



Folk Art

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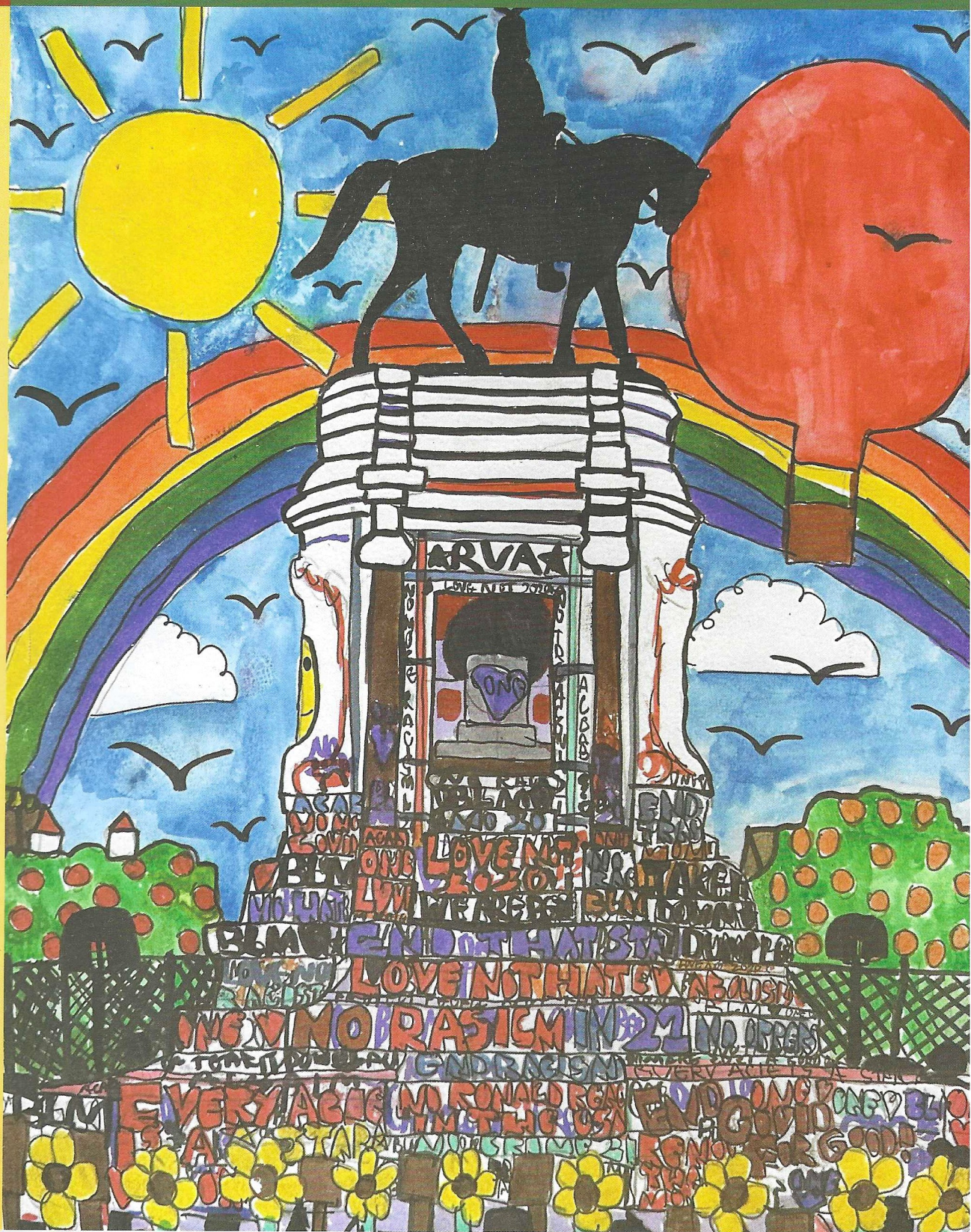
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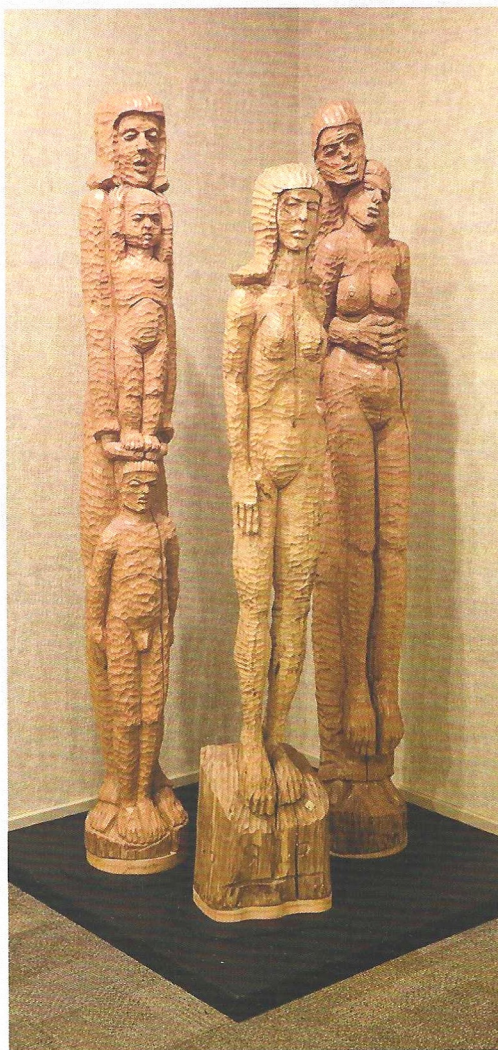
Calendar of
Exhibitions



Essential Creativity: The Self-Taught Art of Rudy Rotter



◀ Woman, Bas relief carving.



▲ Figures, wood..

Note on images:
All works are from
the Rotter Family
Collection unless
otherwise noted.

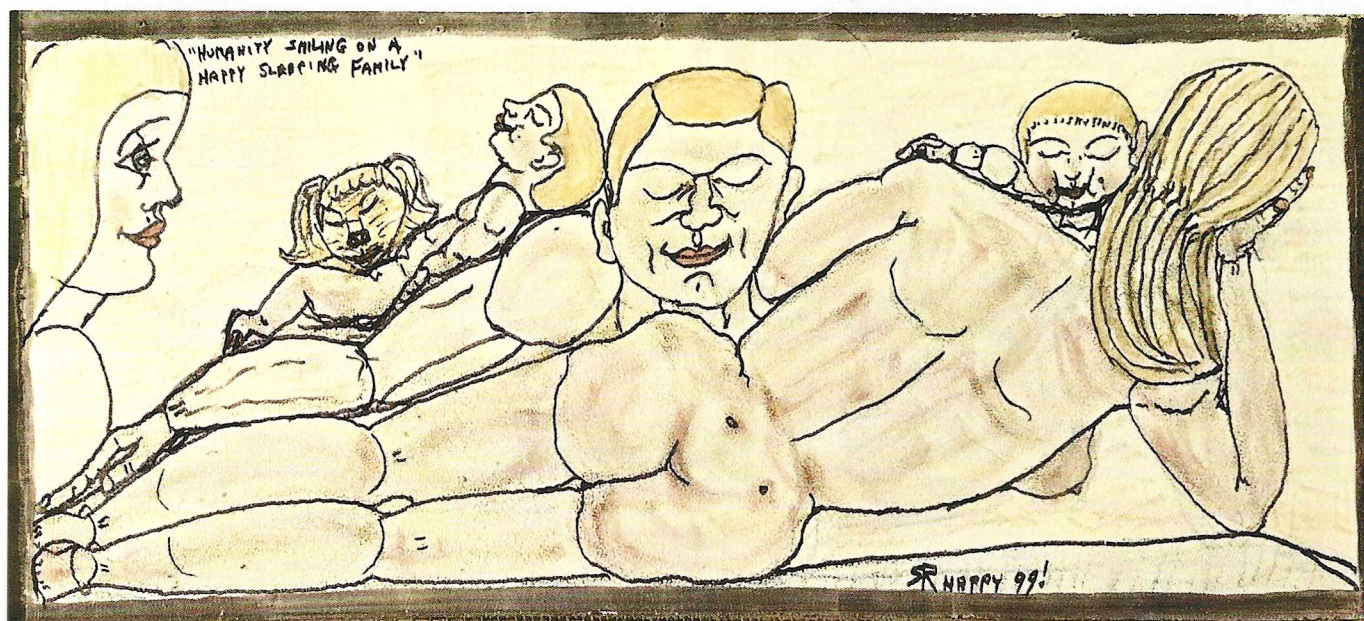
BY DIANA BOLANDER

The Rahr-West Art Museum's exhibition, *Essential Creativity: The Self-Taught Art of Rudy Rotter*, features the work of legendary Manitowoc, Wisconsin artist Rudy Rotter. The works, in a variety of two- and three-dimensional mediums, illustrate major themes of Rotter's work.

Rudy Rotter created art in Manitowoc for five decades,

beginning in the 1950s. He created art in conjunction with raising his family and running his dental practice. In the late 1970s, he opened a Museum of Sculpture in Manitowoc that eventually evolved to hold thousands of his works of art. He began with stone and wood carving and then moved on to the less strenuous mediums of assemblage and free drawing later in

his life. His work was, and continues to be, a celebration of life, creativity, and joy. This exhibition explores three main themes: 1) Rotter's exploration of family and humanity, 2) How the changing manufacturing scene in Manitowoc is reflected in his art, and 3) The importance of innovation, experimentation and the art making process in understanding Rotter's work.



▲ Humanity Smiling on a Happy Sleeping Family, 1999, drawing on panel.

Rotter's earliest works are studies of people, figures or portraits. Intertwined figures and family groups are pervasive throughout his art.

Family and Humanity

Rotter's earliest works are studies of people, figures or portraits. Intertwined figures and family groups are pervasive throughout his art, independent of the mediums. Rotter was raised by Jewish immigrants in Milwaukee who instilled a deep respect for family and doing right by others. His first marriage failed, and, perhaps because of this,

his work often features happy, smiling family groups. In a 1972 *Herald Times Reporter* article, Rotter is quoted as hoping that this series helps people to "not alienate themselves from one another." The figures look at and touch each other while overlapping and creating a visual representation of the interconnection of humanity.



▲ Untitled Rondo, n.d., drawing on cardboard.



▲ Woman and Dog, 1999, marker on wallpaper sample.

Rotter's work during his productive years also serves as a kind of time capsule for manufacturing in Manitowoc. Rotter started sculpting and carving with plaster, wood, and stone, but soon found ways to incorporate waste materials from local industry. Perhaps coming of age during the Great Depression instilled a desire to not waste available resources that were otherwise going to a landfill.

The available materials evolved throughout his life, from hardwood molds, aluminum sheets, and trophy

parts to unwanted electrical parts. Rotter was either given, scavenged, or purchased the following materials that can be found in this exhibition:

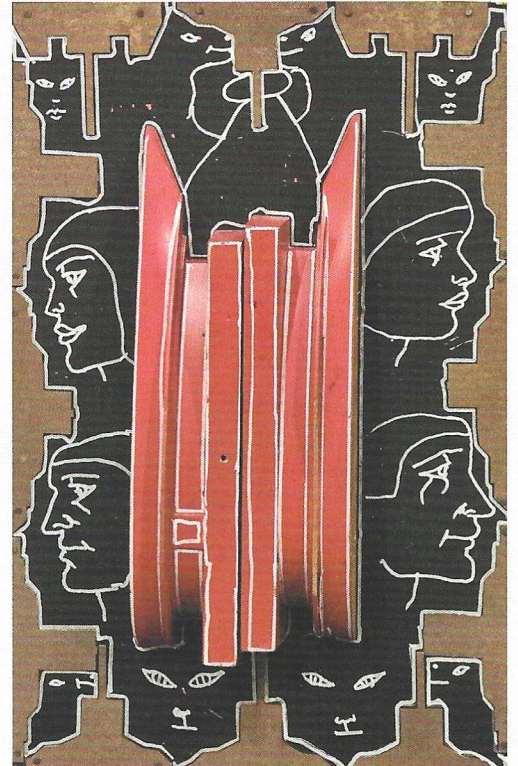
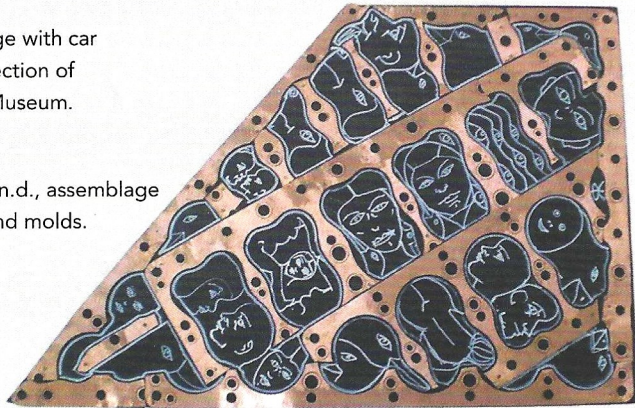
- Teak and other hardwoods from Burger Boats
- Slag, aluminum sheets, and mold forms from the Wisconsin Aluminum Foundry
- Slag or purged plastics from Red Line Plastics
- Blank plaques, various shiny materials, figures, and other trophy parts from the Trophy Company

- Church pews and other materials from church sales
- X-ray plates and car parts from Muchin junkyard
- Various materials from St. Vincent DePaul
- Dental supplies
- Leather from a shoe company in Port Washington
- Logs or used telephone poles from the city of Manitowoc
- Wallpaper and upholstery sample books

Many scholars of Rotter have noted that Rudy's favorite piece was the one he was currently working on and that he didn't get too attached to any one piece after he was done with it. The act of working on the piece was more important and more exciting to him than the result.

► **Untitled**, n.d., collage with car parts (from the collection of the Rahr-West Art Museum).

► Far right, **Untitled**, n.d., assemblage with sheet metals and molds.



Innovation and Experimentation

Many scholars of Rotter have noted that Rudy's favorite piece was the one he was currently working on and that he didn't get too attached to any one piece after he was done with it. The act of working on the piece was more important and more exciting to him than the result. It is no wonder that he eventually created thousands of works that were put into his Museum of Sculpture with little to no editing or curating. Rotter's *Imaginary Creatures* series is a good example of this compulsive need to create.

It has been said that the experience of going through his

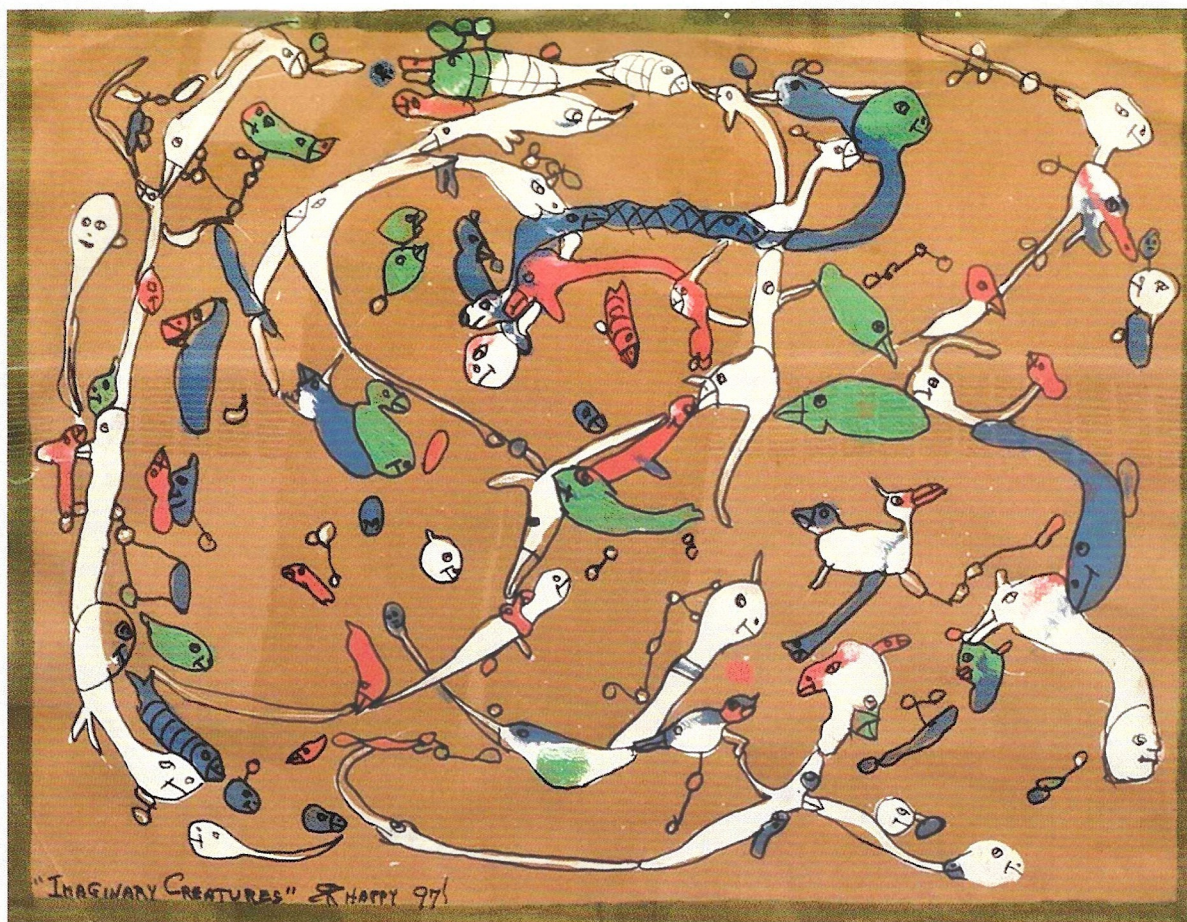
extant Museum of Sculpture, which exhibited and housed more than 17,000 works of art, was the ultimate way to appreciate his art and the only way to understand it. While it certainly was an experience, the Rahr-West exhibition presents the case that it gives viewers the space to consider each work of art as an individual piece. In this exhibition, each work is given the room to speak for itself as well as within its place in his oeuvre.

Rotter's confidence in his line-work, whether he was carving or drawing, took practice and skill. His style features strong lines, bold use

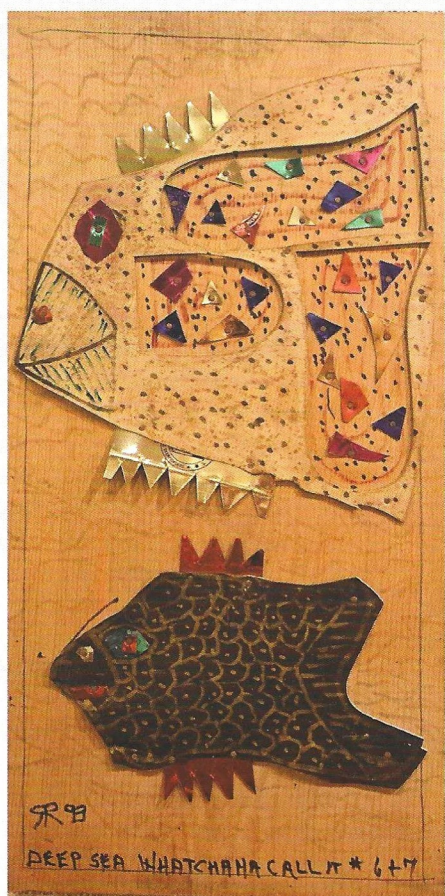
of color, and exaggerated features that, over the decades, ties his work together while each piece retains its individual value.

Essential Creativity: The Self-Taught Art of Rudy Rotter will be open December 8, 2024 – February 16, 2025, at the Rahr-West Art Museum, a department of the City of Manitowoc, which is free and open to the public. The address is: 610 North 8th Street, Manitowoc, WI 54220. 📍

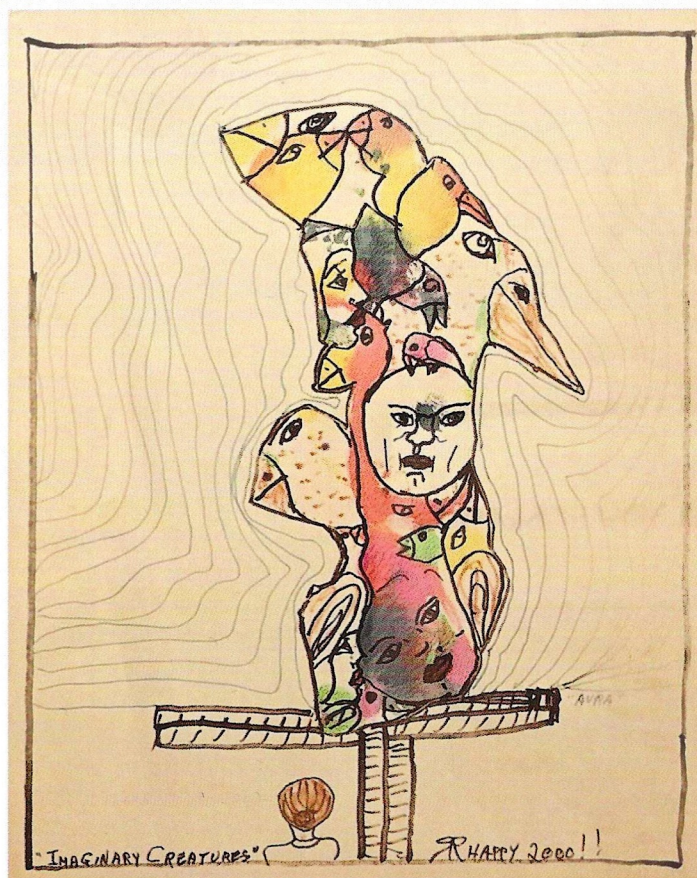
DIANA BOLANDER is the Assistant Director/Curator at the Rahr-West Art Museum in Manitowoc, Wisconsin.



▲ Imaginary Creatures, 1997, paint and marker on paper.



▲ Deepsea Whatchamacallit #6&7, 1999, assemblage on wood panel.



▲ Imaginary Creatures, 2000, marker on paper