

Ink-Stained Wretches: The mad geniuses of “Obsessive Drawing” doodle around the outside edges of outsider art.

By Mark Stevens
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The passion for outsider, naïve, primitive, folk, and self-taught art—none of the traditional adjectives really captures its character—is one of the oldest romances in modern culture. For a sophisticated and often corrupt world, the makers of such work appear virginally pure. To the Surrealists, for example, the self-taught were free-form followers of the inner voice, creators of an Eden in which the values destroyed by Western society could still flourish. Our own day doesn't respond with the same rapture the Surrealists felt; their love affair with outsider art was a giddy infatuation. But the fascination remains, and outsider art is now an institutionalized field with its own galleries and fairs. I wonder if that's an ominous sign: No doubt there are suddenly a lot of savvy naïfs around.

Brooke Davis Anderson, the curator of the “Obsessive Drawing” exhibit that opened last week at the American Folk Art Museum, is well aware of this tricky cultural history. The five outsiders she's presenting are the real thing. They are also alive and in one or two cases could almost be called “emerging” or “professional” artists. (The museum traditionally concentrates on artists from the past who maintained little or no connection to mainstream art.) She doesn't play up clichés about such art, such as the mental illness of certain practitioners, and she knows that some smart contemporary artists ape its strategies and effects. Drawing is now fashionable, especially drawing that looks self-taught but may not be, and the desire to create a kind of funky parallel universe is widespread. Recent shows organized by the Museum of Modern Art, as well as many galleries, attest to this ongoing interest of the inside for the outside. Certain works in “Obsessive Drawing” should, in short, send ripples through Chelsea.

The showstopper in “Obsessive Drawing” is Chris Hipkiss's 35-foot-long *Lonely Europe Arm Yourself*, an apocalyptic scroll that took two years to complete and will remind many people of Henry Darger's otherworldly universe. Like his great predecessor, Hipkiss sets up a detailed, precise, and eroticized narrative in which women battle for something vitally important—but exactly what isn't entirely clear. (Some secrets are so enormous they're kept in the shade, lest the revelation blind us.) Unlike Darger's child-warriors, however, Hipkiss's women are tough dames inhabiting a dark, fantastical world of streaming smoke, winding pathways, and intricate towers that appear more alive than most people you see on the street. Hipkiss is a married Englishman in his forties who doesn't fit the usual recluse-in-the-attic profile; he has a bleak but common view of the world's environmental policies. Yet his work has the haunted, hallucinatory buzz that often distinguishes outsider fantasy from the parallel universes of cozier, mainstream artists. If Tolkien had taken acid . . .

The other four artists in the show are not narrators who create populated, myth-scaled visions. Instead, they form hermetic, sometimes rule-bound worlds that offer a momentary alternative to the scatteredness of daily life. Hiroyuki Doi, a Japanese artist in

his late fifties, makes pictures of light, bubbly floating forms that almost change as you watch them. They seem both large and small; they could represent a vast astral cloud or a tiny bit of cellular tissue seen under a microscope. Each has a different visual weight, and each is made from hundreds of thousands of tiny circles, every one representing, in Doi's mind, a creature of our world. In *Random Numeric Repeater*, Charles Benefiel, who's in his late thirties, has invented a language based on dots and circles that is intended to subvert the dehumanizing use of numbers in our society. Its visual impact is soothing and almost hypnotic, like chanting or looking at an Agnes Martin painting. Two of the artists—Eugene Andolsek, who's in his eighties, and Martin Thompson, a New Zealander in his forties—elevate pattern, symmetry, and rule-making into something well beyond the decorative. Their work is strangely reassuring. It makes focus and patience appear not only possible but soothing and fruitful.

People who enjoy self-taught or outsider art often wonder what now distinguishes it from the mainstream. Part of the answer is that, though Chelsea sometimes needs the outsider, the outsider never needs Chelsea. You can sense that here. No art-world signals are being sent, no ironies presented for our delectation. The audience doesn't matter to these artists. As a result, their art looks necessary—uncommonly so.

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