

ROSE deSMITH GREENMAN



A REMEMBRANCE:
ROSE deSMITH GREENMAN

1898 — 1983

by Betty Greenman Avruch



*“See elements of what once was an imposing personality glisten
like the fragments of a shattered mirror.”*

—KENNETH LONERGAN’S
“The Waverly Gallery”



(SELF PORTRAIT???)

12 x 18 inches

Pastel on brown paper

Signed: Rose Greenman July 17, 1970

FOREWORD

A REMEMBRANCE

It was always my intention to do something with my mother's art work. After her death in 1983, her drawings were stored in my attic.

There they remained for sixteen years.

After seeing an "Outsider Art" show a few years ago, my mother's work immediately came to mind.

The similarities struck a deep chord in me. Her drawings, filled with imagination, humanity, spirituality and grace, were a reflection of her life.

I was inspired with a need to reconnect with her.

Over the years, I absorbed her life story with its happiness and sadness. Unfortunately I was unable to shield her from the reality that was about to overtake her—Alzheimer's Disease.

Looking through her many drawings, I felt as if I were discovering hidden territory, unlocking and opening doors.

Many houses, portraits, still lifes, flowers.

Are these images real? Imaginary? Purposely distorted?

Rose's art becomes a sensitive look, not only into her life, but into mine as well.

Rediscovering her art has been a personal journey for me. A need to embrace the past. A need to relate and connect. This project has been a liberating one, an amazing catharsis; an opportunity to celebrate my mother's life.

As other people view her work, it may jog their own personal story.

There is nostalgia, there is humor, there is a sense of connection that reaches the inner soul.

Out of Rose's isolated silent world, she has given us an appreciation of the simple everyday love of family, friendship, and beauty.

It is a very rich and humbling gift.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge some special people whose contribution and encouragement made this project a reality.

Beverly Bernson, who was the first to show me the way—so that I could share my mother's art with others.

Lorri Berenberg, who was instrumental in introducing my mother's art to a wider audience, and who continues to champion and show her work at the Berenberg Gallery in Boston.

Cynthia Randall, whose sound advice, insight into the world of art, and expertise in graphics and design has always been gracious and much appreciated.

The late art historian Bates Lowry and his wife Isabel, who so generously shared their knowledge of art and collecting.

And finally, I would like to dedicate this book to my family.

Sons Matthew, and Steven whose wise counsel and encouragement is a tribute to the affection they both felt for their grandmother.

Grandsons Robert and Maxwell who never knew their great grandmother, but through her drawings already show an appreciation of art and understand the meaning of a loving family.

To my dearest husband and partner, Frank, whose love and commitment to share my life helped me achieve the full potential that my mother envisioned for me. Working with me side by side he gave me the inspiration to undertake this journey.

BETTY GREENMAN AVRUCH

November 2004

BIOGRAPHY

ROSE deSMITH GREENMAN was born in Boston in 1898, but she didn't begin creating art until after she retired in 1969. Orphaned at a young age, deSmith Greenman was raised by her extended family and graduated from Boston's High School of Practical Arts, in 1916, where she displayed a natural aptitude for the arts. In 1927 she married Maurice Greenman, a pharmacist; they had one daughter, Betty. When her husband died suddenly in 1956, deSmith Greenman became a clerk in the Massachusetts Division of Banking and Insurance where she worked until her retirement.

In the mid 1970's deSmith Greenman was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. From 1970 to 1977, while struggling with the disease, she produced a staggering number of drawings. Spending most hours alone, she drew obsessively. Working with pencils, pens, crayons, and markers, deSmith Greenman interpreted her world—creating images of her home, garden and family as well as scenes from the world of her imagination. Other favorite subjects included vases of flowers, fruit bowls, and television sets broadcasting invented programs. Her images frequently involve transformations; a familiar table or paper weight will often reappear with a new identity.

Despite suffering from headaches, sleeplessness, disorientation and memory loss, deSmith Greenman's remarkable creative output continued to accelerate. Drawing consumed her life. She meticulously signed and dated almost every drawing, labeling many of them "imaginative sketches" or "doodles." In 1977 Rose deSmith Greenman abruptly stopped creating art.



Rose deSmith Greenman at age 17.

DRAWING ON LIFE: THE WORK OF ROSE deSMITH GREENMAN

“Rose deSmith Greenman’s delicate, feminine renderings of flowers, furniture and family are tender, sweet and endearing.”

—Brooke Anderson, *Director and Curator, American Folk Art Museum, New York*

DURING A BURST OF CREATIVITY when Rose deSmith Greenman (1898-1983) was in her seventies, she created countless drawings of flowers, home, family and other assorted domestic subjects. The images—all drawn in Greenman’s calligraphic hand with pen, pencil or marker on any readily available scrap of paper—were rooted in her everyday life. From bowls of fruit and vases of flowers to her favorite television station, and from her daughter Betty’s beloved house and gardens to her grandson’s precious doll, her quotidian existence served as inspiration for a series of extraordinary visual interpretations.

Although Greenman explored the same subjects many times during her seven years of making art, each image is seen afresh and rendered differently every time. The same vase of flowers is transformed from a simplified yet accurate representation in which each flower is recognizable to a highly stylized or a wonderfully fanciful picture. The garden becomes an intense maze of graceful lines that go beyond describing the visual appearance of the plants and trees to evoke the sensation of being enveloped and protected by nature in this remarkable backyard setting.

Rose deSmith Greenman’s steadfast vision is paralleled by the intensity and intentionality of her characteristic line. Her predilection of drawing materials over paint is understandable given her use of line to create not only the visual description and fluid patterning of her subject but also as

an energetic force that unifies and breathes life into each picture. This energy might be explained by the build up of visual and emotional material over her lifetime that came pouring forth when Greenman started to draw at the age of seventy-two. The images and experiences that defined her life were finally and furiously being delineated on paper.

It is not surprising then that drawing of family abounds in Greenman’s work, relating both to her own family history and possibly to family members imagined or seen on television. Losing her parents at a young age and being an integral part of her only child’s close-knit family perhaps combined to create a deep appreciation yet continual longing for kindred connections. Whether dad, mom, and the children are shown in domestic scenarios or are seen in pictures hanging on the wall or set on the furniture, they always appear together as a solid nuclear unit in Greenman’s work.

While quite possibly inventing some of the details of her daily routine, Rose deSmith Greenman sought to capture the beauty and spirit of her challenging yet fulfilling life through her artwork. Making one drawing, one after another, sometimes creating up to fifteen a day, Greenman envisioned for herself and for us a world in which the simplicity of a vase of flowers or a family photograph could represent both a physical reality and transformative vision.

JULIE BERNSON

Director of Education

Addison Gallery of American Art

Phillips Academy, Andover, MA



"MY GOODNESS HOW EVERYONE
HAS CHANGED"
8 x 12 inches
Ink on cardboard
Signed: R. deS. G. 2/3/73

ROSE deSMITH GREENMAN: HER ARTISTIC AND SCIENTIFIC LEGACY

“Rose deSmith Greenman’s subject matter flows seamlessly between her familiar, domestic world and the imaginative transformations that set it free to explore a range of multiple realities.”

—Gilian Shallcross, *Manager of Education Resources, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*

I FIRST BECAME AWARE of Rose deSmith Greenman shortly after she died in 1983 while doing Alzheimer’s research at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Examination of her brain showed typical intense findings of Alzheimer’s disease. It was my privilege to study the prolific amount of drawings that Rose produced during the course of her illness (between 1970–1977). Her drawings raise many interesting questions about creativity, art and the brain. Does Alzheimer’s disease interfere with or contribute to creativity, leaving certain brain areas relatively spared, while affecting other parts more severely?

Perhaps the most important finding we discovered is that creativity and growth can continue into the later years of life, despite the psychological effects of a devastating illness like Alzheimer’s disease.

Rose systematically signed and dated each drawing. Thus we were able to place her work in chronological sequence during our research. Her work clearly evolved with time.

Largely self-taught, she drew in pencil, ink, and crayon on paper, and occasionally posterboard and cardboard. Often she would produce a series of pictures on a particular topic or variations on a theme.

Her drawings of still life and domestic scenes are more than decorative. She became freer with her use of fluid lines and decorative patterns, evoking the beauty and mystery of everyday life.

Through her drawings, she reveals the awesome beauty and inspiration lying in the most unsuspected people and places.

Rose deSmith Greenman’s art is a testimony to the triumph of the human spirit. Her work tends to instill a reverence for the sanctity of life and the creative spirit.

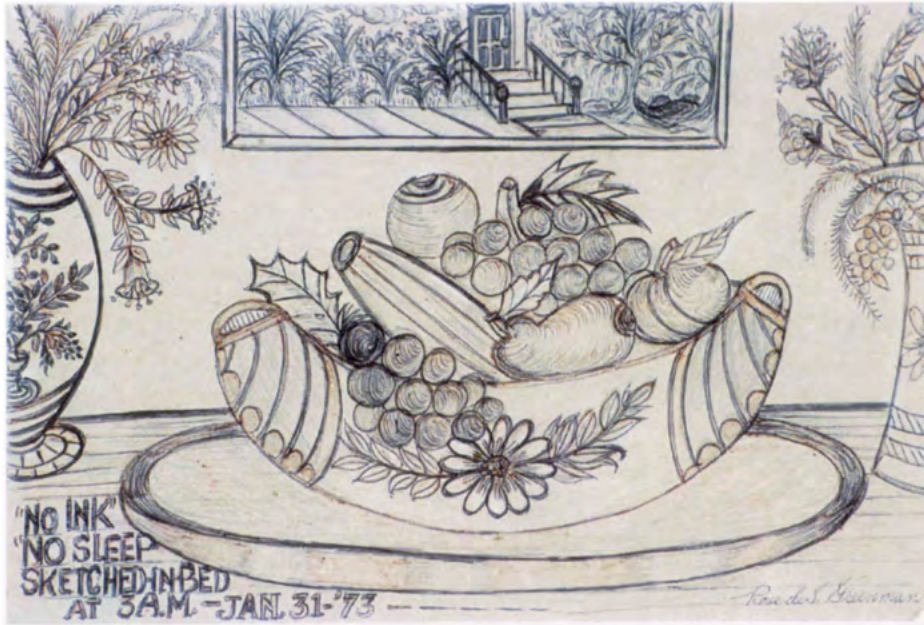
Rose deSmith Greenman’s work says emphatically “Yes” to life.

PETER FLEMING M.D.
*Director, Headache Clinic
Faulkner Hospital, Boston, MA*



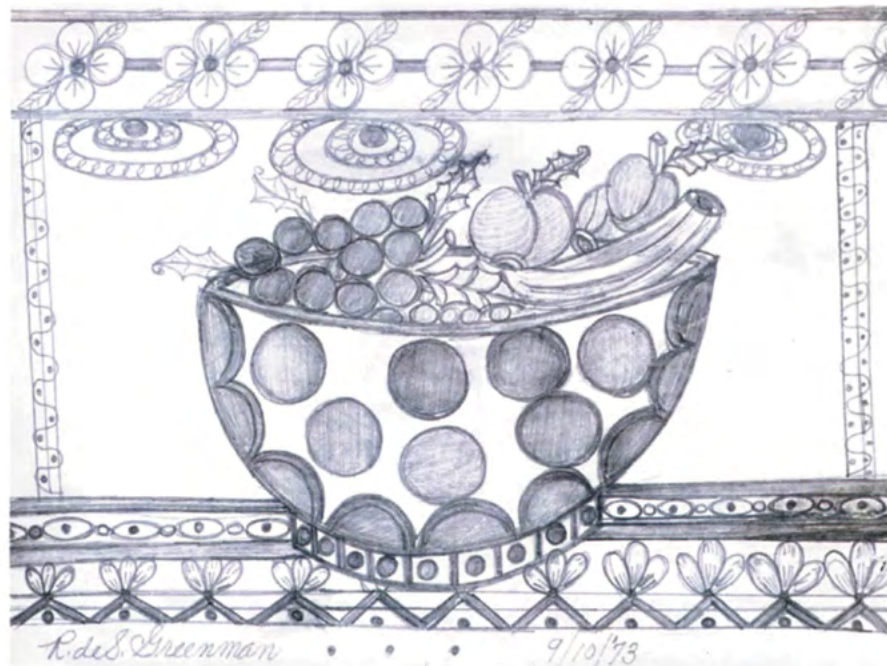
6/23/70
UNTITLED
9 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches
Oil on cardboard
Signed: Rose Greenman 6/20/70 and 1969

Rose Greenman 1969



"NO INK, NO SLEEP, SKETCHED
 IN BED AT 3 A.M." (top)
 8 x 12 inches
 Pencil and ink on cardboard
 Signed: Rose deS. Greenman
 Jan 31-'73

UNTITLED (bottom)
 8 ½ x 11 inches
 Pencil on paper
 Signed: R deS. Greenman
 9 /10/73





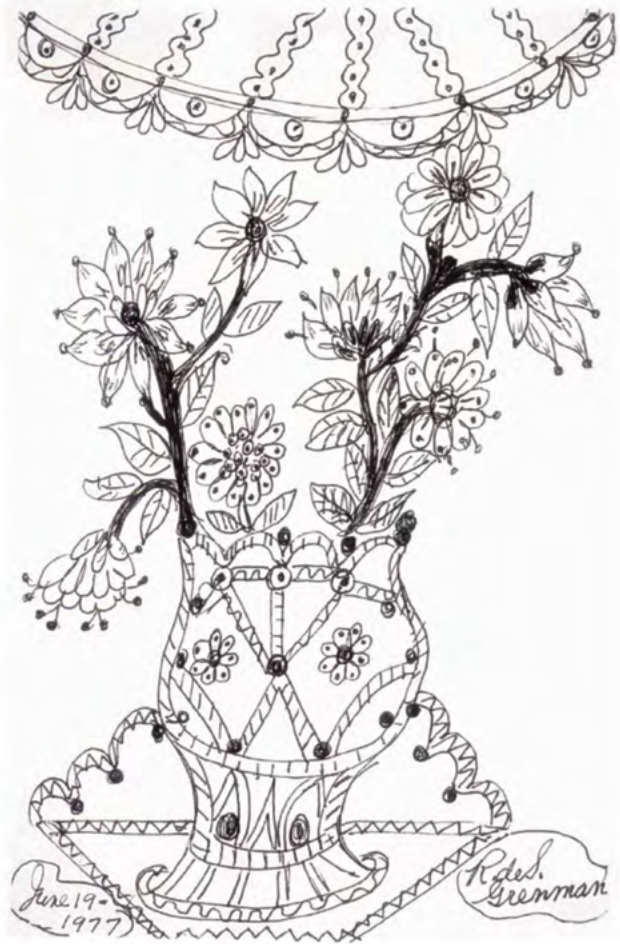
"IMAGINARY SKETCH"
 "ON LAP SKETCHING WHILE
 WATCHING T.V." (top)
 8 ½ x 11 inches
 Color marker on white paper
 Signed: Rose deSmith Greenman
 September 15, 1974

UNTITLED
 (right)
 8 x 12 inches
 Mixed media on cardboard
 Signed: R deS. Greenman
 1/5/1973





UNTITLED
4 x 6 inches
Color marker on paper
Signed: R. deS. Greenman
11/26/1973



UNTITLED
5 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches
Pen on paper
Signed: R. deS. Greenman
June 19, 1977



"TREES" (top)
19 x 24 inches
Pencil on paper
Signed: Rose Greenman June 1972

UNTITLED (bottom)
11 X 14 inches
Mixed media
Signed: R. deS Greenman 1973





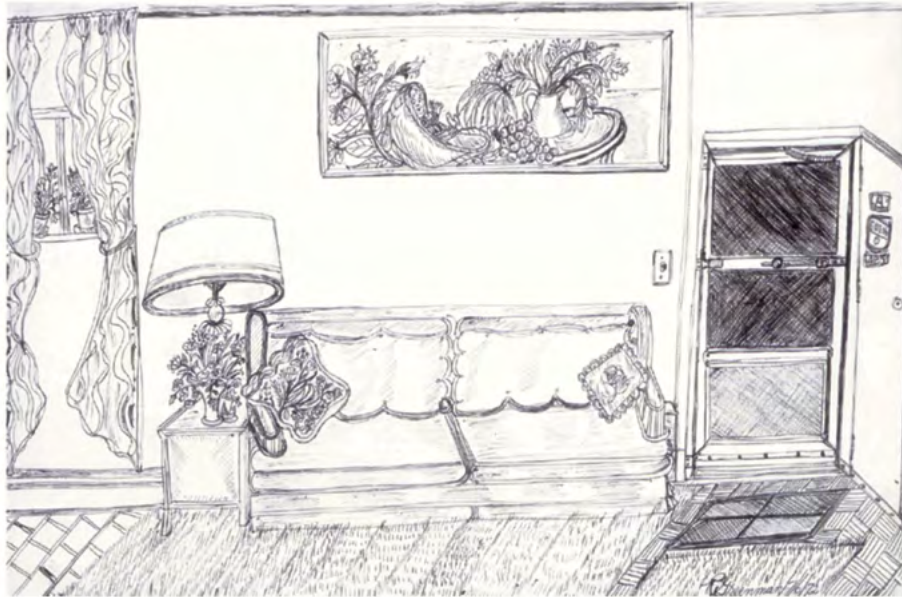
UNTITLED
17 x 22 inches
Mixed media on paper
Signed: R. Greenman 2/12/73



UNTITLED (top)
 8 ¼ x 11 ¼ inches
 Blue ink on white paper
 Signed: R deS. Greenman 2/10/73

“FIRST SNOWMAN OF THE SEASON”
 (bottom)
 11 x 14 inches
 Blue ink on paper
 Signed: R deS. G 11/8/72





UNTITLED (top)
12 x 18 inches
Ink on paper
Signed: R Greenman 7/6/72

"MY TELEPHONE TABLE"
(bottom left)
7 ¼ x 11 ¼ inches
Mixed medium on cardboard
Signed: R Greenman 3/4/72

UNTITLED (bottom right)
8 ½ x 11 inches
Pencil on paper
Signed: R. deS Greenman
November 32, 1975 [sic]





"FAMILY DAY ON T.V."

8 ¼ x 11 ¼ inches

Pencil on blue poster card

Signed: R deS Greenman 2/19/74

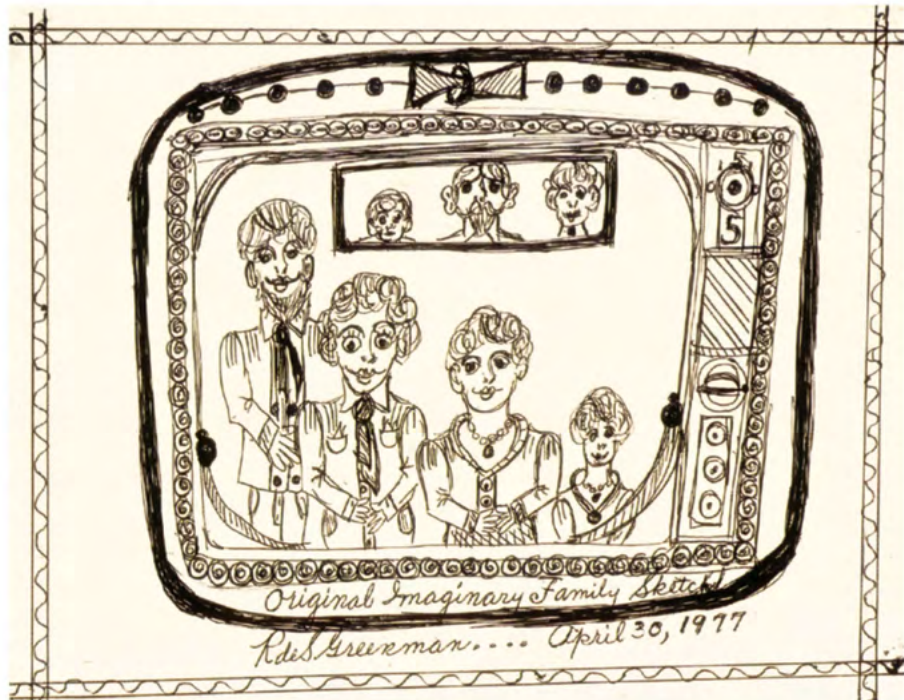
"ORIGINAL IMAGINARY FAMILY SKETCH"

8 ½ x 11 inches

Ink on paper

Signed: R deS Greenman

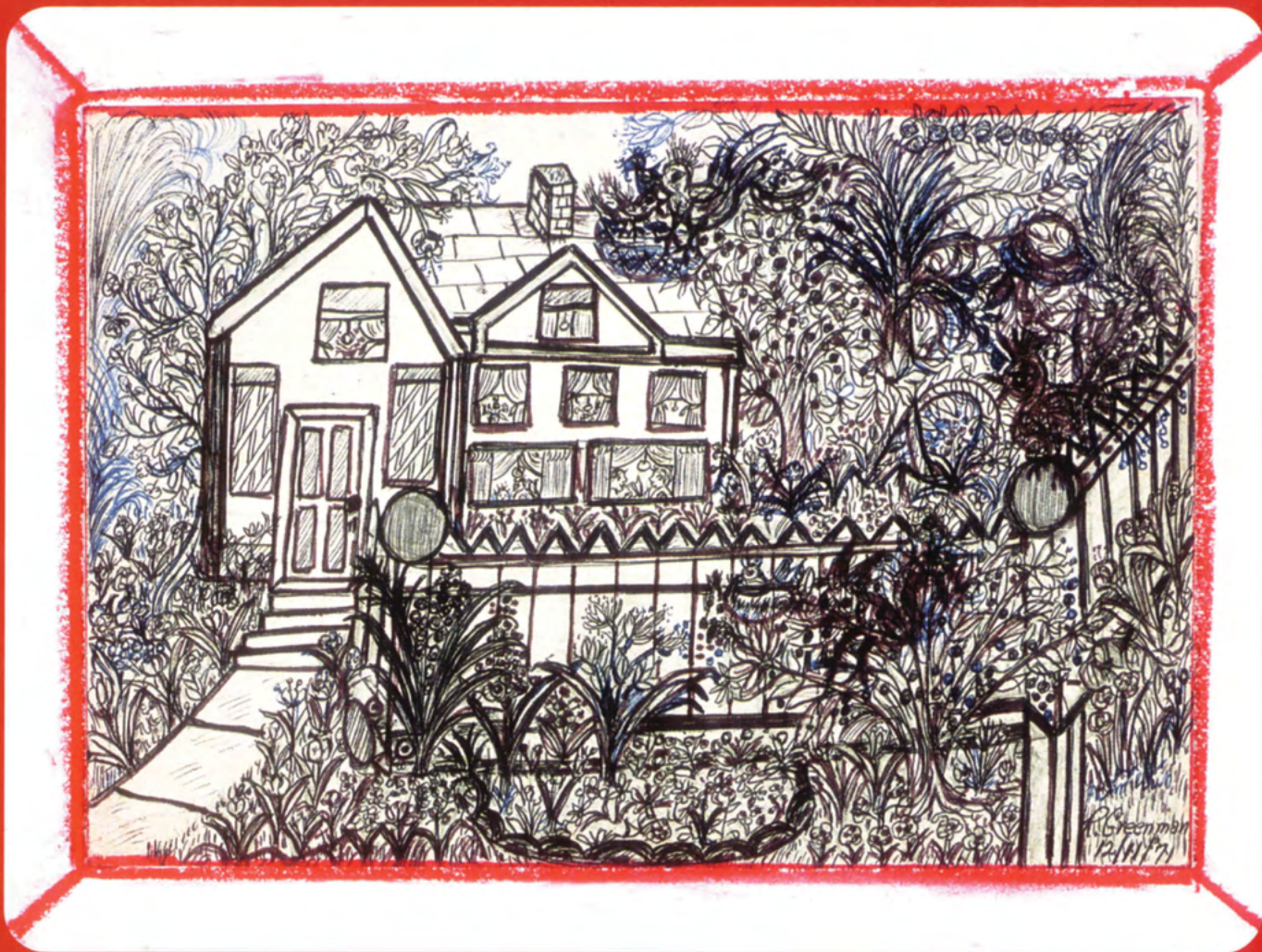
April 30, 1977



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Betty Avruch

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Front cover:

UNTITLED

8 ½ x 11 inches

Marker on paper

Signed: R deS Greenman 2/11/1974

Back cover:

UNTITLED

7 x 9 ½ inches

Ink on cardboard

Signed: R. Greenman 12/11/71