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Dolls by Norah Wellings at The Museum of Everything.

London's Museum of Everything challenges art

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Walking into The Museum of Everything, a quirky art gallery in north London's Primrose Hill, is like walking into a Victorian funfair, the home of an eccentric recluse and a massive junk shop stocked with fascinating treasures all at once. Housed in a former dairy with narrow stairs, twisting corridors and a homey help-yourself tearoom, the gallery has just re-opened for the second time (in between, its founder James Brett took the last show to Turin and put on a new one at Tate Modern) for a spectacular show co-curated by Sir Peter Blake.

Posters from bygone freak shows, explicit embroideries, eerie taxidermy and displays of dozens of seaside trinkets made from shells are a fraction of what's on display, most of it culled from the heaps of bric-a-brac Blake has hoarded over a lifetime. A sign at the entrance instructs us not to consider it a traditional gallery exhibition but rather as one "giant artwork" or a "living diorama". We're exhorted to "be amazed not just by what [we] see" but also by "how it feels".

"Outsider art" is how many writers have described the Museum of Everything's remit, focusing as it does on people working outside of the professional art world of dealers, art school and publicity. The gallery's first exhibition included pictures by Henry Darger, the mentally unstable and reclusive janitor whose drawings and writing were hailed as brilliant examples of Art Brut when they were discovered after his death.

But Brett, who set up the museum last year, doesn't like the label. "Outsider art doesn't mean anything," he tells me in the gallery cafe, seated at a trestle table dotted with bowls of sweets and miniature pumpkins. "If you have a disability and you're making pictures do you want to be called an outsider? On what basis does someone call you an outsider?" He prefers to think in terms of inclusivity, hence the gallery's name. "I'm a fan of keeping things vague," he says. "I don't really like the cultural obsession with defining things. I like to be thrown off guard."

"Thrown off guard" is how visitors to the exhibition are sure to feel as they pass distorting mirrors and

faded photos of performing midgets, or stumble into a room filled with miniature funfair rides, made in a barn by a farmer called Arthur Windley, which play tinny tunes as they spin, illuminated by fairy lights. ("The family motto is 'who wants to be normal?'" reads part of a sign by Windley that explains the display.)

Walter Potter might have agreed with Windley. There's another room that's dedicated to works by the Victorian amateur taxidermist, who stuffed birds, rats, frogs, kittens, squirrels and other animals found near his Sussex home, dressed them in human clothes and arranged them in elaborate scenes: getting married, playing cards, competing at sports. James Brett describes the displays as "Over-the-top", "beautiful" and "very tender", and he urges people not to dismiss them as kitsch.

"It's all done with warmth and personality," he says, pointing to the miniature pictures of taxidermy on the doll house-sized walls of a work called "Squirrel's Club" as an anachronistic example of postmodernist ideas: referencing Potter's work within his work. "It's not kitsch because kitsch is connected to cynicism," Brett says. "We're not really a cynical operation

Something that proves Brett's point is that the Museum of Everything (as well as the Café of Everything) survives on a donation system, despite receiving no funding from the Arts Council because he doesn't believe that art should be "the preserve of the rich". Physical barriers between the viewer and the art, such as glass or cordons, are avoided wherever possible, and in the same spirit, Brett says he "doesn't want to put up a barrier to anyone who can't afford it". Whether it's down to financial accessibility or the broad appeal of the exhibits, people have flocked here: an estimated three or four thousand a week.

With all this dedication to anti-establishment, anti-corporate inclusivity, it might seem surprising that Sir Peter Blake, his title indicating his status as an established art-world figure, was invited to co-curate the Museum of Everything's third exhibition (the second at its own venue). Blake shot to fame in the 1960s as part of the Pop Art movement and is best known for creating the cover of The Beatles' album Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band; and the exhibition at the Museum of Everything took Blake's own personal collection of work by self-taught artists as its starting point.

Brett defends the decision, saying "you need a way to get bums on seats, and Peter does that", but also talking of his admiration for the artist, and calling him a kindred spirit. "Some people come here expecting to see Peter Blake's artwork and there isn't any," he admits, although he describes the whole building as a "single artwork" by Blake. Within that frame, however, "everything inside the artwork is self-taught art, to some extent."

"If you see a picture of the bearded lady or a midget troupe, I would argue that they are self-taught performance artists," Brett says. "We've got a room full of dolls and it's the assembly itself that's the artwork, and yet there's something extremely creative about the dolls themselves. I don't think that classic Art Brut is that far away. It's art being made not for the intention of being perceived as art."

Challenging a received definition of art, Brett says, is important to him, although he calls art "a bad word" that can put an unnecessary straightjacket on creativity. "Saying 'This is art because it's meant to be put on a wall,'" Brett argues, "is quite far away from the creative urge, which is just to express yourself in some way. I'm definitely more interested in that instinct."

With enviable visitor numbers and a second successful show at Primrose Hill, it's tempting to think that the Museum of Everything has settled into a groove, with a new exhibition of definition-defying objects being mounted each autumn. But according to James Brett, the future's very much a blank page. "I do make it up as I go along," he says of his business plan. "I think it's better that way."