
The Kohler Art Preserve

*by Margaret Hawkins
Chicago*



Exterior of The John Michael Kohler Art Preserve in Sheboygan.
Courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Photo: Durston Saylor.

The **Kohler Art Preserve** in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, which opened in 2021, is one of my favorite places. For starters, I like the name. It suggests a mission. To preserve something is to protect it from encroachment, extinction, or rot, like fruit or a forest. “Preserve” is both a noun and a very active verb. A preserve maintains things.



Mary Baber, Ray Yoshida in his apartment, c. 1974, Chicago, photograph. Courtesy of Mary Baber and The Kohler Art Preserve.

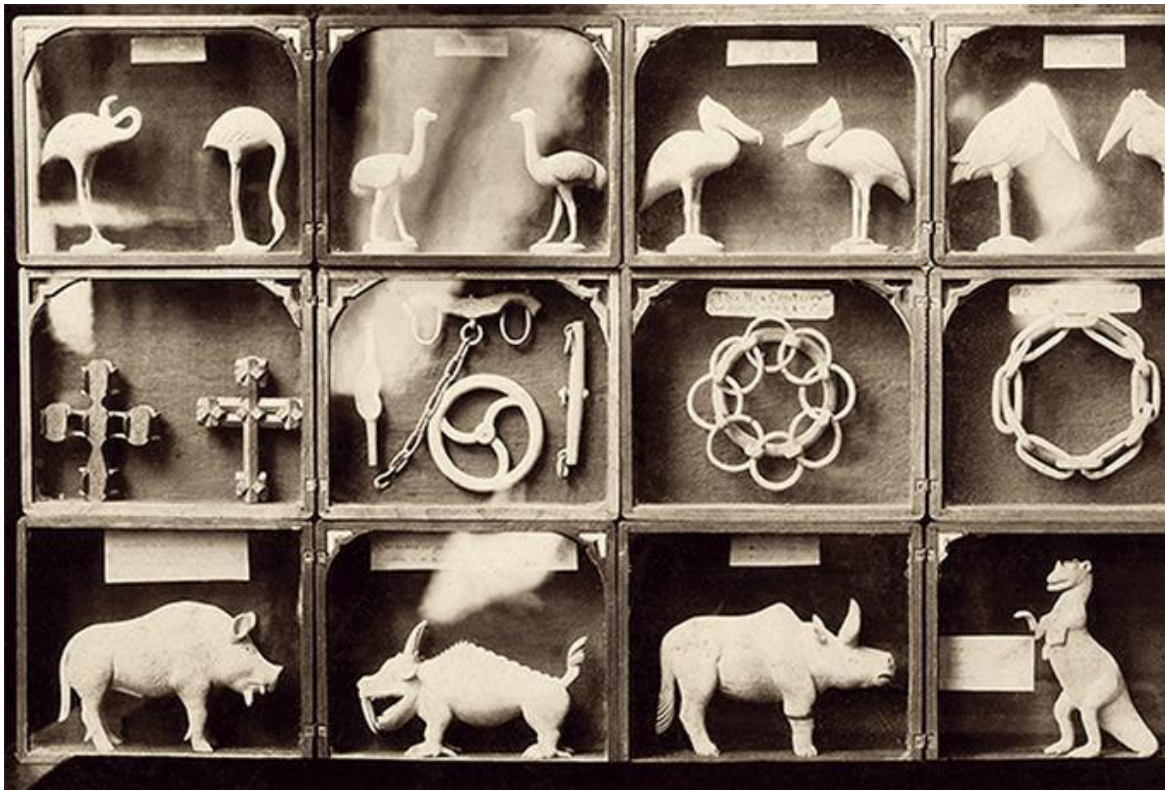
This particular Preserve, especially dedicated to outsider art, is fittingly located in a peaceful spot outside the city proper, near a river. Visitors enter through a façade of tall beams that look like a pile of building materials waiting to become something. The place is dedicated to preserving not only art but also the environments in which it was made or displayed, and while not every object here comes with or in an environment, when artwork and context are paired the combination makes the often-inscrutable work more intelligible.

As a satellite campus to the John Michael Kohler Art Center (JMKAC), also in Sheboygan, the Preserve, like its mother ship, is free to the public, completely supported by Kohler family money. You may recognize that name. Old man Kohler got rich the old-fashioned way, by making good products everybody needs, in his case high quality ceramic sinks, toilets, and water fountains. His daughter, Ruth DeYoung Kohler II, a former art teacher, wanted to share the wealth and in 1967 she and her husband built the JMKAC to champion self-taught and folk artists. The Art Preserve opened 54 years later, less than a year after its founder's death.



Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, "Untitled," 1960-80, chicken bones and paint. Courtesy © Andrew Edin Gallery, New York.

The place is both storage facility and exhibition venue, giving a feeling of accessibility rather than the standard preciousness of most museums. Visible racks of artworks line some of the walls. And the place is big. Artists get whole rooms rather than just wall space for one or two representative works. In 2012, JMKAC acquired Chicago artist Ray Yoshida's collection, and has recreated Yoshida's curation approximately as it appeared in his home. This intimately lit, densely hung exhibit at the heart of the Preserve is a mini-tour through one artist/curator's psyche, a show within a show, a mix of ephemera, art, and artifact. Each of Yoshida's choices highlights not only that object and its maker, but also the workings of the mind of the artist/collector who brought these works together and set them side by side.



Levi Fisher Ames, untitled, c. 1900, gelatin silver print of L.F. Ames Museum of Art. Courtesy of Howard Jordan and Bonnie Cunningham.

If the Yoshida Collection is tightly curated, The Art Preserve also makes room for sprawling, messy displays. Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, for instance, gets a huge expanse of real estate. Are there too many chicken bone sculptures, fashioned from what the Milwaukee-based art brutist culled from garbage bins at the fried chicken place next to his studio? Probably. But the excess makes a larger point about the obsessive nature of this artist, in fact artists in general. A side gallery with photographs of Van Bruenchenhein's wife in various states of undress tells another part of the story.

Animals are important here as they so often are to artists outside the mainstream. The creatures here are full of spirit and energy, unencumbered by the narrowing effects of language, as are so many artists. One of my favorites here is Levi Fisher Ames, an itinerant

showman who traveled the Wisconsin countryside in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, showing his hundreds of miniature carvings of real and imaginary animals, telling stories and singing songs about them. He stored the carved creatures, sometimes in sets and pairs, in homemade wooden travel cases.



Nick Engelbert, "Lion." Courtesy of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

Ames's commitment to his fantasy world will inspire any artist, or anyone else, who has found themselves on a path that leads away from accepted reality. As does so much at The Art Preserve. Another favorite discovery on my last visit was Nick Engelbert's "Lion." Two disconcertingly soulful eyes stare out of the beast's rough concrete body. Somebody is in there and has something to say. If only he could break out and make himself heard; we want to listen because we want to be heard ourselves.

All this odd gorgeousness so well displayed wouldn't be possible without a lot of private money. Even an art-friendly government, which we currently lack, would never fund as eccentric a mission as this, and popular demand is not sufficient to support hefty admission fees. There have been times I've visited when I've had the entire third floor to myself. I'm grateful to the toilet king and his wise, wealthy daughter. Art and capitalism have made friends

in Sheboygan, and the world is better for it. Which begs the question — what is a good society? How does capital get rerouted from base greed and sweetened into generosity, as it has here? What, occasionally, inspires people such as the Kohlers to share the wealth?



Nicole Eisenman, "The Triumph of Poverty," 2009, oil on canvas, 65 x 82". Courtesy of ICA Philadelphia.

I recently read **Aldous Huxley's "Island,"** his last novel, from 1962. It's about a utopian society and the religious system he invented for it, a quasi-Buddhist credo with lots of other stuff thrown in. I knew I had to buy the book when I opened it and this sentence popped up: "You cling, you crave, you assert yourself, and you live in a homemade hell."

"Island" is Huxley's manifesto about how he thought people should live. Some of it is just wacky. He touts psychedelic enhancement via government-grown mushrooms, beginning in childhood, as a fast track to religious enlightenment. He advocates hands-on sex education for children, to be taught in schools by matronly women. But he also paints a picture of a world where acquisition isn't the goal of wealth, shared prosperity and universal enhanced living is. In Huxley's utopia everybody does physical labor every day and works at different jobs

throughout their lives — inefficient for the economy, he points out, but highly efficient for people's happiness and overall education. Nobody's poor or hungry. A booming economy is not the point of this society. Human fulfillment is.



Pieter Breugel, "Greed," c. 1556-1560, engraving on paper. Courtesy of Artchive online art gallery.

Spoiler alert that will surprise no one: It doesn't end well. A greedy, autocratic man-child takes over and figures out how to sell the island's natural resources for great personal profit, and one hundred years of peace and rational living end in gunfire. Sound familiar?

It's simplistic to dismiss capitalism as bad. Or to say it's bad but argue that with checks and balances it's better than any other system humans have devised. Or to say that, like everything else in a free society, its badness is directly proportionate to the badness of its practitioners. The trick is to design a society in which successful people with good intentions together with the means and resolve to choose to act on them, the Kohlers for example, also acquire the most cultural and political capital.



Margaret Hawkins is a writer, critic and educator. Her books include “Lydia’s Party” (2015), “How We Got Barb Back” (2011) a memoir about family mental illness, and others. She wrote a column about art for the Chicago Sun-Times, was Chicago correspondent for ARTnews, and has written for a number of other publications including The New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, Art & Antiques and Fabrik. She teaches writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Loyola University.

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