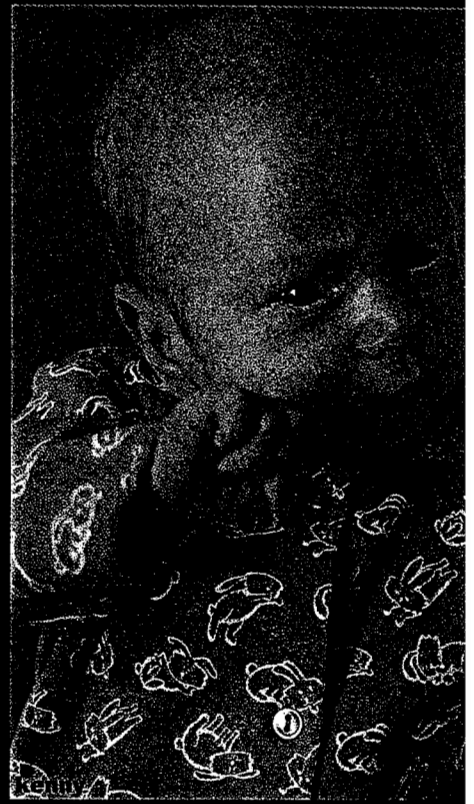
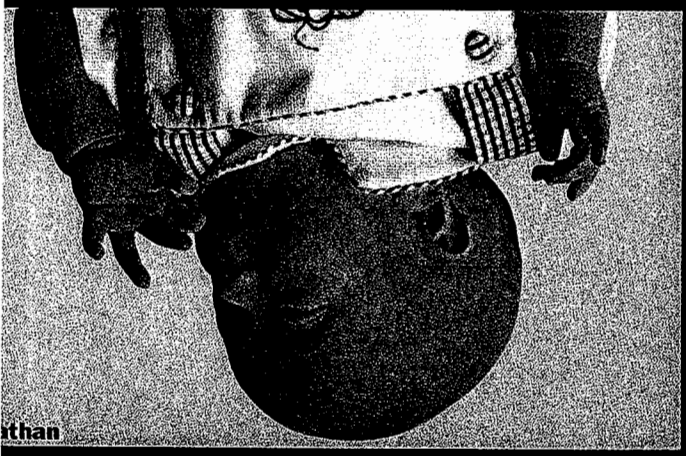
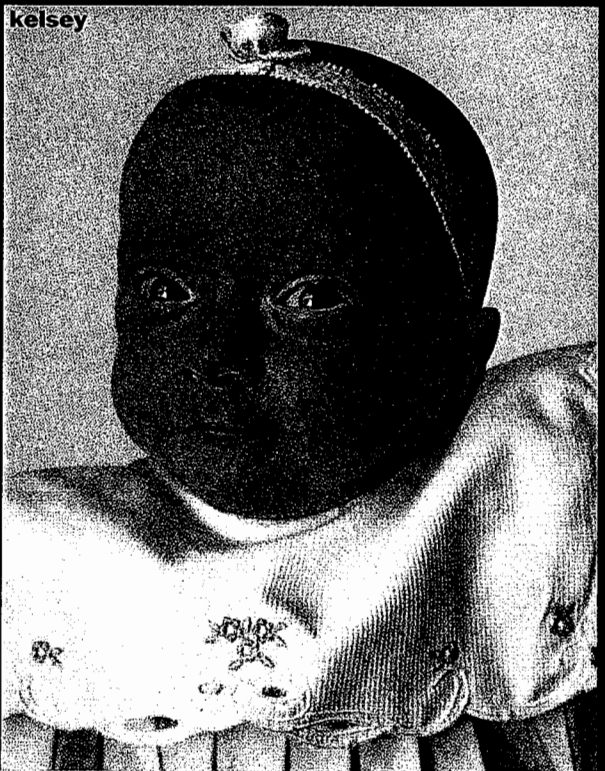


CANCER VACCINES: TEACHING THE BODY TO CURE ITSELF

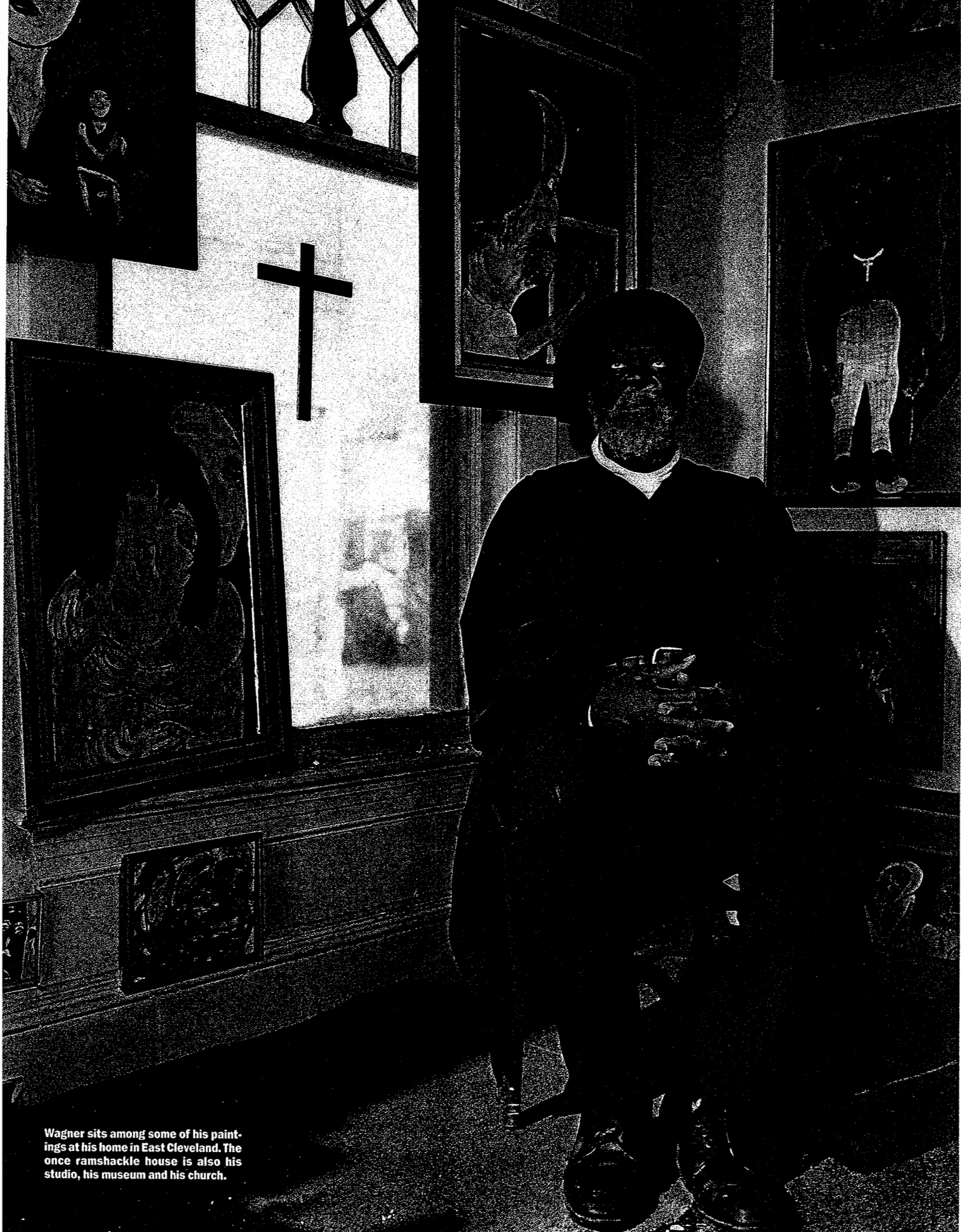
# LIFE



## Raising the septuplets!



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Wagner sits among some of his paintings at his home in East Cleveland. The once ramshackle house is also his studio, his museum and his church.

# FAITH IN PAINT

BY NIK COHN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARY ELLEN MARK

**P**ICKET FENCES ARE FEW in East Cleveland. On Lakefront Avenue, where the Reverend Albert Wagner lives and paints and preaches, some buildings are boarded up, while others look like fortresses. But Wagner's own home, which he has named the Wagner Museum, is unprotected. The front door stands open; the porch, beneath a sign that reads COME HOME ETHIOPIA, is crowded with artwork.

Standing on the stoop, patriarchal in black robes and a black wool beret, Wagner greets visitors with hands upraised. "Praise the Lord," he says, his voice a belly-deep rumble, and leads the way into his museum, consecrated to art and God.

He bought this house as a derelict shell and has rebuilt it himself, chasing out the rats, putting in plumbing and electricity. There is still no conventional furniture, though, just room upon room filled with paintings, sculptures, montages and found objects.

TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO, AFTER A LIFETIME OF LUST AND DECEIT, ALBERT WAGNER FOUND GOD AND ART AT A GAS STATION IN CLEVELAND. TODAY HE IS ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST HIGHLY REGARDED OUTSIDER ARTISTS—A PROPHET WHO WORKS MIRACLES WITH OILS.

"THIS IS MY TIME. I CAN'T GET WEARY NOW.  
**I HAVE A MESSAGE.**  
IT BURNS IN ME LIKE FIRE. I CAN KNOW NO REST."

The range of subjects is dizzying. Self-portraits and images taken from Wagner's early life are interspersed with religious works and scenes from street life—drug deals, adulteries and murders. Christ crucified is set off by an exploded car dashboard, a stick man sculpted from peanut shells, renderings of lynchings and rapes, raging prophets, a snub-nosed Madonna. A sculpture of a bowling ball escaping from a bleached canvas satchel is titled *Black Cat Coming out of a White Bag*, and a charcoal drawing of Wagner's younger self as a drummer surrounded by a whirl of cavorting women is *Ethiopian Queens and Dancing Dolls*. Works like these—raw, obsessive, utterly original—have brought him national attention. Outsider art, meaning self-taught and outside the mainstream, is currently much in fashion. Several of Wagner's paintings are in museum collections, and he has had two shows in New York. Another show, his biggest yet, opened in April at the Fruit Avenue Gallery in Cleveland. Recognition, however, has not led him to splurge on needless luxuries. "If a man has a true vision," Wagner explains, "he needs to be ready to sit on the floor."

When he was 10 and living in Crittenden County, Ark., Wagner used to carry two buckets of water balanced on a yoke across the fields to the cotton pickers. In summer the temperature would hit 110°, sometimes more: "My mother would be waiting on me, burning up, so I'd carry the pails real careful not to spill one drop. Gnats and flies flew in, all kinds of bugs, but my mother would never shuck them off, she just blew them back, *scbbhhwooo*, *scbbhhwooo*, before each sip."

Forty years later, Wagner had become a successful businessman in Cleveland, a furniture mover, supporting a fleet of trucks, three identities, three families and 20 children. "I had the world's riches, but I was a backslider and a whoremonger. I was pitched in the pit." Then one day, during a heat wave, his car radiator sprang a leak. A woman at a gas station brought him two pails of water. And suddenly, as he watched her, he was back in Arkansas.

"Between one breath and the next, I saw the whole scene—myself as a child, my mother waiting, the bugs and the high cotton, the yellow sky. I went right home and I started to paint it all. I never stopped painting since."

That was 24 years ago. Since then, Wagner estimates, he has produced 5,000 pieces. At the same time he has made a new life for himself. In the wake of his epiphany at the gas station, he gave up his business, stopped tomatting and became an ordained minister. "It didn't come easy," he admits. "Sex had me bound and chained. I was like the wolfman—the moment that the trick of lust allured my nostrils, it was like I had fangs, my body went back to the beast. That wolf had got to die. But it took me long years to kill him."

Now 74, Wagner believes the predator within him is finally tamed. Massive of head and shoulder and fist, he cuts a monumental figure, fit for an Old Testament prophet, but his gaze is mostly benign, and the harshness that runs through his work is offset by a wry humor: "What do I do normally? I don't do anything normal. I'm a very strange man. Strange to myself sometimes."

Under provocation, his eyes can still flash fire. "When I was a boxer in my prime, no man born of woman could stand under my blow," he says, not without satisfaction. "My rage was terrible." These days, however, most of his anger is reserved for those who try to lay thieving hands on the chocolates and



Wagner works with found objects as well as paint. Above: *City Beneath the Sea*, made out of old toys and jewelry.

sweet cakes that are his last indulgences.

How did he unravel the tangle of his former life? "It's still a complication," Wagner admits. His wife, Magnolia, who bore him 16 children, left him many years ago, though she stays in touch; his onetime mistress Bernice, who gave him two more, has also remained close; while his former secretary Harriet, who mothered the last two, holds court in his basement, dispensing coffee and doughnuts. "Wagner," she says succinctly, "is a man that keeps himself busy."

The basement where Wagner preaches is the only part of the house in which he has permitted furnishings—a table and some fold-up metal chairs, a few rows of bare wooden benches. Visiting daughters and grandchildren congregate around a small TV, which he rarely watches. Once a week they join him in worship.

Wagner's religion is idiosyncratic. His diet is strictly kosher, and his Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday. On Saturday morning he seats himself behind a battered drum, chanting and preaching redemption while assorted family members shout responses. The basement is suffocatingly hot, yet the service lasts all day, and Wagner, pounding the offbeat as if crushing rocks, never flags. "This is my time. I can't get weary now," he says later. "I have a message. It burns in me like fire. Until I show my people the truth, I can know no rest."

What is this message? "We need to see the true root of all our troubles. The fault doesn't lie in American history, not in slavery times or any other injustice, but way back in antiquity. Ethiopia sinned; it's in the Bible. We committed an atrocity in God's eyes. And this is my mission now, to make my people fall down on their knees and beg His forgiveness. There is no other way."

These beliefs have not won Wagner any popularity contests in his own community. White collectors and fellow painters may revere him, but many blacks dismiss him as a crank. He suffers their scorn without anger. Informed that he's known as a crazy man, Wagner smiles indulgently and spreads his huge hands. "Every prophet is crazy to most people," he says "If he wasn't, there would be no need to prophesy." □