

The Desire to Draw, Sometimes a Compulsion

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Every now and then contemporary art delivers a little surprise, which is why I love it. The American Folk Art Museum just opened an “emerging talent” show, its first, titled “Obsessive Drawing.” Frankly, the idea sounded like a sop thrown to a Babes-in-Chelsealand art moment. But “emerging,” as it turns out, is relative.

One of the five artists being introduced, Eugene Andolsek, is 83. A former railroad employee, he lives in a senior citizens’ home in Crabtree, Pa., and stopped painting two years ago because of failing eyesight. He has never shown before. He doesn’t even consider his sumptuously patterned, labor-intensive colored-ink drawings to be art, and seems to disapprove of anyone who does. The thing is, the work is really good, rich and solid, but also trippy and full of little elegancies, which makes it look very now.

But why, if Mr. Andolsek wasn’t thinking art, or audience, did he do what he did for so long, drawing thousands of pictures over 50 years? Because he wanted to, and because he had to, which in his case are more or less the same thing. The act of drawing and painting, he has said, helped to ease a debilitating anxiety that had dogged him all his life. Once he started a drawing, the anxiety lifted. Relief arrived as a state of entrancement.

One minute he’d be sitting at his kitchen table with sheets of graph paper and a pen filled with ink. The next, he’d be aware that hours had passed, and he’d done a drawing. What was the mechanism responsible? He’s not sure, but it worked for a creative half century.

The other artists in the exhibition, which has been organized by Brooke Anderson, director and curator of the museum’s Contemporary Center, are similarly, if differently, driven to art. So “obsessive,” too, is relative. It can describe pathological behavior - art as a motor constantly running, a habit, a twitch - or therapy for such behavior. It can indicate an aesthetic style, a “look,” defined by, say, repetition of forms or motifs, or by excruciatingly micromanaged details.

By such standards, all sorts of artists, from the Boucicault Master to Picasso, fall into the obsessive camp. But the show is talking, directly or by implication, about something else: in a word, abnormality, art as a symptom of psychological disorder, the Outsider phenomenon.

Debates about the ethics and efficacy of Outsider Art as a category, with an aura of exceptionalism and exoticism, are old by now. For many observers the matter boils down to whether the art in question is interesting to look at and think about even without the support of biographical data. For much of the historical work that now constitutes an Outsider canon, the answer is yes, as it is for the work in this spare, tidy show.

The installation actually opens with the canon, or selections from it, in a salon-style hanging of work by figures from the past like Madge Gill, Consuelo González Amezcua, A. G. Rizzoli and Adolph Wolfi, with a few Pennsylvania German Fraktur pictures mixed in to distinguish obsessive from merely intricate or busy.

The binding element, though, in old work and new, is drawing itself, expressive or notational. In Mr. Andolsek’s abstract pictures, done on sheets of graph paper the size of placemats, lines are so meticulously executed that they look machine-tooled. Often thick and black, they define patterns - baroque swags, space-filling grids, jazzy zigzags - and enclose color. The overall impression of locked-in, airtight harmony brings work of the late Al Held to mind, though certain pictures with compositional asymmetries also resemble cut pieces of printed cloth, swatches from a grand continuous fabric.

Abstract drawings by Hiroyuki Doi, a Japanese artist born in 1946, are also products of trancelike concentration, but their method is free-form and incremental. Each design is built up from countless small-to-tiny black ink circles drawn in dense, foamlike clusters, with the clusters coalescing into larger forms that suggest mountains, galactic clouds or fleshy mounds.

Mr. Doi’s drawings evoke a whole lineage of cumulative circle-intensive art, led by Yayoi Kusama and Atsuko Tanaka. And to this he adds a specific personal motivation. According to a wall text, he regards his pictures as exercises in cosmic and personal rejuvenation that he feels compelled to perform.

The work of Martin Thompson, a street artist from Wellington, New Zealand, is based on mathematical calculation. He draws intricate, digital-looking patterns on graph paper by filling in individual squares with colored ink. He then hand-copies the design, square by square, onto a second sheet of paper, but in reverse, from positive to negative.

This emphasis on the laborious performances of repetitive sequences is reminiscent of certain conceptual art of the 1960’s and 70’s. But Mr. Thompson’s physical immersion in his work, which extends to making surgically precise cut-and-paste corrections, connects the realm of detached ideas to that of extreme handcrafting.

Charles Benefiel, who was born in 1967, and lives in New York and New Mexico, is the only artist in the exhibition to have been diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, which he controls in part through his art. His Minimalist-looking drawings are, like Mr. Thompson’s, grounded in numerical calculation, but have a critical dimension.

To Mr. Benefiel, numbers, by which people are routinely identified and tracked, add up to a dehumanizing force. And both to warm up his world view and symbolically dodge computational surveillance, he has invented a mathematically based private language of dots, circles and dashes that correspond to spoken sounds and musical notes. His art consists of strings of these forms written horizontally across sheets of paper, with results that look like Agnes Martin drawings made of fine beadwork.

The British-born artist Chris Hipkiss is the show’s only figurative artist and contributes its most spectacular work, a 35-foot-long pencil-drawn narrative titled “Lonely Europe Arm Yourself.” The panorama seems to depict the aftermath of environmental destruction, which has left behind only fortress walls, factory smokestacks, grotesquely sexualized trees and squadrons of transgendered figures in dominatrix attire.

The terrain is like a nuked version of Stanley Spencer’s Cookham; the figures like Henry Darger’s Vivian girls grown up to be avenging punk-Valkyries. And the work, dated 1994-95, is right in synch with a trend for fantasy narrative in the mainstream art world today. At the same time, though, it stands apart from that trend and that world, though in ways hard to define.

Maybe it is just that in addition to formal brilliance and conceptual ambition, there is something unguarded about Mr. Hipkiss’s art, and that of his “emerging” colleagues. Much of their work conveys, through content or form, a sense of exposed privacy. This is art that can neither be expressively tempered, nor politically corrected, nor marketably slotted by that great vetting, veneering machine called the art industry. So it stays volatile, radioactive, problematically hot.

Is this why our mainstream institutions are so reluctant to exhibit it? Because they’re afraid of it, afraid of its unpredictability, afraid of how its intense singularity will react with, clash with, even infect other art? I don’t have an answer, but it is questions like this that keep my passion - crazy, I know - for contemporary art alight.