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Art review: ‘The Visionary Experience’ at American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore



By **Michael O'Sullivan** November 6

How fitting that the [American Visionary Art Museum](#) has, on the occasion of its 20th thematic exhibition, chosen to unpack the word that lies at the heart of its mission — and its name. “[The Visionary Experience: Saint Francis to Finster](#)” takes a look at the vision thing from several angles, resulting in a show that is, as devotees of the quirky Baltimore institution have come to expect, full of surprises — and a few familiar faces.

Among the surprises also is a familiar face: Terrence Howard (yes, *that* Terrence Howard). The Academy Award-nominated actor’s geometric constructions of acetate and glass aren’t showstoppers; they have a dated feel, halfway between op art and a kid’s science project about molecular structure. But give the guy a break. They were, after all, made in the mid-1980s, when he was still a teenager.

It’s not even clear they were intended as art. Legally emancipated from his parents at age 16, Howard briefly

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studied chemical engineering in New York before turning to acting. Although he has spoken publicly of his ongoing interest in science and his plans to produce synthetic diamonds, [doubts remain](#) about the extent of his academic bona fides, not to mention his artistic credentials.

Of course, that shouldn't disqualify him from being in this museum. AVAM is notable for its championing of those with less pedigree than passion. Another artist better known as a performer is the late musician Jimi Hendrix, who is represented here by a few trippy psychedelic drawings and a self-portrait.

(Christine Sefolosa)

While taking in the show, a definition of “vision” gradually emerges from the haze. It encompasses many things: the hallucinatory results of overindulgence in drugs and alcohol; mental illness; religious enlightenment/ecstasy; the dream state; brainwashing by cults; extrasensory perception; and simple artistic inspiration. Some of the featured artists are trained. Many are not. A few are arguably not even artists.

One of the show's most fascinating galleries is devoted to such late-20th-century cultists as Velma and Orval Lee Jagers of the [Universal World Church](#); Ernest and Ruth “Uriel” Norman of the [Unarius Academy of Science](#); and James Edward Baker, a.k.a. [Father Yod](#), who founded a commune and a famous vegetarian restaurant in Hollywood. (Look for it in the movie “[Annie Hall](#),” when

Woody Allen's character orders a plate of “alfalfa sprouts and mashed yeast.”)

Although this gallery features artifacts — jewelry, costumes, record albums, video and other ephemera — its



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focus is almost more anthropological than artistic. The room is slightly creepy, with some of the video and photographic material evoking memories of the Heaven's Gate cult, several of whose members committed suicide in 1997, believing that their souls would be picked up by a spaceship that was trailing the Hale-Bopp comet. All the same, I could have devoured a whole show on this topic alone.

Painter Paula Rich-Greenwood portrays cultist Ruth Norman (a.k.a. Uriel) of the Unarius Academy of Science. (Courtesy of the Unarius Educational Foundation)

A portrait of Elvis Presley by the folk artist Howard Finster, who often signed his work "Man of Vision." (Thomas E. Scanlin Collection)

Some of the best works in "The Visionary Experience" are a couple of mysteriously evocative paintings by Christine Sefolsha (who also was in AVAM's "[Home and Beast](#)" show) and two massive drawings by architect Paolo Soleri. Soleri, whose works here come from a 50-foot-long scroll, is best known for designing the utopian community [Arcosanti](#), which has been under construction in the Arizona desert since the 1970s. A sculptural assemblage by Odinga Tyehimba also is quite powerful, evoking a religious totem.

As for the first name in the show's subtitle, the Roman

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Catholic saint Francis of Assisi was no artist. He's included as a representative of the visionary experience, for his decision to renounce his family's wealth and follow his inner light, a theme echoed throughout this diverse show. (An alcove at the museum features a devotional icon of Francis, surrounded by animal sculptures made by Claude Yoder and other artists.)

Nowhere is that theme of answering a higher calling better expressed than in the work of Howard Finster, whose name also graces the show's title. His art — both whimsical and inspirational — fills almost an entire gallery.

The late Georgia folk artist and Baptist minister, who often signed his work "Man of Vision," is an AVAM favorite as well as one of the best-known creators of American visionary art. Finster said that at age 60, he received instructions from God to "paint sacred art," to which he replied, "I can't. I don't know how."

God's comeback: "How do you know you can't?"

This show takes that argument even further: No matter where the call to art comes from, those of us who hear it should at least give it a try.

The story behind the work

One of the most fascinating displays in "The Visionary Experience" is devoted to the work of Paul Koudounaris. Taken from the author, art historian and photographer's 2013 book "[Heavenly Bodies](#)," the four images on display at AVAM document a macabre yet little-known folk practice of the Catholic Church: bedecking human skeletons in jewels

The Los Angeles-based Koudounaris, who specializes in photographing mummies and other human remains, stumbled on the phenomenon quite by accident during a 2008 research trip to Europe, when he was led to a decrepit German chapel in the woods. Inside a boarded-up display case, the photographer found a human skeleton done up in the raiment and gems of a king. Since then, Koudoularis has tracked down many more such examples of this art form, in which the skeletal remains of those believed to be early Christian martyrs were re-assembled, preserved and decorated, often by nuns, as a kind of ghoulish good-luck charm.

The works can be hard to find. In the late 18th century, when their superstitious nature became an embarrassment to a modernizing church, many of the skeletons were destroyed or removed from public view. Koudoularis's creepy yet beautiful art gives them a second — or maybe a third — life.

The Visionary Experience: Saint Francis to Finster

Through Aug. 30 at the American Visionary Art Museum, 800 Key Hwy., Baltimore.

410-244-1900. www.avam.org. Open Tuesday-Sunday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. \$15.95; \$13.95 for seniors; \$9.95 for

children ages 7-18 and students; members and children 6 and younger free.

Born and raised in Washington, D.C., Michael O'Sullivan has worked since 1993 at The Washington Post, where he covers art, film and other forms of popular — and unpopular — culture.
