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## Outside, now!



**NUMBER'S UP:** Alfred Jensen's *Twelve Events In A Dual Universe*, above; *Thanaton III* by Paul Laffoley, left; and, right, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's *Untitled (Bonnet)*

### MARK HUDSON SHOW OF THE WEEK

**The Alternative Guide To The Universe**  
Hayward Gallery, London  
Until August 26 ★★★★★

**T**here's nothing new about Outsider Art. The idea that art produced by people on the fringes of society – eccentrics, homeless people, the insane – can be more interesting than the efforts of professional artists first began to be fashionable in the 1950s.

But there has recently been a tremendous growth of interest in it: not least, one suspects, because contemporary art has become increasingly safe and predictable.

Faced with yet another oh-so-clever, Turner Prize-

nominated display, wouldn't you rather be looking at the visionary outpourings of, say, a retired postman from Wisconsin who has never had an art lesson in his life? I know I would.

This exhibition, however, presents a completely new view of Outsider Art – or that's the way it looks at first. Rather than the vibrant, spontaneous imagery that has become the Outsider stereotype, the work here is all super-controlled: meticulous renderings of imaginary inventions and expositions of baffling theories.

Instead of Outsider Artists, the creators are referred to as 'self-taught artists and architects, fringe physicists, dreamers and visionary engineers'. We encounter the photo-booth self-portraits of a Chicago bag lady, robots made by a Chinese farmer and futuristic cities designed by an American homeless man, based on number systems

so complex it would take a super-computer just to decipher them.

Obsessive but unrealisable architecture is a recurring feature, from ever-expanding Gothic towers drawn by a French road-sweeper to disturbing portraits of a San Francisco man which all look bizarrely like buildings.

While this sounds like a cornucopia of the weird and the wonderful, the presentation is oddly dry. I've never seen the Hayward looking so bare. The extraordinary stories behind the work are kept, when they appear at all, in the small print.

I liked Alfred Jensen's rainbow-hued number paintings and Guo Fengyi's shamanistic drawings, while Morton Bartlett's pseudo-advertising photographs, shot with painstakingly created half life-size models, are delightfully creepy.

So on one level the exhibition's straight-faced

approach, showing the exhibits not as cranky curiosities but as serious art, makes sense: if it's worth looking at, why put it in a special category?

The problem is that a lot of the work isn't particularly visually exciting. Plans for devices to get in touch with ghosts or for healing machines are more interesting to read about than look at. It isn't clear if the quasi-scientific theories have any validity or if the serious-looking inventions would work and, as all you see develops only in its creators' heads, I slowly stopped caring.

Faced with yet another display that seems stuck in a mental groove, I started to glaze over. Not a response I'm particularly proud of, but this exhibition's academic approach does these artists and inventors a disservice. In trying to elevate them, it ends up feeling oddly patronising.

*Philip Hensher is away*



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### ALSO WORTH SEEING

**Exultant Strangeness: Graham Sutherland Landscapes** Abbot Hall, Kendal, until Sept 15

Once notorious for a portrait of Churchill that the subject had destroyed, Graham Sutherland has been written off since his death in 1980 as a tame Establishment figure. This magical exhibition, however, focuses on his strength: landscape. Inspired by visionaries such as Blake and Palmer, and by Surrealism, the 40 works get into the soul of the Welsh coast and hills. Rocks, roots and thorns take on threatening importance. Hot, alien colour creates images at once modern and rooted in ancient Britain.

