

ARTS

## Visual Arts

### That inescapable sense of soul

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Published: January 4 2010 22:22 | Last updated: January 4 2010 22:22

Beyond the clubby precincts of the art establishment and its controlled climate of prestige exists a whole separate world of sculptors, painters, tinkers, weavers and makers of bewitching objects who fall under the vast rubric of outsider art. They are united by their exclusion – which usually stems from a bewildering assortment of handicaps: mental illness, extreme poverty, rural isolation – and by their lack of formal training. Yet outsiders have acquired an establishment of their own. They too have a constituency of collectors, curators, scholars and institutions, all eager to classify and group them, to negate their solitude by discovering trends and discerning themes.



Mythical concoction: detail from Miles Carpenter's 'Beast' (after 1966)

In *Approaching Abstraction*, a glowing bouquet of pieces from the collection of the American Folk Art Museum, curator Brooke Anderson tries to extract a thesis from unruly variety. Self-taught artists, she declares, are generally enveloped in a haze of common fallacies: that some kink in their psyches drives them inexorably to tell stories; that the only art they know is whatever they make themselves; and that they favour repetition over invention. Anderson counters these stereotypes by gathering the outsider versions of Pollock and Kandinsky – artists who gravitate towards colour, form, line and texture, without visual narrative or picturesque tableaux.

So, for instance, she offers the vibrantly coloured drawings of John "J.B." Murry, a sharecropper and preacher from Georgia for whom putting pen and brush to paper was akin to speaking in tongues. He "wrote" in mysterious magenta runes that only he could read, and then only through a glass of water, ravishing symbols whose significance vanished when he died in 1988. Yet the strength of his works reveals

the weakness of Anderson's argument. What we see as patterns of daub and line are traces of Murray's contact with the Holy Ghost, documents that were anything but abstract to the man who made them.

Here and there a stylised, cartoonish face peeks out from Murray's turbulent colours. Veiled, distorted or barely suggested figures lurk throughout the rest of the show as well. While Anderson makes the case for abstraction in text panels, the exhibition she has put together suggests another theme entirely: the perception of humanity and sentient life in random forms and debris. There is a whiff of voodoo in a cluster of little anthropomorphic figurines made of tape, paper, buttons and metal tabs, all bound by wire by some unknown genius referred to in the literature as the Philadelphia Wireman. The Wireman, whoever she was, fabricated at least 1,500 of these flotsam statuettes, which were dumped in an alley and rescued by some astute discoverer.

People and creatures show up as totems or game pieces, as in Leroy Person's "Hens and Chicks with Rooster", a poultry family of wooden pieces standing on a rough-hewn board. Miles Carpenter's "Beast" is a mythical concoction, a grey, misshapen Eeyore with red stripes, an extra limb or two (it's hard to tell) and the stub of a rhino's horn. It is either staggering to its feet or taking a bow, at once preposterous and poignant. Carpenter didn't feel he had invented anything so much as uncovered its shape in the contortions of a tree root. "There's something in there, under the surface of every piece of wood," he once said. "You don't need no design 'cause it's right there, you just take the bark off, and if you do it good, you can find something."

An unsettling kind of magic permeates much of this work, an insistence on drawing out the animal spirit that pervades even dead objects. Several artists work with vegetation: the Chicagoan Gregory Warmack – "Mr Imagination" to his admirers – has tiled one multi-tendrilled branch with buttons, making it a sort of Harlequin tree. Bessie Harvey, an African-American mother of 11 from Alcoa, Tennessee, carves and paints roots in order to free the spirits trapped inside. The sculpture "7 Legs" resembles a mutant spider scuttling through a nightmare.

Almost none of the artists here embrace abstraction for its own sake, yet most use it to suggest vivid life teeming just beneath the crust of perception. We are programmed to map animate forms on to coloured lines and squiggly shapes – to detect the soul behind the stick figure. So it takes very little for faces, limbs and hair to materialise out of glued-on fabric or twisted wire. Judith Scott, who had Down's syndrome and was deaf (and died in 2005), wrapped objects in bright yarn with such transformative thoroughness that it's impossible to tell what she started with. Her eerily beautiful enigmas shrouded in tinted wool evoke something dead, trapped or about to be born. They might be mummies or cocoons.

Many of the artists in this show approach abstraction the way Scott does: obliquely. They nudge stylisation an inch or two farther than paper dolls and comic-strips, or whittle figures down to their animate nubs, or else cover up a human shape that remains – just barely – detectable. These artists imagine people as they once were or might yet become: foetuses enwombed in thread, or skeletons fragmented into harmless shards.

*Until September 6* [www.folkartmuseum.org](http://www.folkartmuseum.org)

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