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AT HOME WITH/THE REV. ALBERT WAGNER; Moses of East Cleveland, With Detours

By JOHN LELAND

In a corner of his weathered wood-frame house, behind a sculpture made from a tree trunk and tire chains, the Rev. Albert Wagner has a painting that he calls "One Bad Cat." It is loosely autobiographical, like a lot of the art in the house. Against a bright turquoise background, an elderly African-American man lies under a pile of paintings.

"He painted himself out of his home," said Mr. Wagner, who is 77 and has a glistening bald head and a wiry white beard. "Sometimes I'll be painting upstairs and fall asleep, and I'll wake up with paintings all on top of me."

Mr. Wagner, whose artworks will be on display at the Outsider Art Fair, which begins on Friday at the Puck Building in SoHo, is a folk artist of many media -- a painter, sculptor, woodcarver, compiler of found objects. But his greatest creation, in living flux, is his home, a three-story house about 15 minutes east of downtown Cleveland. He calls it the Wagner Museum, and keeps the front door open to the public.

When he first moved to the house, in 1980, he furnished the rooms with couches, chairs, the usual. But over the years, the furniture has been pushed out by his art. Paintings on wooden boards cover nearly every inch of wall space. Wood carvings, sculptures and assemblages of recycled traffic cones, table legs and other detritus cover the floor. Sometimes for a show he'll send out as many as 100 paintings, then quickly paint another 100 to fill the void.

The house is a running document of his life and faith. A question about his childhood or his marriage sets off a deliberate, discursive march upstairs or down to find the right painting. The artist is neither undiscovered nor naive, and has told many of his stories before. "Ask whatever you like," he said. "This is business."

Mr. Wagner was born in 1924 in rural Bassett, Ark., into a family of sharecroppers. When he was 5, his mother said that if she could only afford to send him to art school, he could be a great artist. Instead, he left elementary school after just three years, and eventually went north to Ohio, to the call of family, fortune and temptation. There are tribulations on these walls.

At one point in his life, Mr. Wagner had two identities, three families and four homes, and a taste for gambling and alcohol. He has 20 children by three women. When he was 50, moving a paint-spattered board, he felt the patterns on the wood were calling him both to paint and to preach.

Though the colors are bright and the scenes vivid, Mr. Wagner does not go gentle into the comforting canon of folk art. His conversation and art bristle with rebuke for African-Americans. He pointed to a scene of crude debauchery and provocation and said, "I believe that the black man has a sexual sickness, more than any other people in the world." In the center of the main floor is a metal sculpture of a man being lynched, called "American History." Its invective is aimed not at the descendants of the mob, but those of the victim. A legend over the sculpture reads, in part, "We must not let what happened then erase us of the reality of today." This is the crux of his message. "I cannot erase history," he said, "but history is erasing us. We're using history as an excuse."

He says it pains him that his support has come from white patrons and collectors. "I have so much I want to give to my people, but they don't accept it," he said. "They don't like me because of what I'm saying. I'm an Uncle Tom. Everyone's an Uncle Tom who tells us to get up and make something of ourselves."

The basement is the chapel of the People Love People House of God ministry. On Saturdays, he holds marathon sermons, singing and playing drums, telling stories from his life. He is an ordained minister in a denomination called the Commandment Keepers, and keeps a kosher diet -- "God gave kosher food to everyone, not just the Jews," he said. Most of the congregation is made up of his children and grandchildren. Some live with him for periods of time, in combinations that shift like the artwork.

The signature painting in the home is a 14-foot canvas of Moses leading the multitudes out of Egypt. Gene Kangas, a local sculptor and retired art professor, who has known Mr. Wagner since 1971, remembers when the Moses figure, like the artist, had black hair and a black beard. As Mr. Wagner turned gray, he revised the figure in his likeness. Mr. Wagner stopped short of declaring himself a prophet, but said, "Maybe somehow the Lord has permitted me to feel the joy or the pain that Moses felt, so I'm able to express his thoughts."

Running through the house are laments for his marriage, and for the absence of his former wife, Magnolia, mother of 16 of his children.

The paintings repeat, on a domestic scale, his entreaty to let history be a thing of the past. He gestured to one, called "Holding Onto Bad Memories," of a penitent man and an unforgiving woman. "You see she's not playing," he said. He says he wants the house to call her back.

The artist has a spirited and complex relationship with his former wife. When she visited on a family errand, he greeted her sharply: "Look at that woman, got no teeth in her head." She did not miss a beat: "I got teeth at home, so shut up."

With this crackling preamble, he introduced her, equal parts dig and self-reproach, as "the lady that set my clothes on the porch 35 years ago."

This spirit of cantankerous play, woven through his biblical exhortations, supplies the energy of the house. He wishes the children of the neighborhood would visit more, to learn from its stories of the sharecropper boy and his wayward path to redemption. Mr. Wagner speaks of that child as a living presence in his art. "When you look at my work," he said, "a 5-year-old boy sketched it out and an old man messed around with it. We have an understanding. That's the best of Albert."