



In the Realms of the Unreal

The Mysterious Life and Art of Henry Darger

A film by Jessica Yu

A Wellspring Release
Not Yet Rated by the MPAA
In English

82 min / 35mm / Color / 1:85 / Dolby SRD

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ABOUT THE FILM

IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL, an innovative feature length documentary, directed by Academy Award-winning filmmaker Jessica Yu and produced by Susan West, explores the parallel lives of legendary outsider artist Henry Darger. Reclusive janitor by day, visionary artist by night, Darger's 15,000 page novel details the exploits of the Vivian Girls, seven angelic sisters who lead a rebellion against godless, child-enslaving men. Featuring the voices of Dakota Fanning (I AM SAM, CAT IN THE HAT) and Larry Pine (THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS, THE ICE STORM), the music of Emmy-winning composer Jeff Beal and the work of a team of animators, this wholly original film tells the story of a hidden universe.

ABOUT HENRY DARGER

In 1973, at a Catholic poor house in Chicago, an 81-year-old retired janitor quietly died. His name was Henry Darger. Just months earlier, he had moved from the rented room where he had lived for over 40 years. When his landlords, Nathan and Kiyoko Lerner, cleaned out the clutter room, they discovered paintings: hundreds of brilliant watercolors, some over 10 feet long. The images were disturbing and mysteriously beautiful: little girls frolicking under stormy skies, little girls fighting soldiers, little girls being rescued by fantastic winged creatures. In many images, the girls were drawn naked, with penises.

The landlords soon found the other half of Darger's life's work, perhaps the longest novel ever written: the more than 15,000 page, single-spaced typed "In the Realms of the Unreal", an epic story of the virtuous Vivian girls and their religious war against the evil Glandelinian army. For most of his life, Henry Darger, a recluse whom others called "Crazy," had lived in this rich fantasy world. It was a world he had kept to himself.

Today, Henry Darger is considered to be one of America's foremost outsider artists: an untaught artist working in isolation from the commercial or public eye. IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL, an adventurous documentary feature, explores the fantastic vision and shadowy life of this enigmatic artist.

A HIDDEN WORLD

IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL explores outsider art from the inside. Eschewing expert opinion, it reflects the uniqueness of its subject, employing vivid animation and experimental elements to immerse us in Darger's world and all its strange beauty. Brought to life on film, the works reverberate with universal themes: the search for meaning, control, connection, moral direction. Through Darger's eyes, film reveals this odd man to be Everyman.

Darger lived a virtually friendless existence, but his imaginary life was as exciting and colorful as his real life was tedious. By day, he scrubbed floors, attended Mass, rummaged through garbage cans. By night, he ruled a world in which the forces of innocence and good fought a bloody battle against the forces of treachery and evil. By juxtaposing Henry Darger's parallel but opposite universes, the film shows how he forged magic out of the bleakest of lives, leaving a legacy that has inspired other artists around the world.

Darger moved through the world virtually unnoticed, and the ultimate meaning of his work remains an enigma. The film begins as a mystery, but ends as a celebration of the power of individual creativity. IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL captures the haunting imprint of an extraordinary, ordinary man.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

I was first introduced to Henry Darger about 15 years ago at the LA County Museum of Art, where his work was included in a collection of "outsider art." It stood out to me for its combination of perverse subject matter and innocent presentation -- there was

something about the total lack of irony in his depiction of soldiers wearing mortarboards or nude little hermaphrodites toting rifles. Such bizarre and powerful imagery, but without a wink and a nod. It really stayed with me, and I had no doubt that there was a lot more to that particular story. About 10 years later, I was giving a lecture on "The Living Museum" in Chicago, and a man in the audience asked me if I had heard of Darger. He was a journalist named Ted Shen, and he happened to be a friend of Darger's last landlord, Kiyoko Lerner. The next day Ted took me to the house, where Kiyoko graciously showed me a collection of Darger's paintings and then took me up into the 3rd floor room where he had lived for over 40 years.

Entering the room was a powerful experience, as Darger's presence was palpable in every square inch of the place. Everything in the room was something that he had chosen – paper dolls, statues of the Virgin Mary, paint pots, boxes of rubber bands. And it had all aged to the same rich sepia tone. There was incredible stillness in the room; you could see the dust hanging in the air. It was one of the most beautiful rooms I had ever been in, and in that moment I became obsessed with the thought of making a film about the artist who had lived there.

After seeing the hand-bound volumes of Darger's 15,000 novel, several hundreds of the paintings that accompanied it, the thousands of pages of notes and journals, and drawers filled with color tests, source material, and piles of clippings, it was clear that the paintings I had seen at LACMA could not be dismissed as the spontaneous output of a crazy man. They were definitely pieces of a much larger and more intricate puzzle, an epic work that consumed much of Darger's life. I wanted to learn the inner architecture of this grand structure. A daunting task, but I felt that Darger's work could only be done justice if treated as a whole – the expression of a life.

I was drawn to this subject not only for the strange beauty of the work and the mystery of Darger's parallel lives, the "real" and the fantastical; I was moved by the fact that he created this work only for himself. Early on, I kept thinking of the John Donne quote, "No man is an island." It seemed that Darger was testing this idea. He had such a traumatic early life -- the loss of his mother and baby sister, his tumultuous confinements in a boys' home and an asylum, the death of this father, not to mention the effects of poverty -- that it seems he willfully chose to create another world for himself. That became the central question of the film. Can one's imagination be enough to live on? Can one replace real human relationships and community with those invented in one's mind?

This question I explored in depth, as the film took about 5 years to make. The first year or so was almost purely research, as there was so much of Darger's writing (the 15,000 page novel, the hundreds of paintings, the journals and other collections) to go through. I'll admit to becoming semi-Darger-like during this period, spending many night hours

hunched over the microfilmed copies of his work, not wanting to leave the house. I was lucky enough to be able to film in Darger's room, which had been preserved since his death in 1973, twice before it was permanently dismantled in 2000. Because there are only 3 known pictures of Darger himself -- no home movies, very few people who even knew him -- the greatest challenge in the film was to evoke a sense of the man in the film. I decided early on not to include any art experts or psychologists; when it comes to Darger we're all guessing anyway. By including impressions only from the people who actually knew him, I felt the film could present an amount of "evidence" to let the audience make up their own minds about what this man was like, and what his art meant. The idea behind the structure of the film was to parallel his real life with his fantasy life; as one reflects on the other, the oddness of his fantasy world becomes more accessible, enabling the audience to become more immersed.

The last two years of the film were devoted to editing and animation; we worked with a team of seven animators. They did an amazing job, considering that their directive was to animate using only elements found in Darger's paintings, not to invent new elements. It was a very labor-intensive process, but I believe it more faithfully reflects the spirit of Darger's original work than slicker animation.

- Jessica Yu

Introduction of Henry Darger: Art and Selected Writings

Author: Michael Bonesteel

Rizzoli International Publications, 2000

Do you believe it, unlike most children, I hated to see the day come when I will be grown up. I never wanted to. I wished to be young always. I am a grownup now and an old lame man, darn it. - Henry Darger, "The History of My Life"

For Henry Darger, the boundaries between art and life blurred so thoroughly that were have some difficulty determining where one ended and the other began. Progressively, from the age of three on, life became to painful and disappointing for him to spend much time in the so-called real world. Darger made a conscious decision that, if the real world were not good enough, he would invent a different one, populate it with characters based loosely upon the people he knew or read about, and then enter his world himself. Starting around 1910, he began constructing an alternative reality from the ground up, and, for a period of some sixty years thereafter, he devoted the majority of his time and energy to bringing to life his magnum opus, IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL, first in words and then in images. He did not do this to make "art" or "literature". He did not do this to gain fame or make money. He did it to save his life. And though he fought with God over it and risked losing his soul in the process, it worked.

Reading Darger's REALMS and viewing his arts can be like entering a trance. We stare transfixed by awe and fascination as a self-taught savant peels shreds of subconscious anguish and ecstasy. In the end, Darger invented a luminous and bewildering hybrid of prose and art, history and fantasy, unfettered childhood bliss and unremitting psychological torment IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL is impressive and powerful, filled with flashes of beauty, brilliance, and humor, but also with the stench of fearless atrocities. It is an outrageous Frankenstein's monster, with parts scavenged from here and there, then stitched together. By all rights, it should not be alive at all, but there it is, rough and unrefined, with a strong pulse and a brave soul, lumbering forward unsteadily on mighty legs.

One might view Darger's REALMS as fine art, Outsider art, Catholic art, or proto-pop appropriative art, but in the end it transcends categories. It is both more and less than art. It is a life's experience distilled into a strange new paradigm, an idiosyncratic mythological opus with historic and psychological underpinnings. Darger thought of himself as an author and an artist and he set out to make a novel with illustrations, but he wound up with an account of a war waged in his psyche. The lifeblood of his creation, what made it come alive, was his desperate desire for company-the company of imaginary playmates. The heroines of REALMS, seven saintly sisters and child princesses known as the Vivian Girls, were willed to life by Darger, and they became his life. Sometimes it seems that the greatest animating force of his entire saga was his need to be with these children in a world were he could become all the things he dreamed about: writer, warrior, rebel, and guardian. REALMS became that world. What kind of man would create such a place?

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

JESSICA YU

Director, Writer, Producer

Jessica Yu is a filmmaker based in Los Angeles. She won the 1997 Academy Award for Best Documentary Short for *BREATHING LESSONS: THE LIFE AND WORK OF MARK O'BRIEN*, an intimate portrait of the writer who lived for four decades paralyzed by polio and confined to an iron lung. The film also won over 20 festival awards, including the IDA Achievement Award, the Audience Award at Aspen Shortsfest, and First Prize at the St. Petersburg International Film Festival, since its debut at the Sundance Film Festival. She also won an Emmy and a Cable Ace Award for Best Documentary Director. Yu's documentary *THE LIVING MUSEUM*, the award-winning HBO film about an art community in a New York mental institution premiered at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival.

Yu's narrative short *BETTER LATE* was the debut film for the fXM Shorts Series. It has been featured in 60 festivals since its premiere at Sundance 1997, and it won First Prize for Short Drama at the New York Festivals. Her other films include *MEN OF REENACTION*, a documentary about Civil War reenactors, for which she received grants from ITVS and NEA; the popular black & white short *SOUR DEATH BALLS*, which won several awards, including Best Live Action Short at the Santa Barbara Film Festival, was featured at Berlin, Sundance, Telluride, Toronto, San Francisco, Sydney and the national PBS series *ALIVE TV*; *THE CONDUCTOR*, a musical comedy short featuring Mark Salzman (*IRON AND SILK*) and the documentary *HOME BASE*, winner of several festival awards. She also directs commercials, for which she has won a New York Emmy.

Yu has served on the Board of Directors of the International Documentary Association, where she was an organizing member of the first International Documentary Congress. Yu has also written articles and fiction for the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, *Buzz*, *Worth*, and the Pacific News Service. She received the Murrow Award for Journalism from the Skeptics Society, the DREAM Media Award from the Western Law Center for Disability Rights and ACV's Asian American Media Award. She has lectured at various universities and conferences, including the Sun Valley Writers Conference. She has been profiled in *The New York Times*, *People*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *Working Woman* magazine. She is a recent MacDowell Colony Fellow and a Yaddo Fellow. Yu graduated from Yale University, Phi Beta Kappa, Summa Cum Laude, with a B.A. in English.

In 2000, Yu was the artist-in-residence at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. Also, as the first director selected for the John Wells Director Diversity Program, she has directed episodes of the NBC dramas "The West Wing," "Lyon's Den," "ER," and "Mr. Sterling," as well as "The Guardian" for CBS. Yu directs commercials with nonfiction spots of Santa Monica.

SUSAN WEST

Producer

Susan has produced theater, television and documentary films for the last 15 years. She produced some of the most innovative live performance acts in the United States and Europe, including the Blue Man Group, Bill Irwin, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, David Byrne, and Robert Wilson. She also produced and managed theater both on and off Broadway in New York, including productions with the Royal Shakespeare Company, author Susan Sontag, The Wooster Group and actor/playwright Sam Shepard. Her theater experience also includes serving as General Manager for productions and festivals around the globe, including General Manager for the Los Angeles Festival, the Olympics Arts Festival, and the TOGA festival in Japan.

Susan has produced documentary films in collaboration with some of today's most interesting filmmakers, including Eleanor Coppola, Academy Award winner Jessica Yu and other distinguished documentary filmmakers. In addition, she produced VH-1's hit television program *Behind the Music* for two seasons and served as director of On Air Talent for E! Entertainment Television. She holds a B.A. and a M.A. in literature from the University of California at Berkeley.

KARA VALLOW

Animation Producer

The first series Kara Vallow produced was "The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" final three seasons in the 1990's. Since then, she has produced series for Warner Bros., MTV, Comedy Central, Sony, Cartoon Network, Hanna Barbera, Comedy Central and Fox. Some of these series include "Dilbert," "Johnny Bravo," "3-South," and "Family Guy." She worked with Adam Sandler on "8 Crazy Nights." She is currently producing "Drawn Together" for Comedy Central as well as "Family Guy" and "American Dad" for Fox Television. She is the creator of "Wanda Booth: Teenage Sleuth" which she is currently developing. She lives in Silver Lake, CA.

JOAN HUANG

Co-Producer

Since the days of producing student documentaries and guerilla marketing at UC Berkeley, Joan Huang multi-tasked in multiple fields including casting, public relations, film festivals, event television, and traveling Asia for a (now -defunct) dotcom and 3D animation studio. In 2001, Joan founded Cherry Sky Films LLC, and co-produced Justin Lin's BETTER LUCK TOMORROW, which debuted at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival and is nominated for an IFP Indie Spirit Award. Working with MTV Films, she helped produce the film's website, as well as strategize and execute the grass roots and internet marketing/ outreach campaign for BLT's 2003 theatrical release. Most recently, Joan was the Casting Director and Associate Producer for ETHAN MAO, an independent

feature by writer/director Quentin Lee; she works with him again on his horror/thriller feature CAMPUS GHOST STORY. Currently, Joan is producing a themed series of 5 short films which will launch into an annual series of shorts to showcase independent filmmakers.

JEFF BEAL

Composer

Emmy award winning composer Jeff Beal is a member of a new generation of eclectic composers; fluent in the diverse languages of jazz, classical, contemporary, electronic and world music - composing for screen, Cds and concert hall.

As a film composer, Beal scored Ed Harris' acclaimed directorial debut, POLLOCK. Utilizing heroic and ironic Americana themes, this score established Beal as an innovator. Recent scores include Bob Rafelson's noir feature starring Samuel Jackson, NO GOOD DEED, William H. Macy's Emmy awarded DOOR TO DOOR, and the theme and underscore for USA's hit comedy series, MONK. Beal scored Tibet: Cry Of The Snow Lion, a documentary initiated by the Dalai Lama, currently showing around the country. He received two Emmy awards in 2003, one for his score to the NBC Sports division's Olympic documentary, Peggy and Dorothy, and one for his main title theme for Monk. This fall, Beal composed the evocative underscore for the HBO original series, Carnivale.

Beal's concert music has been performed by many leading orchestras and conductors, including the St. Louis, Frankfurt, Munich, and Detroit Symphonies. American conductor Kent Nagano commissioned and conducted the world premiere of two concert works; Interchange (recorded by the Turtle Island String Quartet, Neeme Jarvi and the Detroit Symphony) and Alternate Route (recorded by Nagano, the Berkeley Symphony and Beal as trumpet soloist) Beal's seven solo jazz CDs, including Three Graces, Contemplations and Red Shift (Koch Jazz) have established him as a respected recording artist.

RECENT EXHIBITIONS OF HENRY DARGER'S WORK

VISIONS REALIZED: The Paintings and Process of Henry Darger

Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art in Chicago presented this exhibition, which included drawings, paintings and "ephemera from Darger's room," between March 14 and June 1, 2003.

Watari-Um Museum of Contemporary Art

Between November 29, 2002, and April 6, 2003, the Watari-Um Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo held an exhibit entitled *Henry Darger: In the Realm of the Unreal*, containing 48 images.

The American Folk Art Museum

The American Folk Art Museum in NYC held two exhibitions showcasing their Darger collection in 2001-2002. *Darger: the Henry Darger Collection* included 26 paintings and ran from December 11, 2001, through June 23, 2002. A 170-page catalog with 70 color illustrations is available for this exhibition. Another exhibition, *Studies and Sketches: Henry Darger*, ran from January 21, 2002, through July 14, 2002, at the Museum's Eva and Morris Feld Gallery.

Irish Museum of Modern Art

The Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin held an exhibit from April 10 through September 23, 2001, entitled *The First 10 Years: Selected Works from the Collection*, that included one or more works by Darger. The Darger work was on loan from the The Musgrave Kinley Outsider Art Collection.

Disasters of War

Presented by P.S.1., *Disasters of War* included "never before exhibited" works by Darger, as well as works by Francisco de Goya and Jake and Dinos Chapman. *Disasters of War* ran from November 19, 2000, through February 25, 2001.

Henry Darger: Realms of the Unreal

The Carl Hammer Gallery in Chicago held this exhibit from October 11 to November 11, 2000.

The Modern Child: Images of Children in 20th Century Art

Galerie St. Etienne in NYC held this exhibit, which included a few Darger paintings, from September 14, 1999, to November 6, 1999.

Henry Darger and His Realms

Galerie St. Etienne in NYC held this exhibit from January 14, 1999, until March 13, 1999.

Self-Taught Artists of the 20th Century: An American Anthology

This traveling exhibit contained nine Darger pieces.

Philadelphia Museum of Art
March 10-May 17, 1998

High Museum of Art, Atlanta
July 14-October 20, 1998

Amon Carter Museum and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
October 31, 1998-January 24, 1999

Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester
February 20-April 18, 1999

Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University
May 15-August 15, 1999

Museum of American Folk Art, New York
September 19-December 11, 1999

Henry Darger: The Unreality of Being

The University of Iowa Museum of Art, Ames
January 13, 1996 - March 10, 1996

Museum of American Folk Art, New York City
January 18, 1997 - April 27, 1997

Center for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco
September 20 - November 30, 1997

The High Museum of Art, Atlanta
December 13, 1997 - March 7, 1998

Chicago Public Library Cultural Center, Chicago
April 4 - May 31, 1998

ABOUT WELLSPRING

Current and upcoming **Wellspring** theatrical releases include Jean-François Pouliot's Sundance Audience Award-winner *Seducing Doctor Lewis*, Jonathan Caouette's groundbreaking debut film *Tarnation*, Vincent Gallo's controversial *The Brown Bunny* starring Gallo and Chloé Sevigny, André Téchiné's World War II drama *Strayed* starring Emmanuelle Béart, Alexander Sokurov's Cannes prize-winner *Father and Son*, Cedric Kahn's thriller *Red Lights* starring Jean-Pierre Darroussin and Carole Bouquet, Marco Bellocchio's Venice prize-winner *Good Morning, Night*, Savi Gabizon's *Nina's Tragedies* which won 11 Israeli academy awards, and Anne Fontaine's erotic love story *Nathalie*, starring Gerard Depardieu, Fanny Ardant and Emmanuelle Béart.

Past releases include some of the most acclaimed and successful arthouse films of recent years such as *Russian Ark*, hailed by Roger Ebert as "one of the most astonishing films ever made.," Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece *Ran*, *The Circle* by Jafar Panahi, *Yi Yi* by Edward Yang, *Under the Sand* by François Ozon and Lorene Machado's *Notorious C.H.O.* **Wellspring** has fostered the careers of some of the most important directors in world cinema today including Bruno Dumont (*Life of Jesus, Humanité, Twentynine Palms*), Alexander Sokurov (*Russian Ark, Father and Son*) Jafar Panahi (*The Circle, Crimson Gold*), Leos Carax (*Mauvais Sang, Pola X*), Tsai Ming-liang (*What Time is It There? Goodbye Dragon Inn*), Olivier Assayas (*Les Destinées*), Claire Denis (*Friday Night*), Bahman Ghobadi (*Marooned in Iraq*), Liz Garbus (*Girlhood*), Marina de Van (*In My Skin*) and Karim Ainouz (*Madame Satã*). **Wellspring** has also been committed to the theatrical re-release of classic films including the works of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Demy and François Truffaut.

Together, the **Wellspring** Home Entertainment and Worldwide Sales libraries boast over 1,000 titles including major works by François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Luchino Visconti, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Taviani Brothers, Peter Greenaway, Jacques Demy, Akira Kurosawa, Pedro Almodóvar, Michelangelo Antonioni and Lina Wertmüller among others.

Wellspring's Direct Response unit sells arthouse and specialty video/DVD titles via **The Video Collection** and **the artfilm collection** direct mail consumer catalogs and websites, www.videocollection.com and www.artfilmcollection.com

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