

# TRIBUNE

## **VISUAL ARTS: Private worlds and work of outside artists**

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The Museum of Everything  
Sharpleshall Street, London

Forget clean white spaces – the neat, slick lines of the modern anonymous art gallery – and think of a maze, a collection of rooms and spaces that in many ways more accurately reflect the state of the mind. That is appropriate for the newly-opened Museum of Everything, which is devoted to what can loosely be called “Outsider Art” – a term used to describe work by artists who may have little or no training but are driven by an inner compulsion to produce art, mostly for themselves.

Recognising the power of the work early in the 20th century, the French artist Jean Dubuffet coined the phrase “Art Brut”, translated as “raw art”, to include work made by naïve or “primitive” artists working outside the tradition of fine art, dominated by formal study, which he referred to as “art culturel” – cultural art. Dubuffet responded to what he saw as the raw expression of a vision or emotions, untrammelled by convention, a concern with perspective or the more formal study of perspective.

While outsider art has had a keen following in countries such as Germany, Switzerland and the United States, it has found little support in this country, and one of the largest collections – the Musgrave Kinley Outsider Art Collection – is now on loan to the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, as no other institution offered to house it.

The Museum of Everything is therefore doubly welcome in bringing together more than 200 drawings, paintings, sculptures and installations, drawn from private collection, selected by leading contemporary artists, curators and cultural figures. There are, for instance, examples of work by Henry Darger, a Chicago-based artist who died 25 years ago leaving rooms packed with fantasy drawings influenced by religious themes, of young girls, and often horrific brutality displayed against children. This is a glimpse inside a mind that is as disturbing as it is chilling.

Wandering round the well-installed displays, often with sizable amounts of work by each artist, give an idea of the obsessive qualities of the work, and often the sheer labour and engineering required. One group of mechanical fair-like objects move and turn, lit by pretty lights in a fascinating evocation of a magical fairyland.

Equally, a group of life-sized standing figures by the Indian artist Nek Chand combines some of the formalism of Egyptian art with a naive, doll-like quality. All the figures wear different clothes, but the faces – simplified and seemingly with a fixed smile – are the same. All are self-portraits, suggesting the different persona of one individual. Much of the work is by overseas artists, reflecting to some extent the general lack of interest in this country or the difficulty in finding it.

Among the British artists are Alfred Wallis, the “St Ives primitive”, with his captivating seascapes and Madge Gill. The latter lived in the London’s East End and drew on long scrolls of paper, often with a black felt-tipped pen, driven by the spirits accessed through her role as a medium. Like many other outsider artists, she had little interest in selling her work, seeing it as part of her private life, an impression confirmed by this engrossing exhibition.

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