

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST: 26/08/17

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There's a certain kind of artwork that up until the seventies didn't really have a name. The French called it *Art Brut*, and across the Channel, it eventually became known as 'outsider art'. Basically, it was a term that described art produced by people other than "artists-with-a-capital-aye". People that were *compelled* to create in some way. Creations that weren't made for the art market, or produced from a formal point of view or skill set. You probably know someone like this. An ex-soldier processing their undiagnosed post traumatic stress disorder by writing violent poetry on gum wrappers. An aunt that collects seashells and makes picture frames out of them. A cousin that paints empty plastic soft drink bottles with detailed scenes of great battles from the American Civil War. A kid who fills dozens of exercise books with messy, biro-drawn battles featuring his favourite horror movie characters. Hold on... that sounds a bit *too* familiar.

I work a couple of days a week at Tasmania's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) and the Museum's current major exhibition is called ***Museum of Everything*** and features a lot of work that people might define as outsider art. Your opinion may vary. Call this art what you want, but it does have some nice **Henry Darger** stuff and a diorama featuring kittens having a tea party. But I digress...

The exhibition is fronted by a faux old building that looks like it's a set from a 1970s Jack the Ripper TV movie. It's pretty cool, actually.

On one wall near the entry, is a hand painted sign — white, old school butchers window lettering on a blood red background — asking a few interesting questions:

"Are you a self-taught or secret artist? Is your home your own personal gallery? Have you invented a private language? Do you know an undiscovered maker?"

I can readily answer all of these questions with a hearty "Yarp!"



But more's the point, it got me thinking about how the general qualities of outsider art also pertain to many aspects of being a comics creator. I mean, for decades, comic books have been seen as an illegitimate, bastard art form. And it's only in the last twenty or thirty years that the art form has slowly clawed its way to respectability... in a similar time frame as that of the rise of outsider art.

Still to this day, though, a lot of local creators spend many hours scribbling away compulsively at their sketchbooks or secret projects. Defining their own private language (developing their own style). I mean, that's how most of us taught ourselves the basics of storytelling. Yes, a few, eventually, after many years of hard work, turn pro and get to work on high-profile corporate characters and projects, or perhaps sell their graphic novel to a major publisher, but all of us start in the same way. All of us.

And not all creators *want* to go on to write or draw Spider-Man or Transformers comics. Many creators are very content in producing their own mini-comics or small print run editions. The end result is not a lesser thing than a Spider-Man comic, in fact, it can be so much more.

Many creators are happy enough to muster the courage to see if the local comics shop will stock five issues of their comic. Or they'll save up their hard-earned cash to book a table at a comics convention or festival and hope they'll sell enough to cover costs and a bit more. That's a big step. And they'll do it again. And again.

For others, they want a bit more, and with talent, grit and determination, opportunities can open up for them as they master *the language of comics* in their own way.

Getting back to the Museum of Everything, I'd like to point out that before the exhibition opened, I was a bit dubious about the whole thing. But when I went on the staff walk-through days before the exhibition opened, I had my mind changed. How the work is showcased and presented is impressive and shows off the work in the best way possible. It is thematically grouped from room to room (in this wonderfully fake Victorian building) and wonderfully lit. More importantly, it's the overwhelming sum of its parts that is most impressive. It all works together. It all fits. It's not a collection of disparate weirdo creators lobbed together like a garage sale at the local community shed. It works, and the volume of work is impressive.

How does this apply to Australian comics?

There is a need for local creators to show their projects at festivals, street markets and conventions. A lot of these events are organised by fellow creators. The support creators give each other is too valuable to put a price on. Events like **Australian Comic Arts Festival (ACAF)** and the soon-to-be-launched **Indie Comics Con** should be supported and lauded. The community outreach initiatives like Sydney Libraries' **Comic Con-versation** and the many, signings, launches and fan-based groups organised by retailers like All Star Comics, Kings Comics, Impact Comics, Greenlight Comics (the list goes on) are a credit to all involved. As well, the growing number of regional comics conventions relying on local talent as guests and exhibitors are a sign that local comics are coming out of the shadows. It all matters. They are all *needed*. That's why **The Ledger Awards** are needed. That's why online initiatives like **Ownaindi** are needed. Even sites like this one are needed. All these efforts are attempting to showcase Australian comics in the best light. Put it all together and it *means* something.

Yes, it may still be a *lonely*, solitary existence as a creator, sitting behind the drawing board or computer, but you are not *alone*. We are no longer *outsiders*. Well, only if you *want* to be.



Gary Chaloner

Credits from the top:

Museum of Everything exhibition entrance, B3 level, MONA.

Museum of Everything signage.

Photos by GC.