

LONG LOOK/OPINION

Kuimeaux's quiet architecture of the soul

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There's a small house perched on the crest of a hill in "Mind's House II," a watercolor by the Arkansas artist who called himself Kuimeaux, though he entered the world as Dwight Wilson Drennan in Little Rock in 1950. At first glance, the painting can't help but summon echoes of Andrew Wyeth's "Christina's World" — that instantly recognizable American gothic daydream with its pale farmhouse and stretched horizon. But if Wyeth's picture makes you think of stories withheld or tragedies glimpsed side-long, Kuimeaux's feels more like the dream you wake from reluctantly, wishing you could slip back inside.

Both works share a familiar American composition: a wide foreground of Earth, a solitary structure in the middle distance, and a sky that decides the emotional weather. But "Christina's World" is anchored — haunted — by Christina herself, lying in the grass like a question you're not sure you want answered. "Mind's House II" offers no such figure. The absence is an opening. Without a human presence, we become the ones at the foot of the hill, choosing what the walk upward might mean.

It helps, too, to remember who Christina was. Anna Christina Olson lived near Wyeth's summer home in Cushing, Maine — a proud, stubborn woman with a degenerative muscular disorder that left her unable to walk. She refused the wheelchair, crawling instead, using her arms, across the rough fields of her family's farm.

When Wyeth painted her lying in the tawny grass, he was honoring her fierce independence — her determination to make her way toward the house on her own terms. "A picture of the Maine I love," he later said. But Christina's half-hidden form enlarges the painting into a meditation on longing, grit and the complicated heroism of ordinary lives.

Once you know something about Kuimeaux, the title "Mind's House" takes on a gentle glow. The house isn't a place — not a physical one — but an interior made visible. Kuimeaux grew up the youngest of seven, the son of two floor attendants at the old Arkansas State Hospital. There's something formative, quietly so, about growing up beside a building where the mind is treated as architecture — corridors, locked rooms, bright windows.

Raymond Carver, who spent part of his childhood



"Mind's House II" (watercolor, undated) by Arkansas artist Kuimeaux (Dwight Wilson Drennan). The painting, from the collection of Dean Lottinger, is part of "Kuimeaux's World," a major exhibition at the Historic Arkansas Museum featuring 59 works and on view through 2027. (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Philip Martin)



"Christina's World" (1948) by Andrew Wyeth, tempera on panel. The painting, inspired by Wyeth's neighbor Christina Olson, is part of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Courtesy of MOMA)

not far from Western State Hospital in Washington, seemed to carry a similar intuition: The mind is a place with its own rooms and shadows. Perhaps Kuimeaux understood this before he had words for it, that each of us walks around with an interior house, full of private spaces no one else quite enters.

"Houses are symbolic of the mind, a person's mind,"

Kuimeaux once wrote in a note that accompanies the painting. "No trees. Just flowers, and the ivy covering ... and that's probably my brain, because it's been covered with ivy, out-of-control growth. It's going to take over soon."

DRIFTING THROUGH THE SOUTH

He spent years drifting through the South, hitchhik-

ing with his dog Mojo, planting gardens that looked less like landscaping and more like exuberant rebellions. In Monroe, La., he let his front yard grow wild, a kind of jungle that threatened to swallow the house. Later, as caretaker of a lakeside estate at Bearskin Lake, he lived among cypress whose long shadows might have intimidated another sort of painter but

seemed to ground him. Everywhere he lived, he built worlds — tangled, vivid, alive. Some artists build characters; some build myths. Kuimeaux built ecosystems.

You can see that world-building instinct — akin to Tolkien's or George R.R. Martin's — in the delicate strangeness of "Mind's House II." The house at the hill's crest is almost too white, too precise, like something gently stitched into place rather than resting on its foundation. Ivy climbs it with the confidence of already being in charge. The grass is rendered in soft, flickering movements, more mood than botany. And the open, buoyant sky feels as though it wandered in from a Studio Ghibli film. It has the same subtle theatricality you find in "Howl's Moving Castle" or "The Wind Rises," a sky that seems aware of you, maybe even slightly pleased with the attention.

If Wyeth's farmhouse is a place you approach cautiously, Kuimeaux's house feels like one you recognize from somewhere — you just can't recall where. It hums with the familiarity of dreams.

What makes the painting especially poignant is how bright it is, considering what the artist endured. In 1984,

a fire destroyed his home, a decade's worth of artwork, and his two beloved dogs. He barely escaped. Many artists would have turned inward, grown darker, perhaps more brittle. Kuimeaux didn't. He turned outward — to color, to gentle forms, to landscapes that feel tended rather than tortured. While undated, "Mind's House II" shows no smoke damage, literal or metaphorical. It radiates a clarity that feels earned. Maybe it represents the place inside him that outlasted the flames.

There's a difference, too, in the solitude presented by the two painters. Wyeth's solitude is austere, bracing, the kind that leaves a mark. Kuimeaux's is warmer, almost companionable. You don't feel abandoned in this world; you feel welcomed. The house looks empty — but not lonely. The unmarked path feels perfectly walkable. Where Wyeth gives us yearning, Kuimeaux gives us something close to arrival.

And that might be the most striking divergence between the works. "Christina's World" is about the distance between a person and a haven. "Mind's House II" is about the haven itself — its privacy, its gentleness, its open invitation. If Wyeth's painting is a question, Kuimeaux's is an answer.

'KUIMEAUX'S WORLD'

One of the gratifying developments in Arkansas art lately is the renewed attention to Kuimeaux's work. Though commercial success mostly eluded him while he was alive, a new exhibition, "Kuimeaux's World," opened at the Historic Arkansas Museum last week. It gathers 59 pieces — the largest showing of his work to date — and will remain on view for 18 months. "Mind's House II" hangs there quietly, waiting for viewers to step inside its soft, private geography.

Standing before it, you may find yourself slowing down, breathing a little differently. Maybe you'll recall a place from your own life — a field, a room, a moment — that felt like a refuge built expressly for you. Or perhaps you'll just admire the steady work of a man who painted not the world he found, but the one he needed.

In that sense, "Mind's House II" is exactly what its title promises: a dwelling constructed out of thought and feeling, a house for the mind, standing bright on its hill — still waiting, still generous, still open.

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