

An Expansive Show of Undersung (Don't Call them 'Outsider') Artists

By SASKIA de ROTHSCHILD MARCH 7, 2016



Two installation views of the Museum of Everything, a traveling art installation featuring work by underrepresented artists that is currently on view at Rotterdam's Kunsthall. Thijs Wolzak

When crates and boxes holding more than 1,000 artworks landed on the doorstep of the Kunsthall in Rotterdam, museum director Emily Ansenk was worried that they might not all fit inside. She soon figured out all she could do was trust James Brett, the mastermind behind the [Museum of Everything](#), a traveling installation with art by self-taught, undiscovered and unintentional creators.

But don't call it "outsider" art. Brett offers a manifesto of sorts to this effect on the show's entrance wall: "Imitators, segregators, false messiahs, please be warned. Art brut is a fiction, outsider art is a myth; discover the art-makers who re-write art history," he writes, setting the Museum of Everything up in opposition to the rising trend of "[outsider art fairs](#)," which are often defined as on the sidelines of mainstream art circuits.

Assembled in the two largest halls of this Dutch cultural landmark (designed by Rem Koolhaas), the exhibition does no hand-holding and throws the visitor headfirst into the minds of these “invisible makers.” Upon entering the show, you meet a family of life-size wooden dolls, carved in the '50s by Calvin and Ruby Black. The childless couple used to exhibit them in their Desert Valley, Calif., backyard and thought of them as their children. “You don’t need to know you’re an artist to be one,” Brett said last week. “These people just needed to create.”

A day away from opening, he was still obsessively pacing each room directing his team in the hanging process. “We were told everything that wasn’t on the wall by tonight had to go, so we better hurry,” he joked. “It’s the world’s most impossible jigsaw puzzle.”

Brett designed the show in partnership with the Oscar-nominated production designer Eve Stewart as an “anti-white cube”: a succession of high-ceilinged spaces and passageways leading from minuscule devil drawings from 19th-century France to astronaut sculptures and fields of parking meters.

In a dark, cryptlike room, behind the doors of glass cabinets, lie the dreamlike narratives of the now acclaimed self-taught artist Henry Darger. “We had to find clues in the tears to put them back in order,” Brett said, insisting he was the first to have tried to reassemble the story lines that this visionary hospital janitor once painted. Torn apart from the original manuscript by the landlord who found the treasure after Darger’s death, [the pages now sell for up to \\$700,000](#). Works on slavery and segregation by once silenced African-American artists such as William Edmondson and Elijah Pierce tell another kind of unspoken story.

The Kunsthal show is the Museum of Everything’s largest display to date — and the Netherlands’ first encounter with such an extensive array of alternative art. “It was challenging to work with the Dutch; they are so direct, and I like to hint and misdirect,” Brett said. “I wanted to be helpfully confusing.”

“The Museum of Everything” is on view through May 22 at the Kunsthal Museum, Westzeedijk 341, Rotterdam, Netherlands, kunsthal.nl/en.