

Photography

Insights from the outside

Outsider photography is still relatively unknown, but three artists in a forthcoming show at the Hayward Gallery explore the dark fringes of urban society through images ranging from the obsessive to the downright creepy

Sean
O'Hagan



A homeless woman who regularly photographed herself in various guises in a bus station photo booth. A recluse who secretly hand-carved disturbingly lifelike wooden dolls, then photographed them. A lovestruck man who obsessively took pin-up-style photographs of his wife against a variety of chintzy backdrops. If you needed an illustration of the term "outsider photography", the work of Lee Godie, Morton Bartlett and Eugene Von Bruenchenhein might be a good place to start.

All three are included in *An Alternative Guide to the Universe*, a survey of outsider art from the past 50 years, which opens on 11 June at the Hayward Gallery in London. Outsider art is now an established genre, an often dark counterpoint to the "official" history of art that includes work made by mental patients, homeless people, and urban hermits who worked alone and in secret. Among its best-known exponents are Henry Darger, who painted baroque adventure stories featuring heroic female children known as the Vivian Girls, and Madge Gill, an English outsider artist who



'Dark undertow': three of Morton Bartlett's doll images (clockwise from main picture), *Untitled*; *Untitled (Girl Looking Down)*; and *Untitled (Saucy)*. © Morton Bartlett and Marion Harris/courtesy Museum of Everything; Barry Sloane; Robert M Greenberg and Corvova Lee

created thousands of mediumistic ink drawings through a spirit presence she called "Myrminerest".

Outsider photography, though, is still relatively unknown terrain. The most well-known practitioner is the late Miroslav Tichý, who made his own primitive cameras from cardboard tubes and metal cans in order to pry on the women in his home town, Kyjov. Tichý was a loner who amassed thousands of blurred, blotchy snapshots from the mid-60s to the 80s, which, in their amateurishness, undercut the creepy nature of his voyeuristic endeavour. He once said: "If you want to be famous, you must do something more badly than anybody in the entire world."

This is an ideal not shared by Morton Bartlett, a perfectionist in extremis.

The naked or semi-naked girl dolls are disturbing in their mix of playful innocence and sexual suggestion

Born in Chicago in 1909, he was orphaned at eight years old and grew up in the Massachusetts home of his wealthy step-parents, before becoming a successful freelance graphic designer. A lifelong bachelor, Bartlett began creating his lifelike wooden dolls in 1936, aged 27, as a kind of secret hobby. Self-taught, it took him on average a year to sculpt a doll. By 1962, when he stopped, he had created 15 in total – 12 girls and three boys – each one half lifesize, meticulously detailed, hand-painted and clothed in a miniature stylish outfit created by him. (His boy dolls are now generally considered to be self-portraits of himself as a traumatised eight-year-old.)

The end results, particularly the naked or semi-naked, pubescent girl dolls, one of which has a provocatively protruding tongue, are unsettling in their anatomical verisimilitude and mix of playful innocence and sexual suggestion. All the endeavour he expended on the dolls was towards one end, though: the photographing

of them in often staged "real-life" scenarios. When I spoke to Marion Harris, a New York-based collector and curator who discovered the dolls and 200 photographs by Bartlett at an antique fair in Manhattan in 1993, she pointed out that some dolls had only one arm. This was because Bartlett knew from the start how he was going to pose his creations and, if he had decided on a side-on portrait, the making of a second arm would be an unnecessary labour given that it would be concealed in the photograph anyway.

Once Bartlett was satisfied with his staged portraits, the doll was taken apart and wrapped up in a box, never to be used again. As he knew, it was the photographs, taken on a humble Brownie camera, that transformed his craft into an art. The artist Laurie Simmons writes in her catalogue essay for the Hayward show that they "reveal an uncanny awareness of the power of light and lens to animate the inanimate. Painted plaster skin turns supple and dewy through his watchful viewfinder." There are echoes, too, of the noir-ish 50s TV dramas that inspired him, but also of the dark undertow of certain fairytales, such as Pinocchio, as well as the work of Hans Bellmer, a creator of altogether more disturbing dolls.

Bartlett was also working, unconsciously or otherwise, in the tradition of staged photography. Likewise Lee Godie, a kind of downbeat, slightly deranged pioneer of the kind of elaborate persona that has made Cindy Sherman one of the most famous artists of our time. In the late 60s, Godie was living on the streets and selling her paintings outside the Art Institute of Chicago. She was also photographing herself regularly in a

photo booth in the nearby bus station, having dressed up in found clothes, rouged or painted her face and brought along a prop – a paintbox or, in one instance, another photograph of herself. She would then further enhance the prints with crayon or paint.

The strange energy of Godie's self-portraits rests in their rawness and in the fact that they seem so uncannily aware of emerging conceptual strategies. "[Her] bus station photographs have overpowering and unnerving impact," notes the novelist Rick Moody in his Hayward catalogue essay. "They are almost too painful to



'A slightly deranged pioneer of the elaborate persona': a self-portrait by Lee Godie, c1970s. Courtesy Richard and Ellen Sandor Family Collection

gaze upon. They are remarkable not only for the fact that they exist, but that a person living mainly on the street was cogent enough and resourceful enough to find 'public cameras' and to compose for them." Always convinced of her greatness, Godie lived long enough to attend a retrospective of her work, aged 85, at the Chicago Cultural Centre in 1993.

Against Bartlett or Godie's work, the thousands of pin-up-style photographs that Eugene Von Bruenchenhein made of his pretty wife, Marie, in their house in Wisconsin in the 40s and 50s, seem oddly unknowing, even innocent. Marie often blends into the ornately patterned backgrounds in her matching swimsuits and sarongs, or poses like a cross between the Virgin Mary and Bettie Page in their kitsch living room. Often, even when topless, she gazes skywards away from his idolising – and idealising – lens.

What surprises, though, is Von Bruenchenhein's playful use of double exposure – Marie floating in clouds, or superimposed on a rural landscape – and the unrealness of the many hand-coloured prints that they made together. This is obsessive devotion channelled into an outsider art that knowingly echoes all its influences, both kitsch and sublime.

In the context of the Hayward's outsider art show, notes curator Ralph Rugoff, these outsider photographers "make up a kind of semi-autonomous zone... All three used the camera to document images of provisional fictional personae and alter egos... all explore the tenuous relationship between image and identity, and the way that 'character' can be constructed

through the codes of popular media." All three are pioneers of a kind, then, outsiders who nevertheless instinctively understood the transformative power of photography.

The Alternative Guide to the Universe opens at the Hayward Gallery, London SE11 on 11 June and runs until 26 Aug