

COMMENT

When outsider art entered the mainstream

Hettie Judah

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Full of Days (Hermione, Pleasant Thoughts) (2023), Andy Holden. Photo: © Jorge Antony Stride

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London's art season past was deftly skewered by the satirical meme-based Instagram account 'Freeze Magazine' in a single throwaway image. Keanu Reeves (in Bill and Ted mode) appears, mind blown by this thought: 'What if artists are just copying each other and the outsider artists are the real artists?'

Perhaps uncoincidentally, the meme circulated just before 'Souls Grown Deep like the Rivers' opened at the Royal Academy. The exhibition drew from the late Bill Arnett's widely toured collection dedicated to Black artists from the southern United States – among them Lonnie Holley, Thornton Dial and the quilt makers of Gee's Bend – working within local traditions of assemblage, painting and textiles. The artists had, until quite recently, received little attention from the mainstream art world, though works in these traditions have informed others celebrated on the global scene, from Robert Rauschenberg's assemblages to David Lynch's *faux-naïf* paintings and Eric N. Mack's suspended textile works.



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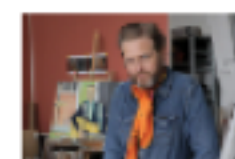
Samuel Reilly

In the same week, at the Gallery of Everything in Marylebone, Andy Holden's video *Hermione: Kingdom of the Sick* was projected amid paintings by the self-taught artist found in a charity shop in Bedford. Hermione Burton's idiosyncratic paintings amount to a picture history in which past, present and fantasy intermingle. From a slim catalogue, Holden learned that Burton's rheumatoid heart condition had dictated a largely sedentary lifestyle punctuated by episodes of hospitalisation. She started painting as occupational therapy, and later joined the Bedford Art Society. Holden imagines Burton occupying an intense border zone between what Susan Sontag termed 'the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick'. Interviewed many years after Burton's death, members of the Bedford Art Society admit nobody thought much of her work at the time. Holden is fascinated by it.

What objects are now acceptable as sources of influence, and to whom? How and when should we give credit? Why does the market value a painting by Agnes Martin over a Navajo blanket? Questions of how we derive inspiration, what material we can appropriate, and how we attribute value feel hyper-present, shimmeringly sensitive. At Tate Britain, [Isaac Julien's](#) velvety, multi-screen film *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)* (2022) pivots around a debate between art collector Albert C. Barnes and philosopher Alain Locke. In Julien's staging of this encounter, Locke argues that Barnes should prize music and sculpture of African origin as artworks with significant histories in their own right, not just as a resource for modern painters and composers. The pairing of [Hilma af Klint](#) and Piet Mondrian at Tate Modern relieves the Swedish artist of her wrongly attributed 'outsider' label, while also revealing that one inspiration for her exuberant, diagrammatic painting series *The Ten Largest* was the traditional embroidery used in Swedish folk costumes. In 'Action, Gesture, Paint', Whitechapel Gallery showed dripped abstractions by Janet Sobel that had inspired Jackson Pollock to try a similar technique on a larger scale. Pollock's paintings were lauded, Sobel's dismissed as 'primitive'.



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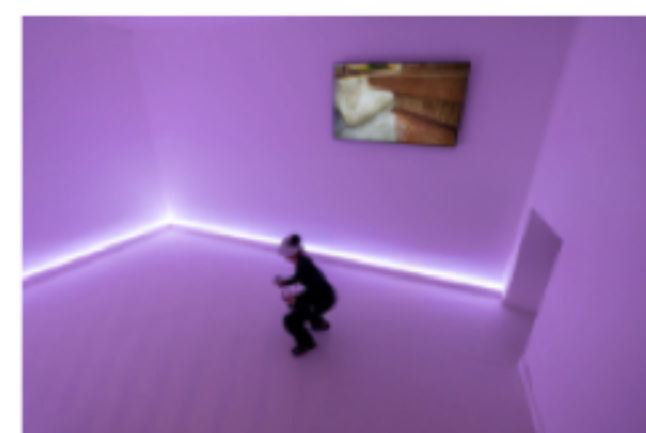


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Artists have always been finely attuned to the broader visual culture of their own time and beyond. Frida Kahlo's early blend of narrative imagery and unfurling text derived from Mexican *retablos* – devotional paintings offering thanks for divine intervention. Jean Dubuffet coined the term *art brut* to describe 'raw' art responding directly to human experience, unfiltered by academic training. Pop art looked to advertising and commercial graphics – Andy Warhol and Peter Blake were also voracious collectors of folk art and painted signage.

In the early 2000s, Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane started accumulating contemporary folk art, and documenting events such as the Egremont Crab Fair. As 'The Folk Archive', the collection was exhibited at the Barbican in 2005. One critic was driven to outraged tears by the show, and berated Deller for squandering gallery space that could have been used by a 'real' artist. This question of who gets to be a 'real' artist is vexed, as Deller has pointed out. Bundled up in it are unspoken prejudices around class, race, gender, mental health, physical mobility and, of course, academic training.

Much has changed in the intervening 18 years. It's unlikely 'The Folk Archive' would be met with the same vitriol if shown at the Barbican today, in part because the art world is becoming more plural, in part because art education has come to such a point of crisis that alternative systems and methodologies seem particularly attractive. As the curator Dieter Roelstraete has pointed out, the recent painting tendency dubbed 'deskilled figuration' is a means by which (largely white) artists distance themselves from the academy: it represents 'the unfinished work of *unlearning*'.

'What is outsider art?' Holden asks, in *Hermione: Kingdom of the Sick*. 'It is raw, unfiltered art of the margins. Art that often evokes qualities of the mystical, disconnected from conventional culture or community, untainted by the taste of sophistication.' He concludes that Burton's paintings are distinguished not by specifics of style or composition, but by the dual citizenship her life at the margins affords her: '[S]he paints to fix images from the time of the sick to be shown in the time of the well. Perhaps only in this sense can we describe Hermione's work as outsider.'

The drift of influence between those condemned to outsider status and those who long for it seems inevitable. It's part of art's churn. Even in the pages of *Apollo*, where a columnist vainly grasps for outsider cool by appropriating ideas from an extramural meme account.

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