

# Philadelphia's Magic Gardens: The Dreamwork of Isaiah Zagar

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## Forward

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Over the past 20 years, Isaiah Zagar has gained an international reputation as a mural artist. His embellished walls and hyper-energized environments attract many thousands of visitors to Philadelphia each year. Monumental and engaging, this art has transformed a neighborhood of mundane row houses into an unorthodox outdoor gallery. But what is less known about Zagar is that these walls represent only one aspect of his artistic identity. Few creative individuals are as complex, informed, and multifaceted as Isaiah Zagar. While he received a conventional art education at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, many of his influences come from nonacademic experiences. Throughout his lifetime, Zagar has traveled the world to see art firsthand and to meet artists from different cultures. These encounters are often absorbed into his work, whether referenced directly or implied. It is not easy to define Isaiah Zagar or to explain his artistic achievements. He is a hybrid, a visionary who needs to be acknowledged entirely on his own terms. His public works are reminiscent of those produced by “Outsider” artists, yet with his comprehensive knowledge of art history, he can hardly be considered a naive artist. His walls of tile fragments and broken mirrors are the result of a trained artist responding to and reimagining the environments of Outsider art. Exploring the conceptual underpinnings of the self-taught artists he admires, Zagar found a way to create intuitively, rather than relying on an orientation acquired by formal creative wife Julia, and started countless journeys and collaborations along the way. However, it was a mental

breakdown in 1968 that set Isaiah on the path to becoming the mosaicking maestro he is today. Stunned and disheartened by his nation after the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., he retreated into a deep depression and attempted suicide. It was at the hospital when a doctor offered sage advice to combat his anxiety: "It is important for you to keep working, Isaiah. Just focus on putting one thing next to the other." So he did. Untrained in mosaic-making but fearless and energized, he started in his bathroom, went out into the hall, down the stairs, and eventually through the front door to the streets. He covered the walls with tiles, mirror, collected objects, narrative text, and portraits of those around him. What started with one building led to another. Then another. Then a dozen. Then hundreds. By the time I stumbled upon the unfinished Magic Gardens when I was 18, he had been working on the site for eight years, and it was another six years before it opened to the public. The work was exploding out of him then and still does today. The sheer scope of his vision is overwhelming, and it can be challenging to approach. My advice is to take time to look closely. If you don't pause you might miss a great secret, a saucy joke, a special trinket. You should view the work as if it was a page from his journal. There is no veil, no editing; the stories and imagery are displayed with no inhibition. The text and drawings found on his tiles reveal whatever was preoccupying him that given day in the studio: friendships, anxieties, loves, pets, desires, influences, failures, dreams. You will find portraits of those who crossed his path, quotes from the books he was reading, events that amused him, fixations that tormented him. To dismiss the work as just colorful decoration would be to miss the sophistication and complexity of his storytelling. To be sure, the work is vibrant, exciting, and staggering in scale, but there are shades of darkness in it as well. Laid bare is the struggle of a creative mind, the endless obsession of art-making, and the documentation of his relationships with others and with himself. Tragedy and levity are intertwined. Questions, criticisms, and grandiose thinking all have a place here. There are not only the supreme joys, but also the crippling doubts that we all experience in our lives. What is so beautiful is that as viewers we are welcomed to witness an existence that is triumphantly unashamed. The work is one man's life unfolding all around us, coaxing us in, begging us to explore a strange and exceptional mind. His artwork is a gift. It is a gift to anyone who is courageous enough to love deeply, laugh loudly, and challenge the ugliness of life unafraid.