

This Section of *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* appears in each issue of the Journal and is dedicated to all forms of creative production born of an intimate and individual urge, often secretive, unbound from the conventional art system rules. Through short descriptions of the Outsider art work of prominent artists and new protagonists often hosted in community mental health services, this section intends to investigate the latest developments of the contemporary art scene, where the distances between the edge and the center are becoming more and more vague.

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Artist Lee Godie. 'I'm much better than Cezanne'

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Starting in 1968 on the steps of the Art Institute of Chicago, a visitor might find the artist Lee Godie, cloaked in a frayed fur coat selling her canvases. Born in Chicago as Jamot Emily Godee (1908–1994), she became famous during the 1970s under the name Lee Godie. She was a self-taught and self-described 'French impressionist painter' (Bonesteel, 1999), a label conveying her ardent affinity to all things French (Moss, 2008) as well as validating the artistic aura of her work (Benjamin, 1977).

Always acutely aware of her own creative power, Godie never accepted living in the shadow of the audience, thus representing the antithesis of the typical Outsider artist (Russell, 2001). Upon making the decision to be part of the official art world, Godie frequented its spaces, such as the Art Institute of Chicago, and socialised with its people. Remarkably, Lee Godie is among the rare Outsider artists to receive strong public recognition while still alive.

Little is known about Lee Godie's life before she became Chicago's most collected artist (Dubin, 1997), but what is known gives an insight into a painful and precarious life, one that Godie decided to leave behind, along with her husband and kids. She was

an independent woman, determined to realise her own destiny as an artist on the streets of her beloved Chicago. She was a well-known singer, dancer and poetess. She proved herself to be a savvy business woman, elusive with those who wanted to get more private and pragmatic with those who were interested in buying her work. But above all, Godie was a painter and photographer of undeniable talent.

Her visual works developed around some major themes that had profoundly affected her imagination. She sought a certain affinity with the French impressionists, in particular with Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), whose spirit, recounted Godie in her diaries, suggested that she dedicate herself to art (Moss, 2008). She devoted a series of portraits to the great divas and idols of classic Hollywood, particularly to a certain type of man who alternately identifies with *Prince of the City*, *French Prince* and *Prince Charming*. A reoccurring portrait is that of Léonide Massine (1896–1979), the famous American-born Russian dancer who, like Godie, changed his name into a French variant. Godie most likely had seen his films and was familiar with Picasso's portrait of Massine, housed at the Chicago Institute of Art.

The *Gibson Girl*, produced multiple times over the majority of her career, is her most successful portrait series. First created by Charles Dana Gibson at the beginning of the 20th century, the Gibson Girl represents a type of feminine, strong and independent

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woman. It is easy to imagine how much this feminine ideal resonated with Godie, who often adopts the typical hairstyle of a soft gathered bun.

Chicago's glorious skyline is a common backdrop to the portraits of her sophisticated ladies and gentlemen. For Godie, Chicago is what New York is for Woody Allen, the city he loves and adores, 'his town, and it always would be' (Allen, 1979). There is a series called *Piano Hands*, in which, from an aerial perspective, we see hands coming out of the sleeves of a smoking jacket, waving on the black and white keys of a piano keyboard. Love for music is the most explicit theme of this series, where Godie once again found a way to celebrate her city. Chicago is the city where from the 1920s jazz music dominated the charts, and it is not hard to imagine the profound and sensual voice of Nat King Cole making a soundtrack to Godie's endless days.

A perpetual theme in art history is the artist's self-portrait in which the artist who signs the work is the subject of the work itself. To be represented is the very idea of creation. Godie mirrors this tradition and created a series of photographic self-portraits, where she conveyed her own identity as an artist along with her professional achievement. In this series, Godie took advantage of the recording function of photography and created an archive of her image as an artist.

Throughout the 20th century, the photo booth developed and became popular for its ability to produce a kind of art that is automatic and accessible to everyone. The passport-sized photograph is both a

tool for mapping out a person's identity in an objective way, as well as a device for providing a dreamlike escape, where a medley of illusion and simulation of identity are at play. Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) inaugurated the conceptual turning point of contemporary art through his photographs and ready-mades, emancipating art from the centuries-old constraints of painting.

Lee Godie's snapshots are images with a specific aesthetic value despite being attached to paintings to certify their authenticity (Fine, 2004). Clara Bow (1905–1965) is among the favourite roles played by Godie within the theatrical setting of the photo booth. Bow was the first *It Girl* of the Hollywood star system, an archetype of the carefree, self-confident, emancipated modern woman. Another celebrity venerated by Godie is Katharine Hepburn (1907–2003), the greatest American actress of all time. Like Hepburn, Godie, with irony and detachment, places herself in the shoes of a high-society woman and poses such questions such as '*Jewelry was in this. Where is jewelry now?*' (c.1980, ink on photo booth photograph, Collection of Lorin Adolph). The types of women that Godie stages are vast; from the businesswoman to the successful movie star diva ready for a premiere, predated by



Fig. 1. The Collection of Carl Hammer, Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, IL, USA.



Fig. 2. The Collection of Carl Hammer, Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, IL, USA.

almost 10 years Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, a series of 69 stereotypes of American women of the postwar period.

On 13 November 1993 just 1 year before her passing, the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs honoured Lee Godie with a 20-year retrospective, which represented 160 artworks owned by 24 private collectors (Congdon & Hallmark, 2012).

Lee Godie's artwork can be found among the permanent collections of the American Folk Art Museum of New York; the Milwaukee Art Museum; the Arkansas Arts Center; the Smithsonian American Art Museum of Washington, DC and the Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago. Some recent exhibitions are *Lee Godie: Self Portraits*, Intuit, Chicago, 2016; *Alternative Guide to the Universe*, Hayward Gallery, London, 2013; *Rumors*, MAD Musée, Liège, Belgium, 2012.

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