

# my space

## James Brett in the Museum of Everything

I set up the Museum of Everything as a space for artists living outside modern society. We're itinerant: our first home was in a recording studio in North London, then we went to a gallery in Turin and we're currently based in a specially constructed building inside Selfridges in Central London. It's something that comes and goes and stays in your memory.

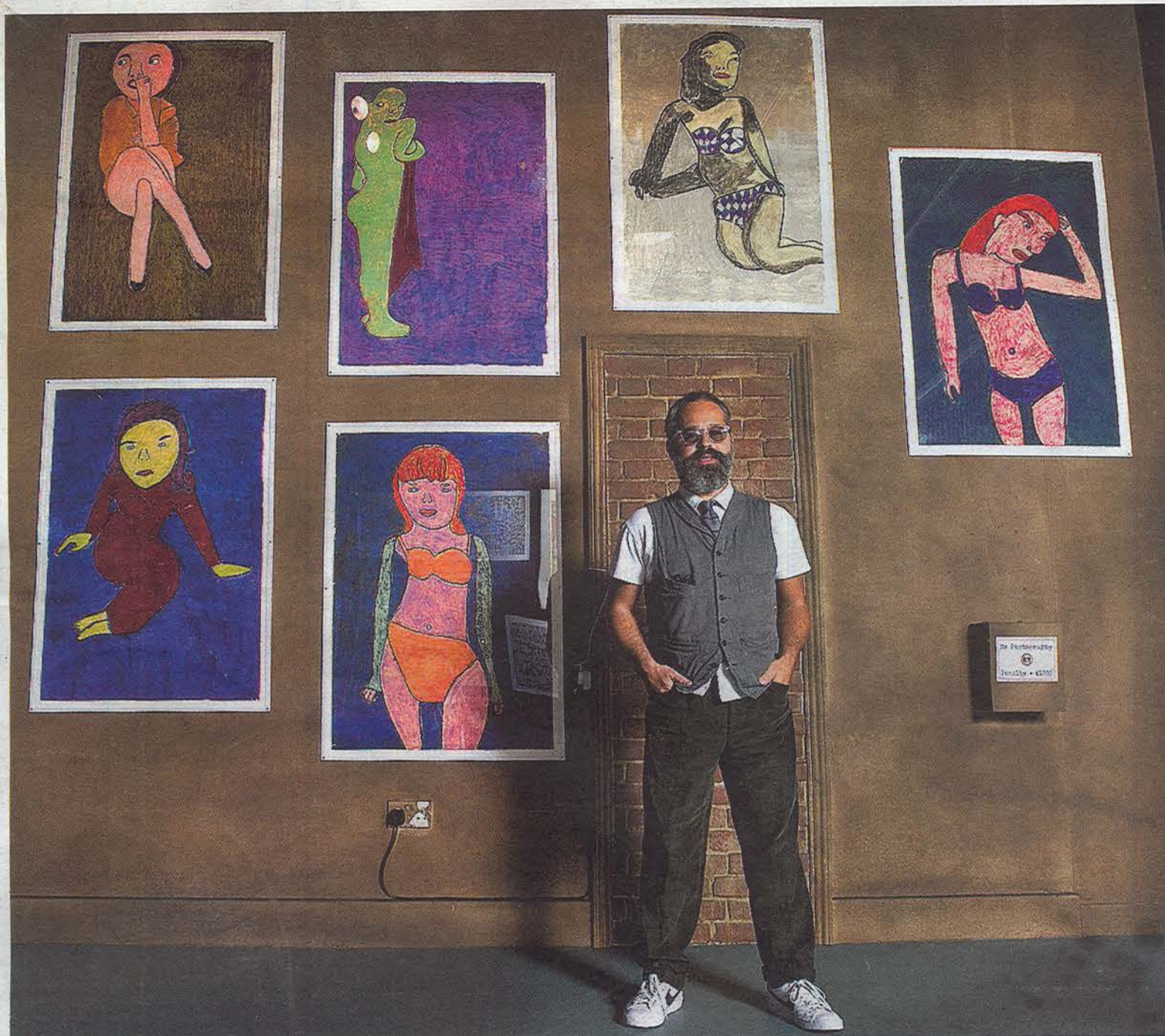
Most of the art here is by people with learning disabilities; most galleries don't view it as art, they view it as this other thing that they can't categorise. The museum consists of about 12 rooms and we have made it purposefully down at heel: the corrugated-iron roofs and exposed brickwork seemed like a good contrast with Selfridges. Eve Stewart, who did the production design for *The King's Speech*, was part of the 40-person design team.

The show is about the studios from America to Belgium, to Japan and Italy, that offer artists with some sort of limitation the chance to make art. No therapy, no teaching — just materials and time and space. Great things come out of that. I love Giovanni Galli's nudes — he prefers older, well-proportioned women, usually viewed from behind — and Stefan Hafner's *City of the Future*, displayed in Selfridges' window. Hafner's father owned the biggest toyshop in his German town, but never let him play with the trains.

Some of our supporters think that moving to Selfridges is the worst thing that we ever did, and I just answer that their bigotry against Selfridges mirrors humanity's bigotry against artists with disabilities. We came here to reach a wider public. We wanted to do it in a place where it could be seen by several hundred thousand people.

The Museum of Everything is at Selfridges, London W1, to Oct 25 ([workevery.com](http://workevery.com))

Portrait by Chris Harris



## 5 minutes with Joe Simpson

Joe Simpson, 51, is best known for writing *Touching the Void*, his account of a near-fatal climbing accident in the Andes in 1985. At the time, Simon Yates, his friend and fellow climber, was criticised for cutting the rope from which Simpson hung. Their ordeal was made into a film in 2003.

**Do you mind that you are still being asked about something that happened 26 years ago?**

It's a double-edged sword. I've done better things in mountaineering since and I think that I've written better books, but I'll always be known as the guy who crawled home.

**You've written seven books. Do you consider yourself more of a writer than a mountaineer?**

Yes, sadly. Given the choice I would have liked to have been the world's best mountaineer. Writing is a lot more terrifying.

**Why?**

When I'm climbing I don't seek anybody's approval, but you want people to like what you've written. I'd rather eat my kneecaps than go through this period of waiting for reviews. Writing can be very

isolating. Climbing is a very intense experience, but you're often doing it with a friend.

**Your new novel, *The Sound of Gravity*, is a love story set in the Alps. How much of it is based on your own experiences?**

It's very selfish to climb. You go off and have your adventures and, if you die, it's your loved ones who suffer. That sense of vigil and loss is a main part of the book. The central story is partly autobiographical. I've found remains of bodies at the bottom of crevasses; I've been in some fairly nasty storms. I was writing within my own world. But I don't see myself as the protagonist. I don't drag my past into my present.

**Your main character is traumatised by an event that happened 25 years earlier. Is there no parallel with you?**

What you know as a mountaineer is that shit happens. You analyse what you did wrong and right, and you move on. My character beats himself up over one moment. I'm fascinated



by how one single event can utterly change your life because of the way you choose to react to it. I don't think that Simon [Yates] or I have ever particularly agonised about our time in Peru. To us the surprise was not that we had an accident but that we survived.

**You have worked as a motivational speaker at corporate events; do you still do that?**

I've done enough so that I won't starve if people hate this book. I don't believe in motivation; you either want to do something or you don't. Motivational gurus are idiots. I just tell the story of *Touching the Void*. There's stuff in there that people can take away. It's quite difficult to hold an audience for an hour — it's quite a thrill. Maybe I just like doing scary things. But it has also helped me.

**Have your experiences brought you closer to people?**

Most of my friends say that I'm completely unable to relate to anybody, but they're just being cruel! The fact that I had an extraordinary experience has given me an insight into myself, but it hasn't made me relate to people any better. I'm just as scared as before.

**Do you still live dangerously?**

I stopped climbing in 2009. I decided that I'd rather not end up under a pile of ice. But it's like trying to get off heroin. It was what defined me and it's not there any more.

**What next?**

I find writing novels difficult, so that's what I want to do. The next one won't be about climbing. If you're only doing the things you've done before, you haven't proved anything. You need to have an uncertain outcome when you start otherwise life gets very boring.

**What's the scariest thing that you could do now?**

I've had a lot of experience of fear. Having a vivid imagination doesn't help. I nearly went to the Kenyan coast with my partner, Corinne, and I thought how terrifying to be kidnapped by pirates. That would give me the willies.

Megan Walsh

*The Sound of Gravity* is published by Jonathan Cape at £16.99. Joe Simpson appears at *The Times* Cheltenham Literature Festival on Oct 12; 01242505444, [cheltenhamfestivals.com](http://cheltenhamfestivals.com)