

# BUILDING CARDBOARD CASTLES IN THE AIR



Randy R. Brown  
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## characterful and movable assemblages

RON SCHIRA



*Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*, 2015, 36 x 22 x 8 ins. / 91. x 55.9 x 20.3 cm, cardboard and mixed media, Outsider Folk Art Gallery, PA

Working with cardboard, scissors and inexpensive paint, Brent Brown of Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, has created a sizable repertoire of movable figures and objects that encapsulate and honour the lasting impressions of his childhood through television and movies. Recalling his own innocence and the need to re-invent his memories and heroes, both fictitious and real, his marionette-type characters move their limbs and bodies in an imitation of the images he grew up with, and the things that left a lasting impression on him.

Brown was born 41 years ago in Indiana, and was deprived of oxygen at birth. As a learning-disabled child, he spent much of his time at the Riley Children's Hospital, Indiana University, Indianapolis. He was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, and now lives in an assisted-living apartment complex near Reading, Pennsylvania, with help from the Mosaic House Clubhouse, a psychiatric rehabilitation service for people experiencing mental health challenges.

He says his talent was recognised early on when he was asked in school to draw a stick figure. He drew a fully-detailed person. As a young boy he was inspired by Bible stories and comic books, then by television and movies. Aged ten he won an art contest, which further encouraged his interest in art, especially puppetry and ceramics. He had always made art in his spare time – images of monsters from movies, clay masks of faces seen in print from all over the world and more.

Having no formal or continuing art education, he credits his Wilson High School art teacher, Robert Chapel, with instructing him on how to make stained glass, and how to work with terracotta clay and other mediums. After high school, he was employed in a factory run by a local organisation that helped people with specific learning disabilities while he made his artwork at home.

Later, in his twenties, a few of his pieces were displayed in the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing



*Ozzie Orangutan*, cardboard and acrylic paint, 20 x 28 x 9 ins. / 50 x 71 x 23 cm, Just Folk Gallery, CA

Arts at the VSA (Very Special Art) Gallery, Washington, DC. His work has since been shown at several galleries and exhibitions across Pennsylvania. He keeps himself creatively busy, but does not make a living through art.

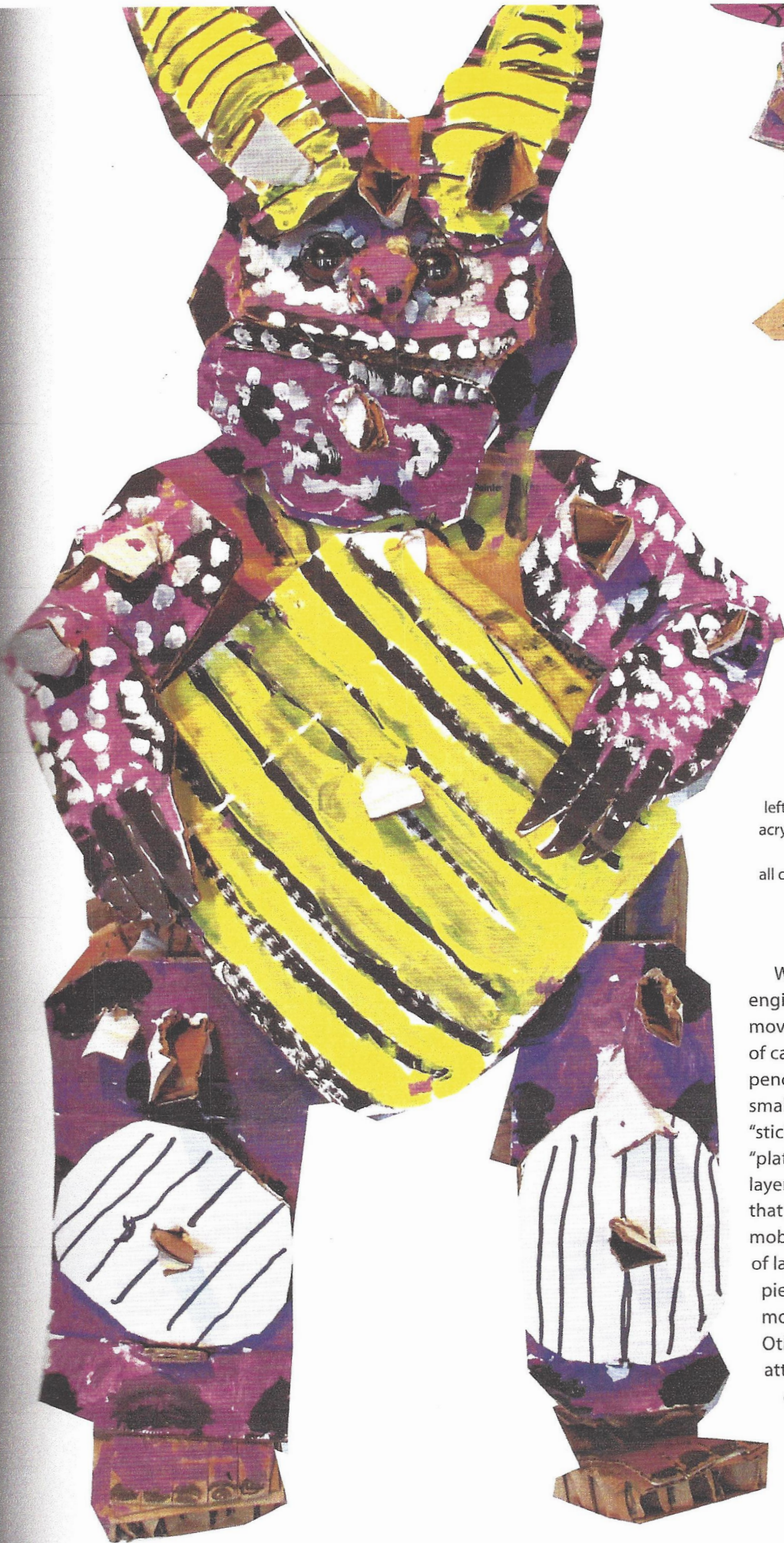
Brown's parents have always been supportive of him. When they divorced a few years ago, he began to make his articulated cardboard puppets. His influences are many: he admires film directors Steven Spielberg and George Lucas for their imaginations and storytelling, and portrays characters from their films in his work. He also loves and appreciates the paintings of Van Gogh and Rembrandt.

It is not surprising to see cardboard renditions of imaginary creatures from *Gremlins* (1984), Yoda from the *Star Wars* movie series, and DC and Marvel characters the Batman, the Joker, Spider-Man and the Hulk. One of his pieces is a three-foot-long representation of the Batmobile, circa 1966, replete

Because he lives in a place for people with disabilities, Brown is restricted from using many of the commercial, and occasionally hazardous, materials such as toxic glues, flammable solvents and sharp cutting tools, so paper, cardboard, non-toxic glue and acrylic paint form the basis of his sculptural pieces.

His work begins with an idea, which he then draws (usually the face) onto cardboard, adding layers and details as he progresses. With limited access to the internet, he relies on his memory or printed images as reference points. *National Geographic* is also a favoured resource.

His subjects include favourite characters from TV, jungle animals, and characters and creatures from the movies *The Blues Brothers* (1980), *Gremlins*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990), Jim Henson's *The Dark Crystal* (1992) and Walt Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* (1951). His work can be divided into two or three



top right: *Armor Grem*, 2015, cardboard and acrylic paint, 17 x 9 x 5 ins. / 43 x 23 x 14 cm

bottom right: *Mexican Jumping Beans*, 2015, cardboard and acrylic paint, 15 x 17 x 4 ins. / 38 x 46 x 10 cm

left: *Bottom Drum Grem*, cardboard and acrylic paint, 17 x 31 x 6 ins. / 46 x 76 x 15 cm

all courtesy of Just Folk Gallery, CA

With an inventive twist of minor engineering, Brown creates moveable joints. By piercing a sheet of cardboard with scissors or a pencil, he rolls cardboard into a small peg or pinion (which he calls a "sticklet") and inserts it through the "platelets" (his term), building up layers of hands, feet, arms and legs that give his creations a gangly mobility. He compares the additions of layers with weaving, and calls his pieces "puppets" because of the movement that he gives them. Other works have taped or folded attachments that allow his creations to bend at the neck or waist, or to open and close their jaws.

Each of the artworks is



below right: *Hollywood Grem*, cardboard and acrylic paint, 16 x 25 x 6 ins. / 40 x 63 x 15 cm, Just Folk Gallery, CA

about 30 inches / 76 centimetres tall, and most of them are to be hung on the wall. A few stand free, such as his rendition of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album cover or the Batmobile. He has constructed dozens of gremlins from the Spielberg film, and many dwarves from the Disney archives, not to forget the Warner Brothers' *Looney Tunes* and other sources of fantasy or cartoon entertainment.

He has mentioned in an interview that when he is in a bad mood, creating a gremlin or other funky creature will cheer him up. He prefers to create creatures and animals because there are no standards for what he makes and he can use any colour he likes.

Nor does Brown believe there is any real difference between the creations of a trained artist or one who is untrained, because all art is the same. He says, "Creating art is a joy for anyone and I am very grateful that I have the opportunity to do it."

The Mosaic Center, where he spends his days learning work skills, is decorated with his work on every wall, relating, too, that the people from his church and many social workers he is in contact with are very supportive of his talent. He is happy to receive a lot of great feedback from many people.

One of his larger constructs is an ambitious, three-foot painted assemblage titled *Sermon on the Mount*, in which a red-robed Jesus and three disciples sit in a row. Another large piece is *Walt Disney World*, a memory-driven maquette of the Cinderella Castle at the famed Florida theme park. Brown has also made his own version of Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and numerous variations on *The Three Stooges*.

Other pieces recapture his love of vintage 1960s television, with the portrayals of the entire cast of *The Addams Family* TV show, including Cousin It and Lurch the butler. Grandpa Munster, Herman and Eddie from *The Munsters* make an appearance, as well as those from the perennial Christmas specials of Santa Claus, reindeer and assorted elves. Every one of his cardboard works has movable parts and is painted with acrylics.

*Ingenuity* steps outside of the box by showing a gremlin-like figure like many of his others. However, his pegs and pivots are more pronounced with rectangular "washers" securing them into place and bestowing his puppet with a decidedly abstract, almost Cubist appearance.

Many of his works own up to an assemblage aesthetic on an inherent level, setting an unintended historical precedent for this kind of work, and the possibility of pursuing his method long into the future.

There are less of his sculptures of unfired clay than the cardboard assemblages, but they are nonetheless well considered. *Dalmatian* offers us the painted form of a seated white dog with black spots and is especially nice. He would like to make more ceramics, but is hampered by logistics and availability.

By creating a compendium of naive, cartoonish portraiture in 3D, combined with recalled images from late twentieth-century American kid's culture, Brown's prodigious output and imaginative content bring the fun of media innocence into his life and ours.



Ron Schira is the lead art critic for the *Reading Eagle Newspaper* with over a thousand articles published. He has been exhibiting his own art for 45 years and co-hosts the *New Arts Alive* television show for Berks Community Television in Reading, PA.