johnson, and Red Lips, One Man by Himself: Portraits of Jon Serl, Hard Press, West Stockbridge, MA, 1995.