

Monsoon exhibit a spiritual monument to coal country

By Geoff Gehman
Of The Morning Call

The Frank Wysochansky show at Monsoon Galleries in Bethlehem makes me want to blow that terribly misleading label of "outsider artist" into the great beyond. It makes absolutely no difference that his formal education ended in the seventh grade; that his perspective was pretty crude; that he worked with cheap materials (melted crayons, chicken bones). Wyso, as he's commonly known, was a hell of a lot smarter than a hell of a lot of teacher-taught creators.

Wyso (1915-1994) was a particularly keen observer of anthracite miners from his native Blakely, Lackawanna County. While he exaggerated their features, he fine-tuned their feelings; as a result, they're less caricatures than characters. A pipe-smoking miner in a wax-reduction drawing, made with melted crayons, has a strikingly chiseled face and big, shifty, searchlight eyes that bless and curse the darkness. Highlighted by floating, flickering colors, the whole picture appears carved on a mine wall.

Even more impressive is a

coal bucket on his feet, arms stretched to clutch a giant pick behind his back. What looks like a defeated victim of crucifixion is really a defiant soldier of industry. The miner grips the pick savagely, as he's going to bend it into a weapon.

Other images show an artist intimately aware of mining's drudgery, danger and dignity, someone whose father died in a mining accident. Pen-and-inks of huddled coal-country houses and stores drip with rain and oppression. A small oil features a miner with his helmet light ablaze, walking under a fireball moon through a swirling scene that's hellish and heavenly.

Wyso mastered much more than miners. His color pen and inks of old, bearded men have electric lines and rigorous shades, dynamically rusty washes and toothy textures. One of the best drawings stars a weary man soaking his feet in a tub, fists grabbing the edge of a robe, watched by an equally tired dog. Intense markings and casual gestures help create a portrait with the warmth of a Rembrandt sketch.

Wyso was fairly successful in his lifetime. From 1965 to 1994 he shared more than 50

FRANK 'WYSO' WYSOCHANSKI'S works, such as this depicting an Amish couple, show his intensive style. Many of his works center on mining in his native Pennsylvania.

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exhibitions in Manhattan, Philadelphia and other art capitals. John Canaday, then an influential critic for The New York Times, chose him for a drawing biennial. In the early '70s he was listed in guides to living American artists in the U.S. and France.

Not everything Wyso did, however, was successful. Most of the oil landscapes at Monsoon are chunky and congested. They seem fingerpainted. A drawing of a flutist and cellist on a red background is

so awkwardly arranged, it seems superimposed. It could be an unedited poster for a music festival.

These second-rate works don't spoil Wyso's first-rate imagination. His sculptures are especially inventive. Made with armatures of everything from wire hangers to chicken bones, they appear cobwebbed, covered in broken blood veins, dusted with silvery coal. Particularly dramatic is a tabletop bust of a miner hugging a kerchiefed woman

PLAN AHEAD

ROLLICKING GRAPHICS AT MICHENER

Red Grooms' rollicking graphics of urban scenes, cultural icons and art-history heroes will be exhibited from Oct. 2 through Jan. 2 at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown.

The show includes drawings, watercolors and prints made from 1956 to 2000. There's a folksy view of the Flatiron Building in Manhattan, a funky portrait of Elvis Presley at Graceland and a 3-D color lithograph of the Tennessee Fox Trot Carousel, a real-life amusement ride with prominent figures from the artist's native state.

The exhibit was organized by the Tennessee State Museum in Grooms' home city of Nashville. All the works come from the collection of Grooms' good friend, Walter G. Kneistrick, who went to high school with the artist. 215-340-9800, www.michenerartmuseum.org.

and a model of a Ukrainian church. It's a deeply spiritual monument to that coal-country trinity of mother, mother church and mother earth. ■ **Paintings and sculpture by Frank Wyso**, through Sept. 30,