

# THE GALLERY OF EVERYTHING

## FRANCIS MARSHALL AND THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

by Emily Watkins

Francis Marshall was born in La Frette-sur-Seine, near Paris. After leaving the city as a young man and moving to rural France, he began to create assemblages, dolls, puppets, sculptures - *bourrages*. I've searched high and low for a direct translation of this word into English; I've pulled out dictionaries, idiomatic and standard; I've quizzed friends in Paris, and I asked the man himself.

"It's a word you would use, for example, if you were making a sofa. It means 'stuffing', perhaps. You would say this is 'rembourré', meaning it was padded. It's a technique, but it also has other meanings. But there's another way of using it which is much more pornographic. You can use it for when a man takes a woman."

Or when someone is drunk? *Bourré*? I ask. Yes, apparently - in that a drunkard is full of alcohol, stuffed to overflowing. It's a nuanced term, like all the best ones, and its initial meaning has suffused other concepts. If *bourré* means jam-full, then *bourrages* are The Jammed.

This is the term Marshall has chosen for his objects, and *bourrages* from across his career fill the ground floor of The Gallery of *Everything's* current exhibition, *Francis Marshall and the Beautiful People*. The *bourrages* are recognisably people - they have faces, clothes, props. But beautiful?

"Some people see them as something scary; others feel quite tender towards them", explains Marshall. I can understand either point of view; on the one hand, the figures are diminutive, *rembourré* with padding in a way which makes them seem pleasantly, childishly plump.

On the other, there's something undeniably sinister about a collection of facsimile men, women and children, pulled together from "bits and pieces of discarded by family, children or sometimes things found in bins", lashed to the chairs on which they're posed. "They're wrapped in these threads", Marshall explains, "we're all prisoners in a way, aren't we? Prisoners to different things, sure, but I wanted to show that."

Composed of materials long loved and lost, weathered, discarded and repurposed, most of Marshall's dolls have been left outside for many years "for the colour. There's a certain colour ... look here, or here [pointing at a stained plate, then a shoe]. There's a certain colour you can't get any other way".

Discovered by Alain Bourbonnais, collector of *l'art brut* and friend to Jean Dubuffet, Marshall's first and primary series of *bourrages*, 'Les Aventures de Mauricette', are permanently preserved in *La Fabuloserie*, Bourbonnais' museum created to house his own personal collection of *art hors le normes*. They comprise more than 400 in

number, and sit amongst Bourbonnais' own work and that of other artists. The collection consists of over a thousand objects, within the house-cum-museum and its grounds.

"I understand you embrace the term 'outsider'?" "And why not?" "I ask because I know it can be a difficult term, so I'm interested to hear from someone who claims it." "Well, it doesn't bother me. In fact, 'Outsiders' was the name of an exhibition at the Hayward in 1979, where I showed my Mauricette series. I was interested in becoming part of this group of artists... Outsider - that is to say, people who aren't completely *l'art brut*, but more nuanced, more complex. I like the ambiguity."

The potential for a kind of voyeurism or exploitation within the term 'Outsider Art' is not a stretch; nonetheless, the category remains a fascinating one, not least because of its rejection of the canon and accepted notions of virtuosity and modes of thinking. *La Fabuloserie* seems purpose built to house work like Marshall's, and it almost was; The Gallery of **Everything** is hardly a white cube, but the question remains: does participation in an exhibition like this one betray a giving-in to the mainstream?

"Yes, that's interesting. Well, for me, it's a way of saving these objects. That's the most important thing to say. I'm a rescuer. And Alain Bourbonnais was a bit like that, too. So that group of artists took me under their wing and afforded a small protection, you could say. That's how the term 'outsider' serves me. A modest one, but protection nonetheless." Marshall pauses. "Everyone needs a bit of that. Even people outside the mainstream need to feel like they belong."

To move amongst this cast of characters, amassed by Marshall over the course of a fifty-year career, is to become one of the **Beautiful People**, and to enter into their world. More than a crowd, it's a society on its own diminutive scale - complete with relationships, props, *mises-en-scène*, stories and culture. One's first encounter with a *bourrage* is very different from, say, the twentieth. The atmosphere of abjection abates, and the filth and tatters start to look normal. It's here that one can begin to examine them as individuals, not just en masse. It's also a lesson in the universal pull of the wildly specific. Over the course of my tour, Marshall oscillates between weaving intricate histories for each character, possible only in this kind of alternate reality, and then pulling back to reveal the recognisably human truth beneath.

One female *bourrage*, for instance, sits at a table with companions, dirty dishes and a dead cat. "So what happened to her?" "They've been dining for fifty years. She had the cat on her lap, and then the cat died and became sort of mummified. A sad story!"

Stories are fundamental to Marshall's understanding of his own work, but so is ambiguity. As we walk around the exhibition together, he offers narrative after narrative without prompting - and yet, there must always remain an element unknown. Another constant: each story is a sad one, told with a smile. There's humour, amongst *bourrages*.

"A lot of it is about solitude. These people here", Marshall gestures to rows of figures in the front room, again bound to their

chairs, each with a placard proclaiming their 'waiting' in one way or another, "are all alone, and waiting. It's a doctor's office. I really like to talk about solitude. And loneliness in love, and between couples. It interests me enormously. And people who dream, obsessives, like this guy here." Francis indicates a figure set up in front of a child's dress pinned to a board, above a desk.

"I wanted to make someone who spends the whole night looking at this dress. It's not entirely clear what's happening. It's called Adoration. It's an obsession, but it makes him happy." Is this the character's bedroom, I wonder? "No, it's his office. The idea is that these doors [obscuring the dress] could be closed during the day. But sometimes, instead of working, he looks at the dress." And we don't know why? "No. It's labelled *Adoration*." Of course, the attention of the doll on the adored dress highlights our own line of sight; we're a little like him, perhaps? "Well, we all have something like that", replies Francis.

"Her - [pointing at another sculpture, a little girl hunched over a desk covered with numerical figures] she's being punished. She doesn't like it, she has to write numbers over and over again without stopping. I call it the night's homework." "Is she at her home, or at school?" "She's at home. That's why she's so sad."

A sense of place - schools, offices, bedrooms, waiting rooms - is an important consideration of Marshall's, especially the collision of the venues conjured up by the narratives ascribed to his characters and the physical one we're inhabiting to hear about them. The people described above are in a waiting room, which means that we are too. "Yes, exactly. We're all waiting for the doctor."

In much the same way as we are thrust into the world of Marshall's beautiful people, they move into ours. The gallery fills, and the *bourrages* seem to number with, not distinct from, their visitors. They're hosting, and it must come as a relief after so many years with only each other's mute company. Marshall's story-telling appears like a kind of charitable sympathy for this brood of his who come to be assembled from trash, odds and ends, each component laden with its own saga and past life. The *bourrages*, it seems, are the real outsiders - both manifestation and embodiment of the term - finding comfort in each other, as Marshall explains he did in the company of like-minded artists.

Of course, each piece is his creation, but there's a sense that many have taken on a life of their own and pulled Marshall's own history into their nascent tales. Sometimes, the divide between realities is less than clear. Each piece has a story, and Francis is eager to tell it: verbally, as above, but there's nothing like writing..

"I like to write. Let me show you. Here, for example, is a bike with a child on it, labelled 'Princesse Nathalie, lemonnier de gouville, a l'age de huit ans.' Because I knew this girl, who is dead now, and I wanted to bring her back to life." Anything is possible in a world of one's own making - which is only fair, considering the cruelty of our own. "She died at that age?" "No, but I knew her. Here, I'm imagining her aged eight."

Even when detailing the tragic, the alienating and the macabre, Marshall is clearly fond of the *bourrages*; they bring him pleasure, as do many of the things he hangs from them (literally, and conceptually). Indicating another handwritten sign, he explains: "Even just a name is enough to please me. For example, here: *Deux jeunes filles de Haute Volta*. 'Haute Volta' - I like saying that a lot." "What does Haute Volta mean?" "It was a French colony in Africa, but it doesn't exist anymore." No matter. It was once, and it still is in memory.

We move to a physical manifestation of memory, covered in the signs which adorn many of the *bourrages* but this time without hosts to narrativise. It feels worth mentioning that the French for 'memory' is *souvenir*. These *souvenir souvenirs* are hung almost at random, with only each other for context. What does unite them is their shared place in Marshall's own memory. "I wanted to make a tree. A memory tree. For example, [reading, in French] On 18th June 1956 I was eight years old. It rained all night, and I don't remember much more than that." Here lies, I suspect, the kernel at the heart of Marshall's oeuvre: time. Recording it, defying it, honouring and defaming it. Condemned to a kind of monotonous purgatory in the doctor's waiting room, or a perpetual dinner party, the beautiful people might seem to be cast beyond time. Crucially, though, the materials which form their bodies and settings have been chosen for their age, and the traces time has wrought on them. The friction between these two conceits births, quietly, an all-too-human response to that impossible master. The *bourrages* can engage with it or not, as Marshall pleases - equally, they force us to confront the horror of a life without its structure. Beautiful, perhaps; always young or always old, immortal but not invincible.

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