

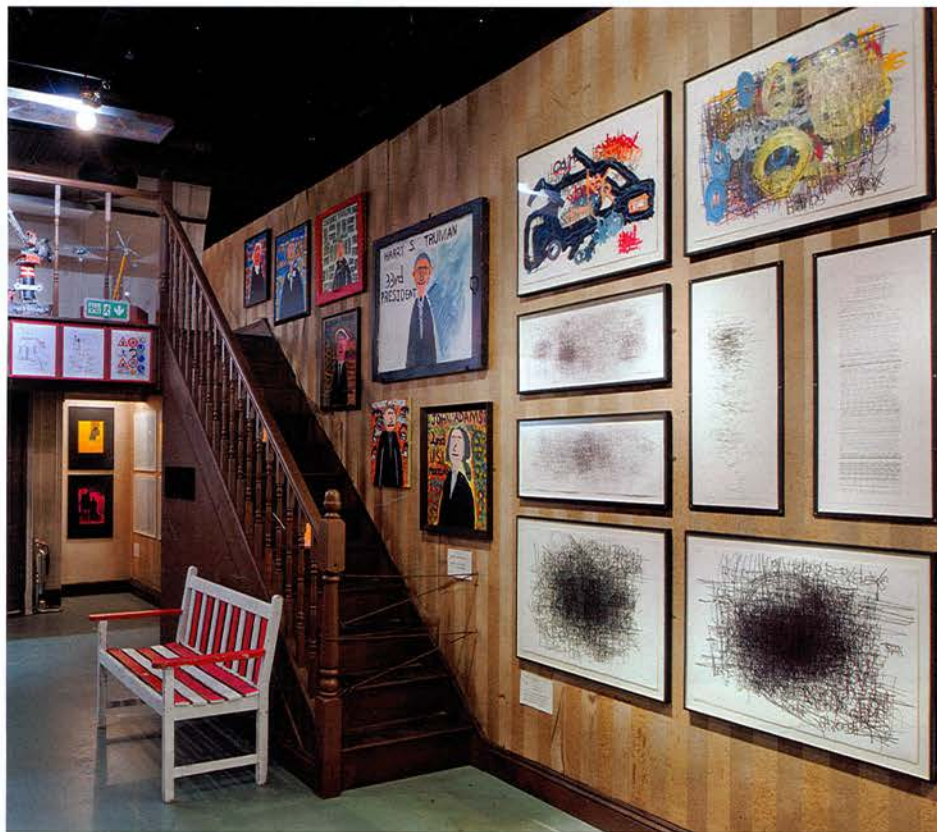
## Taking art to the masses

The art and politics of disability take centre stage in the Museum of Everything's latest show. But, asks **Oscar Humphries**, does it only work in a department store?

**Exhibition 4**  
**The Museum of Everything**  
2 September–25 October  
Selfridges & Co, London

In this, the fourth instalment of his Museum of Everything, collector, impresario and sometime political activist James Brett presents more 'outsider art' at the Selfridges department store in London. The exhibition, which runs until 25 October, includes hundreds of items, ranging from small works on paper to large-scale sculptural installations. It is a disparate and quixotic gathering of pieces united by the fact that they were all produced by artists with physical and/or psychological difficulties practising in specialist workshops around the world. This commonality and the imaginative way in which the works are presented, in 'salon hangs', give the show a magnetism that goes beyond the mere narrative of their quirky geneses. Not only the largest project so far mounted by James Brett, it is the largest of its kind ever to have taken place.

Why put art in a department store? Mr Brett wants the works to be seen by as many people as possible, in order for his own passion to transfer to a new and wider audience. He is interested in challenging the way most of us view art, art practice and the idea of what a museum is. In this sense the show is successful: these artists, many of them unintentional artists, convince us of the merit and legitimacy of their vision (if not always their technique). But it mines a



genre of art for which there is little academic interest and also a limited market. Mr Brett is showing this work and making a case for it because few others are. Moreover, he has brought renown to many of the artists he has shown, most notably Henry Darger (1892–1973), these days the insiders' 'outsider' artist who is seeing serious attention from curators and collectors. 'I am interested in the politics of art and the politics of disability,' says Mr Brett, who wants to 'change people's perception of what art can be.'

Perhaps around 90 per cent of the art collectors who are of his generation – Mr Brett is in his early 40s – collect the readily available, highly-praised and ubiquitous contemporary art trophies. The fact that he is attempting to do something different, with ambition and focus, is commendable. But it is difficult to apply a critical eye to individual

works in this exhibition. (Though some of them are certainly very engaging, like the impossible universes rendered by Katsuhiko Terao.)

Given that Mr Brett wants to bring otherwise marginalised art into the centre of the contemporary vernacular, the very language I use to categorise his field of specialisation might disappoint him. Why, then, do I persist with the term 'outsider art'? The Museum of Everything is engaging, exciting, challenging and inspiring, but an unusual amount of this frisson comes from thinking of how, and by whom, its constituent works were made. Were it held in a traditional museum space purporting to show works by more established artists, the art itself might disappoint. Whereas here, as a showcase of an underappreciated area in the geography of contemporary art practice, it succeeds. **A**