arts

As curated by the Wicker Man

Fatigue with big bucks artists is driving a folk art boom. Is the village fête the new Tate, asks Rachel Campbell-Johnston

At the Port Eliot Festival, opening this week, visitors to the flower tent, that homely heartland of traditional skill, will find themselves facing a guerrilla attack. Jessica Berens has knitted a life-sized, grenade-wielding (in the hand that hasn't yet been blown off) dolly for the make-your-own scarecrow competition. It's not for nothing that this class was called "over the rainbow". Folk art is leading artists off the edge of the establishment map.

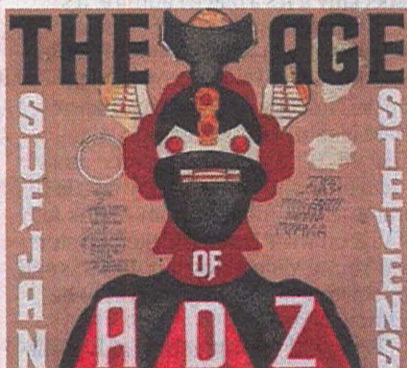
Grace Archer is no doubt, even now, clambering out of her grave. But the curator Michael Howells — a designer who creates sets for anyone from the Rambert Dance Company to John Galliano — is delighted. As a child he adored the classic English flower show with its long wooden trestle tables and its Women's Institute stalwarts, its warm grassy odours and its satin rosettes. And so, invited to curate one for the Port Eliot Festival, he set out to capture this thrill afresh.

He found inspiration in the 1942 film *Mrs Miniver*. "It's about how a flower show can bring the whole community together," he explains, "and so we thought why not have a show that truly crosses all classes?"

Enlisting the local WI to run it, but ditching all the normal Royal Horticultural Society rules — "We wanted imagination, not the perfect exhibit" — he has created a show that, with classes that range from Lend me a Tenor for a black-and-white arrangement to Veg Factor for a sculpture of a pop star made from garden produce, encourages people to tap into what he describes simply as "the common joy of making stuff".

"It's amazing what they can do; it's amazing to see the sheer quality of the work," Howells says.

Little wonder that what is commonly labelled as naive or folk or outsider art — it includes anything from corn dollies to violently expressive paintings — is currently undergoing a vibrant renaissance. Perhaps it was the music



world that struck the chord, with the mainstream popularity of folk revivalists such as Laura Marling, Noah and the Whale, Fleet Foxes and Mumford & Sons.

The American singer-songwriter Sufjan Stevens, who themed his last album, *The Age of Adz*, around the work of the "outsider" artist Royal Robertson, understood the pure, incorruptible energy of the "naive". It is something that our contemporary visual artists have also long been aware of. Grayson Perry, the potter, Jeremy Deller, an orchestrator of collaborative projects, and Susan Philipsz, the sound artist, all picked up the Turner Prize (in 2003, 2004 and 2010 respectively) with unabashed celebrations of folk traditions and techniques.

Institutions are catching up, too. The Museum of Everything in Camden, North London — "London's first ever space for artists and creators living outside our modern society" — has been at the forefront and has proved hugely popular since James Brett set it up "by accident" three years ago.

In September it will be launching its most publicly prominent show to date. Simon Costin, an artist and designer who has been trundling round the country with his collection of folkloric artists in a fairground caravan, is now planning the creation of a more permanent Museum of British Folklore. The Compton Verney gallery in Warwickshire is currently staging an exhibition called *What the Folk Say*, in which contemporary artists — among them the Royal Academician Sir Peter Blake, Mike Nelson, the twice Turner

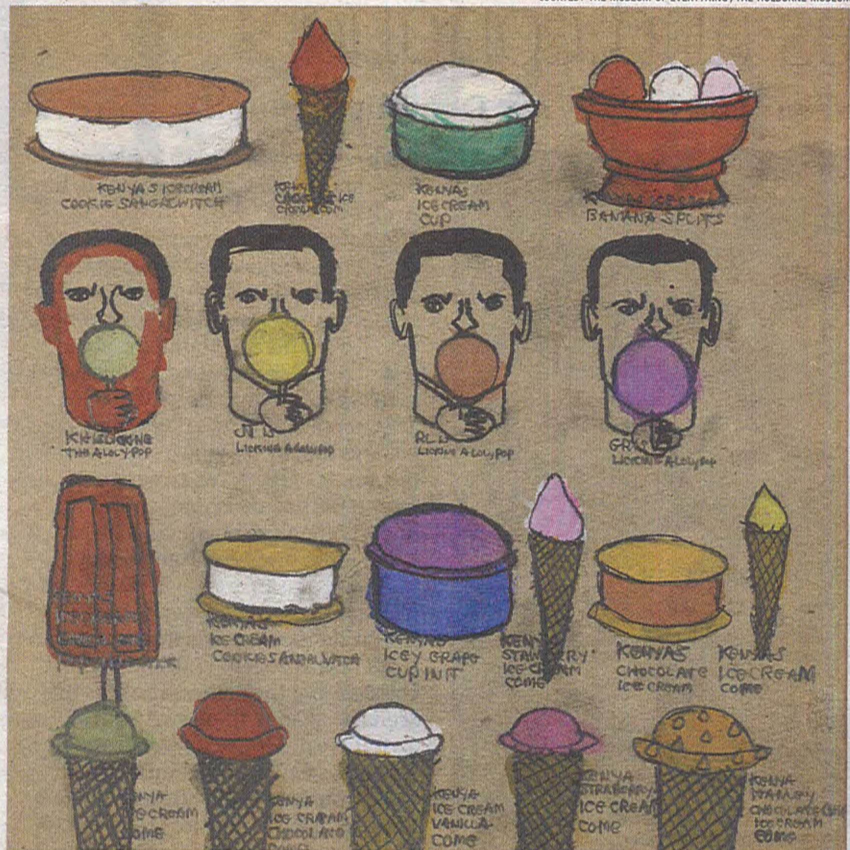
From left, Sufjan Stevens's album inspired by Royal Robertson; Peter Blake's ventriloquist's dummy and, *below*, Museum for Myself; *above*, Cup Cake by Kenya Hanley

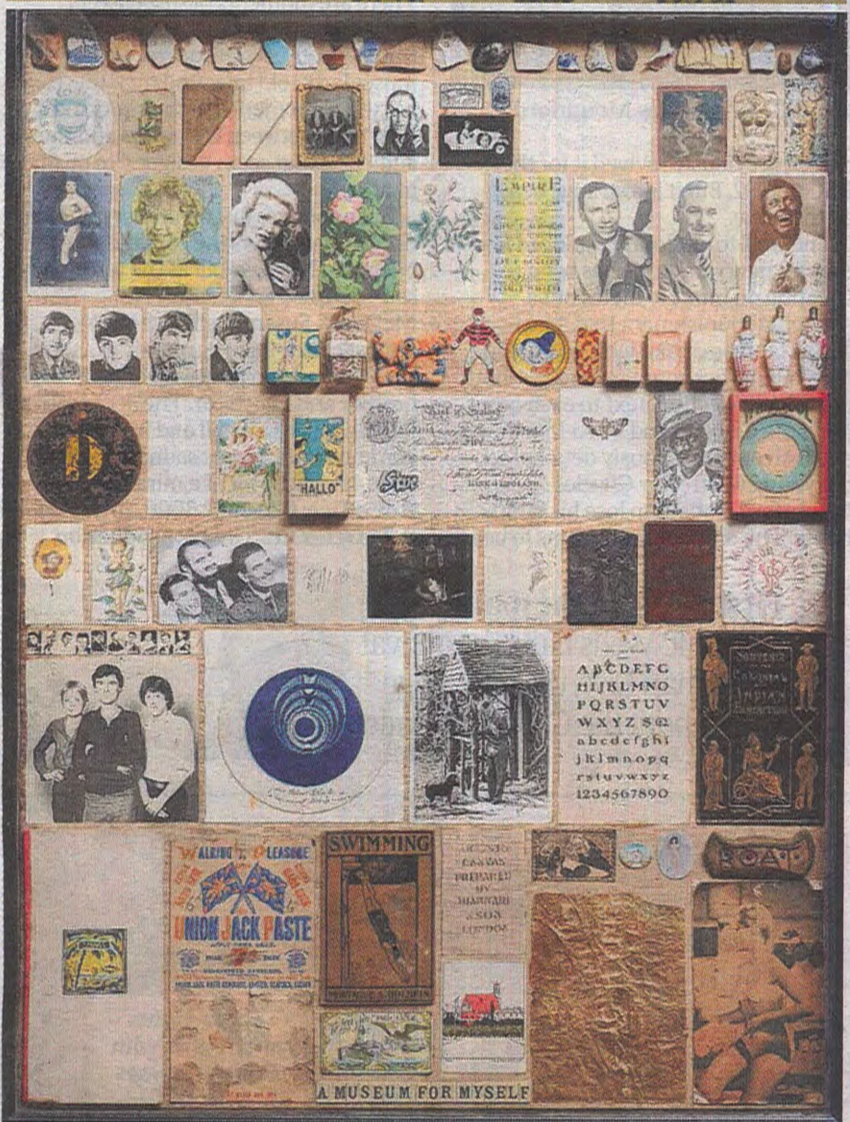
Prize-nominated representative of Britain at this year's Venice Biennale, and Susan Hiller, whose major retrospective at Tate Britain has just closed — respond to the gallery's renowned folk art collection. In September it will open the first exhibition to look at the art of firework-making in Britain. Meanwhile, the Whitechapel and the V&A are both discussing future exhibitions to celebrate the fecundity of folk art traditions and probe their relevance to the modern day world.

"Folk art has always been around and there will always be Sunday painters and outsider artists," says Blake, whose *Museum for Myself*, a kaleidoscopic collection of curiosities ranging from General Tom Thumb's topboots to his own famous album cover for the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* forms the inaugural exhibition in a newly revamped Holburne Museum, in Bath.

"There was a strong interest in it back in the Sixties," provoked, he suggests, by the now famous story (celebrated in another Compton Verney show earlier this year) of how the St Ives artist Ben Nicholson "discovered" the work of the local fisherman-turned-painter Alfred Wallis and found in his naive vision a freshly modern way forwards. "People started looking at barge painting and fairground pictures," Blake recalls.

COURTESY THE MUSEUM OF EVERYTHING; THE HOLBURNE MUSEUM





Explore a slideshow of contemporary folk art

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"They had a purity of intention that appealed strongly to that era."

Fifty years later, the sort of images that spoke so strongly to the mindset of the Sixties are returning. "It's an interest that has been brewing for six or seven years," says Costin. "There has been a huge resurgence in folk techniques, in corn-dolly making and smocking and paper-cutting."

He suggests that it's a reaction against the slick, glossy, expensive productions of such artists as Damien Hirst and a return to the individualistic, the idiosyncratic and the handmade after an era when the name of the artist became a manufacturer's brand. But also, in times of crisis, Costin says, there is a tendency to look back to an idealised past, to the sort of pastoral idyll that the English Romantics turned to when their country was under threat from Napoleonic invasion, to the rustic values that the Victorians sentimentalised when the Industrial Revolution was grinding traditional rural traditions up in its cogs. Television programmes such as *Edwardian Farm* have "pushed interest in this sort of stuff up the contemporary zeitgeist," Costin adds.

A soaring interest in folk is also a response to democratisation, suggests Howells. "In the age of the blog, when everyone can have a voice, people turn to the materials which feel close to them to express themselves as directly as they can."

Antonia Harrison, a curator at Compton Verney, adds: "Folk art is not afraid of crossing boundaries."

In a world where artists are too often commercially categorised, where they feel the weight of expectation hanging over their ideas, folk art offers a sense of liberation. "Because it's not professional, it allows a freedom to range across materials and cultures," says Harrison, citing Mike Nelson whose installation created in the British pavilion at the current Venice Biennale is foreshadowed by his work done in response to a carved figurehead in the Compton Verney collection.

"Artists are voracious," says Grayson Perry. "They are always on the lookout for new things to copy." And amid what he describes as "the glossy advertorials of contemporary art" in a world where "lots of art looks like art but tastes like cardboard", the type of evening-class amateur techniques that he as a potter has appropriated have come to seem like "a signal of innocence and authenticity".

But it's more than that, he explains. "I like the so-called 'outsider' artists because they represent the essence of creativity. They are unselfconscious. One of our problems as artists is to be playful and creative while aware of being looked at," he says. "Folk art by its nature is not aware of being looked at. It is not made with a critical audience in mind."

But, by arrogating the untrained energy of the folk aesthetic, do contemporary artists dilute it? How can they knowingly be naive? Tracey Emin's first hand-stitched quilts, with their stark, dyslexic slogans, may be striking. But once she began to employ a production line of seamstresses to produce them they started to lose their impact, to become less directly moving than distantly beautiful. They have more in common with the fashions in this month's "folk"-themed edition of *Vogue* than with the clothes-peg doll.

"It's very easy to fall into the trope of making things that look like folk art," says Perry. "Go to a degree show and you will always find what I call 'doll's arm collage'" — a sort of collaged clutter of kitsch that always has a plastic doll's arm in it. "People think all folk art is good, but it's like any art — there are a few good artists, a lot of average ones and a load of crap. Just because an old bloke in dungarees in a backyard in Minnesota is making windchimes it doesn't mean they are marvellous. All they have got is their innocence . . . and their ineptitude. But the work of Henry Darger [the reclusive creator of 15 densely typed and profusely illustrated autobiographical volumes] is about the raw sensitivity of the artist. That's what makes it great."

This sort of raw sensitivity becomes a touchstone of truth in our knowingly ironic, self-consciously referential, commercially driven, media savvy art scene. That's why Paul Ryan chose the title *What the Folk Say* for the Compton Verney show, which he curated. "It comes from philosophy," he explains. "When philosophers are talking about language and how it's constructed they turn to the vernacular, to 'what the folk say', to get past the theoretical and explain how language is actually used." They want to stop themselves going too far down sterile explicatory pathways, to put a check on the academic and get back to the vital point.

"When the word 'art' was first used its point was to separate the high and the low, to discriminate between glorious panels in churches and the stump of carved wood in the pub," explains Brett, from the Museum of Everything. "And museums have replicated that idea for more than a thousand years.

"Then came Duchamp's urinal: suddenly anything could be a work of art as long as it was intended to be so. But what about someone who has no interest in saying 'I am an artist'?" asks Brett. "Or someone who can't say it — someone with developmental disabilities?"

The market also has an effect, he explains. "Unless an artist is out in the market he isn't really considered to exist," says Brett. "But outsider artists are not trained, they are not calling themselves artists or selling their work. They are just making stuff. And until recently they were dismissed as primitive. They were patronised. The word 'outsider' [first coined, he explains, by Robert Cardinal in the context of Art Brut], if once helpful, has become a noose. It has come to suggest someone who is excluded or retarded and so not counted. It reinforces a stereotype and so blocks your ability to enjoy the work."

Brett adds: "This is the most fundamental work in existence. You don't need to know art history to understand it. You don't have to learn the techniques of appreciation. It speaks to the instincts.

"Audiences plunge through the highs and lows of emotions as they look," says Brett. "It's much closer to the feelings, to the fundamental questions, to the 'Who are we, why are we, where are we going?' stuff. The key point of this art is to communicate. I have a sneaky feeling that in the next few years we will see a volte-face," he says. "That most of these people will be at the top of the pyramid rather than at the bottom." Maybe they will be inside the Tate and not at the village flower show.

***What the Folk Say* is at Compton Verney, Warwickshire, to Dec 11 (comptonverney.org.uk; 01926 645500). *Exhibition No 4* opens at the Museum of Everything, NW1, on Sep 2 (museumofeverything.com)**

Make your own corn dolly

■ Take a small bundle of wheat with ears still on. Trim the bundle to the same length, and tie at the top, just below the ears (this is the hair), and again an inch or so below it to make the face.

■ Separate the bundle into three sections, a thicker one in the middle (for the body) and two thinner arms. Cut the arms to the right length and tie at the wrists.

■ Tie the body at the waist and separate the remaining length into a pair of legs, and tie again at the ankles.

■ Express your creativity by dressing your dolly using household rubbish, or the fruits of nature.

■ You have created a piece of folk art! Ring the Tate.

Scarecrow by Jessica Berens