Curious about what comprises art, a visit to the Milwaukee Art Museum begins with a view of "Uncommon Art: Selections in American Art." The exhibition features the museum's permanent American folk and self-taught artists' range of media. The exhibit ranges from a faceted untitled landscape by the mid-century Milwaukee artist Eugene Von Bruenchenhein to his exotic poses of his wife. Also from Milwaukee, Prophet Blackmon created spiritual ministry in 1983 from his shoe-repair and sewing as a religious community center. "Tongues of Fire," a large section of Taylor's "Talking Tongues" is shown on the ground floor. Animal themes, elephants, a great gnu, among others) are abundant.

Social or political concerns were not overt in his images such as Mies van der Rohe's (1910). An exception was Okada's "Hit-Mu-To" (1942) the era of Fascism under Tojo. The three leaders catty colored venomous mythological scene with hallucinations.

The question of what these artists were offering a clue to their art. They were, for the most part, ordinary people living ordinary, sometimes redemptive lives. Their special gifts of imagination and sensitivity for transforming everyday life objects are evident. Usually without formal training, they found, through observation and inner expressiveness, uncommon images to share their visions. Hence, it is not surprising that viewers may find in these works experiences that resonate powerfully with their own everyday experiences.

Until the mid-20th century, folk and untutored artists went largely unnoticed in the art world. For a variety of reasons a significant body of American self-taught artists has attracted the attention of museums and collectors in Wisconsin, including the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan. The result is that arguably the most important collections of these artists reside within arm's reach for Milwaukee area residents.

The concentration of self-taught art in Wisconsin is due largely to the acquisition of the Michael and Julie Hall Collection under former MAM Director Russell Bowman, and recent gifts of the Anthony Petullo and Lanford Wilson collections. Director Ruth DeYoung Kohler at the Kohler Arts Center has focused their collection on preserving the works and working sites of the self-taught artists. We can be thankful for these efforts.

Sergei Isupov, Ray, glazed stoneware, 2009

Human beings like to anthropomorphize. So we make memes attributing characteristically human dialogue to the expressive faces of Shiba Inu puppies. Our anthropomorphizing impulse is also evident in the attempts of CGI and video games to recreate the effortless naturalism of human behavior. But these valiant efforts sometimes go awry. To describe such failings, the term "uncanny valley" was coined to describe the sharp drop off where verisimilitude prompts revulsion. Think "Jar Jar Binks.

Sergei Isupov's unmistakable technical mastery allows him to flirt with the uncanny by adding a fusible pinch to the grotesque into his clay sculptures. Humans and animals merge bodies. Physical features are compressed and flattened. Appendages appear in uncommon multiples and locations. All this makes sense in light of Isupov's express intent to explore the human condition. How better to evoke existential constrictions than the flattening and elongating of bodily features? If you find yourself grimacing before Isupov's unsettling faces, is it because you just saw your reflection?

Racine Art Museum's "Collection Focus: Sergei Isupov" opens Sunday, Feb. 23, and will be on display until June 8.

Sergei Isupov, Ray, glazed stoneware, 2009

"Art from the Ashes: Finding Light in the Shadow of the Shoah" Godda Meir Library @ UWM-Milwaukee | 2311 E. Hartford Ave.

It seems paradoxical that beautiful art originates in the most horrific of circumstances. And yet mushrooms burst forth from excrement and humans surrounded by ugliness bring forth beauty. "To comprehend a nectar requires sorest need," noted Emily Dickinson. "Art from the Ashes" presents the works of Bay-area artist Helene Fischman created while working in the remains of former concentration camps. The art, conceived as an homage to the victims of the Holocaust, will be presented alongside World War II artifacts held by UWM's special collections. The works will be on display until May 30.

"Artists Now: Sandra de la Loza—Art as a Living Practice" Arts Center Lecture Hall, Room 120 | 2400 E. Kenwood Blvd.

In his eleventh thesis on Feurbach, Karl Marx upbraided philosophers for overlooking the fact that they should not merely interpret the world, but seek to change it. Sandra de la Loza is an artist who strives, not merely to represent the world, but to change it. Her photographs, silkscreen prints and other creations draw attention to power relations in contemporary social, political and cultural landscapes. De la Loza will be giving a performative lecture at UWM at 7 p.m., Wednesday, Feb. 26.