



**For Immediate Release**

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**P.O.V.'s "In the Realms of the Unreal"  
Explores the Incredible World of "Outsider Artist" Henry Darger**

Reclusive Janitor Dies, Leaving Behind Fantastic 15,000-page Illustrated Novel  
Hailed as Milestone of Outsider Art

*New Film by Oscar-winner Jessica Yu, With Narration by Dakota Fanning,  
Premieres August 2 on PBS on 18th Season of P.O.V. Series*

*An Independent Television Service (ITVS) Co-presentation*

"[An] excellent new documentary. . . Ms. Yu emphasizes the aesthetic qualities of Darger's work . . .  
bringing out the extraordinary dynamism of his compositions."

– David Kehr, *The New York Times*

"Absorbing and exquisite . . . a thoughtful and inspired exploration."

– John McMurtrie, *San Francisco Chronicle*

From 1997 Documentary Oscar® winner Jessica Yu (*Breathing Lessons: The Life and Work of Mark O'Brien*) comes **In the Realms of the Unreal**, the astounding tale of Henry Darger. An orphaned recluse who lived out his life of menial labor in a one-room downtown Chicago apartment, Darger was a social non-entity. So little remarked was he in life that only three photographs of him are known to exist. The amazing secret at the center of Darger's existence only emerged when ill health forced him to abandon his one-room apartment of 40 years a few months before his death in 1973. What the landlord found launched an "outsider art" sensation that has fascinated and inspired millions.

Jessica Yu's **In the Realms of the Unreal** has its national broadcast premiere, **Tuesday, August 2, 2005** at 10 p.m., as part of the 18th season of public television's P.O.V. series. P.O.V. continues on Tuesdays at 10 p.m., through September 13 on PBS stations nationwide. (Check local listings.) American television's longest-running independent documentary series, P.O.V. is public television's premier showcase for point-of-view, nonfiction films.

**In the Realms of the Unreal** is Yu's inventive and loving rendition of Darger's grim life and wildly creative work. It contains, among other marvels, the seven angelic Vivian Girls, who lead a rebellion against godless, child-enslaving men, and Darger's own alter ego, General Darger, who aids the girls in their bloody battles against the evil Glandelinian army. Yu employs dreamlike animation of Darger's art, a haunting musical score by Jeff Beal, and narration taken from Darger's 15,000-page opus, "In the Realms of the Unreal," read by actors Dakota Fanning and Larry Pine, to immerse the audience in Darger's tempestuous alternate universe of innocence in epic struggle with wickedness. Out of the bleakest of existences, Darger obsessively fashioned a fantastic world where goodness and courage hold out – if just barely – over the treachery that lurks in men's hearts.

Darger held several jobs in his life. He'd been a farm laborer, soldier, janitor, dishwasher, and roller of gauze bandages. But no one would have thought of him as an artist, or anything other than what he seemed: a poor, unkempt, ill-educated, half-mad man lost in the fog of his own loneliness. If those around him failed to guess Darger's secret life, they can hardly be blamed. Darger himself, in the massive unfinished autobiography he left behind, along with the single-spaced 15,000-page "novel" (and 8,000-page unfinished sequel), mentions his creative efforts only once in passing, even though those efforts must have absorbed his every free moment. Darger's relationship to his own work – why he began it, what he expected from it – remains one of the great mysteries raised by his life story.

**In the Realms of the Unreal** explores these and other questions by telling what is known of Darger's life while unfolding a dramatized narrative of the Vivian Girls' exceptionally bloody wars with the evil Glandelinians. In the spirit of Darger's own free-wheeling creativity, director Yu has chosen to relate the Vivian Girls' complex story by animating Darger's drawings. Kara Vallow and a team of animators used only elements found in Darger's paintings, accompanied by narration taken from Darger's writings, to give cinematic life to his strange and epic imaginings.

The stranger story, however, may be Darger's own. "Orphaned" at eight when his father was sent sick and dying to the poor house, Darger wound up in an asylum for "feeble-minded children" in Lincoln, Illinois. The asylum's regimen included hard labor on a state farm. When he was 17, Darger succeeded in running away, making his way to Chicago where he got work as a janitor. It must have been about the same time – 1909 – that he began the other work that would secretly consume him over the next 64 years.

Darger's existence grew more constricted even as the narrative of the Vivian Girls grew to include larger realms and more numerous characters. He lived almost all his adult life in a small slice of downtown Chicago, where he was known by sight and found the menial work that sustained him. Darger muttered to himself, but hardly ever spoke to others. Certainly, no one remembers him showing the least concern for children. He went to church every day and took communion, but never had contact with the priest or other parishioners. His landlord, Nathan Lerner, tolerated Darger's odd behavior, his lapses in rent, and the strange noises at night

Darger evidently returned from long job shifts to work into the night writing and illustrating the unfolding struggle between the child-slaving empire and the Vivian Girls' Catholic and beneficent land of Angelina. Darger combined cutouts from scrap images he collected – especially of young girls – with his own tracings, copies, and paintings in layered and collaged compositions that grew into 12-foot canvases that illustrated the equally layered and extravagant text. Entirely self-taught in true "outsider" fashion, Darger developed his own methods and techniques according to his need to tell his story in ever larger and more detailed scenarios. As early as the 1940s, he began using photocopies as a tool – a tremendous expense for someone of such meager means.

When ill health finally forced Darger from his apartment in late 1972 (he died in early 1973 at age 81), landlord Lerner found narrow footpaths leading from door to bed to bathroom through ceiling-high mounds of paintings and typed texts and scrap images. In one of art history's lucky twists, Lerner was not only a man of lenient bohemian outlook, but an artist in his own right, and he immediately recognized something extraordinary in Darger's piles. When he saw Darger in the charity ward shortly before he died, he told him so. Darger could only mouth the words, "too late." Jessica Yu was fortunate enough to be able to film in Darger's room, which had been preserved since his death, twice before it was permanently dismantled in 2000.

Yu's **In the Realms of the Unreal** dives into the many provocative "problems" presented by Darger's monumental work of art. The Vivian Girls may be radiant icons of all that is good and innocent, but their struggle is sometimes presented with a ferocious bloodiness that has millions of little girls being

graphically tortured and killed, while fires, floods, tornadoes, and eruptions as well as warfare dispatch in merciless agonies millions of other people, thousands of them named characters. The Vivian Girls also – like all the children in Darger’s pictures – are depicted completely if chastely in the nude. They are often shown with male organs, an oddity that does not make them any more sexual. In fact, those who knew him at all – his neighbors and Lerner – discount conscious prurience, and believe the appendages actually reflect Darger’s naïve confusion regarding female anatomy.

Darger himself appears in text and picture in more than one guise, most often as the noble general “protector of children” but also as a Glandelinian killer. And Darger’s narrative was left with two endings, one in which the Angelinians win and one where the Glandelinians do – an indecision reflected in the unfinished sequel that Darger took up after quitting his artistic labors for a while, and which illness and death interrupted.

For all the visual and moral puzzles raised by Darger’s work, Yu’s **In the Realms of the Unreal** never loses sight of the most provocative problem of all – the psychological nature of Darger’s singular, doomed, perhaps heroic act.

“When I was first introduced to Henry Darger’s work there was something about the combination of strange subject matter and innocent presentation, the total lack of irony in his bizarre imagery, that stuck with me,” says director, writer, and co-producer Yu, who took five years to make the film, devoting the last two years to editing and animation. “Early on, I kept thinking of the John Donne quote, ‘No man is an island.’ It seemed that Darger was testing this idea.

“But I was drawn to tell his story finally because he created this world of images only for himself. I kept asking myself, ‘Can imagination be enough?’ Can one replace real human relationships and community with those invented in one’s mind?’ And that’s the question this film asks.”

**In the Realms of the Unreal** is a production of Diorama Films, LLC, in association with the Independent Television Service (ITVS).

#### **About the filmmakers:**

**Jessica Yu**  
**Director/Writer/Co-producer**

Jessica Yu won the 1997 Academy Award for Best Documentary Short for **Breathing Lessons: The Life and Work of Mark O’Brien**, a portrait of the award-winning writer who worked for decades from the confines of an iron lung. The film earned numerous other awards, including an Emmy and a Cable Ace Award for Best Documentary Director. Yu’s also directed the award-winning HBO film **The Living Museum**, which profiles an art community in a New York mental institution. Her other credits include the narrative short **Better Late**, the documentary **Men of Reenaction**, about Civil War re-enactors, the musical comedy short **The Conductor**, featuring Mark Salzman, the documentary **Home Base**, and the award-winning and perennial festival favorite black & white short, **Sour Death Balls**. Yu has also directed Emmy winning commercials.

In 2000, Yu was artist-in-residence at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. The first director selected for the John Wells Diversity Program, she has directed episodes of the NBC dramas “The West Wing,” “American Dreams,” “ER,” and “Mr. Sterling,” and “The Guardian” for CBS. She has written articles and fiction for the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, *Buzz*, *Worth*, and Pacific News Service. Yu has served on the Board of Directors of the International Documentary Association. She is a graduate of Yale University.

**Susan West**  
**Producer**

Susan West has produced theater, television and documentary films for the past 15 years. Her credits include such innovative live performance acts as the Blue Man Group, Bill Irwin, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, David Byrne, and Robert Wilson. Her theater credits on and off Broadway include productions with the Royal Shakespeare Company, author Susan Sontag, The Wooster Group and actor/playwright Sam Shepard. She has also served as general manager for productions and festivals around the globe, including the Los Angeles Festival, the Olympics Arts Festival, and the TOGA festival in Japan. In documentary, West has worked with such directors as Eleanor Coppola and Jessica Yu. West produced VH1's hit television program, "Behind the Music," for two seasons and served as director of on air talent for E! Entertainment Television. She holds a B.A. and a M.A. in literature from the University of California at Berkeley.

**Kara Vallow**  
**Animation Producer**

The first series Kara Vallow produced was the final three seasons of "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" in the 1990s. Since then, she has produced such television series as "Dilbert" and "Johnny Bravo," and worked with Adam Sandler on "8 Crazy Nights." She is currently producing "Drawn Together" for Comedy Central as well as "Family Guy" and "American Dad" for Fox Television. She lives in Eagle Rock, Calif.

**Credits:**

Executive Producer for ITVS: Sally Jo Fifer  
Producers: Karen Carter, Susan West, Jessica Yu  
Director/Editor: Jessica Yu  
Animation Producer: Kara Vallow  
Co-producer: Joan Huang  
Cinematographers: Tim Bieber, Michael Barrow, Shana Hagan, Russell Harper  
Original Music: Jeff Beal

**Running Time:** 86:46

**Awards & Festivals:**

- Sundance Film Festival, January 2004 – Competition Selection
- Vancouver International Film Festival – *Best Documentary Feature*
- Full Frame Documentary Festival, April 2004 – Official Selection
- International Festival of Films on Art – *Award for Creativity*
- SF Docfest, May 2004
- Newport Beach International Film Festival – *Best Documentary Feature*
- Seattle International Film Festival, May-June 2004
- Atlanta Film Festival, June 2004 – *Award for Best Documentary Editing*
- Provincetown Film Festival, June 2004
- IDA's Infact Theatrical Documentary Showcase, August 2004
- Woodstock Film Festival, October 2004
- Louis Vuitton Hawaii International Film Festival, October 2004
- London Film Festival, October 2004
- Ojai Film Festival, October 2004 – *Best Documentary Feature*
- Durango Documentary Film Festival, October 2004
- 12th Annual Rendezvous With Madness Film Festival, November 2004

## Co-Presenters:



Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web and the weekly series Independent Lens on PBS. ITVS was established by a historic mandate of Congress to champion independently produced programs that take creative risks, spark public dialogue and serve underserved audiences. Since its inception in 1991, ITVS programs have helped revitalize the relationship between the public and public television, bringing TV audiences face-to-face with the lives and concerns of their fellow Americans. More information about ITVS can be obtained by visiting [www.itvs.org](http://www.itvs.org). ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people.



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and now in its 18th season on PBS, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running series on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary- issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through September, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought over 220 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V is available online at [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov).

### ***P.O.V. Interactive*** ([www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov))

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. It also produces a Web site for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through community-based and educational applications, focusing on involving viewers in activities, information and feedback on the issues. In addition, [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov) houses our unique *Talking Back* feature, filmmaker interviews and viewer resources, and information on the P.O.V. archives as well as myriad special sites for previous P.O.V. broadcasts.

### ***P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education***

P.O.V. provides Discussion Guides for all films as well as curriculum-based P.O.V. Lesson Plans for select films to promote the use of independent media among varied constituencies. Available free online, these originally produced materials ensure the ongoing use of P.O.V.'s documentaries with educators, community workers, opinion leaders and general audiences nationally. P.O.V. also works closely with local public television stations to partner with local museums, libraries, schools and community-based organizations to raise awareness of the issues in P.O.V.'s films. *Youth Views*, P.O.V.'s youth engagement program, expands these efforts by working directly with youth service organizations.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Educational Foundation of America, the Ford Foundation, PBS and public television viewers. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television station including KCET/Los Angeles, WGBH/Boston, and WNET/New York. Cara Mertes is executive director of P.O.V./American Documentary, Inc.



Support for P.O.V. is provided by Starbucks Coffee Company. Starbucks has a rich tradition of supporting the arts and independent film and celebrates the fact that numerous points of view can be discussed over a good cup of coffee. Starbucks is committed to offering the highest quality coffee in grocery stores nationwide.

**American Documentary, Inc.** ([www.americandocumentary.org](http://www.americandocumentary.org))

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, on line and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback, to educational opportunities and community participation.

**TAPE REQUESTS:** *Please note that a broadcast version of this film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.*



**PBS**

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