

Anything Goes

BY HARRIET QUICK | FEBRUARY 04, 2013



Down a tiny, inconspicuous alleyway in North London, next to the gray façade of a public library, lies London's latest gem of an art space. Its name, the Museum of Everything, is spelled out in a swoop over the arched doorway in a ragtag mix of ironwork, neon lighting, and painted letters. It looks like the entrance to a junkyard. Instead, it opens into a former recording studio, a labyrinth of rooms, corridors, rickety stairs, and vitrines that the visitor navigates with the help of hand-painted red arrows and signage daubed on the whitewashed walls.

"The space is difficult to find, and people might come in feeling angry and with low expectations, but then they happen on this maze," says the museum's founder, James Brett. "We made choices in how things were laid out, but the building directed a lot of those choices. In many respects it worked accidentally. I think there is feeling and flow, which is satisfying, with surprises along the way, and it forces people to work."

Brett is a 40ish cultural entrepreneur, born and raised in London. He studied moviemaking at the American Film Institute, in Los Angeles, and for the past few years has been making short films and documentaries; he is currently work-

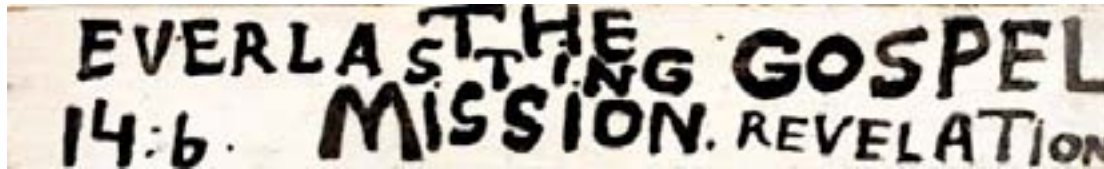


ing on a documentary about Kim Noble, an artist with dissociative identity disorder. He also spearheads building renovations across the city. The Museum of Everything (or M.O.E., as it is known) is devoted to what Brett calls "unintentional" art, created out of passion and for personal exploration rather than by trained professionals as a serious pursuit. Brett abhors the term outsider, popularly applied to this blurry genre. "I'm not trying to turn these people into a sideshow," he says. "They are like you and me. But what we have done here is engage in their work by trying to make the museum a good experience. It's about curating with a personality rather than behind a glass shield. I see myself more as a visual ringmaster."



The museum is wonderfully weird, varied, and intense, exhibiting more than 90 artists from Europe, the United States, and Asia. Some of the works are from Brett's own collection; others are on loan from fellow advocates of unintentional art. There are giant birdlike wool sculptures by Judith Scott, who found her calling at Creative Growth Art Center, an organization for artists with de-

velopmental, mental, and physical disabilities in Oakland, California. There are hand-painted doors and panels from the missions of the evangelicals Sister Gertrude Morgan and Anderson Johnson, and obsessively drawn rows of identical cups and saucers by Heinrich Reisenbauer, who was a patient at the celebrated Haus der Künstler at the Gugging Art/Brut Center, near Vienna. An entire room is devoted to the mesmerizing illustrations of Henry Darger, the loner whose artwork was discovered only upon his death, in 1973, and who is a hero of the unintentionalists. The cumulation is breathtaking and bewildering in its range and depth of expression. M.O.E.'s current home is on loan. When it closes, sometime in mid-2010, the collection will travel to the Agnelli Foundation, in Turin, Italy. For the moment Brett just wants to see



where it goes. "The art is visceral and detached from the mainstream," he says. "I think it has a great appeal now that the formal art market is so commodified."

M.O.E. opened in October on the eve of Frieze Art Fair and became the underground hit of the week. Brett cannily dispatched to the fair a woman dressed as a nun to serve as a walking ad, distributing flyers and preaching "conversion." On the event's first day, the nun accosted the Russian billionaire and collector Roman Abramovich, a confrontation that became a newspaper headline the next day. People came in droves. Supporters of Brett's project — including Ed Ruscha, Hans Ulrich Obrist, John Baldessari, and Rachel Whiteread — helped drive visitors to the museum. Thousands have come since then. There's no entrance fee, just a donation box, and free tea and coffee are served in a suitably eclectic range of decorative thrift-store cups and saucers.

Artists are shown in depth, their works often filling entire rooms. This helps the viewer make sense of individual compulsions. Two vitrines are populated by Nek Chand's figures, part of a gardenful of statues — representing inhabitants of an imaginary town — that he made of recycled materials from demolition sites in Chandigarh, India. Chand constructed them in secret over decades until the patch of jungle that was his de facto studio was found by local authorities; the former no-man's-land is now a visitors' park. Big canvases of numbers by Alfred Jensen, a friend of Mark Rothkos, explore a mathematical formula related to the building of the Egyptian pyramids. Painted metal panels of figures by the Southern American artist Sam Doyle (a favorite of Ruscha's) pulse with adrenaline.

Some of these artists have crossed over and been ex-

hibited at mainstream museums; others are more obscure, like the Nebraskan farmer Emery Blagdon, who hoped his intricate mobiles would help cure cancer. Whatever their medical benefits, the pieces have a delicate musical quality, like dream catchers.

The museum's real magic is its utter independence — free from notions of worth, unencumbered by aesthetic legacy or canons of artistic merit. Here you find work intimately connected with what it means to be alive.

Brett says he wants to convey the universal human compulsion to express oneself through pen, ink, paint, or three-dimensional materials. He has been an avid collector of unintentional art for several years, a hobby that turned into a passion. "I did not have much of a creative education, and I've probably spent the whole of my adult life trying to make up for that. This work led me to be interested in modern and contemporary art, not the other way round," he says. "But the question of taste in this field is complex. The more you see, the less you have an aesthetic."



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