

Art and design

Review

Full of Days review - the wonderfully strange artist discovered in a charity shop haul

The Gallery of Everything, London

Hermione Burton was an amateur painter with immaculate outfits but a turbulent life. Now artist Andy Holden has excavated her rollercoaster story in a film starring Saint Etienne's Sarah Cracknell



■ In sickness and health ... a still from Kingdom of the Sick, part of Full of Days. Hermione Burton and Andy Holden. Photograph: Andy Holden/James Windsor

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Scenes from a life: the artist in her red beret, a phoenix risen from the ashes and surrounded by strange planets and indecipherable signs. The artist at the bottom of the stairs after a fall - the cat watches her while angular abstracts climb the wall and a cup of tea grows cold on the carpet. The artist naked except for a hat. Daughter Jacqui in a wedding veil, and another wearing fishnets, heels and a corset. The artist, or perhaps her daughter again, in tears. And here's Jacqui dressed like her mother, looking ill and lazing on a platform in a wintry garden with bare trees. She's wreathed in light. A big-eyed child holding an unhappy-seeming doll who looks more real than the child. A smiling vicar called David; a village hunting scene; a hospital ward; a city beach scene; somewhere in America.



■ Did She Fall or Was She Pushed by Hermione Burton. Photograph: James Windsor/Andy Holden

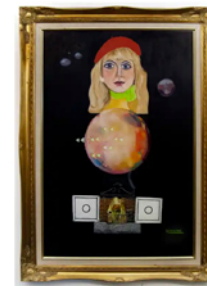
The more you look, the odder Hermione Burton's paintings are, with their mix of the fantastical and the observed, with their strange abbreviations and forced smiles, their mix of the inept and the characterful, their exactitude and wonkiness, their naivety and knowingness. Large, capitalised signatures loom large in every one. Burton might be called an outsider artist, and dedicated herself to painting both happy moments, personal mementoes and uncomfortable memories. After discovering oil paint following open heart surgery in California, she painted incessantly. Born in 1926, Burton had suffered from rheumatic heart disease since childhood, and

her daughter inherited the same condition, dying in her 30s. Burton went to the US with her American serviceman husband, got homesick listening to Tom Jones singing Green, Green Grass of Home and returned, first to her native Aylesbury and then to Bedford, where she joined the local art club. She was impervious to advice and went her own way. She married three times, and died in 2007.

In 2017, Andy Holden discovered a trove of Burton's paintings, scattered between a number of charity shops in Bedford. They'd fetched up there after Burton's house was cleared. Each one was signed Hermione and they had all been carefully framed. Intrigued by both their intensity and variety, Holden bought them all. He is still looking for any more that might come to light.

This has led to both an exhibition of the paintings themselves, and a number of photographs, but also to a film by Holden, Kingdom of the Sick, in which the late artist is played by Sarah Cracknell of Saint Etienne, who also provides the incidental music, although it is Holden's own band, the Grubby Mitts, who do a version of Tom Jones's heart-tugging hit.

Dressed in Burton's characteristic red beret and dress, a motion-captured Cracknell speaks direct to camera and walks through Hermione's painted world, her commentary taken from Burton's self-published autobiography. Holden sees the paintings like stills from a movie, and in The Kingdom of the Sick the scenes featuring Cracknell are interspersed with interviews by Holden with members of the Bedford Art Club who remember her, her supporters and friends, including the director of the gallery in Wellingborough who gave Burton her only solo exhibition, and portrait painter James Lynch (whom she once painted, and who also painted her). Holden, who also supplies the film's commentary, interviews Lynch in hospital - he died not long afterwards. A woman from the art club remembers running into Jacqui in a Bedford pub, where, she discovers, Jacqui is working as an escort.



■ Phoenix Rising from the Ashes by Hermione Burton. Photograph: James Windsor/Andy Holden

All this could be mawkish and intrusive, but isn't. Motion capture gives Cracknell's delivery and movements a strange, stilted disjointedness. She's like the woman who fell to earth, and it is more than Hermione's voice that's out of sync and out of time. Cracknell is her avatar, moving among and between and through her art and life. Examining this hinterland, and the subjective experiences of health and illness are as much Holden's purpose here as they were Burton's, whose paintings are a description and expression of otherness, just as her public facade - the beret, the immaculate make-up, both in her life and in her self-portraits - was a calculated and constructed persona, a protection and a way of moving through the world.

Old-fashioned printed captions sometimes fill the screen, quoting Virginia Woolf, Susan Sontag and others on the experience of illness. It is all done with a deft and unsentimental touch. When we are ill or bereaved, we are all outsiders. "Illness is the great confessional, a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals", wrote Woolf.

Bringing together Hermione Burton's paintings and her words and the reminiscences of those who knew her, and pitching them all in relation to the exigencies of Holden's own art, he talks about Burton as "a sick body that painted furiously to leave a record of her life, as only by telling others our story do we create memories for ourselves". Unlike American artist Jim Shaw, who has for decades collected and shown art found in thrift stores as a commentary on the American psyche, Holden's focus is more singular. Momentarily at least, transience is stilled. And without his serendipitous discovery, Burton and her art, and its singular record of a life, might have disappeared altogether, her paintings only bought for their frames, the canvases chucked.

● Full of Days: Hermione Burton and Andy Holden is at the Gallery of Everything, London, until 30 April