

arts

# The rebel artists who uncovered a new world

## Untrained, unfettered and now unleashed in a major exhibition at the Southbank, the vivid Outsider movement enchants Nancy Durrant

### The Alternative Guide to the Universe

Hayward Gallery, SE1  
★★★★☆

**D**o you believe in parallel universes? Even if you don't you will after you've seen this show. There's proof here (proof, I tell you!). These works, made not just by artists but by "unlicensed architects and urbanists, outsider physicists and visionary inventors", are a window into those other universes — the multiple realms of the human imagination. The catch-all term that has settled into use for this sort of work is "outsider art". Broadly speaking, it refers to art

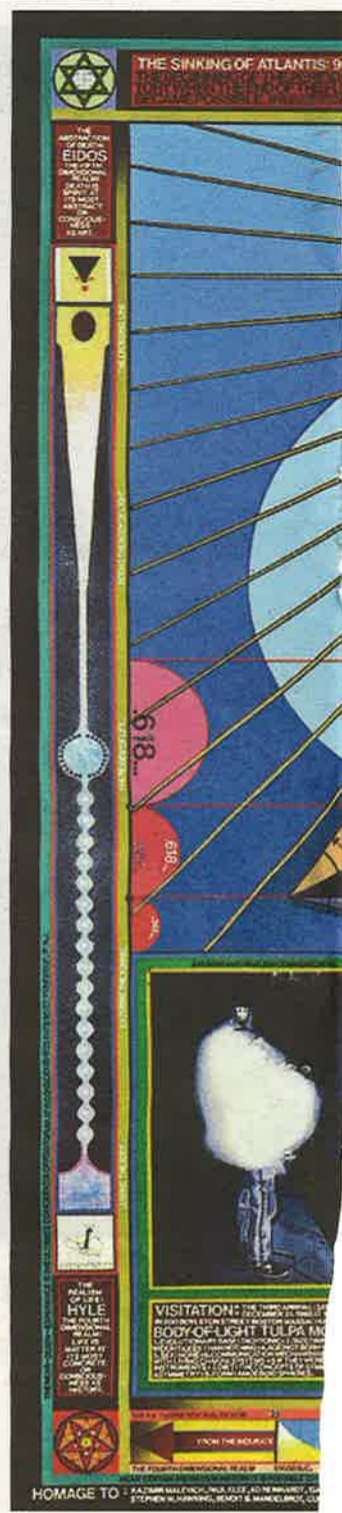
created by people who have no formal, institutional artistic training and who operate more or less on the fringes of society; not what you would call high-functioning, socially speaking. That these criteria don't apply perfectly to all the artists in this exhibition shows how unsatisfactory the term is. They are all though, in one sense or another, outsiders of sorts. But this is not the only thing that unites these disparate characters. Though their bodies of work could not be more singular, there are key themes. One is the attempt to make sense of the world at a fundamental level. Patterns and order, keys and codes, obsess the likes of Alfred Jensen (1903-81) and George Widener (b.1962). Brought up until the age of seven in Guatemala and later introduced to the Mayan number system, Jensen developed a theory of time based on it, Pythagorean geometry,

ALFRED JENSEN; MAIN: COURTESY KENT FINE ART / PAUL LAFFOLEY; BELOW: MARCEL STORR; MORTON BARTLETT



the I Ching, Goethe's colour theories, magic squares and space travel. His expression of this is large-scale, gloriously coloured number charts that I suspect the mathematician Marcus de Sauty would struggle to get his head around. They are, however, beautiful. Equally, but less colourfully, are Widener's meticulous magic square paintings. A former employee of a US government agency in which he shared a department with cryptographers and codebreakers, his work, which includes drawings outlining his ideas for a more humane urbanism, incorporates codes designed to be understood by super-intelligent machines of the

future. Philip Blackmar's (b.1945) multi-octahedral models, painstakingly crafted by hand from paper, express his new ideas about quantum geometry, while Melvin Way's (b.1954) dense ink drawings on scraps of found paper are a sort of visual poem, diagrammatic orderings of thoughts that take the form of cryptograms. Related to this tendency towards order and understanding is the all-pervading sense throughout this show of an urge to make the world a better place — something conspicuously missing from a great deal of more mainstream contemporary art. Bodys Isek Kingelez (b.1948) is a



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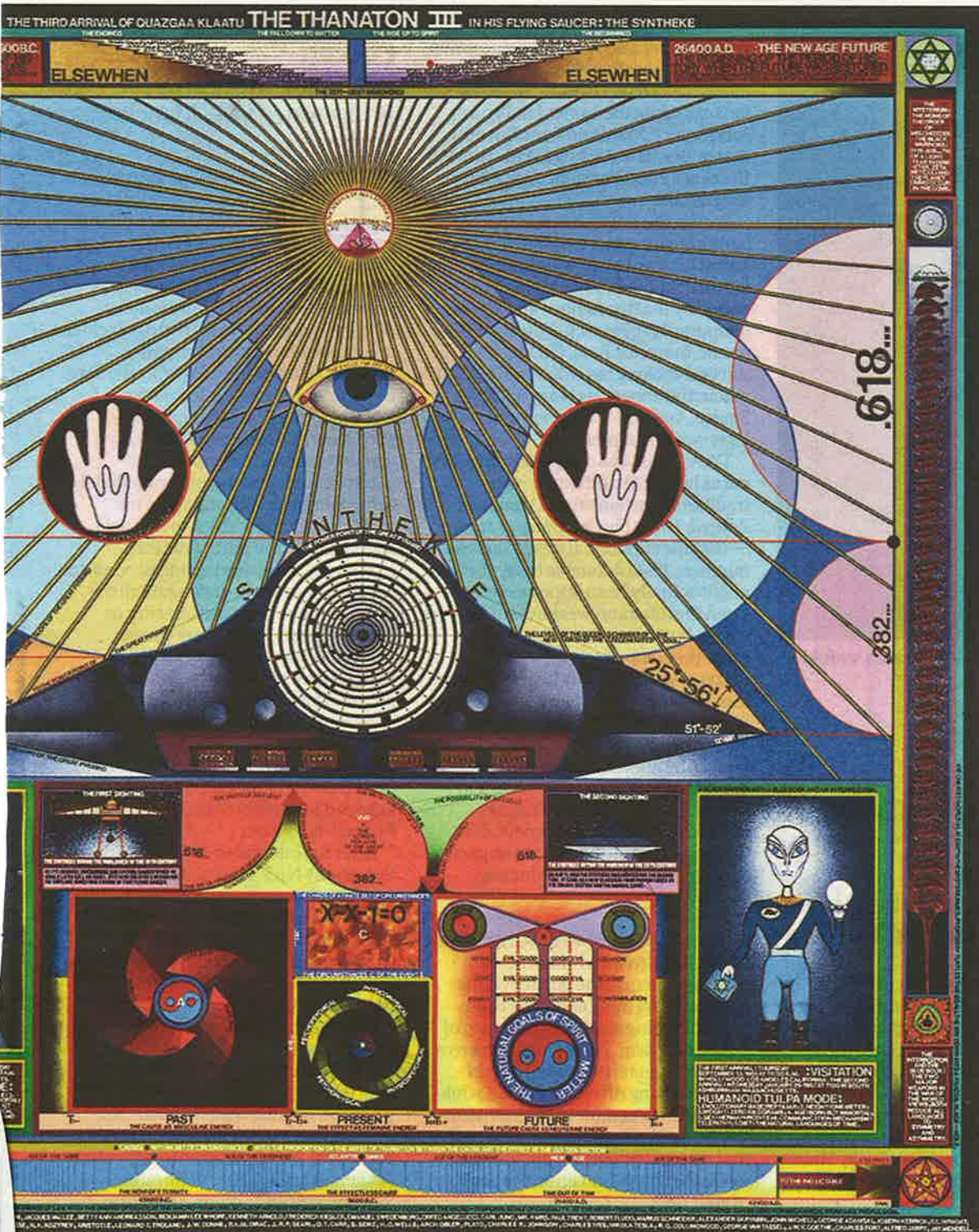
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self-described “designer, architect, sculptor, engineer, artist” who practises what he calls Architectural Modelism in his home town of Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The only possible response to his fabulous, colour-drenched, joyful and wildly ambitious models of imagined hotels, stadiums and civic buildings, neatly constructed from found materials such as waste packaging and drink cans, is a wide-eyed “wow”. He says: “Many people think that art doesn’t contribute

**Top left: Alfred Jensen’s number chart**  
**All the Beautiful Systems.** **Top: Paul Laffoley’s channel for a higher intelligence**  
**Thanaton III.** **Above: Marcel Storr’s intricate design for Paris.** **Right: one of Morton Bartlett’s disturbing models of girls**

anything. I maintain that my art contributes to art and science and a better life.” This sentiment is clearly echoed by others such as Marcel Storr (1911-76), whose mind-bogglingly intricate drawings of vast, interconnected towers and ziggurats, drawn secretly by night at his kitchen table after days working as a road sweeper, were meant to provide a blueprint for the rebuilding of his native Paris after a nuclear attack. William Scott’s (b. 1964) colourful paintings of a Utopian version of his hometown of San Francisco show a safe, clean city built on principles of dancing and happiness. A great number of the works are conceived not as artworks but as functional machines. Paul Laffoley (b. 1940) is a former architecture student. His paintings are described by the writer and novelist Michael Bracewell as “the conversion of mysticism into mechanics” — *Thanaton III* is a beautifully rendered work designed to transmit higher knowledge to those with the capacity to receive it. The knowledge was passed on to Laffoley, who admits he doesn’t fully understand it, by an alien named Quazgaa

Klaatu, who visited him in the form of a body of light on December 31, 1988. The exhibition’s curator, Ralph Rugoff, says it hasn’t worked for him yet, but diplomatically wonders whether he may not have tried for long enough. The Chinese artist Guo Fengyi (1942-2010) and the American Emery Blagdon (1907-86) aim for healing — Guo’s sweeping drawings were ritually produced and central to her practise of the ancient Chinese health care system of qigong, while Blagdon’s belief in the curative powers of the Earth’s energies spurred his construction in his barn of a healing machine. “The energy field from my machines helps some people with their arthritis,” he once explained. “They just stand around here and then they feel better.” There is something in the earnest, beautiful spirit of his hanging circle of copper wire, aluminium foil, minerals and other materials that somehow has this effect. But this show is not just about strange ideas and their meticulous, often stunning — and these works are all stunning — expression. There is a poignancy, lightly touched upon but palpable. Many of these artists had difficult childhoods, or a history of social exclusion. Abandonment, abuse, homelessness or mental illness affected,

“My art contributes to art and science and a better life

among others, Widener, Storr and the photographer Lee Godie (1908-94) — whose photobooth self-portraits in different guises may have been a way of escaping her life on the streets. Jan Gluszek Dagarama (1937-2000) was a Polish architect who ended his studies in 1961 after a diagnosis of schizophrenia and devoted himself to designing beautiful, utopian cities. You can read in their work attempts to make sense of — and find ways of improving — the world as their only possible positive response to the terrible hand that life had dealt them.

There is a darkness too. Morton Bartlett’s (1909-92) photographs of his perfectly rendered, “anatomically correct” half-size models of children can’t help but raise questions about his motives. He spoke of his work only once, to say: “Its purpose is that of all proper hobbies — to let out urges that do not find expression in other channels.”

At no point does the show patronise or ridicule these visionaries. We may scoff at some of the more demonstrably bizarre theories expressed here, such as the artist James Carter’s belief that gravity is an illusion created by the fact that the Earth doubles in size every 19 minutes, but it is presented here without comment, and with respect.

These people are not idiots, it seems to say, they are not mad, they are simply labouring under different assumptions about the world. These works are gateways into the intricacies of humanity. You catch yourself thinking: “It’s crazy but it might just work.” *The Alternative Guide to the Universe opens tomorrow and runs to Aug 26.* [southbankcentre.co.uk](http://southbankcentre.co.uk)

