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Sacred works, secret tunnels: Jarvis Cocker's journey into outsider art

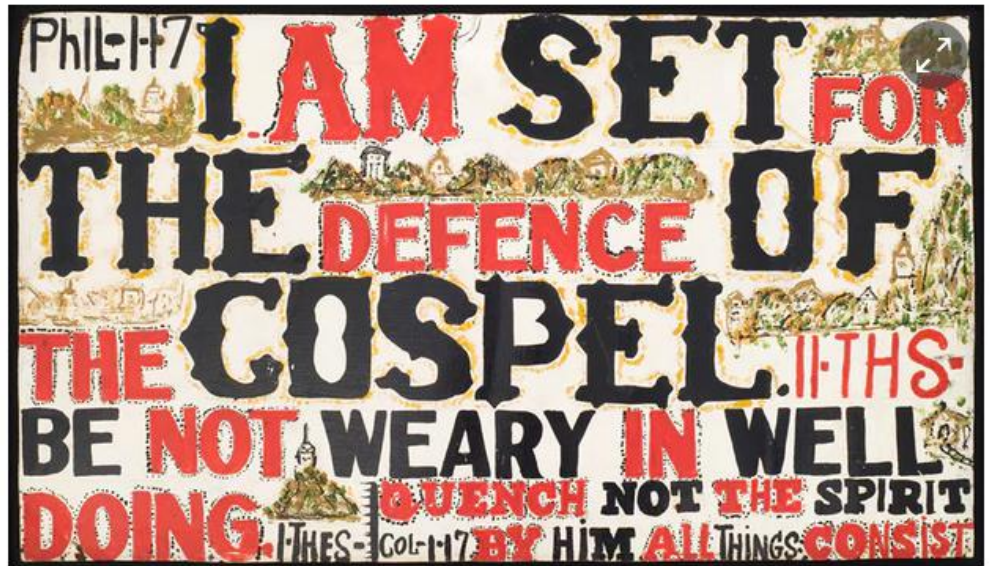
Almost 30 years ago Pulp's frontman fell in love with the untrained, obsessive 'outsider artists'. As he brings them to the Gallery of Everything, he talks about DIY genius - and getting lost in Robert Garcet's tunnels



📷 'It's not a freak show'... Gallery of Everything founder James Brett (right) with Jarvis Cocker. Photograph: Linda Nyland for the Guardian

It is early Sunday afternoon, and the northern end of Chiltern Street in London's Marylebone presents an intriguing study in contrasts. On one side of the road, brunch is being served at celebrity hangout the [Chiltern Firehouse](#). A succession of chauffeur-driven cars arrive and disgorge passengers in search of [crab-stuffed doughnuts](#) and smoked mackerel with buttered mooli and fried eggs. On the other, someone has set up a trestle table outside a former barber's shop called Mario's - the striped pole is still in evidence - and is serving cups of tea from an urn, while a gentleman in butler's livery circulates with a tray of rich tea biscuits.

The occasion is the opening of the [Gallery of Everything](#) and its inaugural exhibition, Jarvis Cocker's *Journeys Into the Outside*. The show is based on a [1998 documentary series](#) in which Pulp's erstwhile frontman investigated the world of what is usually called outsider art - a contentious term that, since it was coined by writer Roger Cardinal in 1972, has been used to describe everything from art made by people with mental health issues to the work of folk artists. Cocker himself prefers to define it as "art made by people who haven't gone through an art education system".



📷 Untitled, circa 1976, by TV repairman turned artist and REM collaborator Howard Finster.
Photograph: Gallery of Everything



"The French term for it, art brut, means raw art: the theory was you get cooked by culture but somehow these artists have managed to be outside it," he tells me. "It might be that some of them have been institutionalised, or maybe they were just brought up in a remote area. As time goes on, it becomes more difficult for people not to be caught up in the dominant culture, because we're all connected to the internet. When you see people who somehow operate outside that, you're quite excited by it."

However you define it, you'd have a hard time arguing that the artworks in the Gallery of Everything are anything other than incredibly striking: the intricate carvings of Karl Junker - a man with schizophrenia who spent his life idiosyncratically decorating a house in Lemgo, Germany - next to the hallucinogenic painting of the New York hustler and fortune teller [St EOM](#) and the figurative sculpture of [Nek Chand Saini](#), who began his career, as Cocker puts it, "nicking off in the middle of the night to build these little figures in secret" but ended it being exhibited all over the world, with his 18-acre sculpture garden in Chandigarh becoming India's second-most visited tourist site, after the Taj Mahal.

Cocker's interest began while he was a student at Central Saint Martins, when he chanced upon Cardinal's book about the subject in the library. "After three years at an art college, the idea of people who made art from some inner compulsion, rather than wanting to show off, appealed to me. And that stayed with me after."



📷 Tête, 1985, by Roger Chomeaux. Photograph: Gallery of Everything



He made *Journeys Into the Outside* with the film-maker Martin Wallace at the height of his pop star fame, embarking on a “road trip” to meet artists across Europe and America. It was shown only once, “after *Queer As Folk* at 11 at night”, but ended up an important and poignant visual document of a deeply strange world: all of the artists, already old when *Journeys Into the Outside* was made, have since died.

The best known might be Howard Finster, a former TV repairman and Baptist minister compelled to paint “sacred art” after seeing a vision while fixing a bicycle. His work - paintings in which naive figures jostle for space with idiosyncratically spelled text filled with references to the Bible and popular culture - and which fill the first room of

the new exhibition - gained a wider audience, largely thanks to the patronage of rock bands. Finster’s fellow Georgia natives REM commissioned him [to collaborate on the cover of 1984’s *Reckoning*](#), wrote the song *Maps and Legends* about him and filmed the video for their single *Radio Free Europe* in [Paradise Gardens](#), a sculpture park Finster created near the city of Summerville that contains more than 46,000 pieces of art. He also painted the cover for Talking Heads’ 1985 album *Little Creatures*. “I think there’s an affinity between rock musicians and these kind of artists because most rock musicians are also self-taught. It’s not as if you go to a conservatoire - you just pick up a guitar and struggle to eventually make some kind of noise you find palatable,” says Cocker. “And having a band is like making your own little world, something you’re the boss of, something you control. When you’re on a stage, you make everybody live in your world, so maybe that has something to do with it as well.”

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Not all of his encounters with the artists went well. The most disturbing room in the exhibition is devoted to the work of WC Rice, a self-ordained minister who was given to fashioning crudely painted crucifixes and daubing slogans about hellfire and damnation on anything he could find, from wrecked cars to washing machines. If you think his work looks unsettling in the back room of a former barber’s shop, Cocker notes, that’s nothing to what it looks like in situ, in Rice’s garden in Alabama. “You drive into his area and see all these crosses and fridges saying, you know, ‘CESS PIT HELP ME JESUS BURN IN HELL.’ It’s got a bit of a Deliverance feeling about it. You did wonder what he was going to be like, but he was very polite.”



Deliverance ... WC Rice's Cross Garden in Prattville, Alabama. Photograph: Kelly Ludwig



Another artist, Robert Garcet, famed for his structure called the [Tower of the Apocalypse](#), had apparently tired of interviewers “asking him when the world was going to end, so he took it out on me. He seemed to see me as a kind of symbol of the stupidity of modern media, so he had a massive go at me, which wasn’t very welcoming. He’d made all these tunnels underneath his house and I went down to explore them on my own and I got lost. I didn’t feel like I was really in danger, but you felt like you were in somebody’s ... you shouldn’t really be looking at it.”

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Outsider art raises unique moral and ethical questions. [James Brett](#), the exhibition’s curator and the founder of the Gallery of Everything, has worked with outsider artists for more than 15 years. “It’s hugely important that it doesn’t become a freak show - I really try to make sure that we’re not doing it.” Brett doesn’t even like the term outsider art. “It sounds negative. It defines itself by an inside and an outside, so the artists - who are often vulnerable adults, or at least unusual - find themselves with a word that describes them that suggests an otherness that I felt wasn’t correct. So ‘non-academic artists’ definitely describes them in one way, and ‘private art-making’ describes the core of it, because almost all of these artists started making art for a private purpose.”



Art by Howard Finster and Nek Chand Saini at the Gallery of Everything. Photograph: Linda Ny Lind for the Guardian



Furthermore, there's the issue of money. Brett is keen to create a British market for this work "because it will bring these artists equivalence" - everything in the show is for sale, at prices ranging from £1,000 to £50,000 - but even the notion of selling the work raises intriguing questions. What happens when an artist who created art purely out of compulsion discovers that there may be money to be made? If the power of their work rests, at least in part, on the fact that there are no commercial considerations involved in its creation, does introducing money into the equation fundamentally alter their art, destroying its authenticity? "You're 100% right," Brett says, nodding. "If I'm working with an artist, I need to make sure they're not making work to order - it would be less strong if somebody wants to please. It's a minefield."

"It is a difficult area when you come to present the stuff," agrees Cocker. "But these artists tap into something universal: the fact that everybody's got the ability to create things. I think also that's why people react to this art and have a fascination with it. You can see the amount of work that's going into it, and you can appreciate that without knowing a backstory. We've all got that tendency - we can all go off on one, can't we? We all know friends who've lost it or got obsessed or whatever, so I think it's not just like, 'Ooh, let's look at these weird and wacky people.' It tells you something about human creativity and what it can do," he says. "Because almost all of the artists I met on that journey, the one question they could never answer was, 'Why do you do it?' That seemed to be a completely superfluous question - it was like they had to do it, and through doing it they would find some peace and contentment. And I think we're all a bit like that. We all have to find something that we love to do that makes us feel OK in the world."

● Jarvis Cocker's *Journeys into the Outside* is at the [Gallery of Everything](#), London, until 20 November.