

The Museum of Everything, London

Gabriel Coxhead



Section from Henry Darger's 15,000-page illustrated manuscript

The very idea of a gallery dedicated to exhibiting “outsider art” is ironic enough. This is a genre, after all, defined by its segregation from mainstream society, whose works were typically never intended for public display, and whose practitioners often never considered what they made to be art at all. For such a gallery, then, to open in London during the annual gala for the global art world that is the Frieze Art Fair seems doubly incongruous.

“Opening during Frieze was intended to be provocative, to start debates about the nature of art,” says James Brett, the force behind the Museum of Everything. Most of the gallery’s 200 or so pieces are drawn from his own collection. “The sort of work we’re exhibiting embodies the most essential motive for making art, where it’s simply about personal creativity and expression, and has nothing whatsoever to do with selling work or building a career.”

Instead, the motivation is often a mystical or visionary experience, a response to physical or mental disability, or simply a secret, reclusive monomania. “We’re hoping to challenge those sections of the art world who don’t see this kind of thing as ‘art’, who certainly would never buy it; to make them question what it is about art that truly interests them.”

Outsider art has had its advocates before. Jean Dubuffet coined the term “Art Brut” in 1945 to describe work made outside the tradition of fine art – there are several specialist galleries and museums round the world. Brett’s, though, is the UK’s first, and he sees it filling a vital niche. “In France and Switzerland, Art Brut is viewed from a very academic perspective, so the beauty of works often gets overlooked; in America, outsider pieces frequently get lumped together with a more generic idea of folk art,” he says. “The idea of the Museum of Everything is to assert the sheer beauty of the best outsider art, to reclaim it as a distinct aesthetic category – one in which you have a whole world being conjured up by the artist.”

It’s this sense of the otherworldly that the museum is particularly good at evoking. Housed in a dilapidated former dairy near Primrose Hill, its labyrinthine interior has been left unrefurbished – all exposed breeze blocks, rusting pipework, crumbling plasterboard – to create an atmosphere of rawness and mystery, but also the feeling of something slightly dysfunctional.

The upstairs galleries, with their cramped corridors and cell-like rooms, are like a series of disparate mental spaces. These offer glimpses into strange realms of private obsession such as Alexandre Lobanov’s gun-fixation which resulted in wondrously ornate, mythologised depictions of Soviet heroism, or the elaborate wire assemblages of Emery Blagdon, part of a vast “healing machine” he built in rural Nebraska from the 1950s onwards. The work of Judith Scott, born deaf and with Down’s syndrome, winds lengths of colourful yarn into numinous, cocoon-like sculptures.



Untitled work by Alexandre Lobanov

Less successful is the ground-floor space, where paintings and graphic works by many different artists are hung on three enormous walls, stretching almost all the way to the ceiling like some Victorian salon display. While some pieces stand out – the intricate Egyptological configurations of Augustin Lesage, for instance, or George Widener’s occult diagrams for predicting future events – the overall result is that distinctions between different approaches and periods become blurred.

This temptation to go for breadth rather than depth is understandable. Yet the room that Brett seems proudest of and the one that best articulates the institution’s principles is one dedicated to the work of Henry Darger – probably the most celebrated outsider artist, whose fantastic 15,000- page manuscript and its accompanying scroll-like paintings were discovered posthumously in 1973. Brett has managed the feat of gathering five sequential sections from Darger’s vast, psychosexual opus, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in this gorgeous yet discomfiting narrative.

“We’re hoping that people will come to realise how affecting, inspirational, and even influential outsider art can be,” says Brett. “Artists such as Darger should be considered not simply important outsider artists, but as great artists, period, in any context.”

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