



James Brett Brings London The Museum of Everything



James Brett's The Museum of Everything, a former dairy and recording store in Primrose Hill, is London's first public space devoted entirely to artists "living outside modern society," a genre which has inspired artists like Jean Dubuffet and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

In its inaugural exhibition, The Museum of Everything will be showcasing over 200 paintings, drawings, sculptures and installations from extraordinary unknown and untrained artists, including five sequential works from Chicago janitor Henry Darger. For more information, check out www.musevery.com.

Here, James Brett tells ASmallMAGAZINE what got him started and what exactly goes into making The Museum of Everything.

What started your collecting?

I have a compulsive nature. When I get into something, I really get into it. A few years ago I was travelling across the southern States and stumbled across some artworks, figurative carvings which were little more than painted lumps of wood. They were examples of American folk art, which I didn't know much about, made by Southerners in States like Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Louisiana, the Carolinas and Texas. That was the earliest collecting I did and it branched out from there. To be honest I didn't really know that I was collecting until a friend ridiculed me, saying: "Oh my god, you're a collector."

You describe the artists in this collection as "living outside modern society." What is it that makes them different from any other artist?

Many of the people featured in the museum wouldn't necessarily call themselves artists or alternatively did not know artistic fame in their lifetimes. They made their work in private to satisfy their own creative needs. This is in stark contrast to the contemporary world where many artists know how to work and engage with the market and their audience. It is this privacy and intimacy which I am personally attracted to.

Display inside The Museum of Everything

How do you acquire this type of art? Is it predominantly found in auctions? Is there competition to acquire it?

It is very mixed and depends on the visibility of the artist. If the artist is undiscovered, the works could be as little as five dollars, meaning that you have the ability to purchase a significant body of work. If the artist has already been discovered, then there will already be some value and a market for the work. The further along the line you go, the more the work is subject to the highs and lows of the secondary market. For example, when Henry Darger was first discovered, you could purchase works for a few hundred dollars. As people realized how astonishing his work was, they started to pay more.



There is a sort of natural life-cycle to this material. It might start out life at a local junk shop or in an estate sale. Then somebody realizes what it is and it works its way up to better quality sellers, be they dealers or galleries. This is often the middle point, where somebody takes the time to contextualise the work and understands what it is, but still keeps it within an affordable price-range. The highest point financially is at the end of that cycle, when contemporary dealers "gallerise" the work and bring it into the mainstream - as with work by James Castle and Martin Ramirez. By that point it is in some ways less interesting, although of course it is wonderful in terms of the recognition of the artist.

What made you want to create a museum for this type of art?

I didn't know what I was going to do with the material I had collected, but knew that I was fascinated by it. The impulse to exhibit came from the positive reactions of others, often with a background in art, who knew about this genre and suggested I might be the person to present it in the UK. Hans Ulrich Obrist, co-director of the Serpentine was one. When he announced that my home was a museum, I decided to open one instead.

What makes The Museum of Everything different?

There is no other space in the UK dedicated to this genre of art. Nor has there ever been an exhibition presented quite like this before. The aim of Exhibition #1 is to show what is meaningful and what we love in an engaging and even entertaining context. Some artists are classic outsiders, others have developmental disabilities, but all are good artists - and that is the defining factor.

Do you have a favourite piece in this collection?

My personal favourite is usually whatever I purchased last. Certainly one of the most interesting groupings in the show are the five works by Henry Darger. He was a janitor from Chicago and created a series of books illustrating an adult fairytale. We have five sequential pages, ten images in total. That is a very rare find and as far as I am aware unique in the world.

Tells us about the the name of your museum, The Museum of Everything. Where does the name come from?

About five years ago I read about a chap called William Brett, who lived in an old school where he had assembled all the bits and pieces from his life and put them into one large room. He called it The Museum of Everything and the idea immediately connected with me. When I finally decided to put on this exhibition, I called him up, explained that we shared a last name and asked if we could open The Museum of Everything in London. He kindly said yes and the rest is history, although I don't think he really knew the size of what I was talking about. If it brings visitors to his museum too, I'll be thrilled.

The Museum of Everything has a number of events planned during Frieze. For more information, go to www.musevery.com.