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January 19, 2017

Behind the Exhibit: Museum of Sex

Get an inside look at the museum's newest addition, Known/Unknown: Private Obsessions and Hidden Desire in Outsider Art

By Kasey Caminiti



Left: Miroslav Tichy, Untitled. Mixed Media on Photography on Cardboard. Courtesy of Delmes & Zander, Berlin/ Cologne. Right: Steve Ashby, Untitled (Embracing Couple), Mixed Media. Collection of Robert A. Roth.

The Museum of Sex in New York City offers visitors a unique perspective on sex and the role it plays in art, culture, science and history. Sexual expression seen through art does not have to be pigeonholed into being deliberately provocative or political, with the hopes of attracting and getting a reaction from a certain audience, it can be unfiltered and honest. The newest exhibit at the Museum, *Known/Unknown: Private Obsessions and Hidden Desire in Outsider Art*, explores just that.

“The exhibitions on display in the past have focused on sexual expression through art. In this upcoming show, we’ve set out to explore what could be learned when art was made purely out of a desire to create, rather than out of a desire for this work seen by others,” the Director of Exhibitions at Museum of Sex, Mark Snyder said.

During the creation process, Snyder worked with the exhibition’s curator Frank Maresca to develop a point of view and overall theme for the show.

“We were drawn to the unfiltered expression of self-taught artists and those who, for a variety of reasons, found themselves making art outside of the mainstream. We were amazed what was revealed about human nature when private thoughts that are typically kept inside have no other option than to manifest into something tangible,” Snyder explained.

A presentation of works created by self-taught artists who are somewhat unknown has never been produced before now. Snyder and Maresca teamed up to illustrate a range of sexually themed works within the Folk, Self-Taught and Outsider Art arenas. The intent from the beginning was to differentiate this art from

mainstream and commercial art. Beyond raising awareness to powerful works of art, Snyder hopes to reveal the stories of their creators.

“We hope to give visitors a diverse view of how sex, sexuality and gender can reveal itself through art and how an individual voice expressing their personal experience can sometimes offer us the best insight into history. By looking at these unique and personal works together in one exhibition, we hope to amplify these individual voices and let them speak universal truths.”

The Known/Unknown exhibition will feature over 100 works of art that span approximately 150 years and cover a diversity of sexual expression. According to Maresca, it was important to include works by anonymous artists because, even though their names are lost, their message still resonates with audiences in endlessly compelling ways.

A common misconception about sexuality in art is that it is going to be obscene or shocking. The art on display in this exhibit is honest and can be startling in its openness. Because they are coupled with the stories of how or why each of the artists created them, they become more poignant. “Each individual story reveals something new about human experience, and, interestingly, sometimes the most surprising is not the most explicit,” Snyder describes what exhibit-goers will be most surprised to see when exploring Known/Unknown.

Exploring sexuality and gender in outsider art has been fascinating for Snyder and Maresca but the most rewarding aspect of their finished product is seeing the range of artists included. “Seeing this diversity of works in dialogue with one another offers a truly unique perspective on the subject of sexuality,” Maresca said, adding, “Bringing together works that have never been in the same space before; the visual and thematic conversations they will have with each other, and how a wider variety of viewers will engage with it all.”

Known/Unknown: Private Obsessions and Hidden Desire in Outsider Art opens at Museum of Sex, 233 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016, museumofsex.com, January 19 – September 17, 2016.